
§1 The Need for Deliverance (Exod. 1:1–22)

The beginning of Exodus is closely linked with the ending of Genesis. In Joseph's dying words he beseeched his brothers to believe that God would one day bring them out of Egypt:

"I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." (Gen. 50:24)

The first chapter of Exodus sets the context and quickly establishes the crisis of the narrative: Jacob's descendants prospered and multiplied in Egypt, which created a threat to a pharaoh who no longer remembered the legacy of Joseph. In order to limit their numbers, Pharaoh oppressed them with forced labor and ultimately with a policy of male infanticide. God provided even in these difficult circumstances by continuing to multiply the population and through the midwives' passive resistance to Pharaoh's orders.

1:1–7 / Jacob's family prospered and grew. These are the names of the sons of Israel who went to Egypt with Jacob, each with his family (lit., "household"). The first words of Exodus look back to Genesis 46:8 by repeating these exact words (NIV wording differs, but the Hebrew is the same). Exodus is the second "chapter" in the ongoing narrative of God's work, creating a people who will bring blessings to all the nations. As in Genesis, God's work with the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob continued in Exodus. We are reminded that they "went to Egypt" and remained as "sojourners," though they lived there for many generations.

The names Israel and Jacob, both mentioned in these verses, referred to the same person. Why use both names? The emerging nation would be commonly referred to as the "sons of Israel" (lit., "children of Israel;" sometimes translated "Israelites" in the NIV). The name "Jacob," here and elsewhere in Scripture, recalls his struggle in becoming "Israel" (lit., "God rules"). The name reflects

Jacob's striving "with God and with humans" and his prevailing (Gen. 32:28). The use of both names indicates the ongoing nature of the struggle of a people to become the family in which *God rules*: through the exodus, in the wilderness, and at Sinai.

Jacob's sons are listed not by birth order, but as follows: Leah's sons (**Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah; Issachar, Zebulun**), Rachel's son (**Benjamin**), Rachel's maid Bilhah's sons (**Dan and Naphtali**), and Leah's maid Zilpah's sons (**Gad and Asher**). The order of these names reinforces the sequence in Genesis 35:23–26, where Jacob accepted God's final promises to him (Gen. 35:9–15). Especially significant for understanding Exodus 1:1–7 is God's command to "be fruitful and multiply" and the promise that kings would come from his family in the land of promise.

The descendants of Jacob numbered seventy in all. This is a quotation from Genesis 46:27. (Gen. 46:8–27 lists the sons and grandsons by name.) Seventy is a number that symbolizes completeness. The text notes that **Joseph was already in Egypt**, as a reminder of the Joseph cycle in Genesis 37–50. The God of the exodus had already demonstrated faithfulness by appearing, guiding, protecting, and redeeming the family to whom God had repeated these promises.

The Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them. This verse is intentionally redundant and in the Hebrew has five verbs that repeat the words of blessing and promise to the patriarchs (Gen. 1:28; 9:1, 7; 17:2; 18:18; 28:14; 48:4). The rabbinic commentators suggest that this repetition functions to interpret the verbs in terms of the sequence of a child's growth. It can mean, "The Israelites were fertile (they conceived easily), they crawled, they grew (childhood), became very, very strong (adolescence), and the land was filled with them." This kind of translation communicates a double meaning. The Israelites grew in number, as well as raising large and strong families. Their families were "everywhere" as they fulfilled the promises God made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that they would be as the stars and as the sands of the sea. The amazing fecundity of the people, despite continued and increasing oppression (1:12), introduces the central theme of the power of God's creation in Exodus.

1:8–14 / The Egyptians forced Israel's people to labor. A new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt. This is an ominous phrase. The memory of Joseph's good

reputation in Egypt, described in Genesis, was forgotten. The entire time of the sojourn in Egypt is reported as 430 years (Exod. 12:40; see also Gen. 15:13). Joseph lived to be 110 years old (Gen. 50:26). The time of the beginning of the oppression is uncertain. Most interpreters place it in the nineteenth dynasty of Egypt under Rameses II (ca. 1290–1224 B.C.) and his successor Merneptah (ca. 1224–1211 B.C.). Rameses II moved Egypt's administration to the Nile's eastern delta (see the discussion in the Introduction). The text does not name this pharaoh (king). Whoever he was, he created obstacles to the fulfillment of the promises God made to Abraham.

This pharaoh “did not know” Joseph. He did not remember or care about what Joseph had done for Egypt. The verb *yada*^c “know” is an important concept in Exodus 1–14, especially concerning what Pharaoh knew or didn't know in relation to the Lord (1:8; 2:25; 3:7; 5:2; 6:3, 7; 7:5, 17; 8:10, 22; 9:14, 29–30; 10:2, 7, 26; 11:7; 14:4, 18; 16:6, 12; 18:11; 23:9; 29:46; 31:13; 33:12, 13, 16–17).

“Look,” he said to his people, “the Israelites have become much too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.” The pharaoh's main concern was that they would leave the country. His response might be understood as an administrative strategy, as “shrewdly” also can mean “wisely.” He did not try to eliminate them directly.

Egypt had a problem with mobile populations. The problem was not that they would take over the country, but that they would join forces with Egypt's enemies and leave. Before the children of Israel were victims of forced labor, they were subject to forced residency in a totalitarian state. Even Joseph had to ask the pharaoh's permission to go to Canaan to bury his father Jacob (Gen. 50:4–14). The words “with them” can also mean “with it,” in which case it would refer to the problem of the immigrant population explosion. The pharaoh didn't want the Israelites to grow too strong or to leave, since they formed an important part of his economic base. His comment that they were much too numerous “for us” is otherwise translated “more numerous *than* us,” which could be a political spin on the actual situation.

Pharaoh's two concerns as an administrator (that they are “too numerous” and might “leave the country”) set him in direct opposition to God's two promises to Jacob: that “a company of nations” would come from him and that God would give him the

land of Canaan (Gen. 35:11–12). This sets the stage for the battle between the God of creation (“be fruitful and multiply”) and of history (“I will give you the land”) and the great and powerful Pharaoh.

The **slave masters** were Egyptian (Exod. 5:6, 14). Literally, they were “captains of labor gangs,” so “taskmasters” is a better translation here. They oversaw the building of the northern and northeastern border towns, Pithom and Rameses, that served as military supply cities for protection and campaigns.

The word root translated “oppressed” (*‘anah*) means “violently afflicted,” or “cruelly crushed.” It includes the graphic nature of dispiriting violence. Yet the population continued to multiply, fulfilling God’s command to fill the earth. This frightened the Egyptians and caused them to loathe (**dread**) the Israelites. They responded with even more vigorous brutality. The fact that the Israelites continued to thrive even under extreme duress was like a plague to the Egyptians. They could not explain it except that God helped them (Houtman, *Exodus*, vol. 1, p. 223). The agents of life and death in creation were the Lord’s to command, yet Pharaoh believed that they were under his personal control.

They made their lives bitter with hard labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their hard labor the Egyptians used them ruthlessly. The literary key here (vv. 12–14) is the five occurrences of the Hebrew word root (*‘abad*), translated “hard labor,” “work,” and “used.” “Used them ruthlessly” expresses the corruption of the goodness of work (Gen. 2:15). It is likely that this indicates an intensification to a full and crushing slavery. The Hebrew word for “ruthlessly” means “with violent hate.”

1:15–22 / The midwives’ courage and fear of the Lord contrast with a powerful, yet paranoid, pharaoh. Although the chapter begins with the patriarchal list, the hope of the Israelites was in the daily life of the Hebrew home and childbirth. Here we see the beginning of the key role women played in God’s deliverance of Israel from crisis in Exodus 1–4 (see also Exod. 2:1–10; 4:24–26).

The “power” of **the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah**, was at once real and tenuous—completely opposite to the power of Pharaoh’s violence. Their existence and their fear of the Lord empowered the midwives. It was enough.

The text communicates this by repeating the word “midwives” seven times in seven verses.

These two women and their sassy courage dominate the narrative. The NIV has abbreviated the deliberately high-profile rhetoric of their introduction (lit., “the name of the first was Shiphrah and the name of the second was Puah”). The contrast to the *nameless* “Pharaoh” is stark.

Because of the extreme difference in political power, the conversation between them is ironically humorous. It is odd that Pharaoh himself spoke to these women and that the ruler of Egypt would say, “**When you . . . observe them on the delivery stool.**” The command “**if it is a boy, kill him**” is also ironic, because it reveals that Pharaoh thought *men* were the threat. In fact, it was the women who continued to outfox him. His fear of the Hebrews’ ever-increasing numbers caused him to escalate his policy to infanticide.

The midwives feared God (vv. 17, 21). They believed that the murder of infants was wrong in God’s eyes. The phrase **feared God** announces an important theme for the book of Exodus. The “fear of God” (*yirʾat ʾelohim*) was the belief that certain things were wrong simply because they were contrary to the order of the life God had woven into the fabric of the created world (see 9:30; 14:31; 18:31; 20:20; also Gen. 20:11).

When Pharaoh asked, “**Why have you done this?**” the women responded, “**Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.**” The women removed suspicion from themselves by stating what was partly true. They spared the boys through a form of “civil disobedience,” since it is unlikely they arrived too late for *every* birth. Pharaoh follows their impudent and courageous response with a weak one, perhaps because they had confirmed his superstitious fears. When he oppressed them, they became more numerous (v. 12). When he enlisted Shiphrah and Puah to kill baby boys, the **people increased and became even more numerous** (v. 20; see also v. 7). The women outmaneuvered him by reinforcing his fear with their comments about the vigor of the Hebrew women.

God **gave them families** (lit., “households”) **of their own**. God made households for them. They may have been childless previously and God gave them fertility as a reward for their courage.

Pharaoh then gave a more general command, “**Every boy that is born you must throw into the Nile.**” The word “Nile” is an

Egyptian loan word that simply means “water” or “canal.” In Egypt, that usually meant the Nile River and its tributaries. What had begun as forced residency escalated to forced labor, then to increased brutality, to a policy of forced infanticide, and finally to a general order to **all his people** to kill Hebrew babies.

The drowning of babies, albeit cruel, seems like an ineffective method for a pharaoh who could have killed them by the sword to employ. The command sets up several deep ironies for the continuing narrative. Is the Nile a source of life or of death? Who is ruler of the great river, if not the one who would turn it to blood? Who would God drown in the Reed Sea, but the Egyptians (14:28)? God repeats the pattern of using creational means that “match the crime” to resolve injustice throughout the Pentateuch and the Prophets.

A second irony prevails, for Pharaoh repeated the command to **let every girl live**. As we will see in Exodus 2, females were *more than capable* of thwarting the machinations of the mighty pharaoh. In spite of their resistance, it is clear that the Hebrew people need salvation. Pharaoh’s command sets up a narrative tension for the birth of Moses in Exodus 2:1.

Additional Notes §1

1:1 / “Jacob” can be translated “he grabs,” and “Israel” means “God rules.” Gen. 32:28 indicates a wordplay between *srr* (“rule”) and *srh* (“strive”). Even after God changed his name, Israel is called “Jacob” in order to reinforce the ongoing process of God’s rule in his life and the difficulty of becoming Israel.

1:7 / The NIV treats the Hebrew verbs (*sharats*) “crawled” and (*rabah*) “to become great” as a verb-adverb pair, a hendiadys, translated into English as “multiplied greatly.” “Crawl” or “swarm” is a word used in Genesis (1:21; 8:17) to describe the action of reptiles upon the ground. Here it has the meaning of “fecund” or “prolific reproduction” (see Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, p. 19). The word translated “numerous” can mean “strong” or “strong-boned.”

1:8 / See Stephen’s sermon in Acts 7:18.

1:11 / Pithom and Rameses were situated at the entrance to Egypt from the Sinai Peninsula. Pithom (Pir-Atum, or “house of Atum,” the creator and sun god) has been excavated as tell er-Retabeh, 60 mi. northeast of Cairo. Rameses was capital of the delta region. Seti I (1294–

1279 B.C.) built a summer palace there that was enlarged by his son Rameses II. The city (Pir-Ramesse-Meri-Amon, or “house of Rameses, beloved of Amon”) is very likely tell ed-Dab^ʿa, 80 mi. northeast of Cairo. This delta region is known in Exodus as the “land of Goshen.”

1:15 / Rabbinic commentary has noted the wordplay between the Hebrew words *toledot* (generations) and *meyalledot* (midwives). The LXX and some interpreters translate the phrase “midwives to the Hebrews,” meaning that these were righteous Gentile Egyptian women. The name Shiphrah comes from a word that means “to be beautiful, to be bright, and to shine.” The name Puah is more obscure, possibly from a Ugaritic word meaning “fragrant blossom” that came to mean, more generally, “girl” (a cognate of *p^ʿy*).

1:16 / The Samaritan Pentateuch, LXX, and Targumim add to “Every boy that is born” the expression “to the Hebrews”—as is implied from the context.