

I

Suffering in Egypt (Exodus 1:1–22)

Introduction (Exodus 1:1–7)

The purpose of the opening paragraph of Exodus is to serve as a bridge between the books of Genesis and Exodus. Verses 1–5 are a summary of where Genesis ended: the twelve sons of Jacob and their families are dwelling in the land of Egypt. Verses 6–7 fill in the centuries between the conclusion of Genesis and the beginning of the story of Moses and the deliverance of the Hebrews from Egypt: the Hebrews have simply been prolific in bearing children. The passage, in other words, demonstrates how the Hebrews have grown from a patriarchal family to a strong and numerous people.

1:1. *And these are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, a man with his household:*

The biblical author opens the book of Exodus with the word ‘*and*’

(the conjunctive *waw* in Hebrew). The conjunction is not reflected in most English translations. It is, however, important to recognize its existence because it connects the exodus story to the preceding material of Genesis. It shows a natural flow of material which underscores that this is a story in development. The conjunction perhaps also indicates that the two books were once formally tied together.

The clause, ‘*These are the names of the sons of*’, is a common introductory formula for a genealogy in the book of Genesis (see Gen. 25:13; 36:10,40). Exodus 1:1, in fact, quotes word for word Genesis 46:8, which says, ‘[And] these are the names of the sons of Israel who entered Egypt.’ The author possesses a deep and remarkable familiarity with the book of Genesis. This truth will be driven home repeatedly in the first chapter of Exodus.

The term ‘*sons of Israel*’ has an ironic usage. From now on in the book of Exodus it will be used to refer, not to the sons of Jacob, but rather to all the people of Israel (as a covenanted nation).

Mīs ‘rāyīm, the Hebrew term for Egypt, is a dual form which probably reflects the ancient division of that land into Upper and Lower Egypt. As the following study will show, the biblical writer had an in-depth knowledge of Egypt, its customs, practices and language.

1:2–4. *Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher.*

The author now lists the sons of Jacob who went to Egypt. Order of birth is not the basis of this genealogy, but it is according to the one who gives birth.¹ The first six sons named were all children of Leah, even though Issachar and Zebulun were the ninth and tenth sons born to Jacob. Benjamin was the second son of Rachel. And,

finally, the two pairs of sons belonging to handmaids are mentioned. This register is exactly the same as the one in Genesis 35:23–26. Once again, the biblical writer demonstrates reliance upon a preceding Genesis account.

Jacob's sons were the ancestors of the tribes of Israel. But the sons did not travel to Egypt alone; according to verse 1, they came '*each with his family*'. The descendants of Jacob have begun to increase in number.

1:5. And all the people that came from the loins of Jacob were seventy persons, and Joseph was in Egypt.

The number of seventy persons having descended from Jacob is first found in Genesis 46:26–27. Included in this figure are only those who came directly from his seed (literally, '*one who came forth out of his loins*'); daughters-in-law and others are not numbered among the seventy. Thus the number of people who accompanied Jacob to Egypt must have amounted to hundreds, at least. The tribes of the Hebrews were in the process of propagation and growth.

The Hebrew readers would have immediately noticed that in verses 2–4 only eleven tribes are listed. So the writer now explains that Joseph did not enter the land with Jacob because he '*was already in Egypt*'. And so the progenitors for all twelve tribes of Israel are accounted for.

1:6–7. And Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died. And the children of Israel were fruitful and they swarmed and they increased and they became very, very strong. And the land was filled with them.

This passage serves to bring the reader up to date. All the sons of Jacob and all the people living at the time have since died. But the

Hebrews have been very active in reproduction. Egypt is simply overflowing with them. The author is attempting to move from a history centred on an individual (i.e., Abraham) or a family/clan (i.e., Jacob's sons), as found in Genesis, to a history that will now focus on a people (eventually a nation).

The extent of procreation among them is underscored by the phrase: '*They became exceedingly numerous*' (NIV). The original Hebrew employs the repetition of the adverb '*very*' (*m'ōd*, *m'ōd*) to reflect an absolute superlative sense.

All five verbs in verse 7 mirror the language of creation. The writer again takes the reader back to Genesis and, in particular, to the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28 and 9:7. He does this to demonstrate that the Hebrews in Egypt were fulfilling the command to be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth. In this respect, they were being exceedingly blessed by God.

This great increase was also a fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham that God would multiply his descendants as the stars of heaven and the sand on the seashore (see Gen. 22:17; cf., especially, Acts 7:17–18). God kept his promise to Abraham even though it was many centuries after the promise was first given. God does his work according to his own timetable.

Application

The book of Exodus cannot be understood in a vacuum. It is merely one piece of the unfolding of God's revelational history. The preceding context of the book of Genesis is critical to a proper understanding of Exodus. The reader must spend time in Genesis to be equipped to interpret Exodus. A case in point is the Genesis creation language used in verses 6–7. The Israelites, as the people of God, fulfil the mandate God had originally given to Adam, and later to Noah, to be fruitful and multiply and fill

the earth. It seems clear that at this point the Hebrews have become the sons of God, and they are now blessed by him and are under his protection. That type of insight will richly bless the believer who diligently digs into the context surrounding Exodus.

It is also important for us to recognize that the history of Israel during the exodus period is to be viewed as a lesson to all believers. Paul says as much in 1 Corinthians 10:11: 'These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the age has come.' So Christians need to pay heed to the Scriptures before us and to learn that God deals with his people in the same ways throughout history. He is the same yesterday, today and for ever.

The seed of the serpent oppresses Israel (Exodus 1:8–14)

Egypt responded to Israel's growth by oppression. The biblical author is attempting to impress upon the reader the horrible condition of God's people: they had taskmasters over them who afflicted them with severity and rigour. The overseers were intent on breaking the Hebrews' spirit; they sought to ruin their health, to shorten their days, to lessen their numbers and to leave them without hope. It demonstrates Pharaoh's desire to stamp out the name of Israel so that the people would have no remembrance on earth. As evil Cain extinguished his righteous brother Abel, so did Egypt try to destroy Israel. The ungodly seed of the serpent acts the same way in all ages.

1:8. *And a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.*

A 'new king' does not necessarily mean the next ruler after the pharaoh of the Joseph story. The text says that this new king 'did