

## Exodus Lesson 1 1-2-3-4 Commentary

**1:1–7. All of the offspring of Jacob were seventy persons.** This makes it clear that the events of the Exodus are a continuation of those recounted in Genesis. The number of seventy (cf. Gen 46:27) conveys the idea of completeness: that is, all Jacob’s descendants moved to Egypt. But it is also a small number, showing that only God could turn them into the sizeable people of Israel.

**1:8. There arose a new King.** Many Fathers of the Church saw in this pharaoh a personification of those who are opposed to the establishment of the Kingdom of Christ. St Bede, for example, reminds the Christian that if, having been baptized and having listened to the teachings of the faith, he goes back to living in a worldly way, “another king who knows not Joseph” will come to birth in him, that is, the selfishness which opposes the plans of God (cf. *Commentaria in Pentateuchum*, 2, 1).

**1:14. Made their lives bitter.** St Isidore of Seville, commenting on this passage, compares it with the situation of mankind which, after original sin, is subject to the tyranny of the devil, who often manages to turn work into slavery. Just as the pharaoh imposed the hard labor of mortar and brick, so too the devil forces sinful man to engage in “earthly, dusty tasks which are moreover mixed with straw, that is to say, with frivolous and irrational acts” (cf. *Quaestiones in Exodum*, 3).

**1:22. Every son you shall cast into the Nile.** In some translations, the texts refers to “the River”. When it has that translation, we know that since the entire life of ancient Egypt depended on river, it is obviously referring to the Nile.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gavigan, J., McCarthy, B., & McGovern, T., eds. (1999). [\*The Pentateuch\*](#) (p. 248). Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishers.

**2:1–10. Now a man from the house of Levi.** In this entire account of Moses' birth there is no mention of the names of his parents (Amram, according to Ex 6:20 his father, and Jochebed, his mother: Num 26:59) or his sister, Miriam (Ex 15:20). The sacred writer prefers to concentrate on Moses, making it clear that God takes care of him in birth and infancy, as he will also do of the people. Even the popular etymology of Moses' name ("taken from the waters") is an indication of God's intervention. The name in fact is Egyptian, meaning "son" or "born", as can be deduced from the names of some pharaohs Tut-mosis (son of the god Tut) or Ra-mses (son of the god Ra)—but that does not matter: the important thing is that Moses is "the first to be saved", just as the Hebrew people is the first people to be saved, and that God is taking great care of him with a view to the important mission he has planned for him.

**2:3. She took for him a basket.** The Hebrew word '*tabah*', translated here as "basket", is the same one as used for the Noah's "ark" (cf. Gen 6:14–9, 18, where it occurs 27 times). The word has connotations of a floating vessel, either large or small. What we are told about the basket links Moses to Noah and his salvation from the waves of the flood which occurred so much earlier and in such dramatic circumstances. After the flood, mankind was reborn; now a new people is in the process of being born.

**2:10. She brought him to Pharaoh's daughter.** According to Egyptian law an adopted son had the same status as any other son. The text stresses that the pharaoh's daughter made him her son. In this paradox we can once again see God's providence at work: the child whom the Egyptians should have put to death is raised to great dignity, given the best of educations and thereby groomed for his future mission. Extra-biblical documents show that during this period the pharaohs trained

select foreign youths for posts in their civil service. However, although Moses spent his early years in the pharaoh's palace, he received from his true mother not only physical nourishment but also the faith of his ancestors and love for his people.

**2:15. And stayed in the land of Midian** It is not clear where Midian was. The Bible often refers to Midianites, who were descendants of Abraham (cf. Gen 25:1–4) and were therefore related to the Israelites; we meet them as traders who used to travel from one place to another (cf. Gen 37:36; Num 10:29–32); who engage the Hebrews in battle (Num 25:6–18; 31:1–9) and are roundly defeated by Gideon (Judges 6–8). At the end of time, as the third part of the book of Isaiah announces, they will come to do homage before the Lord (Is 60:6). But none of this information tells us where exactly this place Midian was. Modern scholars are inclined to situate it somewhere in the Sinai Peninsula, a desert region where people sought refuge who wanted to evade the Egyptian authorities.

**2:16–22. They came and drew water.** The ownership of wells and the right to use them caused frequent disputes. Moses' clear sense of justice leads him to take the part of the weaker side—once again showing him to be a liberator who “helps” (=“saves”, according to the Hebrew etymology of the word: v. 17) and “delivers” (v. 19) the daughters of the priest of Midian. The sacred writer stresses the religious dimension of the incident: the daughters of Reuel are *seven* in number; Reuel is a priest; and it is Moses who delivers them. Moses will eventually marry and have a family; but there is very little mention of it later.

**2:18. When they came to their father.** The priest of Midian (v. 16) and Moses' father-in-law have different names in different places: here he is called Reuel, and in Numbers 10:29 Moses' father-in-law is called Hobab the son of Reuel. In Judges 1:16 and 4:11, his father-in-law is not

considered a Midianite: he is referred to as Heber the Kenite. In the book of Exodus, from chapter 3 on, he is called Jethro (cf. 3:1; 4:18; 18:1f). It may be that the sacred writer is using various traditions which he does not feel he should tamper with.

**2:22. She bore him a son.** He called his son Gershom to show his gratitude towards a foreign land which accepted him as a guest and a sojourner (*ger*). The popular etymology given this name here and in 18:3 links Moses to Abraham and Jacob, who also had to live as exiles in a strange land (Deut 26:5): “A wandering Aramaean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number” (cf. Gen 12:10). The term “sojourner” or “resident” is used in the sense of someone who settles down in a country that is not his own, with the intention of staying there permanently or for a long time.

The sacred writer normally gives the meaning of certain proper names either because they are important figures in the history of salvation (Eve, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, etc.) or because the name is relevant to some point he wants to make (as is the case here). However, it is always a matter of popular, rather than scholarly, etymology. Here the text is emphasizing that Moses realized he was a stranger abroad and that he had a mission to lead his people into their own land; that people will itself spend time as a sojourner prior to settling down in its final home in Canaan.

**2:23–25. God heard their groanings.** God’s action is summed up with four characteristic verbs: he *heard* their cries, he *remembered* the Covenant, he *saw* them and *knew* their condition (vv. 24–25: see the next note). It is an excellent outline of what divine providence does, and it serves as an overture to the chapters that follow, in which God’s direct intervention is going to be recounted. “the Lord saw the affliction of his people reduced to slavery, heard their cry, knew their sufferings and

decided to deliver them (cf. Ex 3:7f). In this act of salvation by the Lord, the prophet perceived his love and compassion (cf. Is 63:9). This is precisely the grounds upon which the people and each of its members based their certainty of the mercy of God, which can be invoked whenever tragedy strikes” (John Paul II, *Dives in misericordia*, 4). (*Ibid.* pp. 249-254)

### **3:2. The angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire.**

Probably an expression meaning “God”. In the most ancient accounts (cf., e.g., Gen 16:7; 22:11, 14; 31:11, 13), immediately after the angel comes on the scene it is God himself who speaks: since God is invisible he is discovered to be present and to be acting in “the angel of the Lord”, who usually does not appear in human form. Later, in the period of the monarchy, the existence of heavenly messengers distinct from God will begin to be recognized (cf. 2 Sam 19:28; 24:16; 1 Kings 19:5, 7; etc.).

Fire is often a feature of the presence of God (theophany) (cf., e.g., Ex 19:18; 24:17; Lev 9:23–24; Ezek 1:17), perhaps because it is the best symbol to convey the presence of things spiritual and the divine transcendence. The bush mentioned here would be one of the many thorny shrubs that grow in desert uplands in that region. Some Christian writers have seen in the burning bush an image of the Church which endures despite the persecutions and trials it undergoes. It is also seen as a figure of the Blessed Virgin, in whom the divinity always burned (cf. St Bede, *Commentaria in Pentateuchum*, 2, 3).

**3:4. God called to him.** The calling of Moses is described in this powerful dialogue in four stages: God calls him by his name (v. 4); he introduces himself as the God of Moses’ ancestors (v. 9); he makes his plan of deliverance known in a most moving way (vv. 7–9); and, finally, he imperiously gives Moses his mission (v. 10).

The repetition of his name (“Moses, Moses!”) stresses how important this event is (cf. Gen 22:11; Lk 22:31). Taking one’s shoes off is a way of showing veneration in a holy place. In some Byzantine communities there was a custom for a long time of celebrating the liturgy barefoot or wearing different footwear from normal. Christian writers have seen this gesture as being an act of humility and detachment in the face of the presence of God: “no one can gain access to God or see him unless first he has shed every earthly attachment” (*Glossa ordinaria in Exodum*, 3, 4).

**3:7. Then the Lord said.** Having made it clear that this is the same as the God of Moses’ ancestors, he uses four very expressive verbs to describe what will be happening: I have seen ..., I have heard ..., I know ..., I have come down to deliver (v. 8). This sequence of action includes no human action: the people are oppressed, they cry, theirs is a sorry plight. But God has a clear aim in sight—“to deliver them and to bring them up [...] to a good and broad land” (v. 8). These two terms will become keynotes of God’s saving action. To bring up to the promised land will come to mean, not only a geographical ascent but also a journey towards plenitude. St Luke’s Gospel will take up the same idea. God’s imperative command is clear in the original text (v. 10): “... bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt”. This is another way of referring to the salvific event which gives its name to this book; according to Greek and Latin traditions “exodus” means “going out”.

**3:8. To a good and broad land, flowing with milk and honey.** This description of the promised land is meant to show that it is extensive and fertile. Its fertility can be seen from its basic products—milk and honey (Lev 20:24; Num 13:27; Deut 26:9, 15; Jer 11:5; 32:22; Ezek 20:15)—the ideal desert food; a land which produces them in abundance is a veritable paradise.

**3:11–12. But Moses said to God.** In reply to Moses’ first objection about his sheer inability to do what God is asking of him, God assures him that he will be at his side and will protect him—as he will help all who have a difficult mission of salvation (cf. Gen 28:15; Josh 1:5; Jer 1:8). The Blessed Virgin will hear the same words at the Annunciation: “The Lord is with you” (Lk 1:27).

The sign which God gives Moses is linked to his faith, because it involves both a promise and a command: when they come out of Egypt, Moses and the people will worship God on this very mountain. When this actually happens, Moses will acknowledge the supernatural nature of his mission but, meanwhile, he has to obey faithfully the charge given him by God.

Moses’ conversation with the Lord is a beautiful prayer and one worth imitating. By following his example, a Christian can dialogue personally and intimately with the Lord: “We ought to be seriously committed to dealing with God. We cannot take refuge in the anonymous crowd. If interior life doesn’t involve personal encounter with God, it doesn’t exist—it’s as simple as that. There are few things more at odds with Christianity than superficiality. To settle down to routine in our Christian life is to dismiss the possibility of becoming a contemplative soul. God seeks us out, one by one. And we ought to answer him, one by one: ‘Here I am, Lord, because you have called me’ (1 Kings 3:5)” (St Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ Is Passing By*, 174; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2574–5).

**3:13–15. What is his name, what shall I say to them.** Moses now raises another difficulty: he does not know the name of the God who is commissioning him. This gives rise to the revelation of the name “Yahweh” and the explanation of what it means—“I am who I am”. The revelation of the divine name is important in salvation history because

by that name God will be invoked over the course of the centuries. (See the Handout – Naming God)

**3:21. You shall not go empty.** The “despoiling” of the Egyptians (v. 22) is by way of compensation for the years they have spent with nothing to show for it (cf. Gen 15:14; Wis 10:17) and also as a sort of booty of war (cf. Ex 11:2–3; 12:35–36): God comes out the victor in the struggle against the pharaoh, and he gives the sons of Israel a share in the booty. It may also be meant to signal festive joy: the Israelites are to dress up to celebrate the victory God has given them. (Ibid. pp.255-260)

**4:1–9. They will not believe me.** God replies to a new objection from Moses by working miracles; these are designed more to prove that God is intervening, not just to provide a spectacle: they are done that “they may believe that the Lord has appeared to you” (v. 5).

It is worth noting that the wonders worked here are tailor-made for the Egyptians, who were used to snake-charming or thought that only their own wise men knew how to cure leprosy. If Moses is more powerful than the wise men of Egypt, it is because he has been given divine power. (Ibid.)

**4:10. Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent.** As a youth, Moses was already bilingual, and as an adult he has to learn a third language, that of his wife’s people, the Midianites. As he became fluent in his wife’s language, he very possibly got rusty in both Hebrew and Egyptian. When he arrived in Midian, the locals took him for an Egyptian, but on his return to Egypt, he would be taken for a Midianite. Moses objects several times to the commission to become God’s spokesman. We should not assume that he had a speech defect. Perhaps, Moses simply knew he no longer commanded the high eloquence needed in a royal court, or the fluency of common speech to address the people. He may



never have been as fluent in Hebrew as in Egyptian, because while in Egypt, the royal palace had been his domicile, while he visited his Hebrew relatives only occasionally.<sup>2</sup>

**4:16. A mouth for you:** The Lord permits Aaron to speak for Moses as a prophet speaks for God (7:1). The episode is a classic instance of divine accommodation whereby God accounts for the weaknesses of his people in the fulfillment of his will.<sup>3</sup> To speak in the name of God is the role of a prophet, quite independently of his qualities, whether he has or has not oratorical skills (cf. Jer 1:6). Moses is the prototype of the prophet (cf. Deut 18:9–22); all future prophets should look up to him and try to copy him (cf. Acts 7:22).

By associating Aaron with Moses as his spokesman, the sacred text is making the point that there should never be disputes between temple priests and prophets; the mission of teaching the people belongs also to those in charge of divine worship (cf. Lev 10:11; Deut 33:10).

**4:21. I will harden his heart.** This phrase comes up often (7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 9:12; 14:4, 8, 17) but it does not mean that the pharaoh is any less responsible for his actions (that, indeed, is specifically stated in the context: 8:11, 28; 9:34); rather, it emphasizes the man's obstinacy and blindness. It needs to be borne in mind that the Semitic mind attributes directly to God (the first cause) the actions of creatures (secondary causes). Moreover, by being contrasted against the intransigent Egyptian king, God's love stands out more; God uses the pharaoh's increasing hardness of heart to show by ever more amazing

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<sup>2</sup> Ponessa, J., & Manhardt, L. W. (2007). [\*Moses and the Torah\*](#) (pp. 20–21). Emmaus Road Publishing.

<sup>3</sup> Hahn, S., & Mitch, C. (2012). [\*Exodus: With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes\*](#) (Second Catholic Edition, p. 22). Ignatius Press.

deeds his special love for the people of Israel. (Ibid. Gavigan pp. 249 – 263)

**4:22. Israel is my first born.** Divine fatherhood, which in the Old Testament simply meant that there was a particularly close relationship between God and his people, prepared the way for the consoling fact that Jesus revealed: “Jesus revealed that God is Father in an unheard-of sense: he is Father not only in being Creator; he is eternally Father by his relationship to his only Son who, reciprocally, is Son only in relation to his Father: ‘No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him’ (Mt 11:27) (See **Handout – Israel as First Born Son**)