

# UNIT 1: ISRAEL IN BONDAGE (1:1-22)

## INTRODUCTION

### Text and Textual Notes

**1:1** These<sup>1</sup> are the names<sup>2</sup> of the sons of Israel<sup>3</sup> who entered Egypt--each man with his household<sup>4</sup> entered with Jacob: **1:2** Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, **1:3** Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, **1:4** Dan, and Naphtali, Gad, and Asher. **1:5** And all the people<sup>5</sup> who were directly descended<sup>6</sup> from Jacob were seventy<sup>7</sup> people (Joseph was already in

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<sup>1</sup> Literally, “now these”; the *waw* disjunctive here marks the new beginning of the narrative and need not be translated. The fact that the Book of Genesis forms an introduction to the Book of Exodus is established more by the contents than by this grammatical use of the *waw*.

<sup>2</sup> The name of the Book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible is *sh<sup>e</sup>mot*, the word for “Names,” drawn from the beginning of the book. The inclusion of the names at this point forms a literary connection to the Book of Genesis. It indicates that the Israelites living in bondage had retained a knowledge of their ancestry, and with it, of their faith and God’s promise.

<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew expression *b<sup>e</sup>ne Yisra’el* in most places refers to the nation, and can be translated “Israelites,” although traditionally it has been rendered “the children of Israel” or “the sons of Israel.” Here it refers primarily to the literal sons of the patriarch Israel, for they are named. But the expression is probably also intended to indicate that they are the Israelites.

<sup>4</sup> The expression literally has “a man and his house.” Since this serves to explain “the sons of Israel,” it has the distributive sense. So while the “sons of Israel” refers to the actual sons of the patriarch, the expression includes their families.

<sup>5</sup> The Hebrew text uses *nephesh*, which is often translated “soul.” But the word refers to the whole person, the body with the soul, and so “life” or “person” would be a better translation; here: all the people, the lives.

<sup>6</sup> The expression in apposition to *nephesh*, literally says “those who went out from the loins of Jacob.” This distinguishes the entire company as his direct descendants.

<sup>7</sup> The Greek text and the Dead Sea Scrolls have the number as seventy-five, counting the

Egypt<sup>8</sup>). **1:6** In time<sup>9</sup> Joseph<sup>10</sup> and his brothers and all that generation died. **1:7** But<sup>11</sup> the Israelites<sup>12</sup> were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and became exceedingly strong,<sup>13</sup> so the land was filled with them.

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people a little differently. Merrill makes the following observation in conjunction with F. Delitzsch, namely, that the fact that the list in Genesis 46 enumerates all the people who entered Egypt, including those like Hezron and Hamul who did so *in potentia* (F. Delitzsch, *Genesis*, 2:340), and, that Joseph's sons are included in the list of those entering Egypt, when they were born there, shows that the list should not be pressed too literally (E. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, p. 49).

<sup>8</sup> Literally, “now Joseph was in Egypt”

<sup>9</sup> The text simply uses the *waw* consecutive with the preterite, “and Joseph died.” While this construction shows sequence with the preceding verse, it does not require that the death follow directly the report of that verse. In fact, we know from the record in Genesis that the death of Joseph occurred after a good number of years. The interpretation of the *waw* is therefore warranted.

<sup>10</sup> The verse literally reads, “and Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation.” But typical of Hebrew style the verb need only agree with the first of a compound subject.

sn/ Since this was common knowledge, its inclusion must serve some rhetorical purpose. In contrast to the theme of the chapter, the flourishing of Israel, there is death. This theme will appear again: in spite of death in Egypt, the nation flourishes.

<sup>11</sup> The disjunctive *waw* forms a contrast with the note about the deaths of the first generation.

<sup>12</sup> Literally, “the children/sons of Israel”

<sup>13</sup> The text is clearly going out of its way to say that the people of Israel flourished in Egypt. The verbs *parah*, “be fruitful,” *sharats*, “swarm, teem,” *rabah*, “multiply,” and *'atsam*, “be strong, mighty,” form a literary link to the creation account in Genesis. The text describes Israel's prosperity in the terms of God's original command to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, to show that their prosperity was by divine blessing and in compliance with God's will. The commission for the creation to fill the earth and subdue it would now begin to materialize through the seed of Abraham.

tn/ The repetition of *m'od* intensifies the idea of their becoming strong (see GKC par. 133k).

**1:8** Then a new king,<sup>14</sup> who did not know<sup>15</sup> Joseph, came to power<sup>16</sup> over Egypt. **1:9** He said<sup>17</sup> to his people, “Because<sup>18</sup> that the Israelites are more numerous and mighty than we, **1:10** come, let’s deal shrewdly<sup>19</sup> with them, lest<sup>20</sup> they continue to multiply,<sup>21</sup> and if<sup>22</sup> a war breaks out, ally themselves with<sup>23</sup> our

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<sup>14</sup> It would be difficult to identify who this king might be. The chronology of ancient Israel is continually debated among scholars. Conservative biblical scholars who take the numbers in the Bible more literally than others would, place the time of Jacob’s going down to Egypt in about 1876 B.C. This would put the Joseph experience in the period prior to the Hyksos’ control of Egypt (1720-1570), because everything in that narrative points to an Egyptian setting and not a Hyksos one. Joseph’s death, then, would have been around 1806 B.C., just a few years prior to the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty of Egypt. This marked the end of the mighty Middle Kingdom of Egypt. The relationship between the Hyksos (also Semites) and the Israelites would have been amicable; the Hyksos then might very well be the enemies that the Egyptians feared in Exodus 1:10. It makes good sense to see the new king who knew not Joseph either the founder (Aosis, 1570-1546) or an early king of the powerful 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (like Thutmose I). Egypt under this new leadership drove out the Hyksos and re-established Egyptian sovereignty. And these new rulers certainly would have been concerned about an increasing Semite population in their territory (see Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, pp. 49-55).

<sup>15</sup> The relative clause comes last in the verse in the text. It simply clarifies that the new king had no knowledge about Joseph. But this also introduces a major theme in the early portion of Exodus, as the Pharaoh will also claim not to know who Yahweh is. But the LORD will work to make sure that Pharaoh and all Egypt will know that He is the true God.

<sup>16</sup> Literally, “arose”

<sup>17</sup> Literally, “and he said”

<sup>18</sup> The particle *hinneh* introduces the foundational clause for the exhortation to follow. In other words, the exhortation to follow is based on this observation. The particle could be translated “since, because” or the like.

<sup>19</sup> The verb is the *hithpael* cohortative of *khakam*, “to be wise.” This verb has the idea of acting shrewdly, dealing wisely. The basic idea in the word group is that of skill. So a skillful decision is required to prevent the Israelites from multiplying any more.

<sup>20</sup> The particle *pen* expresses fear or precaution, and is rendered either “lest” or “else” (Williams, *Hebrew Syntax*, par. 461).

<sup>21</sup> The verb literally means “multiply;” but since the text has already indicated that they were doing that, the nuance here must mean to multiply all the more, or to continue to multiply.

<sup>22</sup> The “temporal indicator” announces a future event; with it the particle

enemies and fight against us and go up<sup>24</sup> out of the land.”

**1:11** So they installed<sup>25</sup> over them captains of the work forces<sup>26</sup> in order to oppress<sup>27</sup> them with hard labor. As a result<sup>28</sup> they built Pithom and Rameses<sup>29</sup> as

*ki* introduces a conditional clause--“if” (see GKC, par. 112y).

<sup>23</sup> Literally, “and [lest] he [Israel] also be joined to”

<sup>24</sup> All the verbs coming after the particle “lest” have the same force and are therefore parallel. These are the fears of the Egyptians. This explains why a shrewd policy of population control was required. They wanted to keep Israel enslaved; they did not want them to become too numerous and escape.

<sup>25</sup> Literally, “placed, put”

<sup>26</sup> Hebrew *mas* is a labor gang, or corvee.

<sup>27</sup> The verb ‘*annoto*, “to oppress them [him],” is the *piel* infinitive construct from ‘*anah*. The word has a wide range of meanings that need to be surveyed. Here the word would include physical abuse, forced subjugation, and humiliation. This king was trying to crush the spirit of Israel by increasing their slave labor. Other terms in the passage that describe this intent include “bitter” and “crushing.”

<sup>28</sup> The form in the text is the preterite with the *waw* consecutive, *wayyiben*. The sequence expressed by this form in this context includes the idea of result.

<sup>29</sup> Many scholars assume that because this city that the Israelites built was named Rameses that the Pharaoh had to be Rameses II, and hence that the later date of the exodus (and the later time of the sojourn in Egypt) is proved. But if the details of the context are taken as seriously as the mention of this name, it will be readily seen that this cannot be the case. If we grant for the sake of discussion that Rameses II was on the throne and oppressing Israel, we would note that Moses is not born yet. It would take about 20 or more years to build the city, then eighty more years before Moses appears before Pharaoh (Rameses), and then a couple of years for the plagues--this man would have been Pharaoh for over a hundred years. That is clearly not the case for the historical Rameses II. But even more determining is the fact that whoever the Pharaoh was for whom they made the treasure cities, he died before Moses began the plagues. The Bible says that when Moses grew up and slew the Egyptian he fled from Pharaoh (whoever that was), and remained in exile until he heard that that Pharaoh had died. So this verse cannot be used for a date of the exodus in the days of Rameses, unless all the other details in the chapters are ignored. If it is argued that Rameses was the Pharaoh of the oppression, then his successor would have been the Pharaoh of the exodus. Rameses reigned from 1304 B.C. until 1236, and then was succeeded by Merneptah. That would put the exodus far too late in time, for the Merneptah stela refers to Israel as a settled nation in their land. One

store cities for Pharaoh. **1:12** But the more<sup>30</sup> they oppressed them, the more they multiplied and spread. As a result the Egyptians loathed<sup>31</sup> the Israelites, **1:13** and they<sup>32</sup> made the Israelites serve rigorously.<sup>33</sup> **1:14** So<sup>34</sup> they made their lives bitter by means of<sup>35</sup> hard labor in mortar and in bricks and by all kinds<sup>36</sup> of labor in the fields. All their labor they made them serve with rigor.<sup>37</sup>

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would have to say that the name Rameses in this chapter may either refer to an earlier king, or, more likely, reflect an updating in the narrative to name the city according to its later name (it was called something else when they built it, but later Rameses finished it and named it after himself [see Benno Jacobs, *Exodus*, p. 14). For further discussion see Gleason Archer, “An 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty Ramses,” *JETS* 17 (1974): 49,50; and Charles F. Aling, “The Biblical City of Ramses,” *JETS* 25 (1982):129-137. Furthermore, for verses 11-14, see K. A. Kitchen, “From the Brick Fields of Egypt,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976):137-147.

<sup>30</sup> The expression literally says, “and when they oppressed them, then/thus they multiplied and spread.” The verse is intended to say that whenever they oppressed them to try to diminish their spirit and their strength, they [Israel] increased. The imperfect tenses in this verse are customary uses, expressing continual action in past time (see GKC, par. 107e).

There was nothing in the oppression that caused this, of course. Rather, the blessing of God (Gen. 12:1-3) was on Israel in spite of the efforts of Egypt to hinder it. According to Genesis 15 God had foretold that there would be this period of oppression (*‘anah* in Gen. 15:13). In other words, God had decreed and predicted both their becoming a great nation and their oppression, to show that He could fulfill His promise to Abraham in spite of the bondage and oppression.

<sup>31</sup> Literally, “felt a loathing before/because of”

<sup>32</sup> Literally, “the Egyptians”

<sup>33</sup> Literally, “with rigor, oppression, harshness”

<sup>34</sup> The form is the *waw* consecutive with the preterite, showing sequence. The verb *marar* anticipates the introduction of this theme in the instructions for the passover.

<sup>35</sup> The preposition *beth* in this verse has the instrumental use: “by means of” (see GKC, par. 119o).

<sup>36</sup> Literally, “and in all labor”

<sup>37</sup> The line is ambiguous. It might more simply be translated, “All their service in which they served them [was] with rigor.”

**1:15** The king of Egypt said<sup>38</sup> to the Hebrew midwives,<sup>39</sup> one of whom was named Shiphrah, and the other Puah,<sup>40</sup> **1:16**<sup>41</sup> “When you assist<sup>42</sup> the Hebrew women in childbirth, observe at the birthstool; if it is a boy, kill him,<sup>43</sup> but if it is a girl, then she may live.”<sup>44</sup> **1:17** But<sup>45</sup> the midwives feared God, and they did not

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<sup>38</sup> Literally, “and the king of Egypt said”

<sup>39</sup> The word for “midwife” is simply the *piel* participle of the verb *yalad*, “to give birth.” So these were women who assisted in the childbirth process. It seems probable that given the number of the Israelites in the passage these two women would not be the only Hebrew midwives, but may have been over the midwives (Rashi).

Moreover, the LXX and V do not take “Hebrew” as an adjective, but a genitive after the construct, yielding “midwives of/over the Hebrews.” This leaves open the possibility that these women were not Hebrews. This would solve the question of how the king ever expected Hebrew midwives to kill Hebrew children. And yet, the two women have Hebrew names.

<sup>40</sup> Literally, “who-the name of the first was Shiphrah, and the name of the second was Puah.”

<sup>41</sup> The verse repeats the verb that began the last verse; to translate it again would seem redundant in English. Some versions choose to render it “spoke” in verse 15 and “said” in verse 16.

<sup>42</sup> The form is the *piel* infinitive construct serving as an adverbial clause of time. This clause lays the foundation for the next verb, the *qal* perfect with a *waw* consecutive: “when you assist . . . then you will observe.” The latter carries an instructional nuance (= the imperfect of instruction), “you are to observe.”

<sup>43</sup> The instructions must have been temporary or selective, otherwise the decree from the king would have ended the slave population of Hebrews. It is also possible that the king did not think through this, but simply took steps to limit the population growth. The narrative is not interested in supplying details, only in portraying the king as a wicked fool bent on destroying Israel.

<sup>44</sup> The last form *wakhayah* in the verse is unusual; it is written in pause for the third feminine singular form, the form not having the *daghesh forte* in pause (GKC, par. 76i). It is the feminine form, following the feminine subject expressed by the *k<sup>e</sup>thiv q<sup>e</sup>re* form *hiw’* (a frequent form in Genesis). In the conditional clause, following the parallel imperative form (“kill him”), this form should be rendered “she may live” or “let her live.”

<sup>45</sup> Literally, “and they feared”

do what the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live.<sup>46</sup>

**1:18** Then the king of Egypt summoned<sup>47</sup> the midwives, and he said to them, “Why have you done this thing and let the boys live?”<sup>48</sup> **1:19** And the midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew<sup>49</sup> women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous; and before the midwives<sup>50</sup> come to them they give birth<sup>51</sup>.”<sup>52</sup>

**1:20** So God treated the midwives well,<sup>53</sup> and the people multiplied and became exceedingly strong. **1:21** And because the midwives feared God, he made<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> The verb is the *piel* preterite of *khayah*, “to live.” The *piel* often indicates a factitive nuance with stative verbs, showing the cause of the action. Here it means “let live, cause to live.” The verb is the exact opposite of Pharaoh’s command for them to kill the little boys.

<sup>47</sup>The verb *qara’* followed by the *lamed* preposition has the nuance of “summon.” The same construction will be used later when Pharaoh summoned Moses.

<sup>48</sup> The second verb is a preterite with a *waw* consecutive. It may indicate a simple sequence: “Why have you done . . . and (so that you) let live?” It could also indicate that this is a second question, “Why have you done . . . [why] have you let live?”

<sup>49</sup> See further Niels P. Lemche, “‘Hebrew’ as a National Name for Israel,” *Studia Theologica* 33 (1979):1-23.

<sup>50</sup> The noun and the verb are singular, but collective.

<sup>51</sup> The perfect tense with the *waw* consecutive serves as the apodosis to the preceding temporal clause; it has the frequentative nuance (see GKC, par. 11200).

<sup>52</sup> The point of this little section is that the midwives feared God more than the king. They simply followed a higher authority that prohibited killing. Fearing God is a basic part of the true faith that leads to an obedient course of action and is not terrified by worldly threats. There probably was enough truth in what they were saying; but they clearly had no intention of honoring the king by participating in murder. And they saw no reason to give him a straightforward answer. God honored their actions.

<sup>53</sup> The verb *wayyeteb* is the *hiphil* preterite of *yatab*. In this stem the word means “to cause good, treat well, treat favorably.” The *waw* consecutive shows that this favor from God was a result of their fearing and obeying him.

<sup>54</sup> The temporal indicator *wayhi* focuses attention on the causal clause and lays the foundation for the main clause, namely, “God made households for them.” This is the second time the text affirms the real cause of their defiance, their fear of God.

households<sup>55</sup> for them.

**1:22** Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying, “All sons<sup>56</sup> that are born you shall throw<sup>57</sup> into the river, but all daughters you may<sup>58</sup> let live.”<sup>59</sup>

### Composition and Context

The Book of Exodus begins by introducing the theme of the slavery of Israel in Egypt. A reading of the first chapter presents a tension between the forces of death and destruction versus the power of God in defeating such forces. In a way, the chapter presents a summary of the conflict that will last for fifteen chapters. It is a question of whom Israel shall serve, Egypt in slavery or Yahweh in freedom. In this chapter the reader discovers that no matter how much Egypt attempted to control the fate of the Israelites, the Israelites continually fulfilled their divinely appointed destiny to become a great nation.

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<sup>55</sup> Or, “families”; literally, “houses”

<sup>56</sup> The substantive *kol* followed by the article stresses the entirety--“all sons” or “all daughters” (see GKC, par. 127b).

<sup>57</sup> The imperfect is either instruction or injunction. The form includes a pronominal suffix that reiterates the object of the verb: “every son . . . you shall throw it.”

<sup>58</sup> The imperfect could also be instruction or injunction. But it could also have the nuance of permission, which may fit better. The Pharaoh is simply allowing the girls to live.

<sup>59</sup> Verse 22 forms a fitting climax to the chapter in which the king continually seeks to destroy the Israelite strength. Finally, with this decree, he throws off any subtlety and commands the extermination of Hebrew males. The verse forms a marvelous transition to the next chapter in which Moses is saved by the daughter of Pharaoh himself. These chapters show that the king’s efforts to destroy the strength of Israel--so clearly a work of God--met with failure again and again.

And that failure was usually at the efforts of women, whom he did not consider a threat.



The structure of the chapter develops the intensification of the opposition to the fulfillment of the promises. The first section (1:1-7) announces the theme of Israel's prosperity in Egypt. The second section (1:8-14) reports their continued prosperity in the face of deliberate opposition. The third section (1:15-21) explains this prosperity as divine favor in spite of Pharaoh's attempts at population control. The final verse presents the culmination of the developing tyranny and a transition to the next section—Pharaoh commands the murder of the males (1:22). But the verse can be included in the third section because it is also part of the plan to kill the males.

The reader can see the power of God throughout the chapter as the people flourish under the forces of evil, but by the turn of affairs reported in the last section the reader is left with new, unresolved questions about the power of God.

There is a fascinating literary connection with Genesis 12:10-20, which in many ways foreshadows this part of Exodus. In Genesis 12 there was a famine, so Abram and his family went down to Egypt. Abram was concerned that he, the male, would be killed, and Sarai, the female would be saved alive and kept in Egypt. Once there Sarai was taken into the house of Pharaoh in spite of Abram's plans to avoid it. But God plagued Egypt with great plagues, so that Abram and his family were expelled from the land ("sent out" is the same verb in Exodus for "let my people go."). The connection cannot be fortuitous. God was working in the events of the life of Abram, to whom the promises were made, to foreshadow the nation's experience. It would be an encouragement to them that the same God was not going to let the king of Egypt thwart the promises of God.

## **Exegetical Analysis**

### **Summary**

After the generation of the founding fathers passed away, the people of Israel grew rapidly into a great and powerful nation, in spite of the king's attempts to prevent their expansion with harsh labor and the killing of all the males who were born to them.

## Outline

- I. In spite of the deaths of the patriarchs and their generation, the people of Israel grew into a great nation in accordance with the promise of God (1-7).
  - A. The patriarchs and their generation all died in Egypt (1-6).
    1. The text records the names of the patriarchs and their families who came down to Egypt (1-5).
    2. All that generation died in Egypt(6).
  - B. The Israelites multiplied rapidly and filled the land (7).
  
- II. Because the Israelites were becoming so numerous, the new king in Egypt began to oppress them with harsh labor, only to discover that the more they oppressed them the more they flourished (8-14).
  - A. The new king, afraid that the Israelites would become too numerous and join the enemies of Egypt, instituted a policy of harsh labor in building projects (8-11).
    1. The new king expressed his fear that the Israelites would ally with the enemies and be a threat to Egypt (8, 9).
    2. He instituted a policy of harsh labor in massive building projects (10, 11).
  - B. The Israelites multiplied even more rapidly the more they were oppressed (12).
  - C. The Egyptians made their lives even more bitter with harsh labor (13, 14).
  
- III. Because the Israelites continued to become a great nation, the king instructed that all the males who were born should be killed, only to find that his plan had been thwarted by the midwives (15-22).
  - A. The king of Egypt tried unsuccessfully to have the midwives kill the male babies when they were born (15-21).
    1. He instructed them to kill the males when they were born (15, 16).
    2. The midwives did not do it because they feared God, and they told the king that the Israelites gave birth before they arrived (17-18).
    3. God blessed the midwives for their obedience and the nation in

- accordance with his plan (20, 21).
- B. The king of Egypt commanded that every son born to them be thrown into the river (22).

### **Additional Resources**

**Aling**, Charles F. “The Biblical City of Ramses.” *JETS* 25 (1982):129-37 [on 1:11]. **Archer**, Gleason L. “An 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty Ramses.” *JETS* 17 (1974):49-50 [on 1:11]. **Coats**, G. S. “A Structural Transition in Exodus.” *VT* 22 (1972):129-42 [on 1:1-14]. **Culley**, Robert C. “Structural Analysis: Is It Done with Mirrors?” *Interpretation* 25 (1974):165-81 [on 1:15-21]. **Kitchen**, K. A. “From the Brick Fields of Egypt.” *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976):137-47 [on 1:11-14]. **Lemche**, Niels P. “‘Hebrew’ as a National Name for Israel.” *Studia Theologica* 33 (1979):1-23 [on 1:22]. **Wicke**, Donald W. “The Literary Structure of Exodus 1:2–2:10.” *JSOT* 24 (1982):99-107 [on 1:2–2:10].

## **EXPOSITORY DEVELOPMENT**

### *I. God blesses his people in accordance with his promises (1-7)*

Prosperity in Egypt is the thrust of the first section (1:1-7), as it is for the whole chapter. The inclusion of the names of those who came down to Egypt forms a literary connection to Genesis and introduces the founding fathers of the nation of Israel. The Israelites living in bondage most likely had retained a knowledge of their ancestry; this list revives the memory of that knowledge as the starting point.

But Joseph and all that generation died. Since this was common knowledge its inclusion must be for emphasis, expressing a contrast to the theme of verse 7. There was death in Egypt (a theme to be used again and again in this book), but in spite of that, the people flourished to become a great nation. The exegesis needs to stress the origin and significance of this death, especially as it relates to the promises. Recall that in Genesis 15 God had said Abram would die, and his descendants would be in bondage for 400 years—and yet the promises were sure.

Death would not hinder them. See how the Book of Hebrews makes a point that these all died not receiving the promises.

Verse 7 states the theme for this chapter. The report of the flourishing of the Israelites is better understood through a close analysis of the Hebrew terms used to describe it. The verbs “be fruitful” (*parah*), “multiply” (*rabah*), “swarm” (*sharats*), “be strong” (*atsam*), and “replenish” (*male’*) are literary links to the account of creation in Genesis. These are the words used in Genesis 1 to describe how God supernaturally enabled everything to develop and flourish and fill the earth. In fact, much of Exodus is based on creation (as we shall see especially with the Decalogue). The text describes Israel’s growth and prosperity in terms of the first great commission given by God—Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth. In Genesis these commands are inseparably connected with the blessing of God (“and he blessed them, and said, ‘Be fruitful . . . ’”). Claus Westermann explains that this blessing included divine enablement for fruitfulness (*Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church* [Fortress Press]). The point of the repeated allusions to that account is to show that Israel’s prosperity in Egypt was also by divine blessing; that the divine plan for mankind to be fruitful, fill the earth, and subdue evil, was now being channeled through the seed of Abraham; and that death and opposition could not frustrate the will of God for his creation. Israel was as much a creation of God as was the universe. This is a crucial starting point for the book and should be given full attention. The people of God owe their existence to two major works of God: election and creation.

The Israelites were entrusted with the traditions that recorded the plan of creation, the interruption of that plan by sin which brought evil and death, and the specific plan of God to make a great nation out of Abraham to bless the world. Israel’s growth in Egypt represents what might be considered normal living on some circumstances, except the growth was rapid and numerous. And, the way it is here reported shows that it was as if they were living in the knowledge of what they knew God wanted done.

## *II. God provides for his people even in difficult times of opposition (1:8-14).*

The second major section of the account records the oppression by the new king in Egypt. It is not necessary for the theological explication of the passage to determine who this king was. However, it makes good sense to argue for an early king of the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty. These Egyptian kings had driven the Hyksos from

power. The Hyksos ruled during the intermediate period. These were Semitic rulers who seized power in Egypt for a couple of centuries and were then expelled by the first leaders of the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty. A plausible reconstruction would be that these Hyksos rulers were a minority ruling class, but they probably got on well with the Hebrews who were also Semites. But when they were driven from power, the new king, an Egyptian, who did not know Joseph, nor care to know him, was insecure in his power and did not wish the Israelites to grow larger than they and join with the Hyksos who might return to fight them.

After a period of time under the Hyksos rulers, the early rulers of the eighteenth dynasty of Egypt came to power. The time is not indicated in the chapter, but the king who tried to get the midwives to kill the infants would have been one of the early kings, perhaps even the founder. He apparently was more concerned about protecting his power than having a slave population to do the work. His policy was eventually to throw the males in the river—and that is the link to Exodus 2. So the king of that policy has to be the one on the throne when Moses is born, 1526 B.C. The Hyksos were long gone. Moreover, it is inconceivable that Hyksos rulers would have wished to kill their slaves, especially fellow Semites. Having Egyptian opponents was enough to handle.

This setting is highly debated in critical circles today because it is related to the date of the Exodus. And since most scholars take a late date for the exodus, ignoring or explaining away the data of the Bible (which we will study more closely later at the passage of the exodus itself), then all these connections have to be changed, according to them. If we can say is that this connection makes the most sense because it fits with the biblical data and the historical setting very well. But as I said above, the theological point of this chapter does not depend on it (but a lot of details in the text do not make as much sense in a later period).

The terms that previously described the prosperity of the Israelites are now expressed as fears of these ruling people: “they are greater and more numerous.” A skillful decision (he used the word “be wise, shrewd”—this is the wisdom of the world that does not know God) was required to prevent their further multiplication, and so intense slavery was designed. The basic word here to describe the oppression is *‘anah*, “to oppress, violate.” The term has a wide range of meanings that should be discussed for the fullest understanding. For example, the usage in Genesis 34 to describe the rape of Dinah is a fitting illustration of the word. It involves physical abuse, forced subjection, and humiliation. This king was

trying to crush the spirit out of Israel by the slavery. Other terms that describe it in the passage include “bitter” and “crushing.” The word “bitter” will come up again in the passover section—they were to eat “bitter herbs” because of this oppression.

If the plan was designed to keep the Israelites from growing in number, it was doomed from the start. The text reports again that the more they oppressed them the more they multiplied. There was nothing in the oppression that caused this. It was that the oppression was part of the plan of God. Genesis 15 told of it and even used the verb “oppress” to describe it. God’s plan included both the becoming a great nation and the oppressing slavery. Pharaoh was simply a part of the fulfillment of the divine plan. Why? Because God wanted Israel to know that their growth, in fact their survival, was a work of God.

*III. God preserves his promises through faithful people  
even when the world tries to destroy them (15-22).*

The third part of the chapter reiterates the point, but with a different situation: nothing will stop the plan of God to make these people into a great nation, not anything the world can try to do, even if they try to kill the people of God.

The section reports the attempt of the king to have the midwives kill the children (15-21). Whether this is a new Pharaoh or not, the point is the intensification of the opposition. It is possible that this is another king trying a new tactic. We do not know because we do not know who the king was who started the oppression. But the fact is that the Israelites had not only grown in number—they had filled the land. It was teeming with them. The strength of the world system now would attempt to curb their growth. The king thought he could control the population by killing the males. But the fact that he could not kill the males shows that he certainly had no power even to keep the females alive. The power of life and death is in the hand of God for the seed of Abram—and for Egypt as the book will show—as Jesus explained to one of his oppressors, Pontius Pilate.

It would seem to me that the point to emphasize in this section would be the faith of the midwives in obeying God rather than man, and God’s reward for their faith. It is in this section first that God is mentioned in the book. The midwives feared God and would not kill the children. A study of what it means to fear God is in order. Such a study will reveal, at least, that fearing God is a basic

element of the true faith that leads to an obedient course of action and is not terrified by worldly threats. Because they feared God they disobeyed the king.

The actions of these women, probably the heads of the midwives guild, for two women could not serve such an expanding population, are honored by God: he dealt favorably with them by giving them families. So the theme of multiplying Israelites continues in the chapter, now as a result of defiance of the order of the oppressor. The women simply followed a higher authority, and that authority prohibited the taking of a life and promised that the seed of Abraham would continue to multiply as the stars of the heavens. Here was genuine wisdom, not the wise dealings of the new king.

The last verse of the chapter (22) could be part of the third division; but it still makes a transition to chapter two. It introduces into the narrative a new tension that will be developed in the next section. The command (now an outward, open decree of murder) called for the throwing of the males into the Nile, but the saving alive of the girls. The decree would be terribly difficult for us to imagine were it not for the modern evidence of the holocaust. One usually asks where God was in such a time, but perhaps a more basic question is where mankind was—if man is supposed to be so humane. The account is another illustration of how much evil man came to know (“you shall know good and evil”). A similar plan would also be devised by Herod in an attempt to destroy the infant Jesus. That Moses or Jesus could survive such devastation is evidence that the hand of God was preserving them for their mission of deliverance.

## CONCLUSION

The theological ideas of this first chapter are not hard to isolate. On the evil side we have the king(s) of Egypt trying to bring death and destruction on Israel. Natural death was one thing, but unnatural death was tyrannical opposition. The chapter shows that they were powerless to complete their plot. The Book of Psalms is filled with similar types of attempts, albeit on a smaller scale. But one thing is very clear here: from the very beginning of the nation, the wicked power of the world, Satan’s kingdom, has tried to exterminate the Jews. Satan knows what the promises of God are, and tries at every step to thwart them. He is not through yet, because the promises have not all been completed. God makes promises that demand a resurrection, so even those who die in the faith will yet realize them.

On the other side we have the outworking of the plan of God, not only as it was revealed to Abram, but also as it was commanded of Adam and Eve. Their fruitful multiplication was a sign of the blessing of God. The indications from **the writing** of the story are that they feared God and lived in confident awareness of the promises of the fathers. They could endure the oppression as long as they had evidence that it was all working according to the word of the LORD.

Transferring these theological themes across to the modern Christian's experience is not too difficult when the New Testament message is brought to bear on the subject. Opposition to the work of God is attested frequently. The world, i.e., the present evil system, is antagonistic and would seek to destroy God's people and their work. But they know they do not wrestle flesh and blood, but forces of evil, much as ancient Israel did. The struggle between good and evil exists from the Fall. What remains then is the determination of the covenant promises God has made to us today, and the covenant responsibilities. Little has changed. We too must fear God rather than men, for therein lies obedience and security in oppression. The Christian today, like the Israelite of old, is God's representative on earth, expanding the kingdom of Christ on earth. The growth of the covenant people today is not primarily concerned with physical birth (although that may be a part of it), but with spiritual. The covenanters today flourish in spite of Satanic opposition, because he that is in them is greater than he that is in the world. A study of New Testament passages on the work of the Church in the expansion of the kingdom in the midst of opposition and persecution will be germane to the application of this story. And down through history we see how the Church flourished the most under persecution.

The practical application for believers is to expect opposition from the world, but to get on with the work of promoting and expanding God's covenant plan, even if the efforts seem small. God wants to build a great people to represent him on earth; but it will take great faith to stand up to the prince of darkness.