Exodus, Chapter 1, Part 1

Verses 1-7

וְאֵ֗לֶּה שְׁמוֹת֙ בְּנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל הַבָּאִ֖ים מִצְרָ֑יְמָה אֵ֣ת יַעֲקֹ֔ב אִ֥ישׁ וּבֵיתֹ֖ו בָּֽאוּ׃

רְאוּבֵ֣ן שִׁמְעֹ֔ון לֵוִ֖י וִיהוּדָֽה׃ יִשָּׂשׂכָ֥ר זְבוּלֻ֖ן וּבִנְיָמִֽן׃ דָּ֥ן וְנַפְתָּלִ֖י גָּ֥ד וְאָשֵֽׁר׃

וַֽיְהִ֗י כׇּל־נֶ֛פֶשׁ יֹצְאֵ֥י יֶֽרֶךְ־יַעֲקֹ֖ב שִׁבְעִ֣ים נָ֑פֶשׁ וְיוֹסֵ֖ף הָיָ֥ה בְמִצְרָֽיִם׃

וַיָּ֤מׇת יוֹסֵף֙ וְכׇל־אֶחָ֔יו וְכֹ֖ל הַדֹּ֥ור הַהֽוּא׃ וּבְנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֗ל פָּר֧וּ וַֽיִּשְׁרְצ֛וּ וַיִּרְבּ֥וּ וַיַּֽעַצְמ֖וּ בִּמְאֹ֣ד מְאֹ֑ד וַתִּמָּלֵ֥א הָאָ֖רֶץ אֹתָֽם׃

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin; Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher.	Now these are the names of the children of Israel coming to Egypt, with Yaakov, each-man and his household they came: Re'uven, Shim'on, Levi and Yehuda, Yissakhar, Zevulun and Binyamin, Dan and Naftali, Gad and Asher.	And these are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt. With Jacob, each and his household had come: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher.	And these are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each man with his household they came. Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin. Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher.
The total number of persons that were of Jacob's issue came to seventy, Joseph being already in Egypt.	So all the persons, those issuing from Yaakov's loins, were seventy persons —Yosef was (already) in Egypt.	And all the persons coming out from Jacob's thigh were seventy persons. And Joseph had been in Egypt.	And all these persons springing from the loins of Jacob were seventy persons, but Joseph was in Egypt.

Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation. But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them.	Now Yosef died, and all his brothers, and all that generation. Yet the Children of Israel bore fruit, they swarmed, they became many, they grew mighty (in number) —exceedingly, yes, exceedingly; the land filled up with them.	And Joseph and all of his brothers and all of that generation died. And the children of Israel were fruitful and teemed and multiplied and became very, very powerful, and the land was filled with them.	And Joseph died, and all his brothers with him, and all that generation. And the sons of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and multiplied and grew very vast, and the land was filled with them.

Commentary on verses 1-7

Fox:

1: **children of Israel:** Or "sons," though it should be noted that the Hebrew *b'nai* can denote members of
a group in general, not just family. In this verse,"children" has been printed with a lowercase "c"; in v.7 the whole expression comes to mean a nation, and so a capital "C" has been utilized (Hebrew writing does not make this distinction).

5: **issuing**: The same Hebrew verb (*yatzo*) is later used to describe the Israelites' "going out" of Egypt

Friedman

5: Notes that Dead Sea Scrolls and Greek Septuagent say 75, not 70, because they include Ephraim, Menashe, and their children. "Came down to Egypt" vs "all the persons coming out of Jacob's loins".

Alter

1: **And these are the names.** The initial "and" (the particle *waw*) serves an important thematic end, as several of the medieval Hebrew commentators have noticed. It announces that the narrative that follows is a direct continuation of the Book of Genesis, which ended with Joseph's death. The list of Jacob's sons harks back to the longer list of sons and grandsons at the moment of the descent into Egypt in Genesis 46:8-27. It should be noted that the dominant Hebrew tradition assigns names to each of the Five Books of Moses based on the first significant word in the text, and so this book is called Shemot, "Names." The English tradition of titles follows the Greek practice, which is to use topical names, hence Exodus.

the sons of Israel. Although the masculine plural form of the Hebrew *ben* could also mean "children," it is clear here and in Genesis 46 that only the male offspring are used to make up the count of seventy, and only the names of sons are given.

2-4. **Reuben, Simeon. Asher.** In order to endow the list of eleven with formal symmetry, the writer arranges them in two groups of four with a group of three in the middle.

5. **the loins.** The Hebrew yarekh means "thigh" and is probably a euphemistic metonymy for testicles, as in Genesis 24:2.
seventy persons. Some ingenuity is required to come up with an exact total of seventy, but the Bible uses numbers as symbolic approximations: after seven and ten, one moves to forty (which is used for units of time rather than people), then ten times seven, or seventy —here indicating a substantial clan, the nucleus of a people. (See the comment on Genesis 46:27.)

but Joseph was in Egypt. The particle waw, which usually means "and," either is the indication of a pluperfect or, as here, has an adversative sense when it is followed by the subject and then a perfective verb (instead of the normal imperfective verb in initial position and then the subject).

7. **the sons of Israel.** Though the phrase is identical with the one used at the beginning of verse 1, historical time has been telescoped and so the meaning of the phrase has shifted: now it signifies not the actual sons of Israel/Jacob but Israelites, the members of the nation to which the first Israel gave his name. In subsequent occurrences this translation will use "Israelites."

were fruitful and swarmed and multiplied. These terms are all of course pointed verbal allusions to the Creation story, as is the final clause of the verse since the Hebrew for "land," *'arets*, can also mean "earth." Despite exile and impending slavery, the dynamic of the first creation is resumed by the Israelites in Egypt. In fact, the thematic grounds of the Patriarchal Tales have notably shifted: instead of the constantly perilous struggle for procreation of the patriarchs, the Hebrews now exhibit the teeming fecundity of the natural world. It is for this reason that the verb "swarm" (*sharats*), which in the Creation story is attached to creeping things, is assigned to the Israelites. The verbal root for becoming vast (King James Version, "mighty") does not figure at the beginning of Genesis, but it is part of God's covenantal promise- "For Abraham will surely be a great and mighty nation" (Genesis 18:18).

Verses 8-14

וַיָּ֥קׇם מֶֽלֶךְ־חָדָ֖שׁ עַל־מִצְרָ֑יִם אֲשֶׁ֥ר לֹֽא־יָדַ֖ע אֶת־יוֹסֵֽף׃

וַיֹּ֖אמֶר אֶל־עַמּ֑וֹ הִנֵּ֗ה עַ֚ם בְּנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל רַ֥ב וְעָצ֖וּם מִמֶּֽנּוּ׃

הָ֥בָה נִֽתְחַכְּמָ֖ה ל֑וֹ פֶּן־יִרְבֶּ֗ה וְהָיָ֞ה כִּֽי־תִקְרֶ֤אנָה מִלְחָמָה֙ וְנוֹסַ֤ף גַּם־הוּא֙ עַל־שֹׂנְאֵ֔ינוּ וְנִלְחַם־בָּ֖נוּ וְעָלָ֥ה מִן־הָאָֽרֶץ׃

וַיָּשִׂ֤ימוּ עָלָיו֙ שָׂרֵ֣י מִסִּ֔ים לְמַ֥עַן עַנֹּת֖וֹ בְּסִבְלֹתָ֑ם וַיִּ֜בֶן עָרֵ֤י מִסְכְּנוֹת֙ לְפַרְעֹ֔ה אֶת־פִּתֹ֖ם וְאֶת־רַעַמְסֵֽס׃

וְכַאֲשֶׁר֙ יְעַנּ֣וּ אֹת֔וֹ כֵּ֥ן יִרְבֶּ֖ה וְכֵ֣ן יִפְרֹ֑ץ וַיָּקֻ֕צוּ מִפְּנֵ֖י בְּנֵ֥י יִשְׂרָאֵֽל׃

וַיַּעֲבִ֧דוּ מִצְרַ֛יִם אֶת־בְּנֵ֥י יִשְׂרָאֵ֖ל בְּפָֽרֶךְ׃

וַיְמָרְר֨וּ אֶת־חַיֵּיהֶ֜ם בַּעֲבֹדָ֣ה קָשָׁ֗ה בְּחֹ֙מֶר֙ וּבִלְבֵנִ֔ים וּבְכׇל־עֲבֹדָ֖ה בַּשָּׂדֶ֑ה אֵ֚ת כׇּל־עֲבֹ֣דָתָ֔ם אֲשֶׁר־עָבְד֥וּ בָהֶ֖ם בְּפָֽרֶךְ׃

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and arise from the ground."	Now a new king arose over Egypt, who had not known Yosef. He said to his people: Here, (this) people, the Children of Israel, is many-more and mightier (in number) than we! Come-now, let us use-our-wits against it, lest it become many-more, and then, if war should occur, it too be added to our enemies and make war upon us or go up away from the land!	And a new king rose over Egypt — who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, "Here, the people of the children of Israel is more numerous and powerful than we. Come on, let's be wise toward it or else it will increase; and it will be, when war will happen, that it, too, wil be added to our enemies and will war against us and go up from the land."	And a new king arose over Egypt who knew not Joseph. And he said to his people, "Look, the people of the sons of Israel is more numerous and vaster than we. Come, let us be shrewd with them lest they multiply and then, should war occur, they will actually join our enemies and fight against us and go up from the land.

So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor; and they built garrison cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Raamses. But the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out, so that the [Egyptians] came to dread the Israelites.	So they set gang-captains over it, to afflict it with their burdens. It built storage-cities for Pharaoh - Pitom and Ra'amses. But as they afflicted it, so did it become many, so did it burst forth. And they felt dread before the Children of Israel.	And they set commanders of work-companies over it in order to degrade it with their burdens. And they built storage cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Rameses. And the more they degraded it, the more it increased, and the more it expanded; and they felt a disgust at the children of Israel.	And they set over them forced-labor foremen so as to abuse them with their burdens, and they built store-cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Ramases. And as they abused them, so did they multiply and so did they spread, and they came to loathe the Israelites.
The Egyptians ruthlessly imposed upon the Israelites the various labors that they made them perform. Ruthlessly they made life bitter for them with harsh labor at mortar and bricks and with all sorts of tasks in the field.	So they, Egypt, made the Children of Israel subservient with crushing-labor; they embittered their lives with hard servitude in loam and in bricks and with all kinds of servitude in the field — all their service in which they made them subservient with crushing-labor.	And Egypt made the children of Israel serve with harshness; and they made their lives bitter with hard work, with mortar and with bricks and with all work in the field — all their work that they did for them — with harshness.	And the Egyptians put the Israelites to work at crushing labor, and they made their lives bitter with hard work with mortar and bricks and every work in the field — all their crushing work that they performed.

Commentary on verses 8-14

Fox:

8: **a new king:** His name is not given, even though later biblical books do refer to foreign rulers by name. This is perhaps another example of the biblical text's playing down history in favor of stressing the story and its lesson.

who had not known Yosef: Just as his successor will say "I do not know YHWH" (5:2), and will continue the oppression begun here.

9: **his people ... (this) people**: Pharaoh states the case as the conflict between one national entity and another.

10: **use-our-wits:** Others, "We must be prudent," "Letus deal shrewdly." **it**: The shift from plural to singular to refer to a plural object is not unusual in biblical parlance.

11. **afflict**: Or "oppress." **Pharaoh**: This is an Egyptian title, "(Lord of) the Great House," and not a proper name. One could justifiably translate, as some do, "the Pharaoh."

12. **burst forth:** The verb (Heb. *parotz*) is connected to fertil ity and wealth in Genesis (e.g., 28:14).

13. **crushing-labor**: A rare Hebrew word, here translated according to early rabbinic tradition, *perekh* is used rhetorically three times in Lev. 25 (vv. 43. 46, and 53), where the Israelites are given laws about how to deal with their impoverished countrymen (v.43, "you are not to oppress him with crushing labor").

14. **in the field**: In Egyptian accounts, the phrase indicates hard labor.

all their service...: The Hebrew syntax is difficult. Here the phrase is taken as the object of "they embittered."

Friedman

8: There are five Pharaohs in the Torah: the Pharaoh who thought Sarah was Abraham's sister, the Pharaoh who knew Joseph, the Pharaoh who did not know Joseph, the Pharaoh who sought to kill Moses (who may or may not be the same Pharaoh who did not know Joseph), and the Pharaoh of the exodus. Why are none of their names given? Names of Pharaohs (Shishak, Neco) are given in later books. Their absence in the Torah gives the narrative a nonhistorical quality, which is contrary to the manifest aim of the Torah to present history. One might argue that this is evidence that the stories are not true, that they were made up by writers who could not name these kings because they had no idea of the names of ancient Pharaohs.In the case of the two Pharaohs in Genesis, we have hardly any evidence to argue for or against this. But in the case of the Exodus Pharaohs, I think that there is sufficient likelihood that the oppression and exodus are historical, so there must be some other reason why the Pharaohs are not named. My friend Jonathan Saville suggests that perhaps the reason, consciously or not, is to downgrade the Pharaoh, as when people sometimes avoid saying the name of someone toward whom they feel hostile. Or perhaps the names of the Pharaohs were no longer preserved in the tradition by the time the stories came to be written.

10. **will be added.** The Hebrew *nosaf* is punning on the name *Yosef*, meaning "may He add." The Pharaoh does not know Joseph, but when he is pictured as worrying that the people "will be added" this summons Joseph back to mind. This pun is not merely wordplay for its own sake. The notation that this is a Pharaoh who does not know Joseph makes a strong break at the beginning of Exodus from what has come before this in Genesis. The reminder of Joseph's presence reconnects this phase of the story to everything that has come before. Even stronger connections are coming.

11: **work-companies**. The Hebrew term, *missim*, refers not to individually owned household slaves but to a policy of forced labor imposed on an entire community (a corvée). The Israelites build whole cities, and they all live in a particular region of Egypt (Goshen), separate from the Egyptian population (Exod 8:18; 9:26).

Centuries later, King Solomon imposes *missim* on Israel, requiring, in addition to monetary taxes, a period of labor on national projects. This so infuriates the Israelites that they stone to death the king's minister of *missim* (1 Kings 5:27-28; 12:18). Israelites will bear taxation, but the requirement of forced labor implies control over people's bodies by the government. This is appalling to a people whose recollection of having been slaves is a central doctrine to their understanding of themselves and their history.

Alter

9**. the people of the sons of Israel.** This oddly redundant phrase — it should be either "sons of Israel" or "people of Israel" —is explained by Pharaoh's alarmed recognition that the sons, the lineal descendants, of Israel have swelled to a people.

10. **be shrewd with them**. The Hebrew says "it," i.e., the people, but later switches to the plural.

they will actually join our enemies. The adverb *gam*, which generally means also, here has an emphatic sense. Compare Genesis 37:7.

go up from the land. The most plausible meaning, as the consensus of medieval Hebrew commentators understood, is that after joining the enemy, the Israelites would leave Egypt — probably to return to their country of origin in the north, as the verb "go up" may suggest. The notion that the phrase could mean rise up from the ground" (New Jewish Publication Society) or "become masters of the land" (Revised English Bible) seems far-fetched.

12. **as they abused them, so did they multiply**. Like a force of nature (compare verse 7), the Israelites respond to oppression by redoubling their procreative surge. Compare Rashi: "The Divine Spirit says, 'So, you say, "lest they multiply" and I say, "so did they multiply."

and they came to loathe the Israelites. William H. C. Propp has made the ingenious suggestion that the loathing is a response to the reptilian "swarming" of reproductive activity exhibited by the Israelites.

13. **at crushing labor**. The Hebrew is an adverbial form derived from a root that means "to break into pieces," "to pulverize."

14. **work... work... work**. Following a prevalent stylistic practice of Hebrew narrative, the writer underscores his main topic, the harshness of slavery, by repeating a central thematic keyword. Indeed, the Hebrew literally says, "their crushing work that they worked," but in English that cognate accusative form sounds awkward except for a limited number of idioms (eg, "sing a song").