

Getting into the text

Q.1 Can you identify words and phrases in chapter 1 that remind the reader of the Genesis creation account? What are they?



Q.2 Exodus 1:7 says that the Hebrews “became fruitful and *swarmed...*” What is the writer trying to convey to the reader here? Compare passages like Genesis 1:20,21; 7:21; 8:17; 9:7; 12:2,3; 15:5; 47:27.

Q.3 What clues do your findings above give as to how we should approach our interpretation of the events described in the book of Exodus? Keep your eyes open for the connection between matters of creation and matters of deliverance during our studies.

Q.4 Ancient Egyptians had benefitted greatly from Joseph’s wise counsel (see Gen. ch 41). What attitude does the new King of Egypt bring to his reign? What troubles him and what fears do his comments and commands reveal (1:8-14)?

It was the infamous Machiavelli who wrote:
“There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. Because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new.”
- The Prince, 1515

Q.5 Pharaoh sets himself against the Hebrews by his actions. How might you say that this story is more than Pharaoh vs. Israel and is in fact about Pharaoh vs. God? How do Pharaoh’s actions differ to the commission God gave to humans in the Genesis creation accounts and in the promise God made to Abraham?

Q.6 What examples do you see in today’s world of leaders, who by their attitudes and actions, are by ignorance or design opposed to God’s plans and purposes?

Letting Exodus speak to our time

Continuity with the past

Several New Testament passages teach the church of “today” with illustrations directly from the experiences of Israel in the past. For example:

- Romans 4
- Hebrews 11
- 1 Corinthians 10

If we want to understand the ideal of faith in God, study Abraham’s example as Romans 4 and Hebrews 11 teaches. Faith in Christ now is a fulfilment of the ideal faith that Abraham expressed, though he himself did not see Christ. By taking God at his Word and acting on it, we do what faithful ones in Israel did in the past too. In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul tells of the rebellion of God’s people in the Sinai desert and says that these things were written as warnings for us today (10:11). The connectedness between those pilgrims of the past and us is Christ (as Paul explicitly states in 10:4). Christ and those who belong to him by faith are the fulfilment of all God promised to Abraham (Galatians 3:6,7). We have the privilege of hearing about and knowing the one who fulfils all God’s promises (2 Cor. 1:20). What lessons then can we glean for the church today in Exodus 1 and 2?

1. The Lord rules despite evidence to the contrary

Scholars often note the absence of God in the opening 2 chapters of Exodus. Until God’s appearance in 2:23-25, there is a sense in which Israel may ask: How could God allow this to happen? Why doesn’t God simply free us and deal with Pharaoh? Has he forgotten us? The tension in these opening chapters finds an answer in 2:25: God is with his people even though he doesn’t appear to be so.

We Christians are often too easily given to doubt God’s presence when outward circumstances suggest otherwise. But Exodus reminds us time and time again that when we are going in God’s direction in life, God’s promise and God’s Gospel will prevail and will advance, despite opposition from humans or powers and principalities. It’s not the circumstances that determine God’s presence with us– it is God’s faithfulness to his promises.

The resurrection and the Gospel that proclaims that not even death can defeat God’s plan (as Paul so eloquently states in Romans chapter 8). Therefore, we may not be defeated by the difficulties of the day, but rather inspired to trust God, even when all is bleak and hard.



The Birth of the Deliverer (see Hebrews 11:23-26)

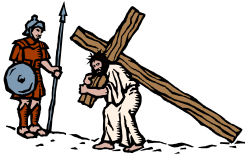
What the Lord God did in the next contest is remembered and interpreted in the light of Christ for us in the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 11...

- 23 By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.
- 24 By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter.
- 25 He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time.
- 26 He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.

Our journey from here on in Exodus is about the man who **chose NOT to 'WALK LIKE AN EGYPTIAN'...but to walk like a person of faith!** We'll look at Moses more closely in later studies. In the meantime, our passage in Exodus tells us quite strongly that resistance is futile- towards God's ultimate purposes that is! God will make his promise to Abraham prosper despite all opposition- but through surprising means.

This, of course, is what the disciples of Jesus came to understand about the resurrection of Jesus. In Acts chapter 2, Peter spoke about God's action in the face of intense opposition:

- 22 "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.
- 23 This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.
- 24 But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.



This again, is the way of God's saving love- God overcomes obstacles too great to imagine in order to complete His saving purposes. God's saving love is displayed in His compassionate response to a cry for help from Israel in slavery. More than this, He loved them and committed Himself to them before they cried out. The small victories in Israel's favour in chapters 1 and 2 of Exodus encourage and inform our faith. Reading Exodus helps us to have a better appreciation of what took place in the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus. Human hardness of heart and the propensity to secure one's own control and sovereignty over life directly opposes God's purpose in creating us and his promise to redeem us and the world. Being freed from slavery in Egypt was a mighty saving act; how much more is God's greater exodus for those who trust in His Son as the conqueror of sin death?

The God of freedom prevailed in the past and will do so today.

Three Unlikely Victories

Wanting to subdue and control God's people for his nation's prosperity, Pharaoh puts in place 3 solutions to the threat posed by the swiftly expanding band of Hebrews. An unevenly weighted battle ensues behind the scenes in the narrative:

Round One- enslavement (1:11-14)

So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. 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.

ACTIVITY

Watch chapter 12 of the DVD "Prince of Egypt" from Disney - young Moses in the courts of Pharaoh observes the hardship of his people.

When considering the plight of the Hebrews we shouldn't underestimate the level of hardship that might have been suffered. We can gain some appreciation through the suffering of others today.

Q. 7 What stories of slavery and hardship in our world from past and present help you to appreciate the plight of the Hebrews?

GOING FURTHER

Israel's future stories, Egypt would be known as "the land of slavery". Much weeping and distress accompanied their experiences (Exodus 2:23). However, note how the Bible calls the faithful to remember "the land of slavery" in the following passages:

- Exodus 13:14-22
- Deuteronomy 7:8,9
- Joshua 24:17
- Judges 6:8,9
- Jeremiah 34:13
- Micah 6:4,8
- Hebrews 11:23-27

In the Exodus narrative, despite Pharaoh's best efforts to oppress God's people, and thus opposing God's plans, 1:12 tells us that nevertheless the Israelites multiplied and spread in number again. Note that there is no Indian Jones type of hero who arose to defeat Pharaoh, or rescue them from slavery. But verse 12 hints that **God is the hero** of these events with familiar words from the creation and promise, "multiplied and spread". God defends and moves his purposes forward often through surprisingly weak or oppressed people in difficult circumstances.

In Deuteronomy 7:8 we later read:

But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

The whole Torah emphasises God's grace and not human effort as the means of God's people multiplying and becoming a blessing to the nations. Equally, their delivery from a plight like slavery is attributed to a gracious and purposeful God and not to human ingenuity or courage alone; on the contrary, the human leaders are often remembered for their frailty and inadequacy. It is by God's power and love that His promise progresses.

Round Two - infanticide (1:16,17)

Pharaoh would have known that setting slave-masters over the enemy should have been a sure-fire winner for any self-respecting king— just enough hardship to subdue but not enough to cause an uprising. But Pharaoh lost round one. He went stealthily to those in charge of the maternity wards for round two....

*"When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live."
The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live.*

Pharaoh hoped to assimilate the next generation and remove any future military might from the mix, but to keep the older male labour force in the short term. "Surely this will stop them spreading", he must have thought. However, God's "army" included insignificant and unsuspected double agents! Again, the population increased against the odds.

Round three - in deep water (1:22 and chapter 2)

Round two had been an undercover operation; an inside job for Hebrew ears only so as not to destabilize the nation's confidence in their leader. But now Pharaoh crosses the line. In verse 22 we read:

Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: "Every boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live."

Pharaoh sets all Egyptian citizens on a path of great peril with this command in verse 22. Like Herod in Jesus' day (Matthew chapter 2), Pharaoh implicates the whole nation in the killing spree out of fear and pride.

Richard Halverson, former chaplain to the U.S. Senate wrote, "Whether a man likes it or not—if he's in a place of leadership—he will be influencing others. He has no right just to consider himself. He must think in terms of his influence. This is part of the price of leadership! Not just the man himself—but what happens to those who follow in his footsteps—is the serious responsibility of the leader..."

Considering water will play a central role in the coming chapters, the choice of the Nile as the place for drowning the young males is not insignificant. Pharaoh's fixation was now escalating beyond the point of no return and his down-spiralling ethics show his aspirations for the role of lord over all to be thoroughly flawed.

The Nile's religious and natural significance led Pharaoh to have the Hebrew boys forsaken to whatever destiny the river might give to them. This life-giving river was to be a grave for many. No doubt, Pharaoh believed the odds were that all would die. However, God the Redeemer was at work yet again through seemingly insignificant events (re-read chapter 2:1-10)



Behind the scenes in this passage, and throughout the Bible, God is always at work (e.g. 1:20). The Bible consistently emphasises our need to remember who God is and how God consistently acts. The prophet Isaiah gives good examples in such passages as: Isaiah ch. 40; 43:16-17; and 45:18,19, where he tells of God's ways in the past so that people will have confidence that God will deliver his people in the future.

The present is not divorced from the past; on the contrary, God's desire and power to save and deliver remains the same. We learn when looking back over these events that God is always with his people of promise, even when by all appearances, we are led to think otherwise (see 2:23-25).