

From Memphis to Memphis
Exodus 1:1–7
September 28, 2025

I imagine you've heard or read the Latin phrase, *E pluribus unum*, meaning "Out of many, one." That phrase is on some of our currency. It's an important phrase. If I were talking about church unity this morning, I could certainly defend it.

But it's actually the *opposite* of that phrase that I hope will help us understand our passage today. The biblical pattern we might call, "from the one to the many."¹ Maybe you say, "Where is *that* in the Bible?" We could go a few places, but the first example is the first man: Adam. We read Acts 17 last week. And in that passage Paul interprets the unfolding of Genesis in this way: **And He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth** (Acts 17:26). From one man, *every* nation. How did *that* unfold? Genesis 1 records, **God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth"** (Gen. 1:27). We might call this the history of humanity in a phrase: "from the one to the many."

But it's not *just* Adam. I mentioned this was a biblical *pattern*. And a pattern is something that happens more than once. So, we *could* pause at Noah and make the connection, but I think it might be more advantageous to go to Abraham, or Abram. In Genesis 12, the Lord says to him, in the singular: **I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great . . . and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed** (Gen. 12:3). A few chapters later, the Lord takes Abram outside, tells him to count the stars, and then says: **So shall your descendants be** (Gen. 15:5). Again, it's "from the one to the many." And in this case, it's not merely instruction, it's what God promises; it's evidence of His blessing.

Why bring all this up, this pattern, "from the one to the many"? Because Adam's story reflects it. So does Abraham's. And as *that* promise is actually *being* fulfilled, it will do so that this pattern might continue—through Israel. Which we'll see in our text today. And further, it's not *just* Israel's story; it connects to ours too.

Our outline will look like this: (1) From the one to the many; (2) For many years; (3) For the many nations.

1. **From the one to the many** (vv. 1–5)

Before we jump into verse 1, I want you to consider some sequel that you're familiar with, and in particular how much understanding the sequel depends upon knowing the first book, or film. For example, in *The Two Towers*, on page two, Aragorn kneels beside Boromir as he dies. And by page three Frodo, Gimli, Merry, Pippin, Legolas, and the Orcs have all been mentioned. The book quickly *assumes* you know who these people are, as well as what's happened in the first installment. It's true of most sequels. It's helpful to know *why* the Empire strikes back.

So, once again, Exodus assumes Genesis. That's why we spent the first point of last week's sermon reviewing the big picture of that book. And it's why we began there again today. And if you're not convinced Exodus *assumes* knowledge of Genesis, listen to verse 1: **Now these are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob**. How *clueless* would you be if you didn't know who Jacob was? Or how he ended up in Egypt? Or would you even know who the "sons of Israel" are? So, just to put a point on it, you can't understand the first verse of Exodus without knowing Genesis.

¹ See Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 27ff.

By the way, it's the Greek Old Testament that gives us the title *Exodus*. The title of this book in Hebrew is actually "these are the names," the first words of verse 1.² I *don't* think that's completely disconnected from the idea we considered last week, that is, the theme of this book that aims to make God—and *His name*—known.

That's where the book is headed, as I hope you recall, and keep in mind. But, first, verse 1: **Now these are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob.** To grasp this, we might quickly go to Genesis 32, when Jacob wouldn't let go. And the One wrestling with Jacob asked, "What is your *name*?" And after he answered, the One who would bless Jacob declared, **Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel** (Gen. 32:28).

As you know, there's a *lot* more we might say about that, but for our purposes now, the **sons of Israel** in verse 1 *are* those **who came to Egypt with Jacob**. We read earlier in the service Stephen's synopsis of this in Acts 7. I'll read part of it again: **Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction with it, and our fathers could find no food. But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers there the first time. On the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family was disclosed to Pharaoh. Then Joseph sent word and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him** (Acts 7:11–14).

Or as verse 1 describes it: **they came each one with his household**. Who are *they*? "These are the names" in verse 2: **Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah; Issachar, Zebulun and Benjamin; Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher.**

Those are the names. And the names *matter*. Exodus *begins* with them. And of course, this isn't the *only* book you've ever read in a church that begins with names. 1 Chronicles does so quite famously. The Gospel of Matthew does as well. And though the reason in each instance might vary slightly, one common thread is the importance of lineage in that world.

We discussed this somewhat when we studied Hebrews. That is, in our day, if you're meeting someone new their genealogy might not be of major concern. But in *that* era, lineage was a significant detail. And this is particularly the case throughout the book of Genesis—a book of origins. It repeatedly says things like, **This is the book of the generations of Adam** (Gen. 5:1). In that book we're told the names of Ham's descendants, of Shem's, of Aram's, etc. In Genesis 11 we read the names of the sons of Arphachshad, of Peleg, and on we might go. We know the genealogy of people in Genesis that we know *nothing* else about. They did *nothing* in the narrative; and we know their kids' names.

Names matter. Genealogy matters. As something of a side note, that isn't actually a side note, God has *always* tied His promises to people, real people with real names. And Exodus lists *these* names for the same reason. As we've said, the names connect what's *about* to happen to what had occurred previously. And if it's connecting the reader to what's *already* happened, these are the names of the sons of Jacob, who was the son of Isaac, who was the son of Abraham. They were the children of the promise, children assured of God's blessing. And they had names.

And the names *also* set the stage for what's *about* to happen. Because these children of the promise—the people God chose for Himself—were in a foreign land. Each one—Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, etc.—**came to Egypt with Jacob; they came each one with his household** (v. 1).

And then verse 5 functions somewhat like a summary: **All the persons who came from the loins of Jacob were seventy in number.** Now, in one sense the author is pointing out that the *seventy* all came from the *one*—from Jacob. But in another sense, the author is pointing out that when they all arrived in Goshen, in Egypt, there were *only* seventy of them.³

² Douglas Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC, 57.

³ Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, AOTC, 37.

Verse 7 will describe something quite different than twelve families and seventy people. It *began* with the one. It will soon be the *many*.

But that will take some time.

2. Over the span of many years (v. 5b–6)

Verses 2-4 actually only mention *eleven* of Jacob's twelve sons. But at the end of verse 5, and leading into verse 6, we're reminded *why* their time in Egypt had gone so smoothly, at least initially. Because *when* the seventy came, verse 5b: **Joseph was already in Egypt.**

Once again, the sequel assumes you know this vital detail. He assumes you know *why* Jacob and his sons were welcomed so warmly.⁴ It's because **Joseph was already** there. And as we move forward in the text, it's helpful to be reminded of all the Lord did to *sustain* Jacob's lineage. Joseph's exile to Egypt—by means of a pit, enslavement, false accusations, and even prison—that exile was the means by which God was fulfilling the promises He'd made Abraham. So, when Exodus says, **Joseph was already in Egypt**, we should remember *why* he was separated from his family, *why* he preceded them by years and years. There was evil, yes. But God meant it for good (Gen. 50:20).

And it's on that high note of God's providence that Genesis ends. And within a few verses, Exodus takes us *back* there.⁵ So, with that in mind—providence—and with the Lord's purposes to sustain Jacob's line in mind, we come to verse 6: **Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation.**

Why does Exodus say *this*? Well, in saying that Joseph died, it's *preparing* us for next week's text and the conflict ahead. But, also, in saying that all that generation died, it's taking the reader past the Genesis story's timeline.⁶ The narrative advances chronologically.⁷ And we should know that it does so, not by a few years, but by *many*. If this were a film, between verses 6 and 8 we might see these words along the bottom of the screen: "400 years later."

That's worth reflecting on.⁸ As far as exiles go, 400 years is a long time. It's easy to write that number down, easy to say 400 years out loud. But if you've ever had a year you wouldn't wish on anyone else, 400 years sobers.

Now, it should be said that God was *doing* something in the midst of all these years. We'll note that in a moment. But first it's helpful—to set the scene for what unfolds—to consider God's people *where* they were because of God's purposes, for years and years and years, and living under the promises of God. We might consider the promise God gave Abram in Genesis 15: **Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions** (Gen. 15:13–14).

You think Abraham kept that sentence to himself? No, of course not. He told Isaac. Then Isaac told Jacob. And then Jacob told his sons, including Joseph. Joseph knew what was to come. In fact, at the end of Genesis, as he lay dying, Joseph reminded his brothers of those promises. That's what Hebrews 11:22 tells us: **By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones.** How convinced was Joseph? He hoped for things yet unseen.

⁴ Stuart, 59.

⁵ In fact, next week we'll begin with verse 8, that reads: **Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.**

⁶ Stuart, 59.

⁷ Alexander, 37.

⁸ Alec Motyer, *Exodus*, BST, 11, "The Bible does not itemize the dark sufferings the people endured."

So, as we move forward from Joseph, decade by decade, we're reminded that God's people are there by God's purpose, living under the promise of God, and awaiting His intervention. And, yet, year by year they see *no* outward sign of it.⁹ If the scope is 400 years, maybe *they're* alive from year 250–320. Their parents lived and died waiting. *They* will die waiting. And so might their kids.

I say all *that* to help us think through what's happening from verse 6 to verse 8. The story of God has fast-forwarded *centuries*. The people of God have waited.

But I also want us to think rightly, that is, in decades and centuries, as we consider what God *did* in those generations. They might've been waiting for full deliverance, but that did *not* mean God wasn't working in the midst of them. We'll see that clearly in verse 7.

So, at this point we might pause, and consider that reality that pervades the Scriptures, and apply it to our own hearts and minds. When I heard this week about Voddie Baucham going to be with the Lord, I remembered the first time I heard him speak—sometime in 2005. I wasn't living here yet, but he was in Memphis when I happened to be in town. A friend invited me, and we went. Like you, I haven't heard a lot of memorable sermons. But this one was an exception. It actually profoundly affected the way I thought about the family I did not have yet.

Anyways, when I heard the news this week, I decided to find my notes from that talk. And as I scanned those notebooks from 20 years ago—with scribbles of Bible verses, prayers, and hopes—I noticed a couple things. First, there's some commonality. I'm still asking for the Lord to work in certain ways. I'm still waiting. But, secondly, there's quite a bit that 42-year-old Matt could tell 22-year-old Matt to press on in praying for. Because, *now* I know, the Lord was then *certainly* working.

The benefit of time is being able to recognize that. It's something Hebrews 6 speaks clearly of, that we're to imitate those **who through faith and patience inherit the promises** (Heb. 6:12). We wait *until* the Lord works. Knowing that *while* we wait, He's working.

And what God was doing all along is finally made visible in verse 7. Joseph's died. All that generation has died. Years have passed. Verse 7: **But the sons of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly, and multiplied, and became exceedingly mighty, so that the land was filled with them.** Over many years, it's from the one to the many. And it is so . . .

3. For the many nations (v. 7)

Let's consider *first* the phrase in verse 7 that we heard first back in verse 1: **the sons of Israel**. In verse 1 it meant one thing. In verse 7 it *still* means that, but the scope is much larger. That family—Jacob's family—has become more like a nation. And, yet—because it's the same phrase, “the sons of Israel”—verse 7 *still* traces the masses back to the one, the patriarch.¹⁰

It's *from* the one. But it's *to* the many, with verse 7 portraying an enormous population explosion,¹¹ stacking up verbs one after another, all associated with growth: **But the sons of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly, and multiplied, and became exceedingly mighty, so that the land was filled with them.** Now usually, in the Old Testament, you *might* find two of those verbs together, *maybe* three, but not four or five. It's as if Moses “packed in” every possible way of saying that the Israelites increased in number. A literal translation of it might read: “As for the Israelites, they grew, they were fruitful, they swarmed, they increased, they got powerful more and more, and the land was filled with them.”¹²

⁹ Motyer, 12.

¹⁰ Stuart, 59.

¹¹ Alexander, 42.

¹² Stuart, 61.

And I hope that language reminds you of other biblical passages, maybe even one we considered earlier. Because all five verbs in verse 7 mirror the verbiage of creation.¹³ And none of those words—fruitful, multiply, and fill—are words you forget when you’ve *just* read the book of Genesis. And if you’ve *just* read it, you also would know that this fruitfulness is evidence of the blessing promised the patriarchs.¹⁴ To Abraham, Genesis 17:6: **I will make you exceedingly fruitful.** To Isaac, Genesis 26:22: **the Lord has made room for us, and we will be fruitful.** To Jacob, Genesis 35:11: **God also said to him, “I am God Almighty; be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you.”**

Even though they’re in a foreign land, what is happening in Exodus 1 is absolutely in tune with God’s purposes. Nothing about it is happenstance. It’s a *result* of God’s blessing.¹⁵

Conclusion

So, this is how Exodus begins. In a foreign land, while enslaved, God was blessing His people, causing them to increase greatly and multiply. He was *filling* the land with them.

Then, in the chapters ahead, we’ll see Him make Himself known *to* this fruitful people, His treasured possession (Ex. 19:5). Out of the many nations, He calls to Himself *one*.

And in this we actually see two strands of God’s purposes running together. From Genesis 1 we know that fruitfulness through His image-bearers is about God’s glory filling the earth. And from Genesis 12—through Abraham—we know that God’s intention isn’t *only* His glory, but also His blessing upon His people. And both are coming to fruition in Exodus 1.¹⁶ Israel’s growth is God’s purpose unfolding, *and* it is God’s blessing advancing. From the one to the many, for *His* glory and for *their* good, He will make Himself known.

And yet not *merely* for Israel’s good alone, but so that *through* them He might be made known to the world. It’s the *one* nation chosen for the good of nation after nation after nation. So that the knowledge of God might go from the Nile’s delta in Egypt to a place called Memphis—a place where names *also* matter, where God’s promises could not be more personal. So that *we* might know the One that reveals God most fully, the *One* through whom the *many* might be made righteous (Rom. 5:18–19), the *One* who gave His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

¹³ Alexander, 42.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Leonard, *The Preacher’s Hebrew Companion to Exodus 1:1–15:21*, 5.

¹⁵ Alexander, 43.

¹⁶ W. Ross Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known*, NSBT, 31.