

Reformation Fellowship Notes • October 18, 2015
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Handout #2
Exodus 1:1-14

I. Introduction

- A. My plan is to work through the text.
 - 1. I will make a wide variety of comments.
 - a) Some lexical
 - b) Some cultural
 - c) Some philosophical
 - d) Some personal
 - 2. Then I will explain several reflections on the text.
 - 3. Comments about outline

II. Exodus 1:1-7—The Growth of the Family of Jacob

- A. Setting the stage
 - 1. “Sons of Israel” is used quite literally here.
 - a) “Israel” is another name for “Jacob.”
 - (1) Why would they be called the “Sons of Israel” instead of “Sons of Jacob?”
 - (a) Jacob means “El will protect him” (Hamilton, Genesis, vol. 2 p. 178; Sarna, Genesis, p. 181).
 - (b) Israel means “El will strive.”
 - (i) But this is very uncertain.

“None of the suggestions proposed to explain the verbal element has yielded satisfaction. Until more philological evidence is forthcoming, the true explanation escapes us.” (Sarna, p. 405)

- (ii) In the context in Genesis, the name’s meaning is clear.

“Note, however, that the reason for the name change is clear: because you have struggled with God, and with men have you succeeded. The explanation for the name change focuses on what Jacob has done: he has struggled with God; he has succeeded with men.” (Hamilton, vol. 2,p. 335)

- (2) The name “Israel” comes to characterize the people.
 - (a) Intense struggle with God and with man
- 2. Each son came with his household.
 - a) This would include wives, children, and possibly servants.
- 3. Why are the names of sons in this order?
 - a) First seven are sons of wives (Leah and Rachel) in order of birth.
 - b) Last four are sons of maids in order of birth.
 - (1) I don’t know why they are in this order.
 - c) But note this:
 - (1) Sons of Leah, sons of Rachel, sons of Rachel’s maid, sons of Leah’s maid

- (2) chiasitic
- 4. “Joseph was already in Egypt.”
 - a) This would serve to remind the reader of how they got to Egypt.
- 5. Those who first went down numbered 70.
 - a) LXX, Dead Sea documents, and Acts 7:14 give the number as 75.
 - (1) 75 may reflect the correct reading.

[Digression on inerrancy: see section V, Appendix, part A.]

- b) Symbolic? Actual?
 - (1) My dilemma:
 - (a) Some numbers show up very often (40, 7, 12, etc.).
 - (i) Can this be coincidence?
 - (b) But sometimes the context makes it clear that the numbers are to be taken literally.
 - (c) On one hand, the numbers appear to be symbolic; on the other hand, they appear to be literal.
 - (d) If God is the author of history, there is no reason that numbers could not be both symbolic and actual
 - (2) If 70 is the correct reading and is symbolic, it symbolizes “completeness.”

“This number—seventy—commonly indicates the perfection of a family blessed with offspring, both in the pre-Israelitic and in the Israelitic traditions. The Canaanites, as we know from the Ugaritic texts, used to speak of the seventy sons of seventy descendants of Noah, and subsequently to the seventy sons of Jerubbaal-Gideon, and the seventy sons of Ahab. Similarly Jacob’s family was perfect in the number of its children. Just as the nations of the entire world number seventy, according to Genesis X, so the children of Israel total seventy; they form a small world that parallels the great world, a microcosm corresponding to the macrocosm.” (Cassuto, p. 8)

- c) This would be an enumeration of males only (Alter, p. 307).
- d) It was a complete family, but it was a relatively small group.
 - (1) It was not a “people.”
- 6. Joseph and his brothers had died.
 - a) Considerable time has passed since Jacob and his family came to Egypt.
- 7. That relatively small number had grown into a “people” (v. 9).
 - a) The term “Sons of Israel” is now used to describe this people (v. 7).
 - b) Repetition of terms is a feature of this book (esp. seven x).

“Seven expressions for increase are used in this verse, a number indicative of perfection: (1) were fruitful; (2) and teemed; (3) and multiplied; (4) and grew mighty; (5) with strength; (6) strongly; (7) so that the land was filled with them. Harmonious perfection is implied here, with the object of teaching us that all that happened was brought about by the will of God in conformity with His predetermined plan.” Cassuto, p. 9

- (1) I am convinced that the piling on of terms is significant.
- (2) I am less certain that seven times is particularly significant.

8. Terms reminiscent of creation
 - a) How does this work?
 - (1) In a tight culture, words will trigger strong associations.
 - (a) “Wardrobe malfunction”
 - (b) “Pursuit of happiness”
 - (2) “Were fruitful,” “multiply,” “teemed,” “land was filled” are all phrases from the creation account.
 - (a) Try replacing “teemed” with “was littered.”
 - (3) Author expects words to trigger associations.
 - b) What is the significance of this association?
 - (1) The expansion of the family of Jacob is a continuation of God’s creative activity.
 - (2) Just as God created the world, now he is creating his people.
- B. Overall importance of this section: All appears to be good with God’s people.
 - a) Barrenness of the matriarchs is a thing of the past.
 - b) This is a partial fulfillment of the promise to Jacob (Genesis 35:9-12).
 - (1) The Israelites are becoming numerous.
 - (2) Now they just need to gain possession of their land.

III. Exodus 1:8-14—The king’s problem and solution

- A. “A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.”
 1. The term used early is “king.”
 - a) Later “Pharaoh” will be used.
 - b) Why use “king”?
 - (1) Head of state rather than the leader of Egyptian society?
 2. “Arose” indicates “inauguration of a new era” (Sarna).
 - a) Could have been just a new king
 - b) Could have been a new dynastic line
 - c) Could be a whole new people group
 - (1) Can mean “rose against Egypt”
 - (a) This suggests an invasion (Hyksos?).
 - (2) Could be describing the return of Egyptian control over its land
 - (a) Ahmose drove out the Hyksos in 1550.
 - d) In any case, the ascension of a new king was always a time of fragility.
 - (1) King has to establish his legitimacy.
 3. This king had no appreciation for Joseph’s service to Egypt.
 - a) Even though Jacob’s family had been an asset to Egypt.
 4. King addresses his people.
 - a) Israelites were increasing in numbers rapidly.
 - (1) “The people of the sons of Israel”
 - (a) Awkward wording
 - (b) Appears to be derogatory (Mongols vs. Mongol hordes; Stuart)

- b) They are “more and mightier than we.”
 - (1) It seems implausible that the King of Egypt would believe that this group of people would be “mightier” than Egypt.
 - (2) This language is calculated to scare his audience.
- B. Why is this a problem?
 - 1. There is no hint that there is currently a problem.
 - a) There is no suggestion of rebelliousness from the Israelites in the text.
 - (1) Even the midwives do not act as rebels.
 - 2. Why does the king think there will be a problem?
 - a) One could conceive of it not being a problem.
 - b) Joseph had been a blessing to Egypt.
 - 3. What does he see as the impending problem?
 - a) Hypothetical chain of events:
 - (1) Sons of Israel will increase.
 - (2) If we are engaged in war, they will join forces with the enemy.
 - (3) They will leave Egypt (most) or take possession of Egypt (Stuart and Sarna).
 - (4) In current parlance, “They pose an existential threat.”
 - b) Danger is not imminent nor obvious (only a smart person can see it).
 - c) The king does not suggest driving them out.
 - (1) They had probably become too important economically.
 - (2) Perhaps Pharaoh was aware of the prophecy that the sons of Israel would return to Canaan (Mackay, p. 36).
 - (a) From there they could become a threat to Egypt.
 - 4. King wants to use this situation to strengthen his position.
 - a) He wants to enhance his glory.
 - (1) He is wise.
 - (2) He is protecting his people.
 - (3) He can build impressive monuments to himself.
 - (4) He can increase his wealth at the expense of the Israelites.
- C. The king’s solution
 - 1. So he proposes that they act wisely.
 - a) Egypt had long been known for its wisdom.
 - b) He is engaging in long range planning.
 - c) He is so smart, he is anticipating a problem and working to solve it before it develops.
 - 2. Use overpowering force.
 - a) Enslave and oppress
 - (1) Pharaoh shows no concern that the Israelites would rebel.
 - (a) This suggests that his original concern was not a rebellion.
 - b) Put them to work building storage cities.
 - (1) Rameses II did a lot of construction (with bricks).
 - (2) This is first time king of Egypt is referred to as Pharaoh.

3. I don't think slavery was new to the Israelites.
 - a) God had told Abraham that his descendants would be slaves in a foreign land for 400 years (Genesis 15:13).
 - b) Joseph paved the way for an enslaved populace (Genesis 47:20-26).
 - (1) Most of the population was presumably Egyptians who were enslaved.
 - (2) At the time of Ptolemies (second century BC–first century BC), Egypt was highly state-controlled.
 - (3) I assume that this pattern held true throughout the entire period from Joseph to Ptolemy.
 - c) If this is true, the Israelites were probably already controlled by the state before this new king.
 - (1) But he is putting them in a more servile position.
 - (2) They were probably in this condition for a number of years before the last half of chapter one takes place.
 - (a) Time frame for events in this first chapter of Exodus is largely guesswork.
4. Note the irony: Joseph's salvation of his family also set the groundwork for their later enslavement.

[Digression on slavery: see section V, Appendix, part B.]

D. Pharaoh fell for the seduction of “free labor.”

1. This was a manpower windfall.

“Such vast public projects required an unlimited supply of labor, a high degree of organization, and the continuous production of abundant supplies of brick, masonry, and other building materials. The pharaoh could find a large pool of manpower at hand in the Delta in the Israelite population, and he proceeded to exploit it to the full.” (Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, p. 20)

2. The conditions of the Israelites:
 - a) It was arduous and demeaning.
 - b) State slavery rather than private slavery.

“What we are dealing with is state slavery, the organized imposition of forced labor upon the male population for long and indefinite terms of service under degrading and brutal conditions. The men so conscripted received no reward for their labor; they enjoyed no civil rights, and their lot was generally much worse than that of a household slave. Organized in large work gangs, they became an anonymous mass, depersonalized, losing all individuality in the eyes of their oppressors.” Sarna *Exploring Exodus*, p.21

- c) No way out and no end in sight.
 3. But it was not horrible in every respect.
 - a) Some lived quite well.
 - b) There seems to have been plenty of food.
 - (1) Israelites later reminded Moses of this fact in the desert.
- E. How would this course of action achieve his goal?
1. Option #1—King wanted to make the Israelites so tired or so discouraged that they would have fewer children.

- a) This fits the wording best.
- b) But this seems like an unreasonable expectation.
- 2. Option #2—King wanted to tighten his control over the Israelites so that they would be entirely servile and present no threat.
 - a) This seems more reasonable.
 - b) But maybe the king was not being reasonable.
- 3. I am currently inclined toward Option #1.
- F. The king's solution backfired.
 - 1. The more they were oppressed, the more children the Israelites had.
 - a) This made the situation even more frightening.
 - (1) Same wording as is used to describe the Moabites (Numbers 22:3).
 - (2) When force fails, do you use more force or make concessions?
 - b) So the Egyptians just doubled down on the Israelites.
 - (1) They made life even more bitter.
 - (2) They worked in construction and in the field.
 - (3) The bitter herbs at Passover recall this.

IV. Conclusion

- A. Why is anti-Semitism such a persistent evil in the world?
 - 1. This is complicated, and I don't know the answer.
 - 2. But I think there is a partial answer in this passage.
 - a) What was Pharaoh thinking?
 - (1) There must have been some underlying uneasiness in Egypt.
 - (a) Too many Israelites
 - (2) The king used this fear to propose a solution that helped him secure his power.
 - (a) Make them slaves
 - b) Whence this fear?
 - (1) This is not the first time we have seen it.
 - (a) Ahimelech feared Isaac and his household (Genesis 26:12-17).
 - (i) Isaac had moved to Gerar.
 - (ii) Pretended to be Rebecca's brother
 - (iii) Ahimelech saw them embracing.
 - (iv) Chastised Isaac
 - (v) Told his people to keep hands of Isaac and Rebecca
 - (vi) God blessed Isaac.
 - (vii) Philistines envied Isaac.
 - (viii) "Go away from us, for you are too powerful (mighty) for us."
 - (b) Moab (Numbers 22:3)
 - (i) Israelites were making their way to the east of Canaan to enter into the land.
 - (ii) The Moabites were afraid of them.
 - (iii) "So Moab was in great fear because of the people, for they were numerous; and Moab was in dread of the sons of Israel."

- (2) Israelites are a blessed people.
 - (a) Patriarchs were blessed.
 - (i) Joseph was blessed in all he did.
 - (b) God promised to bless them.
 - (i) In Egypt, the blessing takes the form of rapid increase in numbers.
 - (3) Giftedness in some causes fear and envy in others.
 - (a) What will they do with this advantage?
 - (i) What would I do?
 - (ii) They might use it to my detriment.
3. Ironic—Israelites were to be a source of blessing to the world.
 - a) Part of the promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:2-3)
 - (1) It would have been to the Egyptians advantage to bless the Israelites.
 - b) It rankles our democratic sensibilities to recognize a people group as God-blessed.
 - (1) Especially when they are imperfect
 - c) How we deal with the “unfairness” of God is part of our task in the world.
 - (1) Can God be unfair and it still be okay with me?
 4. Could the Egyptians have known that the Israelites were God-blessed?
 - a) I think the answer is yes.
 - (1) It is not clear how they could have known this.
 - (2) Those who value the things of God seem to be able to recognize the things of God when they see them.
- B. Planning for the future is a double edged sword.
1. We all want to plan for the future.
 - a) We want to anticipate problems and take steps to keep them from coming into being.
 - b) This would alleviate many fears and insecurities.
 - c) Ellul says this is where technique wants to go.
 - (1) Anticipate crime before there are any victims.
 2. But our ability to predict problems is very imperfect.
 - a) We can foresee far more problems than can happen.
 - b) We expend a lot of resources fighting those possibilities.
 - c) We create more problems as we act to forestall problems.
 - (1) Medical testing
 3. Plan, but don't put more stock in your planning than is warranted.
 - a) We don't know what is going to happen.
 - b) In unsettled times, this is especially important.
 - c) We have to live by faith.
- C. God enslaved the Israelites for their own benefit.
1. Israelites in Egypt needed to be reminded of who God is.
 - a) They did not retain a vivid memory of God and what he had done.
 - (1) Elohim is used in the first part of Exodus rather than YHWH (LORD).

“Apparently the Torah intended to intimate thereby that since they were in a foreign land, the children of Israel were unable to preserve their spiritual attachment to YHWH, the God of their fathers, or their knowledge of Him, to which their ancestors had attained in the land of Canaan.” (Cassuto, p. 16)

- b) The Israelites did not completely forget.
 - (1) The promises
 - (2) And their history
 - (a) Faithfulness of God to the patriarchs
 - (3) But time and assimilation dimmed their clarity and importance.
 - c) History is important.
 - (1) We need to keep reminding ourselves of what God has done.
 - (a) Globally
 - (b) Personally
 - (2) The Israelites in Egypt had not done this.
2. If the Jews had not been enslaved, they would have assimilated and never left Egypt.

“In all probability, if they had been left to themselves, they would have been melted and absorbed into the Egyptian race, and lost their identity as God’s special people. They were content to be in Egypt, and they were quite willing to be Egyptianized. To a large degree, they began to adopt the superstitions, and idolatries, and iniquities of Egypt: and these things clung to them, in after years, to such a terrible extent that we can easily imagine that their heart must have turned aside very much towards the sins of Egypt. Yet, all the while, God was resolved to bring them out of that evil connection. They must be a separated people: they could not be Egyptians, nor yet live permanently like Egyptians, for Jehovah had chosen them for himself, and he meant to make an abiding difference between Israel and Egypt.” (Charles Spurgeon as quoted in Philip Ryken, *Exodus*, p. 36)

3. God saved his people by making their lives miserable.
- D. God is controlling history.
- 1. We see signs of this everywhere.
 - 2. Everything Pharaoh tries is ultimately counterproductive.
 - 3. God had said through Jacob to Joseph, ‘Behold, I am about to die, but God will be with you, and bring you back to the land of your fathers.’
 - 4. In the micro, who knows what is happening; but in the macro, it is clear that God is accomplishing his purposes.

V. Appendix

- A. Digression: Confessions of an inerrantist
- 1. I believe in inerrancy.

- a) I often encounter apparent discrepancies in the biblical text that I cannot explain.
- b) I find it troubling, but it has not changed my mind.
- c) My confidence in inerrancy is not based on my ability to resolve all apparent discrepancies.
 - (1) My confidence is based on:
 - (a) The trustworthiness I have found in the Bible as a whole;
 - (b) The teaching and practice of Jesus.

B. Digression: On slavery

1. Seductive

- a) It offers an irresistible good—"free labor."
- b) But "free labor" is never free.
 - (1) It is in the interests of master to feed and clothe slaves.
 - (2) Measures must be taken to keep slaves enslaved.
 - (a) Force is a very expensive form of social control.
 - (3) Psychological toll on the masters
 - (a) Fear of reprisals and guilt

2. Once slavery is instituted it is hard to undo it.

- a) Slavery has rarely, perhaps never, been cost effective.
- b) Even when it becomes clear that the costs outweigh the benefits, slaves can't be freed.
 - (1) Slave owners are afraid to free slaves who are full of anger.
- c) Slave revolts are particularly brutal and vindictive.

VI. Books I am consulting

Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*

Umberto Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Exodus*

John L. Mackay, *Exodus: A Mentor Commentary*

J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*

Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory*

Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel*

Nahum Sarna, *Exodus: The Torah Commentary*

Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus: The New American Commentary*

James K. Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition*

James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition*

Timothy Mahoney, *Patterns of Evidence* (DVD)

Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*