

Exodus 1

This opening chapter of the book of Exodus can be a cautionary tale, in the sense that God's blessings do not always make life easy or comfortable. We will discover this by connecting the dots (themes) between Exodus and Genesis. One note before we begin though is that in the Torah, this book is not referred to as Exodus, but as Names, based not only on the opening list of names, but more importantly the giving of the name to Israel as a people and the struggle over the name for God.

First let's connect the dots so that we can see how God's blessings put the people of God at risk. The blessings that have been promised to the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are land, seed (children), blessing and the blessing of all the nations. Chapter one tells us that the people became fruitful, multiplied, and so swarmed over the land. The word for swarming is used of insects and creatures in the creation story, implying that the Hebrew people are doing what they were created to do; be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. They were also becoming strong, another promise of God's blessing. Unfortunately, swarming is what leads to their enslavement.

The story tells us that a new king arose who did not know Joseph. The Hebrew implies that this king was not only new but was a usurper who overthrew the previous dynasty. As such he needs to consolidate his power and will be forever looking over his shoulder to see who might be trying to usurp him. In this fear-based quest he spies the Hebrews. They are a minority that may soon become a majority, which might conquer him. The easiest solution is to force them to leave. Unfortunately, they have become essential workers. Thus, the king fears them and needs them at the same time. In response he moves through a three-step process to control them.

Step one is to break their spirits by ruthlessly forcing on them hard work. Though it is not mentioned in most English translations, the word for work is used three times (task, service, labor). When this does not work, the king moves to step two. Step two is that of having the midwives kill all the Hebrew male babies. This will be slow genocide, but it will allow the Egyptians to assimilate the Hebrew women and produce more slaves through them. (connecting the dots again, this is what Abraham and Isaac feared Pharaoh would do with Sarah and Rebekah). Of interest here is that much Hebrew tradition believes the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to be Egyptians. This makes sense because they are commanded to only kill Hebrew babies, implying they work with Egyptians as well. These two women, fearing God (this connects us with earlier foreigners who feared God in Genesis) lie to the king and let the children live. Step three is the King commanding his own people to kill all the Hebrew children (This connects the dots with the sacrifice of Isaac where God refuses to allow the death of the child).

Reflection: It would be easy to simply pass off this story as concerning only the Hebrew people and a new king. However, I believe it must to be a cautionary tale for us. What I mean by that is that for those of us who are white and of Anglo ancestry have often played the role of the Egyptians. This can be seen in the continual emergence of xenophobia in our nation. We feared African Americans and so we enslaved and oppressed them. We feared the Irish, Catholics, Jews, and others and so ghettoized them. We feared the Chinese and passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. We feared those of Latino heritage and vilified them. In other words, we forgot to fear the God who desires that all people flourish and that what we have is to be shared, and instead have tried to both use and cast out those we fear.

Questions:

1. Where do you see connection between this story and the story of Genesis?
2. Where do you see connections between this story and our current circumstances?
3. What do you think of the midwives being Egyptian and their actions being acts of internal resistance to the king?