

DHW

LESSON 1

The Book of Exodus

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The **name** of the second book of the Pentateuch - the first five books of the Bible - is *Exodus*. This English name for the book is derived from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which is called the *Septuagint* (meaning *translation of the seventy*, abbreviated *LXX*). The title fits only the first part of the book (1:1-15:21), which narrates the going out of the Israelites from Egypt. The Hebrew Masoretic text has the name of the book as *Shermot*, which means *Names*. It is taken from the first two words of the book, *ve-elleh shermot* – *And these are the names*. The phrase links the accounts of the book with those of the first book, Genesis. It tells of how God in a great and marvellous way kept His covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob by taking their descendants out of slavery in Egypt. In fact the first six words of Exodus is an exact quotation from the first six words of Genesis 46:8. Thus

the Hebrew text of Exodus begins with the conjunction “and” (*vav*) which is translated “now” (KJV).¹

The **theme** of the book is in two parts: (1) the deliverance of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt (Exodus 1: 1 - 15:21), and (2) the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:1- 40:38). The intervening section (Exodus 15:22 - 18:27) narrates the journey of the Israelites on their way to Mount Sinai.

Exodus gives an accurate **historical account** of the beginning of Israel as a nation. Since the first feast of the Passover, which was instituted by God in Exodus 12, the Israelites have faithfully celebrated this feast till today. It is celebrated on *Yom-Kippur Day* commemorating their deliverance from bondage to freedom as the people of God. At Mount Sinai God gave Israel the Law which taught them how the LORD God ought to be worshipped and have fellowship with Him.

In addition to the historical value of the book, **the theological value** is important and significant. The theological aspect presents a graphic picture of a Christian’s former spiritual state, his deliverance from the bondage

¹ The conjunction is omitted by the NIV translators – “These are the names of.” This omission can mislead one to deny the Mosaic authorship of the book and view it as a separate document.

of sin and Satan, to the freedom of a new life in close fellowship with God. The book speaks to all who have eyes to see and ears to hear even up to this day.

The strongest evidence to **the authorship** of the book is the Scriptural text itself. In many places it is asserted that Moses wrote the book:

Exodus 17:14 *And **the LORD** said unto Moses, Write this for a memorial in a book, and rehearse it in the ears of Joshua: for I will utterly put out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.*

Exodus 24:4 *And Moses wrote all the words of **the LORD**, and rose up early in the morning, and builded an altar under the hill, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel.*

Exodus 34:27 *And **the LORD** said unto Moses, Write thou these words: for after the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with thee and with Israel.*

Our Lord Jesus Christ when referring to God's conversation with Moses in the burning bush spoke of the book as *the book of Moses*.² Moses' mental capacity and literary skill are unquestionable for he *was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds* (Acts 7:22).

Considering **the dating**, according to 1 Kings 6:1 the exodus from Egypt

² Mark 12:26 *And as touching the dead, that they rise: have ye not read in **the book of Moses**, how in the bush God spake unto him, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? (See also Luke 20:37).*

took place 480 years before the fourth year of the reign of King Solomon.³ The date of the fourth year of Solomon's reign is 965/6 B.C. The exodus took place in the year 1445/6 B.C. (480 plus 965/6). A second biblical data for the dating of the book is Judges 11:26,

While Israel dwelt in Heshbon and her towns, and in Aroer and her towns, and in all the cities that be along by the coasts of Arnon, three hundred years? why therefore did ye not recover them within that time?

The judge who ruled Israel at that time was Jephthah. He placed 300 years between Israel's dwelling in Heshbon (Numbers 21:23-26) which was about the second year of his judgeship.⁴ If we add 38 years, the time of the wanderings of the Israelites from Egypt until they took Heshbon to 144 years,

³ 1 Kings 6:1 *And it came to pass in the **four hundred and eightieth year after the children of Israel were come out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month Zif, which is the second month, that he began to build the house of the LORD.***

⁴ Numbers 21:23 *And Sihon would not suffer Israel to pass through his border: but Sihon gathered all his people together, and went out against Israel into the wilderness: and he came to Jahaz, and fought against Israel. 24 And Israel smote him with the edge of the sword, and possessed his land from Arnon unto Jabbok, even unto the children of Ammon: for the border of the children of Ammon was strong. 25 And Israel took all these cities: and Israel dwelt in all the cities of the Amorites, in **Heshbon**, and in all the villages thereof. 26 For Heshbon was the city of Sihon the king of the Amorites, who had fought against the former king of Moab, and taken all his land out of his hand, even unto Arnon.*

which was the period from Jephthah to the fourth year of Solomon's reign, the total number of years between the exodus and the fourth year of Solomon's reign would be 482 years! This remarkably agrees with 1 Kings 6:1. This is a double confirmation.

At that time, the Pharaoh of Egypt was Thutmose III (1501-1447 B.C.), but he was too young to rule. Instead Queen Hatshepsut (1501-1479 B.C.) seized the throne and ruled Egypt for about twenty years. It is the consensus of many bible scholars that she was the woman responsible for the caring of Moses in his early years. Thutmose then regained his rulership over Egypt. He would be most likely the Pharaoh who oppressed the Hebrews. However, he died before the exodus and was succeeded by his son Amenhotep II, who ruled for twenty six years. He was the king of the exodus and the one who lost his firstborn in the final judgment of God (Exodus 12).⁵

The Divine character of the account of the book offers immeasurable **theological and practical values**. Truth concerning the nature and character of God is infallibly

revealed in the relationship between God and the nation of Israel, and the other nations. And because the Divine Author has His authoritative stamp on it, its spiritual and practical values to its readers, and to all those who are believing and who will diligently dig into His Word to know, worship and serve Him, are beneficial and life-transforming.

The following is an outline of the first chapter:

- 1) The names of the children of Israel who came into Egypt (1:1-6);
- 2) The children of Israel became powerful in Egypt (1:7);
- 3) A new Pharaoh began to oppress the children of Israel (1:8-14);
- 4) Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill all the male babies born to the Jews (1:15-21);
- 5) Pharaoh charged the Egyptians to drown all their babies in the river Nile (1:22).

STUDY THE WORD

The Children of Israel in Egypt

The opening words connect the book with Genesis. Moses recalled that all the *children of Israel* (Israel was

⁵ Consult John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt* (pp. 33-37), and W.H. Gispen, *The Bible Student's Commentary – Exodus* (pp.21-24) for more details of the history of the Pharaohs in that period.

Jacob's name) came to Egypt. The names of Jacob's sons are given according to his wives. First are the children of Leah, then Rachael, and then the maids of Rachel and Leah. Joseph was mentioned separately because he was already in Egypt. All the members of Jacob's sons, who came to Egypt, excluding the family of Joseph, were *seventy souls*. Then Moses recorded that Joseph and all his brethren and all that generation died. This verse indicates that a long period of time had passed. It was about four hundred years (Genesis 15:13).⁶ God had already predicted to Abraham that his descendants would temporarily sojourn in *a strange land*.

The Children of Israel Became Powerful in Egypt

The Divine author commented that the children of Israel had multiplied and were increasingly fruitful (v.7). Five verbs describe the extraordinary blessings of the children of Israel (in Hebrew): *were fruitful* (*parah*), *increased abundantly* (*sharetz*), *multiplied* (*rabah*), *waxed exceeding mighty* (*atzam*), and *filled* (*mala*). Although the name of God is not

⁶ Genesis 15:13 *And he said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years.*

mentioned, it is clear that God had kept His covenant promises to Abraham (Genesis 15:5; 17:6).⁷ Israel had grown from a family to a nation. By this time the number of Israelites would be about two million.⁸ God had fulfilled His covenant promises to Abraham. What does this tell us – that all the other promises of God will also be fulfilled!

Pharaoh Began to Oppress the Children of Israel

A *new king* began to rule Egypt. His name is not mentioned. He *knew not* Joseph. In contrast with him God knew His chosen people (vv.1-7). The word *to know* does not merely mean an acquaintance or having knowledge of someone. It denotes an intimate relationship which is characterized by commitment and concern for the parties involved. So this new king *knew not Joseph*. He did not appreciate what Joseph had contributed and done for the people of Egypt in the past. Instead he became jealous, fearful, and suspicious

⁷ Genesis 15:5 *And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be.*

Genesis 17:6 *And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee.*

⁸ Numbers 1:46 gives the number of fighting men to be 603,550. If the number of fighting men represents a quarter of the total population, which included the women and children, they would number over 2,000,000.

of the Hebrews. He was afraid that if war with an enemy nation was to break out, the Hebrews might join the enemy and overthrow him.

Subsequently, Pharaoh devised some methods of suppressing and oppressing the Hebrews. He wanted to reduce the population growth of the Hebrews. He first resorted to putting the Hebrews to hard labour by building the storehouses for him in Pithom and Ra'amses. Ironically, the more Pharaoh afflicted the Hebrews the more they increased and grew. It resulted in the reverse of his expectation. Pharaoh's cunningness and craftiness backfired. Bad things happen to the people of God. But this was one way in which God intended to make His people strong and capable for His future plan.

Frustration and anger filled his heart. His next step was to increase the workload of the Hebrew slaves. He forced them not only to make bricks but also to work in the open hot fields like planting and irrigating the land. He made them work with *rigour*. This word *rigour* (Hebrew, *perek*) is mentioned twice (v.13, 14). It stresses the harshness and cruelty of the Egyptian's treatment of the Hebrew slaves. The attempt was to break their social and cultural life and heritage, and to destroy any political aspirations. In short,

Pharaoh forced them to serve him instead of the LORD their God. This was outright rebellion against God. God's purpose for all men including His chosen people was that they might know Him, worship and serve Him! The enslaving of men by his fellow men robs them of the freedom to worship their Creator God.

Pharaoh Ordered the Killing of Male Jewish Babies

Pharaoh took a further step in trying to cut down the population growth of the Hebrews. He resorted to killing the new-born Jewish male babies. He called two Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah. The identity of these two midwives is the subject of controversy among Bible scholars. Some hold the view that they were Egyptian midwives and not Hebrews. Others hold the view that they were Hebrew midwives.⁹ Shiphrah and Puah could be the chief midwives of all the midwives serving the Hebrews. Pharaoh's secret command by calling these two chief midwives to instruct the killing of the newly born babes would make his plan unobtrusive. They were to kill male infants when they *see them upon the*

⁹ Read the commentaries by George Bush, Gispén, and Fretheim for their arguments.

stools (v.16). The *stools* were birth “beds” on which the women crouched to give birth.¹⁰

Pharaoh’s plan backfired again. When summoned by Pharaoh for an explanation, the midwives explained that they could not carry out his order because it was impossible. Hebrew women were not like the Egyptian women. Hebrew women were *lively*, that is, they were quick and strong in child bearing. They had natural vigour and a robust constitution. They explained that the Hebrew women *delivered* their babies like “the wild beasts”, meaning that they gave birth to their babies after the manner of the beasts of the forest without any obstetrical aid!

In addition, the midwives were motivated by their fear of God (v.17). People who fear God will obey God’s moral laws. They understood the sacredness and value of human life. The answer the midwives gave to Pharaoh was good. There is no reason to doubt

that they were not telling the truth. On the other hand one can guess that they held back part of the truth. There is nothing morally wrong to withhold a part of the truth in order to save the innocent. It was not necessary for them to tell every detail and everything to the wicked and cruel Pharaoh. It is interesting and surprising that Pharaoh readily accepted their explanation. They outwitted Pharaoh. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding!

God blessed the midwives for their fear and honour of God. God *made them houses* (v.21). It does not mean that God personally built them material houses. The Scriptural idiom of “a house” is “a family.” The LORD spoke to David that He would make him a house,

And as since the time that I commanded judges to be over my people Israel, and have caused thee to rest from all thine enemies. Also the LORD telleth thee that he will make thee an house (2 Samuel 7:11).

The house that God promised David was not a material habitation, although David wanted to build God a *house* which was a temple. But the house that God would build for David was his dynasty, his posterity. So echoed Solomon who succeeded his father David,

¹⁰ In Mesopotamia, Egypt, and among the Hebrews, women often crouched down in childbirth upon a pair of stones or on a birth stool of similar pattern.

The Egyptian Papyrus Westcar, written in the Hyksos period, records how three goddesses delivered a priest’s wife of three sons: one each took a child on her arms, they cut the umbilical cords, washed the children, and put them on a cloth on a little brick bench, then went to announce the births to the waiting husband. The Hebrew word for “stools” in verse 16 meaning two stones undoubtedly referring to the procedure described above (Davis, 50).

Now therefore, as the LORD liveth, which hath established me, and set me on the throne of David my father, and who hath made me an house, as he promised, Adonijah shall be put to death this day (1 Kings 2:24).

Pharaoh Next Charged the Egyptians to Drown all Hebrew Babies in the Nile

Once again the Pharaoh's secret plan backfired. Pharaoh tried another method. He ordered *all his people* who were the Egyptians to drown all male Hebrew babies who were born but to let the female babies to live. One can imagine how many such Hebrew male babies would have been killed in this way. At the same time, it was natural for the Hebrew women to hide their newborn male babies.

It is ironical that the more Pharaoh sought to reduce the population growth of the Hebrews the more they increased. No one can win over God. We see that He will protect His people. The enemy of God's people is doomed to failure. In a way, Pharaoh was foolish. He failed to realize that killing of the male infants of the Hebrews would eventually reduce his labour force, and that the daughters could be a subversive factor.

PRACTICAL VALUE

We can trust God for His Word and promises. He had demonstrated His

faithfulness to His Word. When the appointed time was right to lead His people back to Canaan, He providentially acted in preparing to deliver His people from their bondage in Egypt. It was the hope of Jacob and Joseph on their dying bed. For Joseph he had made the children of Israel swear that they would take his bones and bury them in Canaan. God had blessed His people greatly. The land of Goshen could not accommodate them. As a nation of more than two million, they now needed a land of their own, which God had promised. Pharaoh's oppression of the Hebrews actually worked towards the fulfilment of God's plan and purpose. The more Pharaoh oppressed them the more they would desire to get out of Egypt and return to the land of Canaan, where they came from! Yet Pharaoh did not know that he was aiding God's plan. How marvellous is the Lord our God, who can turn the evil and wicked schemes of man against His people for good. We need to know this and walk uprightly before Him like Shiphrah and Puah.

One might say that God should have stopped Pharaoh from oppressing His people. He should not have let His people suffer so much. As Christians we should not grumble to God whenever we face difficulties and

hardships in life. It is through these bad experiences that we learn precious lessons to be wise and have better knowledge of people and things. In this way we are morally and spiritually strengthened to face more serious testings.

There is no such thing as a trouble-free life. Life has its ups and downs, and often there will be more downs. If we adopt a right and positive attitude towards adverse circumstances in life, we shall learn much. This chapter teaches us that it is better to fear God like the midwives (v.17) than to fear man. It is better to serve God than to serve man. When we walk with God, there is freedom but with man enslavement. AMEN

