

Dwelling in Death's Shadows Exodus 1:8–22

Stepping into the second book of the Bible, we've entered a drama that has fascinated the world for millennia. Longing. Conflict. Euthanasia. Fear. Misery. Family. Marriage. Betrayal. Providence. Salvation. Miracles with fire. Miracles with water. Animal invasions. Crippling darkness. The very revelation of God Himself. Considering all that transpires here, it would be difficult to throw off all fascination of the Exodus account. Maybe you can recall the occasions, or even the place where you first watched Cecil DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* starring Charlton Heston, Yul Brynner, Ann Baxter, and Edwin Robinson. If you're twenty-something, or maybe even thirty-something, you may be clueless as to what I'm referencing. But many of you aren't. It's no surprise that what we find in Exodus made it to the big screen.

Much more significantly, however, the book and themes of Exodus play a part in our own salvation story. If you're banking your all on Christ today, then you've known the grace which has drawn you out of the waters of death and placed you on the shores of everlasting life. You release constant and worshipful sighs of relief, identifying with Israel watching the Red Sea close in over her enemies at just the right time. We live in that reality, and we have that final hope as an anchor.¹

But just as in our own lives, which have been racked by sin and brokenness, there is a backdrop for the victorious relief and the joyful singing of Moses, Miriam, and Israel on the seashore that momentous day.² And here we begin to discover the backdrop. Verse 8, ***Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.*** It's likely true that Joseph was no stranger to the historical archives of Egypt, and that since there were so many Israelites swarming in the land, this ***new king*** likely knew of Joseph. However, the sympathies of past administrations bestowed on these Hebrew foreigners within Egyptian borders was now over—that's what is meant by ***did not know Joseph***. Those sympathies were now cast aside. The favor once enjoyed by Joseph's family was no more. Maybe this new Pharaoh never heard the promises made to Abraham, "*I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse...*"³ And because of this new posture there will be new policies, devastating and devious ones.

It's indicative of every culture misaligned in their knowledge of the living and true God—people become expendable; life itself is superfluous and without honor. In other words, death and hopelessness often take prominent seats among those who rule in godlessness. It's always been this way. And in this first chapter of Exodus, for Israel, life in Egypt becomes stained with the darkest experiential tones. As a result, many hearts began to stir in desperation for deliverance.

Remember that the faithful in Egypt are still living in hope of the promises of God. Some had not forgotten what God spoke to Abraham, passed down to Isaac, Jacob, and the rest—that Abraham's offspring would be given the land of Canaan,⁴ that kings would come from his line,⁵ and (maybe the one standing out more, considering what was happening here) that Abraham's offspring would triumph over their enemies.⁶ So, try to imagine with me today the shadows being lived under and

¹ Genesis 3:15, and the New Testament version, Romans 16:20

² Exodus 15:1-18

³ Genesis 12:3

⁴ Genesis 15:18

⁵ Genesis 17:6

⁶ Genesis 22:17

the churning agonies produced at the hand of this tyrant in Exodus 1. One commentator said it better,

“[Israel was] there by divine command, under divine promise, awaiting divine intervention. Of these things, however, they saw no outward sign. Heaven about was as silent as earth around was threatening...Experience without explanation, adversity without purpose, and hostility without protection—that is how life will [often] appear for the earthly people of God.”⁷

I. The enemy of God—perpetuating a death culture

When we use the word “culture,” we simply mean a way of life, or “the characteristic features of everyday existence shared by people in a place or time.”⁸ Egypt was surely known for having a unique culture in many respects. One of the largest rivers in the world served as a geographical marvel, and no one can deny that Egyptian way of life was fashioned by the mighty waters of the Nile River. The Giza-Pyramids have stumped the world for centuries when considering their construction and dazzled regarding their contents. We’re not that many months from addressing all the gods which the Egyptians venerated, completely foreign to the Western mind. In fact, this particular period in which we find ourselves in Exodus 1 was a “golden age” for Egypt—a period of great wealth and power.⁹

But one dominant, cultural feature of Egypt gathered from both history and the testimony of scripture is Egypt’s love affair with the underworld, the place of death. There was no sharing the Hebrew mind of Job, “*Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return*”¹⁰ Great pains were taken to fill their tombs with items to offer their gods, or to simply take for enjoyment into the realm of the afterlife. Egyptians were so enamored by these things that they were highly skilled in mummification, exceeding other nations in the sciences concerning post-mortem bodies.¹¹

Not to be outdone by the historical evidence, scripture agrees with the notion of Egypt’s relationship to death. The Old Testament ideas of descending [yarad] and ascending [‘alah] are often with reference to Egypt—descending into Egypt and ascending out of Egypt. For example, Joseph is sold to a band of Ishmaelites who were, “*bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry these items down [yarad] to Egypt.*”¹² “Unsurprisingly,” writes Morales, “the caravan headed to Egypt, the land renowned for embalming, is laden with funerary (funeral) supplies and is traveling downward...descending into the Sheol of Egypt.”¹³ It might surprise you as it did me at how many biblical references identify Egypt this way.

Therefore, this first movement of Pharaoh’s plan is unsurprising, rooted in this swarming fruitfulness of God’s people considered last week. Matt noted then that in Hebrew, this book is called “These are the names.”¹⁴ In keeping with Israelite heritage, being reminded of their

⁷ Alec Motyer, *Exodus*, 27-28.

⁸ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 11th Edition.

⁹ Barry Beitzel, *Lexham Geographic Commentary on the Pentateuch*, 353.

¹⁰ Job 1:21a

¹¹ Michael Morales, *Exodus: Old and New*, 50.

¹² Genesis 37:25

¹³ Morales, 51.

¹⁴ Douglas Stuart, *NAC: Exodus*, 57.

forefathers and the gracious workings of God among them was paramount, markers of Yahweh's great faithfulness. God was establishing a people, with names and lives set on making His name great. This new king over Egypt, however, would become set on wiping names off the face of his own soil so that he might extend the greatness of his own name.¹⁵ The abundant Hebrew population became unpopular and a stench to the new monarch. We see his concern in verse 9, *And [Pharoah] said to his people, "Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. [10] Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." [11] Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses.*

The reasons for phase one of Pharaoh's strategy seem clear here. The language he uses exposes his insecurities, *too many and too mighty for us*. He presented the Israelites as a dangerous majority living in Egypt, and in doing so, whatever harsher courses of action needing to be taken would be justified. The potential scenario he envisions reeks of fear—*if war breaks out*.¹⁶ And if war breaks out and goes the way of the Israelites, then they'll *escape from the land*.

More lived underneath Pharaoh's message and methods. As with most despots, luxury plays into every decision. Therefore, his financial security and overall power, his bulky treasuries and proud extravagance, were at risk of being diminished. These were dependent, in a significant way, through the Hebrew workforce. This new king, though not the same one who defied God and His servant Moses years from our text, lived inside the same insecurities and the same menacing, conflicting desires. I say "conflicting" because on one hand he's attempting to shrink their numbers by oppression and cruelty, but on the other hand he doesn't want them to *escape from the land* due to all the benefits that the massive work force can bring through their labor efforts.

Seeking to preserve personal power and legacy through his handling of these irritating Israelites, what is this new ruler's first step in the process? Verse 11, ...*set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens*. And just to show how heavy the burdens were, it's recorded, *They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses*. Massive undertakings. The beginning of the enslavement of God's people had begun.

But the actual outcome and Pharaoh's desired outcome failed to match up. Verse 12, *But the more [the Israelites] were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel*. We might call this a failed policy of backfiring!¹⁷ Or we might just chuckle with worship. Through the centuries, numbers and human calculations have not always *added up*, especially when the wisdom and hand of God are considered. The text doesn't explicitly say that the multiplication of life here is God's work, but it certainly implies it. Whether it's Jonathan, Saul's son, saying in a seemingly innocuous moment to his armor bearer, "Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised...for nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few," or the LORD's word to Gideon, "With the 300 men who lapped I will save you and give the Midianites (120,00 of them, mind you!) into your

¹⁵ In fact, the mention of "mortar and brick" in 1:14 is the same language found at the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:3). There, the people expressed aloud the purpose of building a great edifice to the heavens: "Let us make a name for ourselves." Here in Exodus 1 it seems that the Spirit through Moses' authorship is tying these events together. Pharaoh is intent on the very same evil as arrogant of Gen. 11, failing to exalt the name of the true God and instead seeking to make a great name for himself.

¹⁶ Proverbs 28:1, "The wicked flee when no one pursues..."

¹⁷ Stuart, 70.

hand...,” God never needs the odds in His favor to overcome the humanly impossible. He is the One blessing His people with life after life, despite the conditions.

The initial plan to slow down the overwhelming multiplication of these foreigners was in vain. But it was also something else: Anti-life, and against the flourishing of His beloved people, a flourishing sanctioned by Him at creation. The culture of death was beginning to show its murkier tones. Verse 13 speaks to the intensity of Pharaoh’s response, like a child who doesn’t get his/her way at first, ***So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves [14] and made their lives bitter with hard service...*** We can’t gloss over this word ruthless. It’s the kind of breaking-backs service where people could die. This is the kind of servitude that God would soon forbid in the Law of Moses. Notice the language that harkens back to this very event from Leviticus 25:39-42, *“If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave...For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves. [43] You shall not rule over him ruthlessly but shall fear your God.”*

Nonetheless, this first step of political and financial manipulation and widespread clampdowns on working conditions failed. But what Pharaoh did accomplish was the setting in motion the very thing he feared. He unwittingly spoke words and took actions which were declarations of war against the God of heaven and earth. To be clearer, this new king on the block oppressed God’s people, and in doing so, the wrath of their LORD was beginning to awaken, with reserves of His justice and compassion in tow.

II. The people of God—gripped by death culture

The burdens kept deepening and the horror kept expanding. Phase one to suppress the population by working them to death and stifle new life with children, it bombed. Phase two? Verse 15ff, ***Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah. When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live.***” Again, I try to imagine these words sliding off Pharaoh’s forked tongue and landing like venom into the hearts of these midwives, whose very jobs consisted of the preservation and health of newborns. Accounting for the sheer numbers of babies being born throughout the Egyptian delta (remember, they are swarming) it was unlikely that ***Shiphrah*** and ***Puah*** attended all the births. The most probable scenario is that they were senior midwives tasked to direct the other midwives to conform to this deadly command.¹⁸

Pharaoh has now tightened his grip. The whole nation is in now in a death lock of death-culture. Arthur Pink expressed, “It is not difficult to peer behind the scenes and behold one who was seeking to use Pharaoh as an instrument with which to accomplish his fiendish designs.”¹⁹ In other words, it’s not a difficult leap to see the satanic influence of such a command. He is a liar and a thief, set on stealing, killing, and destroying those made in God’s image. Satan is the preeminent influencer of death culture throughout the world. Jesus, who has known Satan longer than anyone, said of him, *“He was a murderer from the beginning.”*²⁰

¹⁸ Stuart, 76.

¹⁹ Arthur Pink, *Gleanings from Exodus*, 14.

²⁰ John 8:44

A few weeks back I finished a fascinating read called *Everything is Tuberculosis* by John Green. In it Green documents the history of tuberculosis and its deadly ravaging of the human body. It's sometimes referred to as "consumption" or the "wasting disease" because that's what literally happens when it takes hold—one literally wastes away with no desire to eat, with seized up lungs leading to eventual asphyxiation without treatment. One of Green's central assertions about the disease is that even though there has been definitive cure for tuberculosis since the 1950's, "the cure, in 2025, is not where the disease is and the disease is not where the cure is."²¹ Green offers various reasons for this tragic unfolding. One, as you might guess, is cost related. People throughout more impoverished places in the world, under unstable and greed-ridden governments might never sniff a treatment. Now you tell me, is there not something fundamentally wrong with this? A cure for a horrible, indiscriminate disease exists, but if you can't pony up? Aspects of death culture are alive and well in our world.²²

But these named midwives won't have any part of this royal thirst for death. Verse 17 tells us, ***But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live.*** Hebrews 11 tells us the kind of women these were, those "of whom the world is not worthy." Courage to the bone, defying the highest authority around. We hear the words of Peter and the apostles resonating backwards in time, "*We must obey God rather than men!*"²³ To be faithful to Pharaoh would mean sinning against God.²⁴ Though no command is recorded here from God, these women knew that the God of their fathers loved life and children and babies, in and out of the womb. When God tabernacled among us, He welcomed little lives, saw that their presence and existence were good, and He took them in His arms to bless them.²⁵

This slithering sovereign over Egypt moved differently. How he found out that boys' lives weren't taken we're not told. But he demanded an explanation. Verse 18, ***So the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and let the male children live?" [19] The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them."*** And, by all indications, Pharaoh bought their interpretation. Was there some "holy" deception involved, like Rahab hiding the spies to preserve lives? Perhaps, but what we can gather from *Shiphrah* and *Puah* and all the midwives under their direction is that God had the upper hand through them; that with conviction they rejected doing what was evil in God's sight and chose to shape this circumstance for the physical saving of helpless children. As a result, God took note of these champions of life for His glory.

III. The blessing of God—blooming life amid death culture

Verse 20, ***So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong.*** In the throes of this new Pharaoh's man-theft and bloodthirst, we find an oasis of divine blessing. ***Dealt well*** signifies not merely a kind of short-term transaction of fading warmth, but a better

²¹ John Green, *Everything is Tuberculosis*, 116.

²² According to Green, 150 million people have died of TB since the cure was discovered in the 1950's (Green, 5). According to the World Health Organization's official tuberculosis report for 2023, 1.2 million people died of the disease. (<https://www.who.int/teams/global-programme-on-tuberculosis-and-lung-health/tb-reports>)

²³ Acts 5:29

²⁴ Jim Hamilton, Bible Talk Podcast: *Exodus 1-2, "On Moses and the Ark—And Tracking Aslan on the Move, Ep. 21*, March 3rd, 2021.

²⁵ Luke 18:16

rendering here would be that He showed kindness over a long period of time.²⁶ He apparently delivered them from any repercussions of not doing exactly as Pharaoh demanded. And then we see another deep kindness from heaven reflected at the end of verse 21. Over the course of many years to come, smack in the middle of Egypt's death culture with a macabre master on the throne, God simply and powerfully and beautifully gave these midwives *families*. This is significant because many of these women were midwives who had experienced childlessness, many of them presumably later on in years. This LORD would be Hannah's LORD in time, who turns whatever He wills on His providential dime, "*The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. [6] The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.*"

In the end, notice the driving force behind these Pharaoh-defying acts from the midwives. Verse 17 and 21, ***But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them... the midwives feared God...*** Fearing God means that He is highly exalted in your very being. Fearing Him means that what others can do to you in your obedience doesn't matter more than pleasing God by your obedience. The nature of this Godward fear is that it tends to devour all other fears, including the fear of others, even those in the highest positions.

Conclusion

To continue quoting Green, "We would like to imagine that we captain the ship of our own lives, that human history is largely the story of human choice...But history, alas, is not merely a record of what we do, but also a record of what is done to us."²⁷ In our text we see both death culture imposed and death culture resisted. Like these midwives, we're not to go along with or give into any aspect of death culture. We serve a Savior who abolished death and gave us life and immortality through the gospel. We're executors of life and blessing and joy, and we operate within life-giving realities such as confession, forgiveness, selfless service and the love of God, stronger than many waters. We stand up for the weak, because we know our own. We champion life, because it is a gift from the Author of life.

I ask of you and me, "Where's our godly fear and courage in the face of evil?" The evil "pharaoh" of the world still holds his allotted sway.²⁸ But for grace, we'd still be harmonizing our own drum of sin to the beat of Satan's pompous and portentous drum.

The pervasiveness of death is the backdrop of today's passage. But as we drop back into the story next week, a baby, hunted by death's curator and cast into the river considered by the Egyptians as both life-giver and life-taker, the God of salvation will break through the darkness by having a baby drawn from the Nile's infested and watery grave.²⁹

²⁶ Stuart, 82.

²⁷ Green, 29-30.

²⁸ 1 John 5:19, "...the whole world lies in the power of the evil one."

²⁹ Tombs were often built on the west bank of the Nile, being the side of the sun's setting, a very symbol of death itself. Kathryn Bard, *An Introduction to the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt*, 219-221.

