Welcome to this, the first of four sessions on the book of Exodus, one of the most important and most fascinating books in the Bible. After all, it includes such key issues as the call of Moses, the revelation of God’s name, the story of Israel’s exodus from Egypt, the Ten Commandments, the Passover and the Tabernacle, which was the precursor to Israel’s Temple. In our four sessions, we couldn’t possibly even begin to do justice to Exodus as a whole, which is why I’ve selected four fascinating texts from the first half of the book. But before we get started with the first of these, let me give you a rough idea of what you can expect from our four evenings.

Tonight, we begin at the beginning, with Israel’s slavery in Egypt under a Pharaoh whose fears lead him to become ever more cruel and oppressive. As we explore the two opening chapters of the book of Exodus, I’d like you to watch out for any similarities in the story to recent events in our world. I’d be really interested to hear from you later on and find out what you’ve detected. Next time, we’ll look at the call of Moses, which is interesting not only in itself but also because the story invites us to reflect on our own calling, on what it is that we may be called to, and how we respond to that call.

The third session deals with the longest text, the story of the Egyptian plagues, a passage that poses some real challenges for us as twenty-first century readers, which is precisely why this is a text that can’t possibly be ignored or skipped over. Lastly, in our final session we’ll be considering how God provides his people with food in the wilderness, which is a story that has crucial things to say about trust – and also rest. It challenges us to build regular times of rest into our lives, trusting that God will provide.

I hope this brief overview has already made it clear that there’s a lot of material in the book of Exodus that’s of real relevance to us today. But there’s something else that I can promise you, which is that none of these sessions will be boring. After all, in Exodus we meet a brilliant story teller who also happens to have very profound things to say. So, let’s get started.

Miserable Slaves in Egypt (Exod. 1:1–2:25)

The Land Was Filled with Them (Exod. 1:1-7)
Actually, if we’re honest, we’d have to say that the book of Exodus doesn’t seem to get off to a good start, does it? One could think of a more gripping opening than v. 1: 'These are the names of the sons of Israel who went to Egypt with Jacob, each with his family'. Then
we get a list of Jacob’s sons; we read about how many people had been entering Egypt; we’re told about the death of that first generation, including Joseph and his brothers; and we discover that the Israelites had flourished and become so numerous that the land was now full of them (1:1-7).

This all sounds a little dull, especially in comparison with stories like Jonah, who’s already on the run from God by the time we get to v. 3. But appearances can be deceptive; and there is in fact something rather interesting going on in the opening seven verses. But before we explore that, it’s worth noting that the book’s unpromising beginning is of course due to the fact that Exodus is a sequel. It picks up the story of the Israelites at the point where Genesis had left it. The writer of Exodus doesn’t need to attract our attention, because we, the readers, are assumed to be keen to know what happened to the Israelites in Egypt, now that they’d had to abandon the Promised Land.

So, what’s so interesting about the opening verses? What we’re meant to notice are two important links with the book of Genesis; and we can be sure that the book’s original readers would not have missed them. The first of these links has to do with Abraham, Joseph’s great granddad, who had been given a promise by God, which, among other things, involved becoming a great nation (Gen. 12:2). When Abraham remains childless for a while, God repeats the promise and even raises the stakes a bit by taking him outside and telling him to “Look up at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them”, only to assure him that his offspring shall be as countless as the stars (Gen. 15:5). When Abraham is ninety-nine years old, the promise is confirmed again (Gen. 17:1-2); and again after he’s shown himself willing to sacrifice Isaac, the only guarantee he had for the promise to come true (Gen. 22:16-17). Indeed, to top it all, the descendants are now said to be not only ‘as numerous as the stars in the sky’ but also ‘as the sand on the seashore’. And then, yes, you’ve guessed it, the promise is confirmed yet again, first to Isaac, twice in fact (Gen. 26:4; 28:3), and then also to Jacob (Gen. 46:3).

What I’ve wanted to illustrate by going on about this a bit is that this promise is a rather big issue in Genesis. Coming back to Exodus, what our writer is keen to point out is that things are now beginning to come together at last. To be sure, Israel is not a nation yet, but they are certainly increasing in numbers (1:7). And that’s something that the author is at pains to draw to our attention, as we shall see when we read on.

First though, we must talk about that second link with Genesis I mentioned earlier. It’s one that connects the story of the Israelites in Egypt not only with that of their ancestors but with the even bigger story in Genesis 1, the story of creation. In Genesis 1:28, God blesses the freshly created humans, telling them to ‘be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it’. Later on, after the great flood, the blessing and commandment are repeated to Noah and his sons (Gen. 9:1, 7). Another glance at Exodus 1:7 quickly confirms that this is exactly what’s happening among the Israelites in Egypt. But we need
to take a closer look at the text to understand just how important this link is to the author of Exodus.

As I hope my slide allows you to see, the three key phrases from Genesis 1 and 9, ‘to be fruitful’, ‘to multiply’ and ‘to fill the earth’, are all repeated in Exodus 1:7. Indeed, when Exodus talks about the land being filled, it uses the exact same term that’s also used in Genesis, for the Hebrew term אֶרֶץ (erets) can mean either ‘land’ or ‘earth’, depending on the context in which it appears. The blessing and command given by God to all humanity at creation are now being enacted in Exodus in the context of the Israelite community.

The author is thus telling us that, rather paradoxically, while the Israelites are finding themselves in a hostile environment and under very difficult conditions (which we’ll hear more about in a moment), God is truly blessing them. As one commentator puts it, ‘Israel ... has experienced the creation blessing on a stupendous scale’ (Goldingay, 2010, p. 7). And, as we saw earlier, God is at the same time fulfilling the promises made to their ancestors. But all this is merely implied in the language of v. 7, because God hasn’t actually made an appearance yet. In any case, it turns out that our opening verses perhaps aren’t quite so dull after all.

**The Israelites Have Become Much Too Numerous (Exod. 1:8-14)**

Paradoxically again, one might say, it’s God’s very blessing, the people’s fruitfulness, that gets them in trouble when a new Pharaoh takes over (v. 8), a Pharaoh who doesn’t know that it had been Joseph, an Israelite, who’d saved the Egyptians from certain starvation during one of the most severe draughts the country had ever seen. Here, of course, is yet another link with Genesis.

Interestingly and importantly in terms of how the story is told, the new Pharaoh is not named by our narrator. He may have been Rameses II of the nineteenth Egyptian dynasty, also known as Rameses the Great (see Goldingay, 2010, p. 7), but our author either isn’t interested in that or may have decided to withhold the name deliberately. It’s a nameless Pharaoh who represents the forces that seek to oppose the God of life. For Israel’s blessing, that the people were becoming more and more numerous, is Pharaoh’s problem. Their extraordinary growth, the fact that there is a growing number of strangers in the land, he fears, may be beyond Egypt’s capacity to handle (vv. 9-10). And so he sets out to change that, seeking to oppose God’s life-giving work with his own death-dealing efforts.

First, slave masters are set over the Israelites to oppress them with forced labour (v. 11); and so the Israelites are made to build the storage cities of Pithom and Rameses. We don’t know anything about Pithom, not even where it was, but Pi-Rameses was one of the most impressive building projects of Rameses the Great. However, Pharaoh’s plan doesn’t work. ‘The more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread’ (v. 12). God’s
blessing can’t be stopped so easily. And so more drastic measures are required – and are quickly forthcoming. Let’s look at these more closely:

So they made the people serve with rigour,
and made their lives bitter with backbreaking service in mortar and brick,
and with every kind of service in the field;
with every kind of service
they made them serve with rigour.

(vv. 13-14; translation by Fretheim, 1991, p. 30)

I’ve highlighted the terms ‘to serve’ or ‘service’, which the author is using perhaps a little excessively, i.e. five times, in only two verses. The corresponding Hebrew terms are the verb עבד (abad) and the noun עבדה (abodah). My reason for drawing them to your attention is that the verb עבד (abad) and similar terms derived from it are used 97 times in Exodus and are of enormous importance for understanding this fascinating book. Here (see also 2:23; 5:9, 11; 6:6, 9 etc.), the reference is to slave labour, but as we move through the book, עבד appears in quite different and, indeed, very interesting contexts.

In Exodus 12:25-26, עבדה (abodah) describes something that the people would do much more gladly, for here it is used of the annual Passover ceremony in which the people would remember and celebrate what God had done for them. That, not slavery, was to be their עבדה (abodah) now. Indeed, the corresponding verb עבד (abad) is also used to refer to Israel’s worship of God more generally. Worship, not slavery, is Israel’s new עבדה (abodah). Indeed, this is one of Exodus’s key themes: the book essentially tells the story of how God liberated the Israelites from their bondage to the Egyptians, their former עבדה (abodah), leading them to serve and worship him instead, which is their new עבדה (abodah). We usually tend to think of the main movement in Exodus as one from slavery to freedom. The book’s author, it seems, saw it as one from slavery to worship.

But there’s another term of interest in these verses, which has been translated by Terence Fretheim as ‘rigour’. Other translators have rendered it as ‘with harshness’ (Goldingay, 2010, p. 6) or ‘ruthlessly’ (NIV). I’m drawing this to your attention because this is exactly the kind of thing that is expressly forbidden in Israel’s law. This term, which underlines the harshness and cruelty of the Egyptian’s treatment of the Israelites, comes up, for instance, in Leviticus 25 (vv. 43, 46, 53) where the Israelites are told not to rule over slaves ruthlessly – having experienced harsh labour, they are not to force it upon others.

One of the key themes of Exodus 1:8-14 is oppression, which, it’s important to note, ultimately comes about because of Pharaoh’s fear. It’s his fear that leads Pharaoh to treat the Israelites in such a cruel way. As Fretheim points out, ‘his fears become structured into an oppressive system’ (1991, p. 28). Indeed, Fretheim goes on to say that ‘the reference to Egypt’s fears indicates that oppression has as negative an effect upon the oppressor as on the oppressed. Both become less human’ (p. 29). A similar point has been made
by the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, who notes that, ‘as the oppres-
sors dehumanize others and violate their rights, they themselves also become dehuman-
ized. ... oppressor and oppressed alike ... are submerged in the situation, and both bear
the marks of oppression’ (1970, pp. 43-44).

But the more oppressed the people are, the more numerous they become. Or, if you
like, the more oppressed they are, the more they experience God’s blessing. Unfortunately
for them, the opposite is also true: the more blessed they are, the more oppression they
have to endure.

The Midwives Feared God (Exod. 1:15-22)

In v. 15, Pharaoh changes the tactics of his struggle against the Israelites’ amazing growth.
When the Egyptians’ cruel oppression doesn’t work, he turns to the Hebrew midwives,
demanding of them that they kill all new-born baby boys (v. 16). As a strategy, it can’t be
faulted, for no more Hebrew boys means no more population growth. Of course, this is a
story that’s very familiar to us, but it’s frequently treated badly in our retellings. It’s quite
an extraordinary story, full of irony and designed to make us laugh more than once.

Did the Israelites only have two midwives? Believe it or not, but questions like this,
which treat the story in a rather naive way, have been asked time and again in the com-
mentaries. You don’t need me to tell you that this is completely beside the point, which is
that we’re meant to have a good laugh at Pharaoh’s expense. What our writer is doing is
to make fun of a powerful world leader in just the same way that a political commentator
might ridicule certain decisions, actions or speeches made by our politicians today.

Just think what an utterly ridiculous scenario this is. Mighty Pharaoh, the king of
Egypt, the ruler of one of the ancient world’s superpowers, needs the help of two Hebrew
midwives. In his desperate attempt to stop God’s blessing and prevent the Israelites from
multiplying beyond all measure, Pharaoh can see no other solution than to turn to some
Hebrew midwives. There’s a heavy dose of mockery in the way this story is told. Indeed,
to add insult to injury, in an absolutely brilliant move we’re told these women’s names,
while Pharaoh remains nameless throughout. As John Goldingay points out, the naming
of the women indicates that our Old Testament writer ‘has a different scale of value; it is
not Pharaoh and his daughter who count’ (2010, p. 10), but these brave women.

And they truly are brave, for they simply won’t comply. They feared God, we read (v.
17), which means that they revered God; and their reverence led them to defy Pharaoh’s
murderous plan, no doubt at the risk of their own lives. Pharaoh’s plan, we should note,
is also deeply irrational – that’s yet another ironic twist in our story. Worried about the
Israelites’ escape (v. 10), which would have deprived him and the country of a vitally im-
portant workforce, he now plans to kill them off, which, of course, would have had the
exact same effect.
Except that Pharaoh is thwarted by those two Hebrew midwives, on whose wisdom, courage and vision Israel’s entire future now depends. As Cheryl Exum notes, ‘in the refusal of women to cooperate with oppression, the liberation of Israel from Egyptian bondage has its beginnings’ (1983, p. 63). What our text also affirms is that small acts by individuals, even such lowly individuals as two Hebrew midwives, can make all the difference. After all, these two women did nothing less than defy the politics of the Egyptian empire. Fretheim expresses this well when he says that:

such persons are not powerless. In the process of carrying out their rather mundane responsibilities they are shown to have had a profound effect on the future of their people. God is able to use persons of faith from even lowly stations in life to carry out the divine purpose.

Being so familiar with the story, we tend to miss the suspense that the original readers must have felt. These women dare to defy Pharaoh. How will that powerful ruler respond, and what’s going to happen to the midwives? The suspense increases when, in v. 18, the midwives are summoned by Pharaoh. What are they going to do? How will they get out of this?

So, what do these women do? Well, to be honest, they tell Pharaoh a blatant lie, and that has troubled many readers down the centuries. Are we not meant to tell the truth at all times? John Goldingay doesn’t think so: ‘your mother used to tell you that the Ten Commandments require you to tell the truth, but they don’t’ (2010, p. 9). Now, what are we to make of that?

There are two versions of the Ten Commandments, one in Exodus 20 and one in Deuteronomy 5, both of which say exactly the same thing: ‘You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour’ (Exod. 20:16; Deut. 5:20). The point is that we’re required to give true witness in court, not that we’re compelled to tell the truth under any circumstances whatever. As Goldingay explains:

The Old Testament sees truth telling as part of a broader truthful relationship. Where there is a truthful relationship between people, telling the truth is part of that relationship. Where there is no truthful relationship, it does not isolate truth telling as an obligation. Where powerful people are oppressing powerless people, the powerless are not obliged to tell the truth to their oppressors.

This is an interesting, and I would argue important, clarification because it allows us to say, for instance, that those people who hid Jews from the Nazis during the Third Reich and lied to the authorities about it were absolutely right to do so. Indeed, our text is even more provocative than that when it suggests that this is something that God desires and rewards. We’ll come to that in a moment, but let’s look at the midwives’ actual words first.

In response to Pharaoh’s question why they’ve defied his orders, they claim that Hebrew women don’t in fact need midwives. They’re in such excellent physical condition that they’ve long given birth by the time the midwife arrives (v. 19). So why have midwives at all? It is, of course, as we said, a lie, but it’s more brazen than that even, because it’s also a putdown of all Egyptian women: ‘Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women;
they are vigorous’. How those two midwives got away with that, God only knows. But in our story they do, which casts Pharaoh in an even more dubious light. As Fretheim says, ‘no king worth his scepter would have considered [that] response satisfactory’ (1991, p. 34).

And then God finally appears on the scene for the very first time. God had already been mentioned in v. 17 where we read about the midwives’ reverence for him, but it’s only in v. 20 that God is said to get involved in things. Previously, as we saw, his work behind the scenes was implied in the Israelites’ extraordinary fruitfulness, which was understood as the fulfilment of God’s blessings and promises. When God at last appears, in vv. 20-21, we read about his kindness to the midwives, which clearly implies his approval of their behaviour. And so God gives them families of their own, once again, in yet another ironic twist, adding to the numbers of the Israelites. Indeed, we’re told that the Israelites continue to ‘become even more numerous’. Things clearly aren’t going according to plan for Pharaoh.

But Pharaoh isn’t done yet. In utter desperation, he finally orders the Egyptian populace to throw all new-born baby boys into the Nile (v. 22). It’s a policy designed not to keep the Israelite population growth under control, as had been the initial plan, but to wipe the Israelites out altogether, which, we already said, ironically wasn’t in Pharaoh’s own best interest, as it would have deprived him of his slave labourers. Our story thus illustrates how irrational fears can lead to deeply problematic and, indeed, cruel, violent and even self-destructive behaviour.

I Drew Him Out of the Water (Exod. 2:1-10)

Have you ever noticed that we never find out what happened to Pharaoh’s last order, whether it was carried out or not? The narrative switches from this edict to the story of Moses’ birth, which of course unfolds against the context of Pharaoh’s command, but we hear nothing about the wider picture.

But let’s look at this birth story. The people involved are: a Levite, a Levite woman, their baby boy, his sister, Pharaoh’s daughter and her attendants. Do you see what’s so remarkable about this cast? None of them are named, apart from the baby, and even he only gets his name right at the end of the story, once he’s grown older and been transferred to Pharaoh’s daughter. Perhaps we know the story too well to pay proper attention, but if we were to read it for the first time, surely, we could only wonder at what’s going on.

The storyteller leaves Pharaoh and his brutal decree behind, only to move on to the story of an unnamed Levite and his newly-wed wife who, we’re told, have a son together. The baby boy, of course, connects our story with Pharaoh’s instruction that such boys be thrown in the Nile, but why is this specific family singled out? As I said, it’s only at the
very end that the boy is named, and even then, it’s not yet clear why the narrative has switched to the story of this boy Moses. For that, we’ve got to read on.

We saw that the opening scenes of the book of Exodus were full of irony; and that continues to be the case here. Indeed, there are some wonderful ironic twists in these verses: (1) the Nile, Pharaoh’s intended instrument of destruction, becomes the means of Moses’ salvation; (2) the daughters who, in contrast to the sons, are allowed to live, end up thwarting the king’s plans; (3) Moses’ mother saves him precisely by following Pharaoh’s orders, albeit with a twist (the child ends up in the Nile but is put in a papyrus basket); (4) it is a member of Pharaoh’s own family who undermines his policies, thus saving the very person who would lead Israel out of Egypt; (5) Moses’ mother gets paid out of Pharaoh’s own budget to raise her son; and (6) Moses ends up being educated to be Israel’s leader at Pharaoh’s own court (see Fretheim, 1991, p. 37).

The use of such irony makes for delightful storytelling, but there’s far more to it than that. By means of all these ironic twists, we’re shown how God, who yet again isn’t mentioned in the text, is at work, quite unobtrusively, behind the scenes, thwarting Pharaoh’s schemes at every point. The story also illustrates that God achieves all this through human beings, especially the weak and powerless. Fretheim suggests that ‘the ironic mode fosters a sense of hope amid any situation in which God seems to be absent. What appears to be a hopeless time is actually filled with positive possibilities. But it takes faith, “the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1), to perceive that God is at work’ (1991, p. 38).

Once again, violence is prevented by the women. Up to this point, five women have appeared in our story, two Hebrew midwives, Moses’ mother, his sister and the daughter of Pharaoh, and all five of them are actively engaged on the side of life against a ruler whose fears have made him capable of substantial cruelty. In a male-dominated society, these women risked a lot for the sake of saving lives; and they were very shrewd in going about it, too. As Goldingay notes, ‘at the moment of crisis, the people with insight are the women who have no trouble pulling the wool over Pharaoh’s eyes’ (2010, p. 11). What accentuates the role of these women even further is the fact that Moses’ father disappears from the story immediately after his son’s birth, whereas his wife and daughter do not. It’s the women who are going to save his boy.

But we mustn’t overlook the role played by Pharaoh’s daughter either. As Fretheim points out, ‘a non-Israelite … contributes in significant ways to God’s activity of life and blessing’ (1991, p. 38). This is an important point, and Fretheim draws the appropriate conclusions, conclusions that sadly are all too often overlooked by us in the church. He emphasises (p. 39) that

basic human values such as compassion, justice, and courage … as well as the active subversion of cruel and inhumane policies are seen to be present among God’s creatures quite apart from their relationship to Israel [or the church] … there is no difference in the effect of the humanitarian efforts of those who fear God and those who do not. Both Hebrew midwives and Egyptian princess are agents of life and blessing … God is able to make use of the gifts of both,
and the community of faith is equally accepting of their efforts. Moreover, by telling both stories, Israel acknowledges both contributions with thanksgiving.

Again, we find some subtle allusions to the book of Genesis at this point. Most notably, the Hebrew word for the papyrus basket that saves Moses from drowning (v. 3) is the same word as the one used for the ark that saved Noah and his family during the Great Flood. And when Moses’ mother sees her son for the first time, the Hebrew text literally says ‘she saw that he was good’ (v. 2), which is precisely what God had said repeatedly when surveying his works of creation (Gen. 1).

Finally, a word on Moses’ name may be in order, too, before we move on to the next episode. Pharaoh’s daughter, we read, ‘named him Moses, saying, “I drew him out of the water”’ (v. 10). In Egyptian, ‘Moses’ actually just means ‘son’. It appears quite frequently in Egyptian names, such as Tutmoses, ‘Son of [the god] Tut’. However, the Egyptian term happens to be similar to a Hebrew verb meaning ‘to pull out’ and thus is a rather fitting name for the boy.

An Egyptian Rescued Us (Exod. 2:11-22)

Much time has passed when the narrator resumes the story, for Moses has now grown up (v. 11). We’re told about three incidents, which present quite a complex picture of Moses. But in all three, he’s shown to care about and respond to injustice.

In the first episode (vv. 11-12), Moses sees an Egyptian beating one of the Israelites. The same verb ‘to see’ is used several times in Exodus of God, who similarly sees the people’s plight (2:25; 3:7, 9; 4:31). It implies seeing and being moved by what one sees. As we all know, we can see and yet not really see. Moses, however, here notices things and is moved to do something about them. That doesn’t mean that he always gets things right, though, and in the first episode he clearly doesn’t. Not only does he kill the Egyptian, but in making sure to be unobserved during the killing and burying of the man he becomes guilty of nothing less than premeditated murder. Not surprisingly, Moses gets in serious trouble because of that, both with his fellow Israelites (v. 14) and with Pharaoh, who now seeks to retaliate by killing him (v. 15).

There’s an interesting detail in vv. 11-13, which, unfortunately, has been completely obscured in the NIV:

He saw an Egyptian beating (נכה, nakhah) a Hebrew …. Glancing this way and that and seeing no-one, he killed (נכה, nakhah) the Egyptian …. The next day he went out and saw two Hebrews fighting. He asked the one in the wrong, ‘Why are you hitting (נכה, nakhah) your fellow Hebrew?’ The man said, ‘… Are you thinking of killing (הרג, harag) me as you killed (הרג, harag) the Egyptian?’

As you can see, the NIV talks about the Egyptian beating a Hebrew. Then Moses kills the Egyptian; and on the next day – we have now moved on to the second episode (vv. 13-15a) – one Hebrew man is hitting his fellow Hebrew. The NIV uses three different verbs
here: ‘to beat’, ‘to kill’ and ‘to hit’. In the Hebrew text, we find the same word (נָכָה, nakhah) throughout. All three men, the Egyptian, Moses and the Hebrew, are essentially doing the same thing: they all נָכָה (nakhah), which designates a severe form of beating or hitting that may even result in death. Moses hit the hardest, however, for he ends up having to bury his victim, whereas in the other two cases we’re not told that the beating resulted in casualties.

The use of the same verb in all three cases may also explain why the Hebrew, when confronted by Moses for beating or hitting his countryman, is worried that Moses, who’s once again responding to an injustice here, might beat him to death as well, having already overreacted once before. And it’s at this point that the Hebrew man spells out what Moses had in fact done by using a different Hebrew verb: ‘Are you thinking of killing (רָגָה) me’, he says, ‘as you killed (רָגָה, harag) the Egyptian?’

And so, in the third episode, Moses ends up as a refugee in Midian (vv. 15b-22). For the third time, he witnesses an injustice – here it concerns some shepherds, who are driving the daughters of the priest of Midian away from their water source – and does something about it. While his responses may not always have been fully appropriate – Goldbergay describes him as decisive but also hasty and impetuous (2010, p. 12) – Moses clearly isn’t indifferent to evil. He shows a concern for justice and especially for the weak members of society and even at times risks his own safety to do something about their plight. Indeed, as Fretheim has pointed out, ‘Moses’ sense of justice even transcends boundaries of nationality, gender, and kinship’ (1991, p. 45). In Midian his help is favourably received, so much so that he’s shown considerable hospitality by these strangers and ends up being given Zipporah, one of the priest’s daughters, for his wife.

There’s an interesting detail in v. 19 when the women tell their father what Moses had done for them. Apparently still unaware of his name, they say that ‘an Egyptian’ had helped them against the other shepherds. Something about Moses, perhaps his dress or demeanour, must have led them to think of him as an Egyptian. It’s perhaps for that reason that, earlier on in the story, the narrator felt it necessary to dwell on the fact that the Israelites are Moses’ own people. This is stressed twice in v. 11, probably to make the point that Moses, despite having been raised at Pharaoh’s court, still identifies with the Israelites.

Indeed, Moses’ identification with the Israelites is expressed again in another interesting detail, the naming of his son (v. 22). As I said, we’ve got to bear in mind that Moses had been raised at Pharaoh’s court. His life experience had thus been quite different from that of ordinary Israelites. While they were slaves, he’d been part of the royal elite. True knowledge and understanding of what it was like to be an outsider or an ‘alien’, as the NIV puts it, thus came to Moses only during his time in Midian, a time that seems to have been
truly transformative for him. And so he names his son Gershom, commenting that he’d ‘become an alien in a foreign land’.

**God Heard Their Groaning (Exod. 2:23-25)**

At that point, the eye of the camera shifts back to Egypt, as it were. It’s as if the storyteller is saying, ‘meanwhile back in Egypt ...’ (thus Fretheim, 1991, p. 46); and what we learn is that the Pharaoh who’d sought to kill Moses is now dead. Yet the Israelites’ situation hasn’t improved; their continued slavery is mentioned twice in v. 23. But there are two further developments, developments that are going to change everything. The first is that the Israelites have begun to groan under their slavery and cry out. And that leads to the second development, which is that God is taking notice.

Goldingay has some interesting and rather beautiful observations on these verses. He points out that ‘it is not explicit that [the Israelites] are “crying out” to God. They are just crying out in pain. But God has a hard time resisting a cry of protest, whether or not it’s explicitly addressed to God’ (2010, p. 13). Indeed, it’s precisely at the point when the people are crying out because of their suffering that God moves into the heart of the story. Of course, the Israelites aren’t yet aware of this. It’s only in the next chapter that God informs Moses that he’s heard the people’s cry and is going to do something about their suffering (3:7-9).

But how come it’s only at this point that God remembers his covenant with Abraham and the other patriarchs and all the promises that went with it? What are we to make of the portrayal of God in vv. 24-25? Couldn’t God have done something sooner? It’s important to pay attention to the four verbs used by our storyteller here. The first does indeed suggest that God intervenes only in response to the people’s cries. That’s not to say that he’d been unaware of their situation up to that point but that it’s their crying out that leads God to respond. Remembering the covenant similarly doesn’t mean that God had forgotten all about it. It means rather that God is now going to do something about it. God, we then read in the Hebrew text, ‘saw the Israelites’, which refers to a compassionate seeing that leads God to action.

Finally, where the NIV translates that God ‘was concerned about them’, the Hebrew text simply says that ‘God knew’. I really love the way the Hebrew text puts it. God saw the Israelites, and he just knew. He knew, he understood their experience, he empathised with them. In Hebrew, ‘knowing’ isn’t limited to intellectual knowledge. So, when, for instance, ‘Adam lay with his wife Eve’ (Gen. 4:1), the Hebrew text literally says, ‘Adam knew his wife’. Knowledge, in the Old Testament, is something deeply intimate. And that’s precisely what’s implied at the end of our story. God knew their suffering in the most intimate way possible. Which leaves us with the question of what God is going to do about it. But for that question to be answered, we must read on, which we’re going to do in next week’s
session. However, if you wish to read ahead, then please do have a look at the story of Moses’ call in Exodus 3:1–4:17.

**Sources**


