



# Exodus

T. Desmond Alexander

ILLUSTRATING THE TEXT

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# Welcome to the Teach the Text Commentary Series

Why another commentary series? That was the question the general editors posed when Baker Books asked us to produce this series. Is there something that we can offer to pastors and teachers that is not currently being offered by other commentary series, or that can be offered in a more helpful way? After carefully researching the needs of pastors who teach the text on a weekly basis, we concluded that yes, more can be done; the Teach the Text Commentary Series (TTCS) is carefully designed to fill an important gap.

The technicality of modern commentaries often overwhelms readers with details that are tangential to the main purpose of the text. Discussions of source and redaction criticism, as well as detailed surveys of secondary literature, seem far removed from preaching and teaching the Word. Rather than wade through technical discussions, pastors often turn to devotional commentaries, which may contain exegetical weaknesses, misuse the Greek and Hebrew languages, and lack hermeneutical sophistication. There is a need for a commentary that utilizes the best of biblical scholarship but also presents the material in a clear, concise, attractive, and user-friendly format.

This commentary is designed for that purpose—to provide a ready reference for the exposition of the biblical text, giving easy access to information that a pastor needs to communicate the text effectively. To that end, the commentary is divided into carefully selected preaching units (with carefully regulated word

counts both in the passage as a whole and in each subsection). Pastors and teachers engaged in weekly preparation thus know that they will be reading approximately the same amount of material on a week-by-week basis.

Each passage begins with a concise summary of the central message, or “Big Idea,” of the passage and a list of its main themes. This is followed by a more detailed interpretation of the text, including the literary context of the passage, historical background material, and interpretive insights. While drawing on the best of biblical scholarship, this material is clear, concise, and to the point. Technical material is kept to a minimum, with endnotes pointing the reader to more detailed discussion and additional resources.

A second major focus of this commentary is on the preaching and teaching process itself. Few commentaries today help the pastor/teacher move from the meaning of the text to its effective communication. Our goal is to bridge this gap. In addition to interpreting the text in the “Understanding the Text” section, each unit contains a “Teaching the Text” section and an “Illustrating the Text” section. The teaching section points to the key theological themes of the passage and ways to communicate these themes to today’s audiences. The illustration section provides ideas and examples for retaining the interest of hearers and connecting the message to daily life.

The creative format of this commentary arises from our belief that the Bible is not just a record of God’s dealings in the past but is the living Word of God, “alive and active” and “sharper than any double-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12). Our prayer is that this commentary will help to unleash that transforming power for the glory of God.

The General Editors

# Introduction to the Teach the Text Commentary Series

This series is designed to provide a ready reference for teaching the biblical text, giving easy access to information that is needed to communicate a passage effectively. To that end, the commentary is carefully divided into units that are faithful to the biblical authors' ideas and of an appropriate length for teaching or preaching.

The following standard sections are offered in each unit.

1. *Big Idea.* For each unit the commentary identifies the primary theme, or “Big Idea,” that drives both the passage and the commentary.
2. *Key Themes.* Together with the Big Idea, the commentary addresses in bullet-point fashion the key ideas presented in the passage.
3. *Understanding the Text.* This section focuses on the exegesis of the text and includes several sections.
  - a. *The Text in Context.* Here the author gives a brief explanation of how the unit fits into the flow of the text around it, including reference to the rhetorical strategy of the book and the unit's contribution to the purpose of the book.
  - b. *Outline/Structure.* For some literary genres (e.g., epistles), a brief exegetical outline may be provided to guide the reader through the structure and flow of the passage.

- c. Historical and Cultural Background. This section addresses historical and cultural background information that may illuminate a verse or passage.
  - d. Interpretive Insights. This section provides information needed for a clear understanding of the passage. The intention of the author is to be highly selective and concise rather than exhaustive and expansive.
  - e. Theological Insights. In this very brief section the commentary identifies a few carefully selected theological insights about the passage.
4. *Teaching the Text*. Under this second main heading the commentary offers guidance for teaching the text. In this section the author lays out the main themes and applications of the passage. These are linked carefully to the Big Idea and are represented in the Key Themes.
5. *Illustrating the Text*. At this point in the commentary the writers partner with a team of pastor/teachers to provide suggestions for relevant and contemporary illustrations from current culture, entertainment, history, the Bible, news, literature, ethics, biography, daily life, medicine, and over forty other categories. They are designed to spark creative thinking for preachers and teachers and to help them design illustrations that bring alive the passage's key themes and message.

# Abbreviations

## Old Testament

|          |              |          |               |       |           |
|----------|--------------|----------|---------------|-------|-----------|
| Gen.     | Genesis      | 2 Chron. | 2 Chronicles  | Dan.  | Daniel    |
| Exod.    | Exodus       | Ezra     | Ezra          | Hosea | Hosea     |
| Lev.     | Leviticus    | Neh.     | Nehemiah      | Joel  | Joel      |
| Num.     | Numbers      | Esther   | Esther        | Amos  | Amos      |
| Deut.    | Deuteronomy  | Job      | Job           | Obad. | Obadiah   |
| Josh.    | Joshua       | Ps(s).   | Psalm(s)      | Jon.  | Jonah     |
| Judg.    | Judges       | Prov.    | Proverbs      | Mic.  | Micah     |
| Ruth     | Ruth         | Eccles.  | Ecclesiastes  | Nah.  | Nahum     |
| 1 Sam.   | 1 Samuel     | Song     | Song of Songs | Hab.  | Habakkuk  |
| 2 Sam.   | 2 Samuel     | Isa.     | Isaiah        | Zeph. | Zephaniah |
| 1 Kings  | 1 Kings      | Jer.     | Jeremiah      | Hag.  | Haggai    |
| 2 Kings  | 2 Kings      | Lam.     | Lamentations  | Zech. | Zechariah |
| 1 Chron. | 1 Chronicles | Ezek.    | Ezekiel       | Mal.  | Malachi   |

## New Testament

|        |               |          |                 |        |            |
|--------|---------------|----------|-----------------|--------|------------|
| Matt.  | Matthew       | Eph.     | Ephesians       | Heb.   | Hebrews    |
| Mark   | Mark          | Phil.    | Philippians     | James  | James      |
| Luke   | Luke          | Col.     | Colossians      | 1 Pet. | 1 Peter    |
| John   | John          | 1 Thess. | 1 Thessalonians | 2 Pet. | 2 Peter    |
| Acts   | Acts          | 2 Thess. | 2 Thessalonians | 1 John | 1 John     |
| Rom.   | Romans        | 1 Tim.   | 1 Timothy       | 2 John | 2 John     |
| 1 Cor. | 1 Corinthians | 2 Tim.   | 2 Timothy       | 3 John | 3 John     |
| 2 Cor. | 2 Corinthians | Titus    | Titus           | Jude   | Jude       |
| Gal.   | Galatians     | Philem.  | Philemon        | Rev.   | Revelation |

## General

|    |  |     |                                  |
|----|--|-----|----------------------------------|
| AD | <i>anno Domini</i> (in the year of our Lord) | ca. | <i>circa</i> (“around,” “about”) |
| BC | before Christ                                | CEB | Common English Bible             |

cf. confer, compare

|      |   |        |                              |
|------|---|--------|------------------------------|
| e.g. | <i>exempli gratia</i> (“for example”)       | NIV    | New International Version    |
| ESV  | English Standard Version                    | NRSV   | New Revised Standard Version |
| i.e. | <i>id est</i> (“that is,” “in other words”) | RSV    | Revised Standard Version     |
| KJV  | King James Version                          | v./vv. | verse/verses                 |

# Introduction to Exodus

The second book of the Bible, Exodus derives its name from the title given to it by ancient Greek translators. The Greek word *exodos* means “going out,” “departure,” and is used in Exodus 19:1 to refer to the departure of the Israelites from Egypt. While the “going out” from Egypt is a highly significant event in Exodus, there is much more to the book’s plot than this. Exodus is not simply a story about the Israelites coming out of Egypt, a story narrated in chapters 1–15; it is much more about God coming to dwell among the Israelites, a theme that includes chapters 19–40. This theological dimension is especially important, but unfortunately it can all too easily be overlooked in discussions that focus solely on the human side of the Exodus story.

## Plot

Exodus is a book that involves movement. Firstly, there is the movement of the Israelites from Egypt to Mount Sinai. Exodus begins by placing the Israelites in the land of Egypt but ends with them camping at Mount Sinai. Most of the book’s contents, chapters 19–40, describe events at Mount Sinai rather than in Egypt, with a few chapters recounting the transition from Egypt to Sinai (Exod. 15:22–18:27). Secondly, there is the movement of God, who takes up residence in the very midst of the Israelite camp. The coming together of God and the Israelites at Mount Sinai is highly significant, but the full magnitude of this convergence can be easily overlooked. It marks a partial restoration of the broken relationship between God and humanity that results from Adam and Eve’s actions in the Garden of Eden, and it anticipates future developments whereby God’s presence will fill a world inhabited by those who are holy as God is holy.

## **Authorship**

Exodus itself does not at any point identify the person responsible for authoring or editing the book as we now have it. Taken at face value Exodus occasionally ascribes the composition of particular sections to individuals who are also characters within the story. In Exodus 15, it seems likely that Miriam composes the song used by the Israelites to celebrate their rescue from the Egyptian army. In Exodus 20, the Ten Commandments are attributed to God, who speaks them directly to the people. The Book of the Covenant (Exod. 20:22–23:33) is spoken by God to Moses, who subsequently records everything that God says (Exod. 24:4). Similarly, the instructions for the manufacture of the tabernacle and associated matters are spoken by God to Moses (Exod. 25–31). No specific source is given for the genealogical information in Exodus 6:14–25, but presumably this draws on known family records. The inclusion of such disparate types of material within the same narrative suggests that the author/editor incorporated into his account preexisting materials. It would require an author of exceptionally remarkable talent to compose from scratch the entire book of Exodus as a work of fiction.

A long-established tradition associates Moses with the composition of Exodus and the other books of the Pentateuch. Given his central role in the book's plot, Moses would certainly be an obvious source for most of the information recorded. However, we should also allow for the possibility that others may have contributed to shaping Exodus as we know it. For example, Exodus 16:35 clearly refers to an event that comes after the time of Moses (cf. Josh. 5:10–12).

Influenced by two centuries of studies that have ridiculed the veracity of the present biblical account, many critical scholars have constructed their own theories regarding the composition of Exodus. While these claim to be undertaken with scientific rigor, they frequently rest on questionable assumptions regarding the relative dating of passages within the Pentateuch. For almost a century the Documentary Hypothesis of Wellhausen dominated scholarly approaches to the Pentateuch, but it no longer enjoys widespread support, resulting in a morass of competing alternatives. Unfortunately, scholarly efforts to explain how and when the book of Exodus was composed have largely diverted attention away from understanding Exodus as a unified literary work of rich theological significance.<sup>1</sup>

## **Interpreting Exodus**

Although the book of Exodus may be viewed as a self-contained entity, it forms part of a later literary narrative that runs from Genesis to Kings. Exodus presupposes that anyone reading it already knows the contents of Genesis.

This is evident from the book's opening sentence, which uses the names Jacob and Israel without explaining that they refer to the same person (cf. Gen. 32:28). Elsewhere in Exodus reference is made to God's covenant with the patriarchs of Genesis; this forms the basis of the expectation that God will eventually settle the Israelites in the land of Canaan (cf. Exod. 2:24; 3:16–17; 6:4–5, 8; 32:13; 33:1–3).

As well as presupposing Genesis, the book of Exodus also anticipates future developments that will be narrated in Leviticus and beyond. The instructions for the consecration of the Aaronic priests, which are given in Exodus 29, are implemented in Leviticus 8. The making of the covenant at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19–24 is presupposed at the renewing of the covenant in the Plains of Moab, as described in the book of Deuteronomy. The announcement in Exodus 15:17 that the Israelites will dwell with God on his holy mountain anticipates their settlement in the land of Canaan, a process that extends throughout the books of Joshua to Samuel.

Reading Exodus as part of the Genesis-to-Kings narrative should inform our understanding of the varied episodes that compose Exodus. When the wider canvas is taken into consideration, God's action in coming to dwell among the Israelites has every appearance of reversing, at least in part, the tragic consequences of Adam and Eve's betrayal of God in the Garden of Eden. In this reversal the Passover is central, for it involves both atonement and consecration. Through the Passover, God takes to himself the Israelite firstborn males, as they are ransomed from death, purified from the defilement of sin, and made holy. Subsequently, the firstborn males are ransomed by the Levites (Num. 3:12–13), who enjoy a special status among the tribes of Israel as those dedicated to serve God in the tabernacle/temple.

To appreciate the theological significance of Exodus, it is important to grasp that biblical narratives frequently show rather than tell what is happening. Thus, for example, although there is no specific mention of the concept of atonement in Exodus 12–13, the sacrificial animals are clearly understood to function as a ransom for the firstborn males, a point drawn out indirectly in Exodus 13:11–13, and their blood is used to purify those who pass through the bloodstained door frames of the Israelite homes. As is evident from the book of Leviticus, atonement includes both the payment of a ransom and the removal of defilement due to human sin. The same process is also reflected in the ratification of the covenant at Mount Sinai (Exod. 24:5–6), emphasizing that atonement is an essential prerequisite for the Israelites' unique relationship with God.

Although the Passover ritual involving atonement and consecration models how people may become holy, the book of Exodus underlines that perfect communion with God is not achieved. Exodus does not end with God's plans

for the Israelites and all humanity being fulfilled. The tabernacle enables God to dwell in the midst of the Israelite camp, but the tent itself functions as a protective barrier between God and humanity. The construction of the tabernacle is merely a first stage toward God's glory filling the whole earth, when heaven and earth will merge into one. The developments that occur in Exodus are a significant step in the plan of divine salvation, but more has yet to take place. The events recorded in Exodus model how the broken relationship between God and humanity may be restored, implicitly indicating that a great exodus is in the future.

### **Key Theological and/or Narrative Themes**

The convergence of God and the Israelites at Mount Sinai is a fitting conclusion to a book that has as one of its dominant ideas the theme of knowing God. Underlying the events described in Exodus is God's desire that people will come to a deeper knowledge of him, both intellectually and relationally. Through both word and action, God makes himself known, beginning with his appearance as a flame of fire to Moses (Exod. 3:2) and concluding with his glory filling the newly consecrated tabernacle (Exod. 40:34–38).

The motif of knowing God takes on special significance in the light of Pharaoh's question, "Who is the LORD?" (Exod. 5:2). The subsequent episodes involving the signs and wonders contain allusions to this question (Exod. 6:3–7; 7:5, 17; 8:10, 22; 9:4, 16, 29; 10:1–2; 11:7; 14:4, 18), indicating that the supernatural events in Egypt are specifically intended by God to make him known to both the Israelites and the Egyptians. These events, together with the destruction of the Egyptian army in the "Red Sea" (or better, "Lake of Reeds"; see the comments on 13:17–18, below), highlight the awesome power and majesty of God.

The motif of knowing God figures prominently in the covenant that is ratified at Mount Sinai, preparing for the subsequent construction of the tabernacle. The covenant establishes a special relationship between God and the Israelites, paving the way for God to come and dwell in their midst. With the making of the covenant, prominent leaders of the Israelites are given the privilege of seeing God, but not fully (Exod. 24:9–11). Yet in spite of these positive developments, even Moses, who enjoys an especially intimate relationship with God, cannot see God's face. Nevertheless, the coming of God to live among the Israelites introduces an entirely new dimension to the theme of knowing God, for he now lives in close proximity to the people, in a way that no one has experienced since Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden. While the coming of the Lord to reside within the Israelite camp is a significant new development in God's redemptive plan, the final barrier between God and humanity will be removed only with the death of the perfect Passover sacrifice (Matt. 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45).

In the process of coming to know God personally, the Israelites have to be set free from serving Pharaoh before they can serve the Lord. While they move from serving one master to serving another, the two masters could not be more different. Whereas Pharaoh forcibly enslaves them and subjects them to harsh servitude, the Lord invites the Israelites to accept voluntarily his rule over them, promising to treat them as his “treasured possession” (Exod. 19:5). While the Israelites are conscripted to build store cities of brick for Pharaoh, the Lord commissions and equips them to construct a royal tent as his dwelling place among them. While Pharaoh refuses to supply them with the straw necessary for their work, the Lord generously provides them with food and water during their wilderness trek. The Israelites’ experience of serving Pharaoh is very different from that of serving the Lord.

## **Historical Setting**

The events described in Exodus are undoubtedly assumed by the book’s author to have a historical foundation. He writes about real events involving real people. In doing so, the author of Exodus has no qualms about attributing to God the occurrence of events and words. Throughout Exodus, God is one of the central figures, and the book itself is penned with the intention of making the Lord known to others. The supernatural events narrated provide evidence for God’s existence that goes beyond what might be derived from “natural revelation.”

As far as locating these events in time and history, the book of Exodus itself furnishes little specific information. Exodus 12:40–41 records that the Israelites lived for 430 years in Egypt, but no absolute date is provided for either the start or end of this period. According to 1 Kings 6:1 the exodus took place 480 years before the “fourth year of Solomon’s reign over Israel.” On the assumption that Solomon began his reign in 970 BC, this would give an absolute date of 1450 BC for the Israelites’ departure from Egypt. However, some scholars question the accuracy of what is said in 1 Kings 6:1, preferring to date the exodus to the thirteenth century BC on the basis of other considerations, mainly archaeological.

Pointing to the lack of nonbiblical sources that mention the Israelite exodus from Egypt, some scholars believe that the Exodus version of events is largely fictitious.<sup>2</sup> While the absence of collaborative evidence must not be dismissed lightly, it is highly unlikely that any pharaoh would record on any stone monument a description of such events, disastrous from an Egyptian perspective. If descriptions were made on papyri and stored in the Delta region, they would have perished along with almost every other papyrus text from the New Kingdom period.

The difficulty of dating the exodus with precision is compounded by the fact that the pharaohs mentioned in Exodus are never named. This appears to

be a deliberate literary feature, designed to convey the idea that these Egyptian kings are in reality nonentities, in spite of their supposed divine status in ancient Egypt. The names of the pharaohs are omitted, but ironically, those of two midwives, who bravely defied their Egyptian king, are recorded for posterity.

If there is no historical basis to the exodus, those responsible for inventing the account of Israel's remarkable deliverance from Egypt did much more than merely devise a fictional description of Israel's past. They also succeeded in establishing an annual commemorative event based on their imaginative reconstruction of the past that was embraced not only by Jews but also by Samaritans. In the light of how these two opposing religious communities celebrated the same occasion, there is good reason to question the skepticism of some modern scholars that the exodus account is merely make-believe.<sup>3</sup> It makes more sense to assume that the celebration of the Passover is based on an ancient reality.

## **Exodus and the New Testament**

As the primary Old Testament paradigm for divine salvation, the exodus story informs the New Testament writers' understanding of the death of Jesus Christ at the time of the Passover (e.g., 1 Cor. 5:7). While all the Gospels draw on Exodus, John's Gospel is especially rich in highlighting parallels between Jesus's death and the Passover. John even notes that Jesus's bones are not broken, as was the case with the Passover sacrifices (John 19:33–36; cf. Exod. 12:46; Num. 9:12). John's emphasis on the Passover resonates with his belief that Jesus brings life in all its fullness. As the Passover sacrifices gave life to the firstborn Israelite males, Jesus's sacrificial death gives eternal life to those who believe in him. Moreover, to underline this link with the exodus, John records signs that Jesus performed leading up to the Passover. Like the signs performed by Moses and Aaron, Jesus's signs are also intended to promote trust in the one sent by God.

## **Exodus and Biblical Theology**

The book of Exodus contributes in a very significant way to our understanding of God's redemptive plan for all humanity. We see in the microstory of Exodus the macrostory of the Bible. God comes as Savior and King to redeem people from satanic control, to ransom them from death, to purify them from defilement, to sanctify them so that they may be restored to the status that was lost by Adam and Eve, becoming a royal priesthood and a holy nation. Yet while God's rescue of the Israelites from Egypt models the process of salvation, it only foreshadows something greater to come, for the Sinai covenant does not enable the Israelites to obey God fully. Consequently, access

to God's presence is still barred to all but the high priest, and even for him access is very restricted. A greater exodus is anticipated, one that will bring to fulfillment God's creation plan to dwell on the earth with his people. This comes through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, which results ultimately in the creation of the new Jerusalem, witnessed by John in Revelation 21–22.

# Standing Up for God's Kingdom

## **Big Idea**

*God's people must face persecution from those opposed to the fulfillment of God's will on earth.*

## **Key Themes**

- God's people will be persecuted by those who set themselves up in opposition to God.
- A healthy fear of God prevents us from succumbing to pressure from others to do evil and produces positive results.

## **Understanding the Text**

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### **The Text in Context**

The opening chapter of Exodus sets the background to the record of God's dramatic deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Eventually, this results in the Lord coming to dwell among the Israelites, having entered into a special covenant relationship with them at Mount Sinai. At the outset of Exodus, however, God does not dwell with the Israelites, and their experience of life becomes exceptionally harsh when a new pharaoh instigates a program of hard servitude designed to restrict the growth of the Israelite population.

### **Historical and Cultural Background**

The events narrated in Exodus 1 possibly occurred during the reign of Ahmose I (1550–1525 BC), who founded a new Egyptian dynasty, known today as the Eighteenth Dynasty. During his reign, he ousted from power the Hyksos from the Delta region of Egypt. The Hyksos were foreigners of Semitic origin who controlled the northern part of Egypt from about 1650 to 1550 BC. Ahmose's success against the Hyksos may have encouraged him to suppress other non-Egyptian groups living in the Delta region.

As regards the location of the two cities named in Exodus 1:11, recent archaeological research suggests that Pithom and Rameses are to be located at

Tell el-Retabah and Qantir/Tell el-Dab'a, respectively. Both of these locations now provide evidence that cities of significant size existed on what was then a major distributary of the Nile in both the fifteenth and thirteenth centuries BC, possible dates for the exodus. If the exodus is dated to the fifteenth century BC, the name Rameses in Exodus 1:11 is anachronistic (as it must be in Gen. 47:11). The Hyksos city at Tell el-Dab'a, known as Avaris, was possibly renamed Perunefer in the fifteenth century BC, only to be renamed Pi-Ramesses in the thirteenth century BC when Ramesses II (ca. 1290–1224 BC) made this location his residence.

## Interpretive Insights

**1:1–6** *the sons of Israel who went to Egypt with Jacob . . . Joseph was already in Egypt.* These verses form a short prologue to the book of Exodus. Apart from setting the scene for all that follows, the prologue links together the books of Genesis and Exodus. Without a knowledge of Genesis, the prologue is unintelligible. From Genesis we know (1) that “Israel” is an alternative name for “Jacob” (Gen. 32:28) and (2) that Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers (Gen. 37:12–36), before becoming prime minister of Egypt (Gen. 41:38–45). Since Jacob’s family numbered seventy when they arrived in Egypt, their remarkable numerical growth takes on added significance.

**1:7** *the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful.* Whereas verse 6 focuses on the death of Joseph’s generation, verse 7 emphasizes the population explosion of the Israelites. In doing so, verse 7 echoes the language of Genesis 1, where God blesses and commands humanity to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Gen. 1:28; cf. 9:1, 7). The close correspondence in language strongly implies that the Israelites are fulfilling God’s creation mandate. In Genesis, the motif of numerical increase appears repeatedly in the divine promises made to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (e.g., Gen. 12:2; 15:5; 26:4; 28:14; 48:4). The extraordinary growth of the Israelite population is a sign of divine blessing.

**1:8–10** *a new king . . . came to power in Egypt.* A new era begins with the enthronement of a new monarch. Consistently, Exodus never identifies the Egyptian rulers by name. In spite of their exalted position within Egypt, they are portrayed as nonentities. In marked contrast, the Hebrew midwives are named (1:15). The Egyptian king’s fear of the Israelites causes him to oppress them harshly. But this is more than xenophobia, for his actions contravene God’s creation mandate. With good reason, the pharaohs of Exodus are portrayed as anti-God figures.

**1:11–12** *they put slave masters over them.* Pharaoh oppresses the Israelites by having them construct cities. In doing so he usurps God’s place (see “Theological Insights”).

**1:13–14** *worked them ruthlessly . . . labor in brick and mortar.* In describing the Egyptian oppression of the Israelites, these verses give emphasis to the Hebrew root ‘*abad*, “to serve,” which underlies the words for “worked” and “labor.” The repeated use of the root ‘*abad* reinforces the idea that the Israelites are Pharaoh’s “slaves” (‘*abadim*). Later in Exodus the Israelites will be invited by God at Mount Sinai to become his ‘*abadim*, exclusively committed to serving or worshiping (‘*abad*) him alone (cf. 23:25). The mention of “labor in brick and mortar” reflects accurately the Nile Delta setting, where stone is not immediately available for constructing buildings.

**1:15–18** *The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives.* In desperation the Egyptian king pursues an additional policy, hoping to restrict the growth of the male population of the Israelites. The disobedience of the two midwives is remarkable in the light of the Egyptian king’s absolute authority. These women put their own lives at risk in order to save the lives of the Israelite baby boys. The evilness of Pharaoh’s plan is evident in the fact that he looks to convert into agents of death those normally associated with bringing new life.

Scholars debate the ethnicity of the midwives.<sup>1</sup> Were they Egyptians who served as midwives to the Hebrew women, or were they themselves Hebrews? On balance, it seems likely that they were ethnic Hebrews. The designation “Hebrew” (‘*ibri*; 1:15) is associated with Abraham in Genesis 14:13 and tends to be used by foreigners to denote Israelites (e.g., Gen. 39:14, 17; 40:15). Some ancient Near Eastern texts use the term ‘*apiro*/‘*abiru* to designate a group of people of lower social standing. Although it is possible to posit some link between ‘*apiro*/‘*abiru* and the Hebrew term ‘*ibri*, this need not mean that the two words are related.

**1:19–21** *The midwives answered Pharaoh, “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women.”* While some scholars suggest that the storyteller commends the deceptiveness of the midwives,<sup>2</sup> the narrative itself gives no reason to doubt the truthfulness of their explanation. For standing up against Pharaoh, God rewards the midwives with children of their own, a further irony in the light of Pharaoh’s desire to restrict the growth of the Israelite population.

**1:22** *Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile.* Pharaoh progresses from a disguised, but unsuccessful, policy of infanticide to one that openly involves all his people. Pharaoh probably encourages the Egyptians to implement his evil instructions on the basis of national security and self-preservation (cf. 1:9–10).

## Theological Insights

The book of Exodus may be viewed as an uplifting account of how God delivers oppressed slaves from harsh exploitation, but the whole narrative takes on a deeper significance when we read it against the background of Genesis.

In particular, Pharaoh is presented as an anti-God figure, whose actions are clearly intended to curb the fulfillment of God's purposes on earth. Pharaoh's antagonism toward the Israelites is much more than xenophobia. It is an attack on God and his will for humanity. This is even more noteworthy when we recall that the Egyptian pharaohs were viewed as divine beings.

Especially important in understanding the significance of Pharaoh's anti-God behavior is the description of the Israelites' remarkable numerical growth highlighted in verse 7. At the very outset of Exodus, the Israelites are presented as fulfilling God's creation mandate for humanity by being fruitful and multiplying and filling the earth (cf. Gen. 1:28). However, they are soon enslaved by a wicked dictator, who malevolently acts to prevent the growth of the Israelite population. Pharaoh's behavior underlines that he stands against the Creator's plans for humanity as revealed in Genesis.

This opposition takes on added significance when we observe that God's creation plan is to dwell with humanity on the earth. As Revelation 21–22 reveals, the greenfield site of Eden is to become a resplendent city where God will live in harmony with his holy people. Tragically, Adam and Eve's betrayal of God in the Garden of Eden creates a major barrier to the fulfillment of God's plan. As the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1–9 illustrates, although human beings are innately city builders, their ambitions are decidedly anti-God. Not only does God have no place in Babel, but the city builders foolishly believe that they can access heaven itself by building a tower. Against this background, the call of Abraham anticipates that one day God will establish his holy city on the earth (cf. Heb. 11:8–16). Ironically, in opposition to God, Pharaoh sets the Israelites to building store cities, not for God's glory, but for his own. Yet the book of Exodus ends with the freed Israelites constructing a dwelling place for God on the earth. Released from the grueling task of building "store cities" (*'are misk'not*; Exod. 1:11), the Israelites construct God's "dwelling place" (*mishkan*; e.g., Exod. 25:9 [NIV: "tabernacle"]). God's release of the Israelites from slavery needs to be seen as part of a larger story.

## **Teaching the Text**

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The initial episodes in the book of Exodus set the scene for God's dramatic intervention to rescue the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Apart from brief references to the midwives fearing God, who in turn rewards them (1:17, 20–21), the contents of chapter 1 focus mainly on Pharaoh's mistreatment of the Israelites. As the antithesis of the one true and living God, Pharaoh is all that God is not. In large measure Exodus 1 reminds us of what the world is like when God is excluded.

The description of Pharaoh's treatment of the Israelites is a chilling reminder of how easily one people group may turn against another, harshly exploiting them under the guise of national interest. From enormous empires to the smallest nations, history teaches us that the attitude of Pharaoh toward the Israelites is not unique. How often have we seen throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century ethnic, racial, religious, and national interests resulting in genocide? It is all too easy for one group of people to target another. Suspicion and hatred are easily fueled, especially through fear. Only faith in God can break down the barriers that alienate people from one another.

In reflecting on the events recorded in Exodus 1, it is easy to forget that Pharaoh relied on the support of ordinary Egyptians in order to implement his policies of exploitation, oppression, and genocide. We too may unwittingly be drawn to condone behavior that is inhumane and unjust. Sadly, history reveals that, in situations where one people group has sought to dominate another, too often Christians have failed to identify clearly the evil at work. The promise of security and prosperity dulls and blinds the moral perceptiveness of people. For this reason Christians should ever be alert and quick to respond when governments advocate policies that are deliberately designed to work against the well-being of marginal communities. When such policies are clearly at odds with God's will, Christians must be prepared to take a stand.

Shiphrah and Puah honored God in the stance that they took. If we are to do God's will and see his kingdom come on earth, we must be prepared to stand up for him against hatred and injustice, even at the risk of our lives. On occasions, this may require Christians to engage in acts of civil disobedience in order to obey the moral demands of God. Such action, however, must be carefully and prayerfully undertaken and, if the present passage provides suitable guidance, in a manner that does not inflict harm to others. Not only did God reward Shiphrah and Puah immediately with families, but their names have gone down in history, in marked contrast to the perpetrators of evil.

## **Illustrating the Text**

***Throughout history, believers have taken courageous stands for life.***

**Biography:** During World War II, as Jews were being systematically hunted down and marked for death, offering them safe haven meant risking imprisonment and death. Yet Casper ten Boom, when asked why he willingly took such a risk, commented, "It would be an honor to give my life for God's ancient people." Soon after stating this conviction, Casper, his four children, and a nephew were taken into custody after being betrayed as members of the underground in Holland. All told, they had saved an estimated eight hundred Jews. Now they faced the horror of a Nazi prison camp. Only one of Casper's

daughters, Corrie, survived. This brave woman went on to inspire millions, sharing a message of God's unfailing love and the power of forgiveness. We never know where a courageous stand will lead us in this life, but we can be sure it is worth any price!<sup>3</sup>

***When we exclude God, bad things happen.***

**Story:** Share a simple, personal experience of having left out an essential component (for instance, cooking without a key ingredient in a meal, running out of gas). It is easy to see how we do this in the small things; how much more dangerous and tragic it is when we forget the most important Person!

***All too often, Christians fail to identify evil at work.***

**News Story:** On a Sunday in February 2014, family members, noticing their absence from church, hurried over to the home of Bill and Ross Parrish, a husband and wife known to the community as loving, warm parents. During the night, as they slept, they and their two children had perished from carbon monoxide poisoning. The news report notes, "Carbon monoxide has no odor, color or taste. It diminishes your ability to absorb oxygen. Symptoms are often mistaken for something else."<sup>4</sup> This is why it is recommended that homes should have a carbon monoxide detector. When the signs are not identified and addressed, the consequences can be tragic. Christians must be alert to the dangerous, subtle creep of evil in our lives and world.

***Be prepared to stand up against hatred and injustice, even at the risk of your life.***

**History:** On June 5, 1989, the world outside communist China sat enthralled, watching as one man, holding two shopping bags, stopped a line of tanks headed to Tiananmen Square to break up a student-led freedom protest. This solitary figure has never been identified, yet his stand for freedom has been immortalized.<sup>5</sup> Shiphrah and Puah stood faithfully before an overwhelming and menacing foe. Christians, too, must be ready to stand up against hatred and injustice, even in the face of overwhelming odds and uncertain outcome.