

it is a brave person who can pick their way through the complex scholarly arguments which still rage over the dating of the Exodus. See, for example, the arguments for a more Biblical time framework argued by David Rohl in 'Pharaohs and Kings – A Test of Time' (Century Press, 1995) which are still strongly rejected by theologians in general. Perhaps there will be a helpful consensus one day which fits the accepted archaeological facts and the Biblical record, but we will have to wait for it!

In the mean time, we are left to note that what happened drove a racial wedge between the people of Israel and the Egyptians. Again, the Hebrew words of verses 12 to 14 emphasise the cruel and oppressive nature of the work the Israelites were required to do, and to add insult to injury, the Israelites were building store cities, these were storage facilities which their own beloved ancestor Joseph had built many years ago in order to save the people of the day. Now, their salvation had turned into slavery!

Application

The great spiritual theme which comes out of this passage is that of a worldly reversal of circumstances which is disturbing, but will prove to be part of God's great plan. At the point at which the people of Israel thought they had become a fruitful and healthy nation, they were plunged into unexpected disaster, and we wonder how strong they were in their faith in the God of their forefathers. In due course, we will find out!

It is hard for us to understand the trials and apparent reversals of circumstances which we experience in life. Certainly, we hope that we might have the strength to endure hardship and trial. Jesus spoke right from the beginning of his ministry about standing firm in the midst of trouble and strife (Matt 5:11f.) and this was a constant theme of his preaching. It was also a frequent theme of Paul's teaching in his letters (e.g. 2 Cor. 5:1f.). The experience of the Exodus was never just a story about escaping the injustices of the world, for we will discover that it is not just here that the Israelite people become partly responsible for their own circumstances, even forgetting their own God and refusing to do His will. For all of us, the story of salvation and deliverance (of which the Exodus is a Biblical model), is not just a story about the tremendous work of God which liberates us. It is also about the reasons why we have found ourselves to be oppressed in the first place.

In Exodus 1, no particular blame is placed upon the Israelites for their being 'fruitful' and increasing in number (1:6,7). This is a natural consequence of their being the people of God. It may be important for us to realise that when we do what God requires of us, the resulting picture may not be rosy. It may be trouble and distress; however, it is all in the Lord's plan. That is the ultimate message of Exodus!

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Does it matter that in different parts of Scripture, the people of Israel are numbered differently (66, 70, or 75; see above)?
2. Are the Israelites in any way responsible for their own slavery?
3. Should we assume that any new worldly authority which affects us is liable to be hostile? Should we watch out for this?

Discipleship

Have you been in the situation where you have been obliged to do things which you do not feel comfortable with because you are a Christian? Like the people of Israel, earthly powers and authorities sometimes entrap us and enslave us in ways which we do not want; yet we can hardly escape. These are times when it is important to keep our faith firm, and because we cannot know the future, we can gain the best strength from a knowledge of what God has done in the past, just as the people of Israel needed to be secure in their forefather Jacob, as well as Isaac and Abraham.

Final Prayer

Lord God; You have guided each of us along a path of life which has been full of many unexpected things. Save us, we pray, from falling into the temptations and oppressions of the world around us; and through Jesus Christ, keep us pure, in faith, in hope, and in love. AMEN

Prayer

So many things have happened in this world, O Lord, because of Your love. Inspire us with the stories of those who have followed Your ways and given us an example of holy living: and let us be true to them by honouring You who inspired them rather than placing them on an unattainable pedestal. Give us clear eyesight to see these things we pray: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Church Triumphant

The history of the Church has been written largely by people who have been in leadership; however, the unwritten history is of faithful people, families and communities, who have been used by God to pass on the teaching of Christ and an example of discipleship and the service of others. Pray today for those who have done this during times of strife and persecution.

Meditation

Lord of all;
Lord of every living thing;
Lord of every wonderful and fascinating human being;
Lord of space, of the solar system and distant galaxies;
Lord of countries and continents; sky, land and oceans;
Lord of time, creator of the past and present and future;
Lord of banking, politics, pressure groups and charities;
Lord of commerce, industry, factories and building sites;
Lord of history, geography, sciences, maths and the arts;
Lord of all that could be;
Lord of all;
Save us and redeem us, and re-make us anew!

Bible Study - Exodus 1:1-14

¹ These are the names of the sons of Israel who went to Egypt with Jacob, each one going with his entire household. ² Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah, ³ Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, ⁴ Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. ⁵ So it was that all the descendants of Jacob numbered 70 people including Joseph who was already in Egypt. ⁶ Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and that whole generation also died. ⁷ However, the Israelites were fruitful and grew in vast numbers and great strength so that the land was full of them.

⁸ Now, a new king came to power in Egypt who did not know about Joseph. ⁹ He said to his people; 'Look, the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. ¹⁰ We must deal shrewdly with them, as they might become stronger in number than we. Then if war were to break out, they could join our enemies, fight against us and then leave the country.' ¹¹ So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour. They were made to build Pithom and Raamses as store cities for Pharaoh. ¹² But the more the people were oppressed, the more they increased in number and spread around the land; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites, ¹³ and they ruthlessly forced them to work. ¹⁴ They made their lives bitter with relentless labour in brick and mortar, and all manner of work in the fields; and in all this cruel labour, they were treated with severity.

Review

The book of Exodus begins by looking backwards and giving us a list of the names of the sons of Jacob who went down to Egypt (1:1-5), offering us no more useful information about them than that found in Genesis 46:26f.). Then, a number of important themes surface which continue all the way through this great book. The main stories of Exodus are yet to begin, of

course, but some important building blocks of the amazing story of Israel's escape from the land of Egypt are put in place right from the start.

The first theme is that of the changing nature of Israel. In the very first verse, both the names 'Jacob' and 'Israel' are used with reference to God's people; 'Jacob' emphasising the family nature of the people descended from the forefathers; 'Israel' calling to mind the national identity of those who had been called to bear the Covenant of God (see Gen 32:22-32). In Exodus, we find that Israel does not simply change from a family unit to a big nation, however. Both descriptions remain relevant. On the one hand, Exodus emphasises the weakness and servitude of Israel as a small group of people facing the overwhelming might of Egypt. Certainly, the Hebrew words which describe Israel's forced labour (1:11-14) over-emphasise the ease with which Egypt oppressed Israel and forced it into slave labour under task-masters, for example. Then, on other occasions, Exodus tells us that Israel became such a large nation (1:7,19-10) that she was a threat to the identity of Egypt! This contrast, however, is essential for our understanding of God's people throughout Exodus. On the one hand, they are the intimate family of God's people, individually known and loved, and on the other hand, a distinct and vigorous nation growing within the world; or as this passage says, 'fruitful' (1:7). It is a contrast which binds together two features of God's people which remain true to this day. God's people are both His family, and also a great 'nation' amongst the peoples of the world.

The second theme which begins to surface in our passage is the foolishness of Egypt's king (Pharaoh). Later on in Exodus, we will be frequently surprised at the senselessness of his actions in promising to 'let the people go' (8:8 etc.), and then 'hardening his heart' (8:32 etc.). We may find some degree of logic within this, but in comparison to Moses, whose words and deeds were according to God's wisdom, the king was a fool. However, the consequence of this was that eventually, wisdom, truth, and honesty prevailed; and the people of Israel were set free from their slavery (Ex 14). It is easy to see how the seeds of this great story are planted within our passage today. The new king came to power ignorant of Joseph's massive contribution to his country's organisational heritage, recorded in detail in Genesis 47:13-26. But how could this man be so ignorant? There is much we do not know, but one thing is known, which is that this Pharaoh was regarded as an incarnation of a god, so he could say and do as he pleased without fear of contradiction or challenge. It was an assumption which surely contributed to a potential for foolishness in high places. The king spoke, for example, of dealing 'shrewdly' with the Israelites because he did not like them, and they were too numerous to continue living in Egypt (see 1:9,10); however, his logic of applying forced labour only made the Israelites essential to the economy of the land, meaning that he did not really want to see them 'leave the country' (1:10), however much he disliked them!

Reading the passage through, however, it is obvious that broad literary 'brush-strokes' were being used to set up an epic story. God's people began life in Egypt under the happiest of circumstances, in favour with God and others. But in a passing but terrible moment of human history, their lives were changed from peace into slavery, intimidation and injustice. Two questions arise from this passage and the problem created by the coming of the new Pharaoh. Firstly, what would the people of Israel do? Secondly, what would their Covenant God do? The story, as with all real history, is both complex and fascinating.

Going Deeper

There are clearly two parts to this passage, and each of them hold far more than we have noticed so far. The number of people going down to Egypt is significant, for example, and signals the great growth of Israel mentioned in God's promise to Abraham (12:5, 22:17). Secondly, the enslavement of Israel is a significant historical event, and one which archaeologists have been keen to identify, but with uncertain and controversial results.

'These are the names' – the opening of Exodus

It is not commonly known that the name of the book of Exodus in Hebrew means 'these are the names'; being the first two words of the Hebrew text. Christian tradition has kept the name 'Exodus' after a Latin word which describes the event which is central to the whole story recorded in the book; the escape or 'exodus' of the people of Israel from the land of Egypt. This is not an unusual way for a book of Scripture to be headed in Hebrew; for example, the first book of the Old Testament, named 'Genesis', is merely a name which is a Latin translation of

the first Hebrew word of that book, meaning 'in the beginning!' The first words of Exodus in Hebrew, however, do not give us such an easy ride to a meaningful name as the first words of Genesis!

The number of people recorded as going down to Egypt agrees broadly with Genesis 46:26, with the number travelling being 66 and the total in Egypt being 70 (assuming we include Jacob, Joseph, and his two sons Ephraim and Manasseh). It is perhaps worth noting that this number is disputed even within Scripture, for Steven, in his sermon to the High Priest and the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:14) declares the total number to be 75! There are a number of theories about this difference of opinion, but there are unfortunately no clear or logical explanations for the differences. We have to accept that Steven spoke according to a Jewish tradition which added up the descendants of Jacob (and their households) in a different way. We must not complain at this, for even we have had to make assumptions in order to make sense of the two numbers mentioned in Genesis; being 66 and 70!

In our passage, the names of the sons of Jacob are listed according to their mothers. The first six are the sons of Leah (1:2,3), then Rachel's son Benjamin is listed alone (1:3) because Joseph was already in Egypt. After this, the two sons of Rachel's maid Bilhah are listed and finally the two sons of Leah's maid Zilpah (1:4). According to verse 1, each son of Jacob went to Egypt with his whole family including wives and children (though we have little information about the names of the wives, in particular). No mention is made of Joseph or his sons Ephraim or Manasseh because they did not travel down to Egypt 'with Jacob'.

At the very end of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus, we gain the sense of a tightly knit family unit, but Exodus quickly moves us on by telling us that this new 'people of God' grew rapidly in number and 'strength', indicating the general wealth and established social framework of the group. This fulfilled the many prophetic words spoken to the forefathers within God's Covenant promises (see above) which are found throughout Genesis. However, great changes were about to take place, and the focus of verses 6 and 7 is on the passing away of a generation of people who were close to Jacob and Joseph, and who were personally connected with the great events recorded at the end of Genesis. It was not simply the coming of a 'new king' (1:8) in Egypt which changed the picture, but the passing of the generations of God's people, and their increasing sense of security; however false that security in numbers and strength turned out to be!

Oppression by the Egyptians

When a new king came to power in Egypt who 'did not know Joseph' (1:8), it was not simply his own ignorance of Egyptian economic history and the part played in it by Joseph which led to the changed attitude of the Egyptian authorities towards God's people. God's people were a perceived threat to this new king because they were numerous and powerful. I have translated the passage in a way which makes the Hebrew readable, but verses 9 and 10 have repeated words which stress the extent of Israel's growth and influence. It may have been that their reputation was bigger than the facts, as is often the case in history, but at the point when God's people may have felt that they were thriving, tragedy was at their door.

The logic of the new king was racially brutal and xenophobic. With twisted logic which expressed his fear of the people of Israel as a racial group, yet a desire to control situations to his own advantage, the new king issued his orders. Taskmasters were set over the Israelites as they were placed in forced labour. In effect, they were made slaves. Under Joseph's reforms, all Egyptians had become slaves of Pharaoh and the Israelites were spared this heavy discipline. Now, under the new king, their slavery did not take the form of living on the land and producing food for Egypt, its court and people, but the hard and brutal work of city building. The Egyptian Pharaoh's were famous for grand construction projects which required enormous amounts of human labour, moving vast quantities of quarried rock, and placing and finishing them according to the designs of Egyptians engineers.

The projects the Israelites are recorded as working on were the building of the 'store cities' of Pithom and Raamses (1:11). There has been much debate about when these cities were built and the chronology of the king who was supposed to have been Pharaoh at the time. Until recently, this was reckoned to be Rameses II (possibly 1304 – 1237 BC), because cities similar to this were built in his reign in the north of Egypt. However, this conflicts with the traditional reckoning of the Exodus as being in the fifteenth century BC, according to dates mentioned in 1 Kings 6:1. Unfortunately, recent archaeology has shed less rather than more light on this, and