

Exodus 1:1-22

I. Exodus 1:1 — **AND** these are the names of the sons of Israel who came into Egypt with Jacob...

The book of Exodus begins with the word “AND.” As a general rule, you don’t start a book, or even for that matter a chapter, with the word “and.” Exodus begins with the word “and,” though, because it’s a seamless continuation from Genesis. Exodus continues the story that began all the way back in *Genesis chapter one* – “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” How does it do this? First, let’s see how Moses connects the beginning of Exodus to the end of Genesis:

- ✓ Genesis 50:22, 24-26; Exodus 1:1 — So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father’s house... And Joseph said to his brothers, “I am about to die, but **God will visit you and bring you up out of this land** to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, “**God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.**” So Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt. [Exodus] **And these are the names of the sons of Israel who came into Egypt...**

This seems to be Moses’ thinking: “We’ve just talked about how God would one day bring the house of Israel *up out of Egypt*; so now let’s remember the names of the sons of Israel who went *down into Egypt*.” If we’re to understand the “bringing up” of a people out of Egypt, then we must understand exactly *who* it is that went down into Egypt.

II. Exodus 1:1-5 (cf. Gen. 35:22-26) — **And these are the names of the sons of Israel who came into Egypt** with Jacob, each with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. All the descendants of Jacob were **seventy** persons; Joseph was already in Egypt.

Exodus not only begins with “and,” it also begins by reaching back into Genesis and repeating a passage from chapter 46 (some of it word for word):

- ✓ Genesis 46:2-27 — God spoke to Israel in visions of the night and said, “Jacob, Jacob... I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, **and I will also bring you up again...**” Then Jacob set out from Beersheba... **And these are the names of the sons of Israel, who came into Egypt...** Reuben... Simeon... Levi... Judah... Issachar... Zebulun... Gad... Asher... Joseph... Benjamin... Dan... Naphtali... All the persons of the house of Jacob who came into Egypt were **seventy**.

Once again, Moses seems to be thinking: “We’ve just talked about how God would one day bring the house of Israel *up out of Egypt*; so now let’s remember the names of the sons of Israel who went *down into Egypt*.”* If we’re to understand the “bringing up” of a people out of Egypt, then we must understand exactly *who* it is that went down into Egypt. We may not usually get

* Notice that here the listing of the names doesn’t happen in a new book, or even in a new chapter!

too excited about genealogies and lists of names. But the point of this list of names is so that the people of Israel can understand *who* they really are, what is their *place* in the world, and what their *experiences* in the world really mean. Even as God’s people today, we need to understand our own identity—who we really are—in light of the book of Genesis – in light of our own beginnings. Only now can we begin to make sense of the next two verses in Exodus – the *first* verses in Exodus that finally begin to tell us something “new”:

III. Exodus 1:6–7 — Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation. But the people of Israel were **fruitful** and **swarmed**; they **multiplied** and grew **exceedingly** [**“greatly, greatly”**] *numerous*,[†] so that the **land** was **filled** with them.

Do you think it’s possible that Moses is trying to make a point? But what *is* the point? Is it just that now there are a whole lot of Israelites living in Egypt? That’s a rather boring point to make. But Moses has chosen his words with special care. He’s chosen words that practically drag us back into Genesis, reminding us first of all of the *covenant* promises that God gave to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

- ✓ Genesis 17:1-2, 6, 8 (cf. 22:17; 26:3-4, 24) — The LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may confirm my covenant between me and you, and may **multiply** you **exceedingly** [**“greatly, greatly”**]... I will make you **exceedingly** [**greatly, greatly**] **fruitful**... And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the **land** of your sojournings, all the **land** of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”
- ✓ Genesis 35:11-12 (cf. 48:3-4; 47:27) — God said to [Jacob], “I am God Almighty: be **fruitful** and **multiply**... The **land** that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the **land** to your offspring after you [for an everlasting possession; cf. 48:3-4].”

See how careful Moses is in Exodus chapter one to use the language in Genesis of God’s covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob! Who you are *today* as a nation that has “**multiplied**” and been “**fruitful**” “**exceedingly**” is because of God’s promises that He first made *four centuries ago* to Abraham. Of course, the mention of the “land” makes us feel a tension. Israel has multiplied and been fruitful exceedingly, and filled the land of *Egypt*, but isn’t it the land of *Canaan* that they’re meant to fill? But then what’s the point of even these covenant promises? What do even these promises tell us about who we really are, and what our place is in this big world? The words that Moses has so carefully chosen pull us back into Genesis, not just to God’s covenant promises to Abraham, but all the way back to the very beginning – all the way back to *creation* in Genesis chapter one.

- ✓ Genesis 1:1, 28; 9:1, 7 — In the beginning, God created the heavens and the **land**... And God blessed [Adam and Eve]. And God said to them, “Be **fruitful** and **multiply** and **fill** the **land** and subdue it, and have dominion” ... And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, “Be **fruitful** and **multiply** and **fill** the **land**... And you, be fruitful and **multiply**, **swarm** [cf. Gen. 1:20-21] on the **land** and **multiply** in it.”

[†] Cf. NIV; HCSB; NASB marginal note

Now let's look again at Exodus: "But the people of Israel were **fruitful** and swarmed; they **multiplied** and grew exceedingly numerous, so that the **land** was **filled** with them." In the end, it's just impossible to miss the point! As one commentator puts it, it's "God's intentions in **creation** [that] are being realized in [Israel]." (Fretheim; quoted in Motyer) To say it the other way around, Israel now exists in order to bring to pass God's creation intention for **all** the land (including the land of Egypt) to be filled entirely with God's righteous people (including even believing Egyptians). We can't understand Abraham, or the nation of Israel, without understanding **creation**. And so we see, as one commentator says, that God's "work in creation provides a basis for his work in redemption; his work in redemption fulfills his work in creation." (Motyer) What Moses wants the people of Israel to understand is that this whole exciting thing is way bigger than the Jews, and way bigger than the land of Canaan to which they're headed (cf. Gen. 12:3; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). Israel exists as the people through whom God will bring the blessings of His heaven to all the earth for all eternity. It's only in this light that we can truly understand and rejoice in these words: "Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation. But the people of Israel were **fruitful** and **swarmed**; they **multiplied** and grew **exceedingly** ["**greatly, greatly**"] *numerous*, so that the **land** was **filled** with them." Here in the multiplying of Israel, we see the coming of God's original purposes for the entire creation. Only now are we really in a position to read what comes next.

IV. Exodus 1:8–10 — Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, "Behold, the people of Israel are **too many and too mighty** for us. **Come, let us** deal shrewdly with them, **lest they multiply**, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from [or, "take possession of"; cf. Stuart; NJPS] the land."

"*Too many*"? "*Too mighty*"? "Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, *lest they multiply*"? In what world can the people of God be *too many*? In what world can it be wished that the people through whom God will bring about the blessings of His heaven in all the earth – in what world can it be wished that *this people* would cease to multiply? It's expected that Pharaoh's words will jar us – grating like fingernails on a chalkboard. They're just completely *wrong*!

Whatever else might be going on here politically, socially, economically, Moses wants us to see that the real crisis is theological and spiritual. Pharaoh's plan is inspired by Satan, the one who would steal, and kill, and destroy (John 10:10), rather than see all the blessings of God's heaven come down to fill all the earth. When Pharaoh says that the people of Israel are "too mighty," he uses a word that appears only *here* in Exodus, and only one time in Genesis:

✓ **Genesis 18:18** — Abraham shall surely become a great and **mighty** nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him.

Pharaoh has set himself against the plan of God to bring His blessing to all the earth. Pharaoh has set himself in opposition not just to the Jews, but to God's purposes and plans in the very *creation* of the world (Genesis 1). In what world can the people of God be too many – the people through whom the blessings of God's heaven will ultimately come to all the earth? Only in a world where the seed of the serpent still exists side by side with the seed of the woman.

- ✓ Genesis 3:14–15 — The LORD God said to the serpent... “Cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field... I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between **your offspring** and **her offspring**; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

When Pharaoh says to his people, “*Come, let us...*”, and then forces the Jews to labor at building cities with brick and mortar (Exod. 1:11, 14), we hear an echo of an earlier story in Genesis 11:

- ✓ Genesis 11:3-4 — And they said to one another, “**Come, let us** make **bricks**, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had **brick** for stone, and bitumen for **mortar**. Then they said, “**Come, let us build** ourselves a **city** and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.”

Just like the people at Babel, Pharaoh is opposed to God and His good purposes in the creation of the world. And so what is intended to bring blessing (the phenomenal growth of the people of Israel) is viewed by the offspring of the serpent as only a threat. What at first seemed so hopeful is now suddenly turned to suffering and dread.

V. Exodus 1:11–14 — Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses. But the more they were oppressed, the more they **multiplied** and the more they **spread abroad**. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves.

If ever there was a picture of human suffering, and pain, and oppression, this is it. Moses says that God’s people were “afflicted” with “heavy burdens,” they were “oppressed,” their lives were “bitter with hard service,” and they were treated “ruthlessly.” And all of this is the **result** of what, at first, we were so excited about. All this bitterness, and suffering, and cruel oppression, and ruthlessness is the apparent *result* of God’s plans and purposes coming to pass. What an unspeakable tension this is – especially when we remember that this isn’t just the “impersonal” story of a big group of people, but the story of individuals, of husbands, and wives, of fathers and mothers, and children. One commentator reminds us: “Beyond [the] public oppression... lay agonizing depths of private and domestic grief. ‘Darkness’ and ‘sorrow’ unbounded!” (Motyer) All this bitterness, and suffering, and cruel oppression, and ruthlessness is the apparent *result* of God’s plans and purposes coming to pass.

But then to add even more to this tension, we read that “the more [the sons of Israel] were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad.” Once again, Moses chooses words that remind us of creation, and of God’s covenant promises to Abraham. God used this same word for “spread abroad” when He spoke to Jacob:

- ✓ Genesis 28:14 (cf. Gen. 30:30) — Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall **spread abroad** to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

The fact that Israel “multiplies” and “spreads abroad” the more they are oppressed tells us that God is still *present*, and working to bring His blessing to all the earth. He’s still there, somehow. But at the same time, it seems purposeful that God is hardly mentioned anywhere in this chapter, and only once in anything like an active role (when He’s said to be good to the midwives). God is present, but seemingly *silent*. Sometimes we may know that God is present, but in so many ways, it feels like He should be absent. Exodus 1 would certainly qualify as one of those times.

In Exodus one, we know that God must be present, because the more Israel was ruthlessly oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread abroad. But then again, on the other hand, the more Israel multiplied and spread abroad, the more they were ruthlessly oppressed. All this bitterness, and suffering, and cruel oppression, and ruthlessness is the apparent *result* of God’s creation plans and purposes coming to pass. Here is an unspeakable tension. What does the “presence” of God mean when it feels like He should be absent? Since Plan A is not succeeding, Pharaoh moves now to Plan B.

VI. Exodus 1:15–21 — Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, “When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live.” But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. So the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and let the male children live?” The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people **multiplied** and **grew very numerous**. And because the midwives feared God, **he gave them families**.

We’re going to come back to this account of the midwives next week, but for right now, we see once again the actual reversal of what Pharaoh intends. Pharaoh would reverse the multiplication of Israel by infanticide – by the murder of baby boys at the moment of their birth. And yet even as his plan is foiled by the midwives, the people of Israel continue to “multiply” and “grow very numerous.” Not only this, but Moses says that God gave the midwives families of their own. I love how one commentator calls this a “delicious irony.” (Currid) It seems likely that in that day, midwives were women unable to have children of their own. (Stuart) This would explain why they were free to devote their time to attending the births of others. Now given all that we’ve seen so far, there were obviously very few women in Israel unable to have children. But now, in some respects as a direct result of Pharaoh’s plan to cut down on the population of children, even the very few who were barren in Israel are now suddenly having children of their own!

And so once again, what does this tell us? It tells us that God is still present; and not just to the midwives, but even to the suffering, ruthlessly oppressed people of Israel whose very lives are a bitterness in hard slavery and labor. God is present, and yet in so many ways it still seems that He remains silent. God is present; but then why, in the very coming to pass of His creation plans and purposes, does Israel experience so much oppression, and horror, and pain? Since Plan A and Plan B have not succeeded, Pharaoh moves to plan C.

VII. Exodus 1:22 — Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live.”

In the next chapter, we'll see a mother trying to keep her baby boy a secret for three months. And then, when she feels like she can no longer keep him hidden, she puts him in a floating basket among the reeds along the riverbank. In the next chapter, the irony gets even more "delicious." But still, there's nothing "delicious" about hiding your baby boy for three months because you fear for his life. There's nothing sweet about abandoning your baby boy in the hopes that he might live. Many of us know the good ending of that specific story. But as we see the desperate actions of that mother, we're reminded that there were others in the same place who didn't necessarily experience the same results. Why, in the very coming to pass of God's creation plans and purposes, does Israel experience so much oppression and horror? I'm reminded of an event fourteen centuries later when God was miraculously providing for the ultimate fulfillment of His creation purposes and covenant promises. (cf. Currid) King Herod had asked the wise men to inform him of the location of the baby, Jesus, so he could kill him. But being warned by God in a dream, the wise men departed by another way.

- ✓ Matthew 2:16–18 — Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."

Conclusion

We live in a world of Pharaoh's – where there has always existed, and where there will always exist until Christ returns, a seed of the serpent. On the one hand, this *explains* a lot. This explains, *in part*, why there have been more Christians martyred in the twentieth century than the previous nineteen centuries combined. This explains, *in part*, why "Christians in many parts of the world suffer brutal torture, arrest, imprisonment and even death – their homes and communities laid waste – for no other reason than that they are Christians." (Currid) This explains, in part, why here in America the sentiment of scorn, and even hatred toward Christians is becoming more and more evident.

The existence of the seed of the serpent explains a lot, but it doesn't explain everything. In fact, by itself it's only the cause of us asking more questions – especially, and over and over again, the question "Why?" When we read Exodus 1 and ask "**Why?**", we have to first of all remind ourselves of **who** Israel is (and who we also are) in light of creation and in light of the covenants. Then we can see clearly, in light of the continued multiplying of Israel, that God is actively **present** even in Exodus 1 – even if, to us, it's still painfully "behind the scenes." But then we also need to go back and read these verses from Genesis 15, and then Genesis 46.

- ✓ Genesis 15:13–14 — The LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions."

- ✓ Genesis 46:2-4 — God spoke to Israel in visions of the night and said, “Jacob, Jacob... I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again...”

The suffering of Israel in Egypt is not ultimately explained by the existence of the seed of the serpent, but by the existence of a faithful, covenant-keeping God whose ways are not our ways, and whose thoughts are not our thoughts. The suffering of God’s people throughout this world is not ultimately explained by the existence of the seed of the serpent, but by the existence of the God of creation, who is *at all times* working out His plan to bring the blessings of His heaven to all the earth (cf. Exodus 1). As Motyer says:

“There is something very basic in us that needs life to be logical and is restless and resentful when we cannot see adversity fulfilling some purpose. Our faith needs to mature if it is to survive the days of darkness that will inevitably come upon us... [We must trust and rest] in the knowledge that underpinning everything that happens to us there is a secret, undeclared providence always at work, always providing, always purposeful, always on the side of the people of God.”

Today, we even have a comfort in suffering beyond what the Israelites could ever know. The seed of the woman in creation, and the seed of Abraham in covenant, is ultimately Jesus Christ Himself – who suffered supremely at the hands of the serpent and his seed. And so today, the suffering of God’s people at the hands of the seed of the serpent has been given *meaning*, and even “*explained*” more fully as a sharing in the sufferings of Christ – whose sufferings were all for our sake, and for our salvation. If we share now in *His* sufferings, then how much more will we also share in His glory!

- ✓ 1 Peter 4:12-14 — Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.