
Lesson 1 Exodus 1:1-22

The Hebrew name for the Book of Exodus is Shemot, “names,” because the book begins by naming the household of Israel, the twelve sons of Jacob who are the patriarchs of the tribes which bear their names: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher ...and Joseph. “Names” is an appropriate title because other significant names will be given in the book, such as the name “Moses” and the names of important places along the journey. Most of all, the most holy Name of God, *YHWH*, is revealed to Moses and the Israelites in the Book of Exodus [3:13-15].¹

Names are much more important in the Bible than they are for modern people. For us, a name is a convenient label which distinguishes families and members of families from one another. Often parents will choose a boy’s name and a girl’s name during their pregnancy, and give the chosen name as appropriate. The chosen names may honor another member of the family, such as a deceased grandparent; or they may continue a tradition, such as Robert, Jr. or John, III. Frequently names are chosen because they are currently popular, and it is only a matter of taste whether the firstborn son is Donald or Sebastian or Edmund. Many people have no idea what their given name means, why it was given, or, in the case of Christians, who their patron saint is.

For the people of the Bible, the choice of a name was very important. The name was carefully chosen and is usually related to a significant event or the circumstances of the birth [see Genesis 29:31-30:24 for the meanings of the names of the sons of Jacob/Israel]. In some cases, the name is actually revealed by God to the parents [Luke 1:13 and 31].

A name symbolizes one’s whole identity. To know someone’s name is to know their character and their very self [see Genesis 27:36]. It is for this reason that God (or an angel representing God) rarely reveals his name, for no mortal can comprehend the nature of God [Genesis 32:29; Judges 13:18].

¹ In this commentary, chapter and verse numbers in brackets, without the name of a book, refer to Exodus.

Names also signify the person's vocation, so that when God calls someone to a special mission, a new name may be given [Genesis 17:5 and 35:10, Numbers 13:16, Isaiah 62:2, Revelation 2:17].

There are many genealogies in the Bible, so that the names of the ancestors may be recalled generation after generation. The remembrance of the name is a kind of immortality. The expression "to have one's name blotted out" [Deuteronomy 26:5, Psalm 69:28] means total annihilation. In Jewish practice today, the dead are remembered and their names announced in the synagogue on the sabbath nearest the anniversary of their death.

In Isaiah 56:5 God promises a monument and a name to those who are incapable of having children and yet keep God's covenant. Isaiah's words in Hebrew, *Yad VaShem*, is the name of the Holocaust memorial near Jerusalem. One section of this shrine is dedicated to the one and a half million children who died during this genocide; their recorded names are played back daily so that they may continue to live in remembrance.

These opening verses also subtly remind us that God is trustworthy. Did not God promise Abraham that his descendants would be numerous? [Genesis 15:5] Already the families of Abraham's grandson number 70. Within three generations the incredible promise of God has begun to be realized; soon the 70 will grow into a sizable community: the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them. As in similar cases in the Bible, the point is not to provide an exact census, but to indicate that the families of Israel had become such a sizable foreign minority as to threaten the internal security of the kingdom of Egypt.

For all its drama and power, the Book of Exodus gives us neither exact names nor dates which can be verified by comparison with what is known about Egyptian history. In one way, this anonymity allows Exodus to proclaim its message to all peoples in every generation. At the same time, it tantalizes us, making us want to know more about the historical circumstances.

Egypt was not the well-defined political entity it is today. In biblical times there was an "Upper" (southern) Egypt, and a "Lower" (northern) Egypt. About 1720 B.C. various Asiatic peoples called the Hyksos ("foreigners") dominated the Nile delta region. Among these foreigners were Semitic tribes - the kindred of the family of Abraham. By 1670 B.C., a Hyksos ruler had occupied the ancient Egyptian capital of Memphis (along the Nile in Lower Egypt) and adopted the traditional titles and privileges of the Pharaoh. The native Egyptian aristocracy maintained itself in Upper Egypt, with a capital at Thebes. This period was both a time of humiliation for the Egyptians and an opportunity for Semitic advancement. It is usually thought that Joseph's remarkable rise to power [Genesis 41] was part of this Semitic success story.

In about 1550 B.C., the Egyptian Amose succeeded in recapturing Memphis and driving the Hyksos people back toward Canaan. He established the 19th Egyptian dynasty and what is called the New Kingdom. His descendant Seti I (ruled 1305-1290 B.C.) is most likely the new king who arose over Egypt, and who did not know Joseph. The humiliation of the Hyksos era was not easily forgotten. Seti and his administrators were anxious about the Israelites who still dwelt along their northeast border. In this location, between Egypt and Canaan, and with ethnic ties to the Hyksos in Canaan, they could “in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.”

Their shrewd dealing with the situation was a policy of conscripted labor. In addition to the necessary work of tending their own flocks in order to provide for their own families, the Israelite men were required to work for their Egyptian rulers. The hope was that this intolerable situation would eventually kill the men and leave the women and children in dependence on Egypt.

As noted earlier, the Bible does not name the “Pharaoh” of the Exodus story. Scholars generally agree that Seti I is Pharaoh at the time of Moses’ birth. Seti’s son, Rameses II (ruled 1290-1224 B.C.), is believed to be the Pharaoh at the time of the actual Exodus. It was Rameses who moved his capital to the site of the former Hyksos capital in the Delta region and inaugurated a massive building program. The new cities are named Pithom (“house of (the Egyptian god) Atum”) and Rameses, for the Pharaoh himself. Since the story is recorded long after the events, the text can be a little confusing about who the Pharaoh is and which building projects are referred to. The point is still clear: the rulers of Egypt oppressed the Hebrews with the work of building.

A note about the term “pharaoh”: In Egyptian, this word originally meant “great house” or palace, just as Americans use the term “the White House” to stand for the office of the presidency and its staff and administration. Once again, the Biblical Pharaoh is a symbol for any oppressor, any enemy of the people of God.

Exodus 1:12 gives us a great insight into human nature. The conscription plan backfires, for people actually can grow stronger through hard work and suffering. Their desire to survive was only intensified by the very real possibility of being worked to death. The inner strength of the Israelite people added to the threat posed by their numbers. Thus, the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.

Now the nomadic shepherd people are forced into a whole new way of life: the settled agrarian and urban life. They are assigned the work of farmers: planting, irrigation, canal dredging and maintenance, and harvesting. In addition, they become brickmakers, hod carriers, and bricklayers. Exodus simply says that their lives became bitter as the freedom-loving Israelites experienced the drudgery of work without the satisfaction of accomplishment and creativity.

Again, the text reminds us that this kind of work dehumanized the children of Israel, for the Egyptians were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

Political domination and taxation of the Delta area by the Egyptians was not deemed sufficient for national security. Forced labor resulted in the strengthening of the people. The next, desperate measure was infanticide, a final solution to the Israelite problem.

The king commanded the Hebrew midwives to kill the child as soon as its sex was known, presumably by strangulation. These deaths could easily be explained away. But Shiphrah and Puah refuse to participate in this scheme and courageously disobey, claiming that Hebrew women deliver their children unassisted.

The story notes that Shiphrah and Puah feared God rather than the king of Egypt. This fear of the Lord, later identified in Christian tradition as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, means a profound reverence for God. This reverence is based on an awareness of the goodness of God toward us; we desire to remain close to God and we fear anything that would endanger that relationship. Catholic spiritual writers link fear of the LORD to the virtue of hope. Overwhelmed at the greatness and goodness of God, we trust God more and more. How wonderful that in the midst of the Israelite's desperation, these two women stand out as signs of hope! They knew that God could be trusted.

Exodus both describes world-changing events and yet retains an intimate style. Why would the king personally interview the disobedient midwives? Pharaoh was rarely seen in public. Even if the new Egyptian capital was located in the midst of the Israelite settlements, the average person, much less a slave, would never expect to be granted an audience with the quasi-divine king.

From a literary point of view, the ongoing dialogues between Pharaoh and the Israelites keep the story exciting and energetic. But theologically, the real dialogue of the story is between Pharaoh and the God of Israel, represented by his people and ultimately by Moses. God has no use for human arrogance and privilege. In his sight all people are equal. Hence the God-fearing midwives are shown to be worthy to stand before Pharaoh and testify on behalf of God's providence.

There is wry humor in the meeting of the midwives with Pharaoh. One can almost imagine them laughing to themselves as they brag about their sisters: Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them. They imply that the aristocratic Egyptian women are weak and unable to endure pain, thus preparing us for the victory of the hardship-tested Israelites over them. The Hebrew word for vigorous suggests that the Israelite women deliver with the ease and speed of farm animals.

The courage of the midwives – and their reverence for God – results in double blessing: the continued prosperity of the whole people, and the personal reward of their own families. For the people of the Bible, there was no greater curse than sterility and no greater blessing than a large family [Deuteronomy 28, Psalm 128].

The Old Testament recounts several stories of devout people who miraculously receive children as a sign of God's blessing on their faithfulness: Sarah [Genesis 21], Rachel [Genesis 30], Manoah [Judges 13], and Hannah [1 Samuel 1].

Pharaoh's dread of the Israelites is shown in all its irrationality. Pharaoh needed slaves to complete his ambitious projects, but his fear of ranks of young Israelite men defecting to the enemy – or even becoming revolutionaries – outweighs his common sense. Frustrated in his secret attempt to stifle the growth of the Israelites, he goes public with his plan of genocide: "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

Ancient peoples believed that the man carried the whole potential for the next generation; the woman served as the nurturer of the new life. Some terms for reproduction reflect this rather agricultural understanding: we speak of male "seed" (in Greek, *sperma*; in Latin, *semen*) placed in a "fertile" or "barren" womb. "Seed" is the biblical term for "descendants." Pharaoh thought that by eliminating the male Israelites he would soon eradicate their whole race, while the Israelite women might serve to produce numerous Egyptians.

Pharaoh is not to be faulted for his inadequate grasp of biology; his actions would have been understood by everyone at that time. Nonetheless, his ruthless oppression of the Israelites reaches its peak: he seeks to destroy Israel, root and branch. The policy of Pharaoh is not simply practical. Its immediate effect is the utter demoralization of God's people. They are bereft of a future.