

An Exegesis of Exodus 1:8-14

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This paper aims to provide an exegesis of Exodus 1:8-14 in *The Holy Bible* (New Revised Standard Version). Also, a description is given of the political situation in the times of Exodus 1:8-14, with an explanation of the intended purpose of the narrative. In addition, comment is offered regarding the writer of the passage, the theological message it contains, and its spiritual and religious significance in today's world.

Keywords: Exegesis, Holy Bible, Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, Exodus, political climate, Egypt, Israelites.

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them. (Exodus 1:8-14 NRSV).

Differing theoretical scenarios have been put forward by Biblical scholars regarding the state of the political climate during the time of Exodus. One such scenario is of interest to us and it focuses on the period when Egypt was ruled by the Asiatic, in the era of the Hyksos, (Gen 37:1-50:26), between the eighteenth to the sixteenth century BCE.¹ This period is also known as the Second Intermediate Period in Egyptian history and has a strong Semitic presence, making it plausible that Joseph, the leader of the Israelites before the time of Moses, may have been the most influential figure within Egyptian society.² According to this view, the Hyksos never had control over Upper Egypt and were finally overthrown by Amose, founder of the Eighteen Dynasty of the Pharaohs, who set up the New Kingdom after expelling the Hyksos from Egypt. However, the Semitic population was not driven out at this time.³ These events are supported by the fol-

1 Laurie Woods, "The Exodus in Israel's Religious History - Chapter 3." In *Reading the Bible: An Introduction for Students*, ed. M. Ryan (Tuggerah, Australia: Social Science Press, 2003), 38.

2 There is little known historic evidence of the existence of the Hyksos and their presence in Egypt. An inscription above a temple at Speo Artmedos by Queen Hatshepsut, approximately a century after the defeat of the Hyksos recalls the ruination of Egypt by the Asiatic (Sarna, 1986, p. 70). This evidence proves their presence in Egypt, making it plausible that Joseph could have found favour with the foreign invaders.

The discovery of the Merneptah Stele in 1896 provides evidence of Israel in Egyptian records (Breasted, 1897, p.62). There are no Egyptian records of the Exodus except for on the Merneptah Stele. Here, Israel is noted as a wasteland, therefore verifying that Israel, during the times of Merneptah, the son and successor of Ramses, was real. Even though the exact date of the Exodus is unknown, there are enough accurate details supported by historical evidence to say that the Exodus was not a fictitious event.

However, the other piece of archaeological evidence used to testify to the presence of the Hyksos in Egypt was a story written in a Nineteenth Dynasty papyrus, which has since been rejected as "containing more fiction than fact." (Gunn and Gardiner, 1918, p.39). To further cast doubt on this theory, there is no mention of foreign invaders of Egypt in either Genesis or Exodus.

lowing Biblical account: "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." (Ex 1:8).

Sarna states that the Pharaohs of the Eighteenth Dynasty lived in Upper Egypt and neglected the Delta area until Rameses II moved the Egyptian government to the Eastern Delta, the same location of the Israelite settlement, to establish a strategic base for military campaigns into Canaan and Syria.⁴ It is further suggested that if the new King was Rameses II, he would have been aware of the potential threat of foreign invaders. Hence, we read: "Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." (Ex 1:10). Rameses II, a visionary builder of pyramids and monuments, was known also for exploiting foreign labour.⁵ Archaeological findings offer evidence of building projects referred to in Exodus.⁶

The political situation during the times of the Exodus 1:8-14, could be described as a time of great change and uncertainty; a time when the powerful inflicted their will upon the weak. Through the use of literary and rhetorical criticism of Ex1:8-14, it can be appreciated that the text's main position in the narrative is persuasive. Its use of language helps the reader understand the Pharaoh's deepest fears and how he responded to them. The vocabulary used to describe the Israelites in the text makes this conclusion evident. For example, the Egyptian Pharaoh is quoted as saying that the Israelites were "more numerous" (Ex1:9). In further reference to the Israelites, we read expressions and words such as

3 Nahum M. Sarna, "Exploring Exodus: The Oppression." *The Biblical Archaeologist* 49, no. 2 (1986): 70.

4 Sarna, "Exploring Exodus," 70.

5 Sarna, "Exploring Exodus," 70.

6 Woods, "The Exodus," 37.

“more powerful” (Ex1:9), “join our enemies” (Ex1:9), “fight” (Ex1:10), and “escape” (Ex1:9). There are also instances when the text uses language to convey the fact that the Pharaoh maintained authority, despite his fears. This is accomplished with the use of expressions and vocabulary like “deal shrewdly” (Ex1:10), “oppressed” (Ex1:12), “forced labor” (Ex1:11), “imposing” (Ex1:14), and “ruthless” (Ex1:14). It is perfectly apparent that the intended purpose of the text is to convey to the reader the idea that while the Pharaoh felt threatened by the Israelites, he desired to rule over them with his full power and authority.

The overriding implication of the text is voiced by *an implied author* who strives to make the reader see the socio-political situation of the time in question from the Israelites’ perspective. The intention of the implied author is to have the reader empathise with the Israelites. Nothing is written in the text to indicate that the Israelites deserved criticism or ill-treatment, nor is it mentioned that they planned to fight for their liberation. The implied author wants the reader to know that the Israelites were unfairly persecuted by the Egyptians. Therefore, it is suggested here that the implied author was most certainly an Israelite.

Both Jewish and Christian traditions consider Moses to be the author of the Book of Exodus, as of other books in the Pentateuch.⁷ This has been a tradition-

⁷ As the Book of Exodus was written in the third person and Moses is considered to be the author, one could speculate that these reported versions of the events were retold to Moses at a later time. Moses was not yet born during the events narrated Exodus 1:1-22 and could not have experienced the suppression of the Israelites by the Egyptians first-hand. Therefore, it is possible to speculate that these events were told to him either by one or many people at a later stage, although this theory can neither be confirmed nor denied due to lack of evidence.

⁸ James Philip Hyatt, "Exodus." In *New Century Bible Commentary*, ed. R. Clements (Mich.: Grand Rapids, 1971), 18-19.

al view probably since the time of the canonization of the Pentateuch.⁸ However, since the nineteenth century Biblical scholars have used source criticism in an attempt to reconcile inconsistencies in the biblical text.⁹ The source for this excerpt may have been (J) [see notes 7 and 8 below] because of the narrative style of the story. This is a common feature of the writings of (J). However, the source for the Book of Exodus, rather than the passage from Exodus 1:8-14 is (J) YHWH and (P) Priestly because there are features in the Book of Exodus commonly found in the writings of both (P) and (J).

The lessons commonly found in (J) narratives commonly deal with human nature and its imperfections. This is done to explain the relationship between man and God. We read, for instance, about weaknesses and faults exhibited by such biblical figures as Moses and Aaron, as well as by the Israelites, in general (Ex2:12, Ex4:1, Ex4:10;Ex 32:6-8;Ex 20:1-31:18). The second source for Exodus is the (P) source because of the detail given when describing the form and function of the Tabernacle (Ex 25:1-31:11; 35:30-40:38). The purpose of the (P) source was to leave a record of the rites and rituals that had a defining significance for the Hebrew religion.

So far, we have briefly discussed some theoretical scenarios of the political situation in a specific historical period, as well as the intended purpose of the narrative of Exodus 1:8-14, and who its source might be. We now focus on the theological lesson contained in Ex 1:8-14. The latter teaches us that the Israelites were

9 The Graf-Wellhausen JEDP theory was based on four main sources: Yahwist, or Jahwist, (J) being the German equivalent of the English letter (Y); the Elohist, (E); the Deuteronomist, (D), the name comes from the Book of Deuteronomy, and the Priestly Writer, (P). They were identified as the composers of selections of the Bible which were woven together from several, at times inconsistent, sources, each originally a complete and independent document.

in a crisis, with no hope of escape. The Book of Exodus details how the relationship between God and his people was born, and how it evolved. We find in The Book of Exodus an account of the foundations of Judaism and Christianity: an explanation, that is, of how and why different clans united to become Israelites with a shared belief in God and entered into a covenant with Him.¹⁰

Canonical critical studies of Exodus point to the fact that most of the Hebrew Bible celebrates the Exodus as a foundational event. The Catechism of the Catholic Church also supports this notion.¹¹ The events in the Book of Exodus define Judaism as a monotheist religion. The Book of Exodus bears witness to their escape and to the subsequent beginnings of a new Israelite nation made possible with God's help—a nation defined by its belief in God and the Covenant they made with Him.¹² The Exodus narrative, then, concerns itself with the birth of Israel, a nation born out of a people's struggle for freedom, made possible through divine intervention.

The Exodus is significant in modern times as a source of hope for people who can identify with the ancient plight of the Israelites. A not too distant historical example of the significance of the Exodus narrative as a source of faith and hope is the story of African-American slaves.¹³ Many of these slaves were introduced to and converted to Christianity, initially with the desired purpose of turning them into subservient, God-fearing souls who would be completely obedient to their white masters. However, the slaves found hope and inspiration also in the Exodus stories. They discovered in those stories of human struggle for survival

10 Woods, "The Exodus", 51.

11 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd ed., 62.

12 Woods, "The Exodus", 40.

13 Anthony R. Ceresko, "Introduction to the Old Testament: A Liberation Perspective," in *The Bible in the Modern World*, ed. G. Chapman (Orbis Books, 2001), 9.

and freedom the strength and courage to persevere under inhuman adverse conditions, knowing that they were among God's children and that, therefore, He would free them from slavery one day.

The Exodus narrative was significant also as a source of inspiration for the poor and oppressed in South America during the 1960s. The latter identified with the plight of the Israelites and prayed to be rescued from abject poverty by the power of God.¹⁴ Thus, we can witness that the message found in Exodus withstands the test of time and crosses cultural borders. This is possible because people around the planet are able to identify with the plight of oppression described in Ex 1:8-14. Many have come to believe that they will find salvation through faith in God.

We have attempted to demonstrate in this paper that Exodus 1:8-14 is a part of a bigger story. There are many interpretations of and meanings given to Exodus. These range from the spiritual to the academic. Specifically in Exodus 1:8-14, the story is that of the plight of the Israelites. Exodus 1:8-14 later develops into a lesson of the power of God, the relationship between God and his chosen people, the birth of the Israelites as a race united by their faith in one God, and the Covenant made between Israelites and God, which defined Hebrew law and promised them a homeland. Understandably so, Exodus 1:8-14 is part of a paradigmatic narrative of great significance to Jews because it is testimony to their relationship with God as His chosen people.

14 Ceresko, "Introduction to the Old Testament", 9-10.

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