

Lesson 1

Exodus



The King Who Did Not Know Joseph

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| Early World | Patriarchs | Egypt & Exodus | Desert Wanderings | Conquest & Judges | Royal Kingdom | Divided Kingdom | Exile | Return | Maccabean Revolt | Messianic Fulfillment | The Church |
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Introduction

The book of Exodus assumes readers are familiar with Genesis, the introductory book of the Bible—especially with God’s covenantal promises to Abraham and his descendants, Isaac and Jacob, and with the story of Joseph and how the people of Israel came to be in Egypt. In the book of Exodus, many moral lessons exemplified in the lives of the patriarchs are codified into law. The same Jesus Christ toward whom “Moses and the prophets” point illuminates in a brand new way the mysteries found in Exodus. Some of the patterns played out in this Old Testament book are as relevant as today’s headlines. More than 3,000 years ago Pharaoh told his Hebrew slaves in Egypt that there were too many of them. Today, Satan, the prince of this world, tells his slaves much the same thing. Like Pharaoh, Satan still seeks to enact “population control” in an attempt to keep people in political power from feeling too threatened.

Exodus 1:1-22

1 ¹These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: ²Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, ³Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, ⁴Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. ⁵All the offspring of Jacob were seventy persons; Joseph was already in Egypt. ⁶Then Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation. **⁷But the descendants of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong; so that the land was filled with them.**

⁸Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹And he said to his people, “Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. ¹⁰Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war befall us, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” ¹¹Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens; and they built for Pharaoh store-cities, Pithom and Raamses. ¹²But 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. ¹³So they made the people of Israel serve with rigor, ¹⁴and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar

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and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field; in all their work they made them serve with rigor.

¹⁵Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶“When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women, and see them upon the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him; but if it is a daughter, she shall live.” ¹⁷But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. ¹⁸So the king of Egypt called the midwives, and said to them, “Why have you done this, and let the male children live?” ¹⁹The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and are delivered before the midwife comes to them.” ²⁰So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and grew very strong. ²¹And because the midwives feared God he gave them families. ²²Then 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.”

[Please Note: One of the best ways to meditate on God’s Word is through memorization. A suggested memory verse is always highlighted in the Scripture text, or you may choose a verse of your own.]

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Study Questions

It’s best to read all of Exodus 1:1-22 and *Points to Ponder* before responding to the study questions. To aid in discussion, please note Scripture verses where you find your responses.

The Sons of Israel Who Came to Egypt

Exodus 1:1-7

1. Where did Jacob and his family live before coming to Egypt, and why did they move? What kind of relationship did they have with the Egyptian pharaoh at that time (see *Gen 47:1-6*)?

2. **But the descendants of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong; so that the land was filled with them.** In Scripture, “fruitfulness” means fertility in all aspects of life—children, family, crops, and herds—and it connotes the

blessing of God. How is the type of fruitfulness mentioned in Exodus 1:7 (our suggested memory verse), related to one of the promises God made to Abraham (see *Gen 15:1-6*)?

There Arose a New King

Exodus 1:8-14

3. In Exodus 1:8, what does the word “know” suggest in the Hebrew language? What does this disclose about the relationship between the pharaohs of Egypt and the descendants of Israel? Why is it important that this new king, or pharaoh, “did not know Joseph”?

4. What do the Egyptians fear in Exodus 1:9-10? What was the political position of the Israelites in Egypt during Joseph’s lifetime (see *Gen 47:27*)?

5. What are the heavy burdens that the people of Israel are afflicted with in Exodus 1:11-14? What is the sign that God still is with them?

The Midwives Feared God

Exodus 1:15-22

6. In Exodus 1:15-16, Pharaoh seeks to kill only the male children of the Hebrews. Why does Pharaoh single out the boys (see the *Rome to Home* excerpt from *Evangelium Vitae* by Pope John Paul II)?

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7. Why do the Hebrew midwives refuse to comply with Pharaoh's edict in Exodus 1:17? Fear of God is one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. What are the other six, and what effect do they have in the life of a Christian (see *Isa* 11:2-3 and *CCC* 1831)?

8. How does God react to the Hebrew midwives' refusal to kill babies?

9. The New Testament writers address the issue of how Christians should respond to requests made by those in positions of authority. What does St. Paul advise the Christians in Rome to do as citizens, and who does he see as the governing authorities (see *Rom* 13:1-7)? In Acts of the Apostles, how do Sts. Peter and John react when they're told not to speak about Jesus Christ (see *Acts* 4:19-20)?

10. In Exodus 1:22, to whom does Pharaoh address his order to kill the Hebrew boy babies, and how does this compound Pharaoh's evil?

Questions for Reflection

The following questions are designed to help you reflect further about how ideas in Exodus 1:1-22 might apply to your own life:

1. Pharaoh was unfaithful to the covenant his ancestors had made with Joseph, but God remains ever-faithful to his covenant with Abraham. Think of a time when you've felt betrayed by someone close to you. Did this betrayal affect your ability to trust others? Why, or why not? How do you think the ideas of religious faith (having faith in God) and fidelity (being faithful to a loved one) are related?

2. A sure indicator that a culture has become deeply corrupt is when it starts to kill its children. List some parallels between the reasons given by Pharaoh thousands of years ago and the reasons given by abortion advocates today for allowing children to die. What are some steps Christians can take to defend life?

Opportunities for Additional Study

Points to Ponder—*Exodus 1:1-22*

Exodus and the Gospel

Many Catholics are more comfortable reading the New Testament than the Old. This isn't a modern phenomenon. During the early years of the Church, the heretic Marcion openly voiced what many Christians still secretly think in the back of their minds—that the God revealed in the Old Testament is a God primarily concerned with wrath and judgment while the God of the New Testament is full of love and mercy. The heresy of Marcionism went so far as to say that Jesus Christ had defeated the God of the Old Testament, and to insist that the Jews had been chosen not by God the Father but by a sort of wicked spirit from whom Jesus came to deliver humans. Most people don't go to such heretical extremes. They simply decide it's easier to stick with the Gospels and other familiar books of the New Testament—and they avoid studying the book of Exodus and other Old Testament writings. Behind this kind of thinking is the mistaken idea that the Old Testament Scriptures are somehow outmoded.

Jesus teaches to the contrary when he says: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them” (*Mt 5:17*). In fact, Christians who are unfamiliar with the Old Testament—particularly with the book of Exodus—can be stymied by the related references found in the New Testament. The book of Exodus is filled with Christian symbolism, and the Christian faith abounds with Exodus and Passover imagery. The Eucharist was instituted in the context of the Passover and is itself the fulfillment of the Passover (*Lk 22:14-15*). The Ten Commandments still bind Christian believers. In the Gospels, the Exodus is one of the principal images used by Jesus to describe deliverance from sin through the waters of Baptism. It's also a dominant image of the final book of the New Testament, The Revelation to John (the Apocalypse).

In the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament) the Hebrew word *qahal*, which means “assembly,” is translated into Greek as *ekklesia*, a word that's the root of the English word “ecclesiastic.” In the New Testament, *ekklesia* usually is translated as “church.” It's the word that Jesus himself is recorded using in Matthew's Gospel to refer to his followers as a group (*Mt 16:18* and *Mt 18:17*). This image draws heavily from the story of the Exodus and is based on the wilderness wanderings of the people of Israel. The Church also is depicted on pilgrimage in search of the city of Zion (*Heb 13:14*). In this, the New Testament writers are following the tradition of Jeremiah and other Old Testament prophets who prophesied that during the messianic age, the Israelites would experience a new Exodus greater than the original Exodus (*Jer 16:14-15* and *Jer 23:7-8*). The Christian faith is rooted in the events surrounding the Exodus.

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In describing the person and work of Jesus Christ, the New Testament draws heavily on imagery from all of the first five books of the Old Testament, but especially from Exodus.

Practical Wisdom of the Torah

The book of Exodus opens with a sort of bridge connecting it to Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament. The reason is simple—the Law of Moses is one continuous scroll containing the first five books of the Old Testament (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). All five of these books constitute Old Testament law—not just the Ten Commandments or the ceremonial prescriptions found in Leviticus. It's here that contemporary readers encounter a major difference between the modern-day conception of law and the ancient Hebrew understanding of it. For the people of ancient Israel, the historical narratives of Genesis and Exodus constitute law every bit as much as the Ten Commandments (also known as the Decalogue).

Hebrew religious law (or Torah) isn't something that can be reduced to statutes or rules and regulations. Instead, it includes the idea of the way to attain wisdom. In Hebrew society, the person who gives Torah (teaches religious law) would be the father of a family and not a legal professional. Sons were instructed in the law by their fathers in order to learn wisdom and the way of life. By the time of Jesus, the Pharisees had emerged as a class of legal professionals who devoted themselves to studying, teaching and interpreting Jewish religious law. When contemporary Christians encounter the word "law," it carries negative connotations associated with rules and regulations. To the Hebrew mind, however, Torah evokes God's fatherly favor in showing his children the way of life in a dark and baffling world.

Torah consists of practical wisdom. As St. Paul discovered, commandments don't create moral people. In fact, they tend to evoke rebelliousness (*Rom 7:7-25*). In the book of Exodus, this problem arises when God is giving the law to the Israelites, a race of fallen people. How can people be taught morality if they're not already righteous? Commandments, blessing and curses aren't enough. Every parent knows this. One of the surest ways to get a child to do something is to say: "You'd better not do that." Somehow, the itch to find out if he or she really will get in trouble compels the child to do what's been forbidden. Telling the same child: "Good things will happen if you do this disagreeable thing" (for example, homework), usually is met with skepticism. Torah (Hebrew religious law) solves this problem by beginning with stories. Before a student encounters "you shall not commit adultery," "you shall not steal," and all the rest of the "you shall nots" (*Ex 20:1-17*), Torah tells stories about people who did things that are contrary to the law, and students can observe the results for themselves. The book of Exodus assumes readers are familiar with some of these stories—those that can be found in Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament. Solid knowledge of the entire book of Genesis is necessary to understand Exodus, the second book of the Bible, but several stories are particularly important in connection with the law given at Mount Sinai. The story of the incestuous origins of the Ammonites and Moabites (*Gen 19:30-38*) establishes the background of nations that pose a severe threat to the Israelites when they reach the Promised Land. Included in the recounting of divine judgment against the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah is the ugliness of the Sodomites' treatment of Lot and his guests (*Gen 19:1-29*). Jacob brings much suffering on himself as the result of his theft of his brother's birthright (*Gen 25:27-34*). Jacob's unhappiness in regard to the injustice

involving his marriages to Leah and Rachel (*Gen 29:16-30*) is echoed in the suffering inflicted on Joseph by his brothers (*Gen 37:12-28*). Without an understanding of these narratives, the rules and statutes of the book of Exodus and the rest of Torah appear to be little more than a collection of empty do's and don'ts. When read in the context of the Genesis narratives, however, the judgments of the law make solid sense.

The Pharaoh Who Did Not Know Joseph

Although Genesis ends on a happy note with the people of Israel comfortably settled in Egypt: “Thus Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen; and they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly” (*Gen 47:27*), Exodus immediately opens to a story of crisis and betrayal. Exodus 1:8 provides the key to why this is: “Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” In Hebrew, the word translated to English as “know” implies far more than knowing the capital of France or knowing who George Washington was. In Hebrew thought, to know someone is to have a sacred covenant relationship with them. Through the prophet Amos, for instance, God tells the people of Israel: “You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities” (*Amos 3:2*). This doesn't mean that God is unaware of the existence of the rest of the human family. Rather, it means that at Mount Sinai when God entered into covenant relationship with the people of Israel, it was a covenant with them alone.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus addresses what it means to know God when he warns: “Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers’” (*Mt 7:21-23*). This doesn't mean that Jesus won't have any idea who these people are. It means that by their infidelity to Jesus' commands, they'll be strangers to him.

A covenant establishes a bond of sacred kinship between those entering into it. When Exodus 1:8 records that “there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph,” the author isn't saying that the new king, or Pharaoh, was ignorant of Joseph or had never heard of him. Rather, he's explaining that there's been a political upheaval in Egypt and that the new Pharaoh deliberately has chosen to break the longstanding covenantal bond between Egypt and the Israelites. At the conclusion of Genesis, Joseph was prime minister in Egypt, and he wielded real power. Goshen, where the Israelites settled, was no slum. The area consisted of some of the best land in the country. Like all covenants, the covenant relationship between the people of Israel and the people of Egypt that had been entered into through Joseph's mediation included an intergenerational dimension. Both parties—in this case Israel and Egypt—are bound to one another in ongoing fidelity.

When Pharaoh refuses to honor the covenant already in place between Egypt and the descendants of Israel, his actions have political and spiritual consequences. Pharaoh's political and economic motivations are obvious. The Israelites have done well in Egypt. Joseph's relatives own the best land, are multiplying rapidly, and are prospering. The spiritual ramifications of Pharaoh's actions will prove to be grave. Despite the miraculous guidance Joseph received from God and used to aid Egypt in a time of famine, a later Pharaoh will declare that he “knows” neither Joseph's kin

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(descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel) nor the deity that Joseph's descendants worship (the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob).

To curb what he sees as a growing threat from the Israelites, Pharaoh forces the Hebrews into servitude, and he launches an attempt to take over their property. When Joseph was second in command in Egypt, he acquired land "for Pharaoh." In reality, he and his family controlled this land, and since the time of Joseph, the Israelites steadily have been gaining more property. To regain this lost land, the new Pharaoh settles on a "quiet" policy of property theft. He orders all the Hebrew male children killed. The reasoning behind this dreadful decree is that within a generation there will be very few Hebrew men, so Hebrew women will of necessity be forced to marry Egyptians. The title to the Hebrew women's property would then pass to their Egyptian husbands.

The murder of babies in Pharaoh's day is similar to legal abortion today. At the time of Moses, as now, some people of conscience stood against this horrible tragedy. As a result of refusing to cooperate with Pharaoh's edict, the Hebrew midwives were blessed with families. Those who refuse to resort to abortion today also receive one of God's greatest blessings, the blessing of children. In the time of the Exodus, additional blessing came to the whole world through the birth of Moses, the man chosen by God to play a pivotal role in salvation history.

Catechism Connections

- To learn more about why Jesus chose the time of Passover, introduced in the book of Exodus, to institute the Eucharist, see CCC 1339.
- CCC 1950 teaches that the meaning of moral law can be defined as fatherly instruction.
- Jesus came to institute a new law, or Law of the Gospel. To learn how this new law relates to the Law of Moses, see CCC 1962 and 1968.
- For more information about the Church's teaching regarding acts that lead to the enslavement of human beings, see CCC 2414.

Rome to Home

Pope John Paul II wrote that there's a parallel between contemporary birth-control practices and Pharaoh's edict that all male children born to the Hebrews were to be killed.

The Pharaoh of old, haunted by the presence and increase of the children of Israel, submitted them to every kind of oppression and ordered that every male child born of the Hebrew women was to be killed (*Ex* 1:7-22). Today not a few of the powerful of the earth act in the same way. They, too, are haunted by the current demographic growth, and fear that the most prolific and poorest peoples represent a threat for the well-being and peace of their own countries. Consequently, rather than wishing to face and solve these serious problems with respect for the dignity of individuals and families and for every person's inviolable right to life, they prefer to promote and impose by whatever means a massive program of birth control. Even the economic help that they would be ready to give is unjustly made conditional on the acceptance of an anti-birth policy.

—*Evangelium Vitae*

Summary

In Exodus 1:1-22, we observed that:

1. The list of names at the beginning of the book of Exodus presumes that readers are familiar with Genesis.
2. The first five books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch) constitute Old Testament law.
3. Torah (Hebrew religious law) consists of more than statutes and rules—it's divine instruction pointing toward a way of life.
4. The consequences of ignoring the law are illustrated in the stories told in Torah.
5. When the new king, or Pharaoh, doesn't "know" Joseph, this implies that the new Pharaoh has broken the covenantal family bond established between the Egyptians and the Israelites during the time of Joseph.
6. The purpose of Pharaoh's oppression of the Israelites is to regain Egyptian land that's fallen under Hebrew control.
7. Pharaoh attempts a "quiet" form of ethnic cleansing by ordering male Hebrew children killed so that Hebrew women will be forced to marry Egyptians and turn over their property to their husbands.
8. The Hebrew midwives refuse to obey Pharaoh's evil law, and their obedience brings blessing not only to them but also, through the birth of Moses, to the whole world.

Exodus Notes

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