



## Prologue to Liberation: On Exodus 1:1–7<sup>1</sup>

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There are no meaningless biblical texts. Even the most simple text hides a particular and unique message. Thus, any time we face a text we are opening a door toward a new and challenging universe. Still, the initial verses of the book of Exodus seem to have poor or little semantic value. Probably nobody will choose to preach on these few lines. A quick reading provides only well-known information, which for some people could be boring, for others merely routine and futile. However, when we approach them, we perceive the feeling that something transcendental is happening, something that will change the future of the Israelite people. We feel that in its simple and probably naïve message are deep, hidden events.

Exodus 1:1–7 is a prologue, but it is not like any other prologue. It comes in the middle of a narrative. Can this be possible? In good literature everything is possible, of course, and here we find ourselves at a literary summit. It is a prologue and at the same time an epilogue, since this text both inaugurates a new period in the history of Israel, one that readers still do not know, and also closes a period that readers know well. It is an essential hinge to both narratives and without it neither

<sup>1</sup>This article is a revised fragment from my book *El Libro del Éxodo* (Salamanca, Spain: Sigueme, 2006).

*To what are the opening verses of Exodus prologue? The book will eventually move to liberation, but only after passing through a time of danger and darkness. The Israelites in Egypt “multiplied and grew exceedingly strong”—good news for Israel, but bad news for Egypt. The reader is left wondering how things will turn out.*

can be understood. This text plays with our imagination and asks for alternative readings to see which are to be confirmed and which will prove fruitless.

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Briefly said, this text closes an adventurous time for Israel—where Joseph and his family had been privileged visitors in the kingdom of Egypt—and opens a new time of blessings, the way towards liberation and the gift of the promised land. But before this happens, the Israelite people will know many sour and tragic experiences. They will suffer oppression, genocide, and idolatry, and they will mistrust their leaders appointed by God. Yet, they will also be enriched by God, receiving divine protection, God’s law, and the instructions and impetus to build a tent to worship him. All of these acts will allow a closer relationship between the people and God. This text is a prologue to all these things, and all of them will be constitutive of the faith and culture of Israel. The prologue invites and encourages the reader to follow up by reading the entire Exodus narrative.

#### READING THE TEXT

These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. The total number of people born to Jacob was seventy. Joseph was already in Egypt. Then Joseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation. But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them. (Exod 1:1–7)

As noted, this unit acts as a prologue to the book of Exodus while also providing links to the previous narrative. Connections with the stories of Genesis are many. The phrase “who came to Egypt” assumes the narrative of Joseph and the arrival of Jacob in Egypt. In the list of descendants, Joseph is mentioned as “already in Egypt,” which assumes that the reader is familiar with the Genesis stories. In verse 7, we find the first suggestion of the fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham that he will become father of nations. The note that the people born to Jacob “were seventy” is a clear reference to Gen 46:27.

When the text says that “the whole generation” passed away and that the Israelites grew from seventy to a multitude, a new period in the narrative begins.<sup>2</sup> That the people “filled” the land has ambiguous meanings. On the one hand, it expresses the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham; on the other, it warns of future problems for the people because this population growth occurs when they are residents in a foreign land.

<sup>2</sup>Gordon Davies in his important work on Exodus considered this text a “transition” between Genesis and Exodus. See *Israel in Egypt: Reading Exodus 1–2* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992) 24.

## Verse 1

“These are the names...” refers back to Gen 46:8, and the information in verse 5 comes from Gen 46:26–28. But these are not the only relationships with the previous verses. Other details support the literary continuity between Exodus and Genesis. The first is not visible in most English or modern language translations. In Hebrew, the entire Exodus narrative begins with a conjunction: “*And* these are the names....” This conjunction expresses the continuity of the narrative with its previous text.<sup>3</sup> This starting “and” is repeated in Lev 1:1 and in Num 1:1, but not in Deuteronomy, revealing the literary continuity of the four first books of the Pentateuch and, at the same time, the distinctive origin of the fifth book.

The second connecting detail is more evident: the list of the sons of Jacob includes only eleven names because Joseph is omitted, while the text then clarifies that he was already in Egypt. Of course, this assumes that the reader knows the previous story. Verse 8 will point out that the new king of Egypt “did not know Joseph,” another hint that the reader was familiar with the old stories of Genesis.

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*the exaltation of the beauty and richness of the land of Egypt in Gen 13:10 might have caused some to view this area longingly, but the fertile lands that surround the Nile River and its delta were not the promised land for Israel*

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Even though it might be obvious, I want to highlight that verse 1 establishes that the Israelites were foreigners in Egypt. The text wants to press the fact that they had come to Egypt from outside and so do not belong to that land. This is not accidental information, especially if we read it in reference to the time of the book’s redaction in postexilic Israel. At that time, there was a growing Jewish diaspora that brought different cultural values and challenged the traditional religious practices and authority of the community resident in the land of Israel. The people living in Canaan, the *returnees* from exile, were suffering limitations, problems, and disappointments regarding their possession of the land (cf. Neh 9:36–37). As a consequence, there could have been a strong temptation to migrate towards one of the cities of the diaspora where the people could have enjoyed the benefits that were missing in their own land. In light of this, we can read the sentence “who came to Egypt with Jacob” as an allusion to and a denouncing of the Jewish colony of Alexandria in Egypt or any other group that challenged the Jerusalem community.

As a corollary, the narrator tries to establish that even if one of the promises was fulfilled in Egypt (that is, the promise of becoming a numerous people), the second promise (the possession of the land) could not be fulfilled in Egypt but only in Canaan. The exaltation of the beauty and richness of the land of Egypt in Gen

<sup>3</sup>This “and” is present in the Masoretic text as well as in the Samaritan text but not in the Septuagint.

13:10 might have caused some to view this area longingly, but the fertile lands that surround the Nile River and its delta were not the promised land for Israel.

*Verses 2–4*

The list of names is meaningful. Our modern translation does not reproduce the original rhythm of the Hebrew names. In fact, certain translations offer the list in continuum with no distinction among them. In the Hebrew text, however, the names are arranged in four groups following the lines of the mothers. The order is as follows: sons of Leah (6) + sons of Rachel (1) + sons of Bilhah (2) + sons of Zilpah (2). To collect the names in this way shows a particular interest in the role of the mothers.<sup>4</sup> This usage is remarkable, particularly because women were so often hidden in biblical narratives. In a polygamist society, the presence of the father gives continuity and unity to the family, but here in Exod 1 the narrative combines information taken from Gen 35:23–26 (sons listed according to their mothers) with the structure of Gen 46:8–26 (sons listed by birth order). Listing the names in the order of birth is more natural and even easier to remember, especially when there are twelve sons (they did not count the daughters). Therefore, we might conclude that the listing in Exod 1:2–4 (through the mothers) is a way to remember those mothers even without mentioning them. This also connects the reader with the two following chapters in Exodus where women will be at the center of the narrative.<sup>5</sup>

*Verse 5*

The information that there were seventy descendants comes from Gen 46:27. This number expresses a superlative form of the number seven, which in biblical narrative is a symbol for plenitude, completeness, and in this particular case the fulfillment of a promise of God. The descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japheth (the sons of Noah) also number seventy, thus expressing the complete population of the world (Gen 10). There are also seventy palm trees in Elim (Exod 15:27) and seventy elders who receive the Spirit in the desert (Num 11:16–24).<sup>6</sup>

The expression “people born” to Jacob is a paraphrase of the literal Hebrew “they came out from the side (*yarek*) of Jacob.” This is a euphemism for the genitals, the place of sexual power and reproduction. In Gen 24:2, Abraham asks for a servant to put his hand under his thigh (*yarek*) in order to give support to the oath

<sup>4</sup>In this list Reuben appears first, but he is not presented as “Jacob’s firstborn” (as in Gen 35:23), perhaps partly due to the fact that Jacob now sees Reuben’s past actions and violence as criminal; see the so-called “testament of Jacob” (Gen 49:3–4).

<sup>5</sup>See Mercedes García Bachmann, “¿Qué hacían mientras tanto las mujeres hebreas (Éxodo 1–2)?” *Cuadernos de Teología* 18 (1999) 7–20; and J. Cheryl Exum, “‘You Shall Let Every Daughter Live’: A Study of Exodus 1:8–2:10,” *Semeia* 28 (1983) 63–82. In both these articles, the authors analyze the role of the women in Exod 1:8–2:10.

<sup>6</sup>Nahum Sarna points out that the number seventy has to be considered as typological and not literal. According to him, the biblical narratives use the number for rhetorical effect to express the idea of wholeness. See *Exodus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New Jewish Publication Society Translation* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991) 4.

he is swearing, but the fact is that the servant has to touch his genitals.<sup>7</sup> In doing so, an essential part of the body became involved in the oath. In the case of our text, the genitals express the deep sense of a people that came from one father, expressing unity and totality. To be “out of the genitals” of Jacob is a privilege and ensures continuity with the promises Abraham received.

#### Verse 6

This verse clearly establishes that we are now in a new period of the story. This is the last time that the word “brothers” will be applied to the sons of Jacob. This suggests that the death of the whole generation is not just a biological and natural fact but also a cultural and political one; at the same time, it is a foreshadowing of the tragedy that will be narrated in the next section. It will be the death of the time when the Israelites were a respectable and prestigious people in Egypt, a time when they had the benevolence of the pharaoh and when one of them (Joseph) was appointed to a high-level government position. If there was a “golden age” in Egypt, it is over, and new, tenebrous winds blow on the Israelite people. Nothing remains of that time, and the old fame of Joseph is now useless to build the future of the people.

This text itself says nothing about how many years the Hebrews spent in Egypt, but in Exod 12:40 we learn that “the time that the Israelites had lived in Egypt was four hundred thirty years.” So, from the point of view of the broader narrative (the story’s internal chronology), these events recounted in the first chapters of Exodus occurred four centuries after the death of Jacob.

#### Verse 7

This verse presents a series of four immediately consecutive verbs and then adds a fifth; all of them express the incredible growth of the Israelite community during the four-hundred-year period in Egypt. This chain of verbs is remarkable, because after connecting them to describe the expansion of the community, the sentence ends with the Hebrew adverb *me’od* (which means “very”) twice in one line to emphasize the superlative force of the verbs. And when the reader believes that he or she has concluded the reading, the text adds a fifth verb, one that means “to fill.” This is a diagram of the sequence: verb + verb + verb + verb + *adverb of quantity* (duplicate) + verb; in translation: be fruitful + be prolific + multiply + grow + *exceedingly* (twice) + the land was filled with them.

Beginning the verse with “But the...” highlights the contrast between the end of one period and the beginning of a new time of blessing: the multiplication of the descendants. The promises of offspring to humanity (Gen 1:28), to Noah (Gen 9:1), and to Abraham (Gen 12:1–3) had already been fulfilled, but the people’s future lay in shadows. Their growth—which should be a blessing—seems instead to become a curse. To be a numerous people is celebrated by the Israelites but makes

<sup>7</sup>Also at the end of Jacob’s life we found the same rite in order to confirm a promise (Gen 47:29).

them a menace to the Egyptian crown. The sentence “the land was filled with them” is, of course, figurative, but it signifies the magnitude of the blessing in order to show us the sad consequences of this growth.

Finally, we should note that the “sons of Israel” in verse 7 refers to a different reality than the same expression in verse 1. In verse 1, they are a family, descendants from the same father Jacob, and each one is presented as the head of his own tribe. Now they are a people and the expression “sons of Israel” will not be used any more with the meaning of “family.” This verse provides a transition from the fulfillment of the promise of fertility to the oppression that lies ahead. The promise of the land is still not mentioned at this point in the narrative.

#### THE FULFILLMENT OF THE PROMISE AS A TRAGEDY

The relationship between verses 6 and 7 has to worry us. When a nation becomes numerous in a foreign land and has lost the protection of the government, things become problematic. From Gen 17:6 we learn that God has promised, “I will make you exceedingly fruitful,” and this extends not just to Abraham but also to Ishmael and Esau. This promise is received as a blessing and a proof that God is faithful to his word.

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Even so, we find in the Exodus narrative a kind of contradiction: God has fulfilled the promise, but it seems he did it in the wrong moment and the wrong context. In Egypt the abundance of sons and daughters is a problem, not a blessing. It is evident that the narrator knows that the reader is conscious that the promises are two—to become numerous and to receive the land—and that both promises have to go together. The narrator is trying to create in the reader the feeling that God is complicating the life of the people because he has only fulfilled one of the two promises. The reader has to continue reading to know what will happen with the promise of the land.

Another issue that has interested many biblical readers is how, starting with only seventy people, Israel became a huge group that bothered the Egyptians (cf. Exod 13:17; Num 1:46). There are legends that say that every Hebrew woman gave birth to six or twelve babies in each pregnancy—or even sixty or seventy!<sup>8</sup> The narrative of Exod 1:1–7, however, is simply not interested in this issue, so to ask this practical and mechanical question misses the sense of the narrative. From the tex-

<sup>8</sup>See Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1968) vol. 2:250; vol. 5:391, note 4.

tual and literary point of view there are two points to keep in mind related to the growth of the Israelites. First, verse 7 is in tune with the old promise of fertility (Gen 17:2–6; 22:17; 26:4–24; 28:3; 35:11; 48:4). Second, fertility in biblical theology is always a sign of blessing (Gen 16:10; 17:20). Thus, the high level of fertility speaks of God's strong commitment to the future of his people.

The menace that the text foreshadows will be realized in 1:8–22 with the oppression of the Israelites and Pharaoh's order to kill every Hebrew boy. The reader will have to wait until the action of the midwives in verse 17 to move out of this darkness and discover that we are in the prologue to liberation. ⊕

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