

The Israelites in Egypt

SCOTT HOEZEE

A coffin in Egypt. Those are the last four words of the book of Genesis, and those words refer to the death of Joseph and how his loved ones placed his remains in a coffin in Egypt until the day would come when the children of Israel could return to the promised land and bring Joseph's coffin with them; but the image of a coffin is not a very hopeful way for a book to end, and indeed, as we begin a new series on the book of Exodus, we will see that Israel's situation has only gotten worse in the centuries since Joseph died. The people were in an increasingly desperate situation and the prospects of ever getting back to Canaan were not looking good. So, did God have a rescue plan? Was God up to anything? We shall see. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we are beginning a new series here on *Groundwork* of seven or eight programs I think on the book of Exodus. So, we are starting right at the top today, where Genesis left off and where Exodus begins is a period of some centuries in there – what, about 400 years or something like that?

DAVE BAST

Yes; the period of time when the children of Israel sojourned in Egypt, as the old Biblical phrase had it. Really, the book of Exodus is one that has captured the imagination of people, both Jews and Christians, and for that matter, non-religious people as well, with its themes of bondage and deliverance and hope and fear; all of these wonderful – plus some incredibly great stories – some of the most familiar Bible stories of all.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They are great narratives and they are fun to read. They are the stuff that Sunday School and Bible School curricula are made of; but more than that, more than just cracking good stories and enduring human themes, this is, of course, a pivotal piece in the whole narrative arc of the Bible in terms of salvation history; and a lot of what we are going to see in this series, even in this program, are things that point like an arrow all the way to Jesus; all the way to the culmination of salvation in the New Testament.

DAVE BAST

Right, because Exodus is really the great saving event of Old Testament history, as the cross and the resurrection of Jesus are for New Testament history – a new Exodus – as the great act of God's salvation for his ancient people, Israel, the themes of Exodus have also resonated later in history, including in American history.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes; just recently, in the 20th Century, the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King, Jr., the themes of Exodus, of leading the people out. A lot of the spirituals, African American spirituals, that emerged out of slavery and that remained popular also in the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-20th Century, all resonated with themes of Exodus – Let My People Go – Go Down, Moses – those themes have really been enduring.

DAVE BAST

Right; or you could even think of more modern history with Israel. Leon Uris, the novelist, wrote a book called *Exodus* about the return to Palestine and the creation of the State of Israel. So, yes, many of these are not just Bible stories; not just important for Jewish or Christian people; but they are human stories, and they resonate with the human spirit and the human longing for freedom.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The book begins where we were catching up with the descendents of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but they are in a tough spot. Joseph, of course, as we remember from the Genesis stories – Joseph had risen to prominence. He landed in Egypt in a very rough way, but he rose to be second only to Pharaoh. He oversaw a massive food program that saved peoples' lives in Egypt and elsewhere through a famine. Joseph had been very powerful, but as Exodus begins, that was a long time ago.

DAVE BAST

Right, so I will pick up the story reading in Chapter 1, beginning at verse 8: Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. ⁹"Look," he said to his people, "The Israelites have become far too numerous for us. ¹⁰Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous, and if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us, and leave the country." ¹¹So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor; and they built Pithom and Raamses as store cities for Pharaoh. ¹²But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread. ¹³So the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. ¹⁴They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar, and with all kinds of work in the fields. In all their harsh labor, the Egyptians used them ruthlessly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹⁵The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, ¹⁶"When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live." ¹⁷The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do. They let the boys live. ¹⁸Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?" ¹⁹The midwives answered Pharaoh, "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous. They give birth before the midwives arrive." ²⁰So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. ²¹And because the midwives feared God, He gave them families of their own. ²²Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people, "Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live."

DAVE BAST

So, what is going on here in this story? It really sets up the whole drama of the early part of Exodus and it begins with an ominous phrase – in the version that we read it was a new king to whom Joseph meant nothing came to power – in the older version it was: There arose a Pharaoh who knew not Joseph.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, that is right. Joseph who?

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly. Short historical memory; although, as you pointed out, I think, Scott, earlier; probably some 300 or maybe 350 years have passed since Jacob and his sons moved down into Egypt; but the truth is, this is maybe a different dynasty; maybe a whole different set of Pharaohs, and they just do not care about Joseph or what he did and they do not remember him, even.

SCOTT HOEZEE

What is interesting – there is a lot going on here, and the people are in a terrible situation – but there are two things that we want to mention yet in this segment; one is, there is a little hint here, and you have to read

carefully to catch it, but there is a hint here that God has fulfilled a big part of his promise to Abraham because, in one of the early verses here that you read, Dave, for the very first time in the Bible, the people of Israel are referred to – in Hebrew it is called *am*, but it means *nation*; it means a people; and of course we know that was God's great promise to Abraham and Sarah, right? Out of this childless couple – and then they finally have a little boy named Isaac – supposedly a nation is going to come. It seemed unlikely, but look; it has happened. They are so numerous now the Egyptians fear them, that they could take over the country. So, there is a covenant fulfillment going on just in how they are referred to as a nation.

DAVE BAST

Right, and in fact, the Apostle Paul will refer to this in one of his great sermons that is recorded in Acts 13, he points out how they went down into Egypt only a few persons, but they came out a great nation; so that has taken place. Part of the purpose of this intervening time, these centuries that have gone by, is that God has fulfilled his promise and he has made of them a numerous people; in fact, that is one of the great emphases of this verse: Pharaoh is afraid of it because they are multiplying like rabbits. So, they become a people, a nation, and God is fulfilling that part of his promise.

SCOTT HOEZEE

What is interesting about Exodus 1, and scholars have pointed this out and if you read it carefully you will see it, that for almost the entire chapter, until – we will see in a minute – at the very, very end, God is not mentioned. There is not one word or reference to God even one time, and so God seems to be absent, and probably the text mirrors how the people felt. They did not see God doing anything either. They were getting enslaved; they were having to work with brick and mortar; they are getting cruel taskmasters; their children are being threatened with death; baby boys are being tossed into the Nile; it is horrible. And God is not mentioned in the text at all. So, the question is: Is God doing anything or not? These Israelites, they have become a nation now, but are they still God's people because he seems absent.

DAVE BAST

Well, He is not absent, and we are going to see the way he is at work in the names of two Bible characters that you probably are not as familiar with, and frankly, neither are we, but they are very important keys to show us how God is working for his people. We will look at them in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today, Dave, we are beginning a series on the book of Exodus, and we are in the first chapter.

DAVE BAST

Right; and Scott, you were just pointing out an interesting thing about Exodus Chapter 1: God is simply not mentioned. The narrative begins; we are told about Pharaoh; we are introduced to the problem of the people in slavery, and Pharaoh is launching a preemptive strike against them; a genocide, really; an early holocaust, we might say, to destroy the Israelite people; and God does not seem to be doing anything. He does not seem to be aware of it. Joseph was a long time ago. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, even further back, and in all those great stories that the people of Israel must have been telling one another and preserving, God was active; God was there; he was speaking; he was making himself known; where is he now?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Pharaoh is huge in Chapter 1. Pharaoh looms large; he is threatening; he is menacing; he is like Darth Vader in the Star Wars movies or something. He looms large over everything; but God? Not mentioned; does not seem to be doing anything; horrible things are happening and nobody is stopping it. So, where is God? Well, it turns out that God is very quietly but surely at work through two women whose names are actually preserved for us. When you think about the whole Bible, Old Testament, the story of Israel, all the way into the New Testament, all of the people Jesus met, even most of the people Jesus healed; you almost never get a name. Really, the number of names in the Bible other than the genealogies – there are not that many – but

here, we have two names: Shiphrah and Puah; and they are mentioned several times, and they are very carefully preserved in scripture because, it turns out, that is where God was, in people like this.

DAVE BAST

I love these two women. They have moxie. They have chutzpah. Pharaoh calls them in and he gives them instructions, “Look, I want you to kill every male baby that is born,” which is a chilling thing when you think about it. You think about the killing that goes on even today with so many unborn children – a chilling thing. He says, “You can let the girls live; we don’t worry about them. We will marry them off to Egyptians and they will disappear, but the boys we are concerned about,” and these women come back at Pharaoh and simply refuse to do it, and when he calls them back and says, “Hey, what’s going on? I keep seeing these babies...” They tell him, “Well, you know, the Hebrew women aren’t like your Egyptian women. They are vigorous and they give birth before we can get there,” which is undoubtedly untrue, but it is a little bit of Jewish humor, I think.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They are the ones with whom, through whom God is indeed working. As we said earlier, the Israelites get referred to as a nation for the very first time here in Exodus 1, so that is significant. It is fulfilling the promise. You flash back to Genesis 12: I will make of you a mighty nation, God said to Abram; a childless, old man at the time, but now it has happened; it is happening in part because of Shiphrah and Puah. So, you say, “Oh, look at that. They are called a nation; I wonder how that happened,” and the answer is, it happened because God uses these women who are just doing their job, and doing it correctly, and yet, God can do a mighty thing through ordinary acts.

DAVE BAST

Right, absolutely. Not only are they doing their job, but they are bravely refusing to do something they know to be wrong; and when they are commanded by the power of the State to kill these innocent children, they simply will not do it, no matter what the consequences are, and thus, God is working through them. There is a wonderful little word that the Apostle Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 3 when he is talking about himself and Apollos and the other apostles, he says we are God’s co-workers. That is such a striking thing to me; does God need co-workers? Probably not, but he chooses to use co-workers; God does his work through us in the world. If you want to know where God is today in some of these terrible situations, he is quietly working through brave men and women who are doing their job and refusing to do the wrong thing, and instead doing the right thing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as a testament to that, the first time God does get mentioned in this chapter comes in verse 20, which we read in the first segment of this episode, and it is in connection to God being pleased with Shiphrah and Puah. Not only does he manage to protect their lives – Pharaoh certainly could have had them killed – but he rewards them with big families of their own; so Pharaoh’s plan has backfired times two. Not only did these women disobey him and so all of their babies are getting born, God made sure that Shiphrah and Puah get big families; and so, Pharaoh’s situation has actually gotten worse; the people are becoming more numerous. But indeed, sometimes even today – you are right – we wonder what is God doing, and so we wonder what the Pope is doing or we look at some kind of hotshot celebrity pastors who show up on Fox News or CNN and get interviewed all the time, or we look at big denominational programs and big pushes with a lot of money; well, God might be active in and through some of that, but as often as not, he is active in the little people like Shiphrah and Puah, who are just quietly doing faithful acts of mercy through the church, outside of the church, beyond the church; and God gets his work done.

DAVE BAST

So, Exodus 1 really is a story that has some real inspiration and encouragement, I think, for us as ordinary people...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, God works through us...

DAVE BAST

who have jobs to do. Yes, exactly; that is what God is up to. But, as we pursue the story a little bit further, we learn that Pharaoh is not finished; he has not played his last card yet; he is about to increase the stakes rather dramatically. We will look at that next.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and we want to move quickly into the next part of this story, because we are going to be introduced to one particular Hebrew baby boy, and I think you have heard of him. Exodus 2:1:

Now a man of the house of Levi married a Levite woman, ²And she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months. ³But when she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. ⁴His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁵Then Pharaoh's daughter went down to the Nile to bathe and her attendants were walking along the riverbank. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her female slave to get it. ⁶She opened it and saw the baby. He was crying and she felt sorry for him. "This is one of the Hebrew babies," she said. ⁷Then his sister asked Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?" ⁸"Yes, go," she answered, and the girl went and got the baby's mother. ⁹Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this baby and nurse him for me and I will pay you." So the woman took the baby and nursed him. ⁹And when the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, "I drew him out of the water."

DAVE BAST

So, here we go; another Hebrew baby boy; Pharaoh, remember, has just ordered that every male Hebrew child now – every male Israelite baby is to be simply chunked into the Nile and drowned. That is how he is going to get rid of them. In this case, we have all sorts of interesting little twists. Moses will be chunked into the Nile, but he will not be drowned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, but he will not drown.

DAVE BAST

Pharaoh's own daughter will be the agent of his rescue; and meanwhile, in a little bit more typical Jewish humor, Moses' mother will become his nurse, and his sister is the go-between who makes it all happen. So, it is just a marvelous story.

SCOTT HOEZEE

When I was a little kid, I do not know if I was actually actively taught the story this way or if this is how I understood it, but I suppose you could read this story, and when I was a kid it was sort of like, "Well, what a happy set of coincidences here." They set the baby adrift in a basket. Who knows what is going to happen to the kid, but oh, lucky you. The Pharaoh's daughter came by at just the right time...

DAVE BAST

Or it is all a miracle that God has engineered, maybe, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But I have kind of a funny feeling that Moses' mother and sister had done a little reconnaissance; I think they had done a little pre-work on this. I have a funny feeling they knew exactly where the Pharaoh's daughter tended to take her dips in the Nile, and I have a feeling they made sure the basket got hung up on just the right reed so that it would be there when Pharaoh's daughter got there; and unless Pharaoh's daughter was a real nitwit intellectually, she must have known what was going on. She probably knew the girl who popped up...

DAVE BAST

Oh, my goodness, here is a Hebrew girl – what a coincidence.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Could you find someone to nurse the baby? Oh, I think I could find a candidate. I think Pharaoh's daughter knew exactly what was going on. There was a lot of winking and nodding going on in this story. The girl who had been spying from the reeds was the little baby's sister, probably; that a wet nurse was going to be the baby's mother, and she knew if full well; but Pharaoh's daughter played along – that is what is interesting – and she, therefore, becomes an agent of providence in saving the person God is choosing to deliver the people, ultimately.

DAVE BAST

Nevertheless, it is important, I think, to see the symbolism here, too. The Nile was the great fact of life in ancient Egypt.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it was the source of life.

DAVE BAST

It still is, in a way, for Egypt. It was the flooding of the Nile annually that would inundate the fields to each side of the river and provide fertility again so that food could be grown in that very desert-like land; and yet, for the Israelites, the Nile has become a symbol of death. It is the source of their destruction. It is the gas ovens in the concentration camp. So, here it is all turned over and switched, as Moses is cast down into the Nile, but his life is preserved, and he is drawn up out of the Nile by Pharaoh's very daughter.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And throughout most of Church history, I think, most commentators and theologians have recognized that this story is a prefiguring of baptism. These waters are waters of chaos – they are not the good creation waters that stay where God separated them in Genesis 1. These are waters of chaos; waters that are being used for the purpose of death instead of life. The Nile is a source of life; water is a source of life, but it can become an agent of chaos, and in this case it does, and so this harks back to Noah's flood – the Noah's Ark story – it points forward to the Red Sea, which we will see in a future episode in this Exodus series. Ultimately, it points forward to the Jordan River, where Jesus is baptized. You go down into the waters of death and you are drawn out like Moses; by grace, you are drawn out alive.

DAVE BAST

Peter calls the Ark a symbol of baptism, in which a few persons are saved through water, and Moses' ark is even smaller. It is just this tiny basket. So, there is this wonderful symbolism going on of the God who brings life out of death, who preserves his people, who works and accomplishes his purpose through ordinary people. So, we have Moses' parents; they are not even named.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, unlike Shiphrah and Puah.

DAVE BAST

Shiphrah and Puah; yes. We have their names, but we do not know the names of Moses' father and mother. They are Levites, which will become the priestly tribe; and yet, Israel's greatest leader, its proto-leader, Moses, will not be from Judah, the royal tribe; he will be a Levite, along with his brother, Aaron. So, all of this is going on, and in and through it all, God is at work to save his people.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Moses ends up being where Joseph had been some centuries earlier. He ends up, once he is weaned from his mother and is given to Pharaoh's daughter, that means now Moses is in the royal palace. Moses is growing up in Pharaoh's household, and commentators differ a little bit, but it could be that the Pharaoh that Moses will confront many, many decades from now, could have been a young boy at the time growing up with Moses – there has been speculation – in fact, there is a movie coming out in late 2014 that is going to speculate on Moses and the Pharaoh growing up together like brothers; but the point is, God has positioned – for now, anyway – it is going to change – but God has positioned somebody right back in a central position of power; and as you said, Dave, he is doing this through ordinary people and through ordinary means. No thunderbolts from the sky here in Exodus 1 and 2; just a mother carefully making a papyrus basket and putting in the tar and pitch; just doing all the simple things to preserve one life; and yet, God is active right in and through it all.

DAVE BAST

And we know that that one life is going to turn out to be an extraordinarily significant leader; although his story is going to take a few twists and turns and detours as well; and that is what we are going to look at in our next program; but meanwhile, God has set the plan in motion and we can trust that he will see it through to the very end, just as he will with the plans he has for our lives and our churches and our family as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

0:24:12.4] That is very, very good news, indeed. Well, thank you for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. We are your hosts, Dave Bast and Scott Hoezee, and we always want to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. We have a website: groundworkonline.com. Visit it and tell us what topics and passages you would like to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

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