

# CHAPTER 1

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. And all these persons springing from the  
loins of Jacob were seventy persons, but Joseph was in Egypt. And

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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 peo-

- 7 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.
- 8,9 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  
10 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

ple), 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).

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.

fight against us and go up from the land.” And they set over them 11  
 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 12  
 them, so did they multiply and so did they spread, and they came to  
 loathe the Israelites. And the Egyptians put the Israelites to work at 13  
 crushing labor, and they made their lives bitter with hard work with 14  
 mortar and bricks and every work in the field—all their crushing work  
 that they performed. And the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew mid- 15  
 wives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other was named

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*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 (e.g., “sing a song”).

15. *the Hebrew midwives.* “Hebrew” is regularly the designation of Israelites from a foreign perspective.

*Shiphrah . . . Puah.* The first name suggests “beauty,” the second name, as the Ugaritic texts indicate, might originally have meant “fragrant blossom” and

16 Puah. And he said, "When you deliver the Hebrew women and look on  
 17 the birth-stool, if it is a boy, you shall put him to death, and if it is a girl,  
 18 she may live." And the midwives feared God and did not do as the king  
 19 of Egypt had spoken to them, and they let the children live. And the  
 20 king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, "Why did you do  
 this thing and let the children live?" And the midwives said to Pharaoh,  
 "For not like the Egyptian women are the Hebrew women, for they are  
 hardy. Before the midwife comes to them they give birth." And God

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hence "girl." But since the root *pa'ah* can also mean "to murmur" or "to gurgle," Rashi inventively suggests it is the sound a nurturing woman makes to soothe an infant. In any case, the introduction of just two heroic midwives reflects the way this entire narrative, in contrast to Genesis, has been stylized and simplified. Abraham ibn Ezra appears to grasp this principle of schematization when he proposes that Shiphrah and Puah in fact would have had to be supervisors of whole battalions of midwives.

16. *birth-stool*. Literally, "double stones." Although there is some debate about the meaning of the term, there are persuasive grounds to understand it as the double stone or brick structure that the childbearing woman gripped as she kneeled, the standard position to give birth. There is an Egyptian magical papyrus that announces it is to be recited "over the two bricks of birthing."

19. *for they are hardy*. "Hardy," *hayot*, is derived from the verb "to live," which has just been used twice in connection with the newborn. (Hence the King James Version's "lively," though in modern English that unfortunately suggests vivaciousness or bounciness.) The fact that *hayot* as a noun means "animals" may reinforce the strong connection between the Israelites and the procreative forces of the natural world: like animals, the Hebrew women need no midwife.



made it go well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and became very vast. And inasmuch as the midwives feared God, He made households for them. And Pharaoh charged his whole people, saying, “Every boy that is born you shall fling into the Nile, and every girl you shall let live.”

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21. *He made households for them.* Although some have seen Pharaoh as the antecedent of “he,” God seems considerably more likely. The sense would then be that they were rewarded for their virtue with social standing, establishing their own families, or something of the sort.

22. *Pharaoh charged his whole people.* Despairing of cooperation from the Hebrew midwives in his genocidal project, Pharaoh now enlists the entire Egyptian population in a search-and-destroy operation.

*Every boy . . . you shall fling into the Nile, and every girl you shall let live.* The schematic—as against historical or even historylike—character of the narrative is evident in this folktale antithetical symmetry. The idea is presumably that the people would be eradicated by cutting off all male progeny while the girls could be raised for the sexual exploitation and domestic service of the Egyptians, by whom they would of course be rapidly assimilated. Pharaoh’s scheme will again be frustrated, as the future liberator of the Hebrews will be placed (not flung) in the Nile and emerge eventually to cause grief to Egypt. There is also an echo here of Abram’s words to Sarai when they come down to Egypt, adumbrating the destiny of their descendants, during a famine: “they will kill me while you they will let live” (Genesis 12:12).