

Homiletics Analysis: Exodus 1

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Exodus 1 opens with a deliberate bridge from Genesis: the seventy souls who descended to Egypt with Jacob are named, and then the text pivots sharply — “But Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation” (v. 6). What follows is a new chapter in redemptive history. The sons of Israel multiplied with extraordinary fruitfulness — language that deliberately echoes the creation mandate (“be fruitful and multiply”) and the Abrahamic promise. A new Pharaoh arose who did not know Joseph, and with that political rupture came fear, oppression, and systematic brutality. Pharaoh’s strategy unfolds in three escalating stages: forced labor under harsh taskmasters (vv. 11–14), the secret command to Hebrew midwives to kill male infants at birth (vv. 15–21), and finally the open decree to all Egyptians to cast every newborn Hebrew son into the Nile (vv. 22). Against each escalation, the text sets a counter-movement: the more the Israelites were oppressed, the more they multiplied. The midwives — Shiphrah and Puah — feared God rather than Pharaoh and preserved the male children, and God rewarded them with households of their own. Pharaoh’s power is vast; his program is systematic; his decree is final. And it is failing. The chapter closes with his program in full force and the people still multiplying.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to establish, from the chapter’s opening verses, the governing theological reality of the entire Exodus narrative: that the powers of this age cannot suppress, defeat, or extinguish the purposes of the living God. Pharaoh is enormous — politically, militarily, economically absolute. Israel is enslaved and vulnerable. Every human calculation says the story ends here, with assimilation or annihilation. The intent of Exodus 1 is to drive the reader to recognize that this calculation is wrong because it omits God — and that God is already at work, through the fertility of a people, through the courage of two midwives, through the very failure of Pharaoh’s program, to preserve what He has promised. The chapter is designed to produce in the reader a settled confidence that God’s covenant purposes cannot be overturned by the greatest earthly power, and that faithful, fear-of-God courage at the ground level is the form God’s preservation most often takes.

Subject Sentence: God’s covenant purposes survive and multiply under the crushing weight of imperial opposition.

Primary Claim: The God who made the promise to Abraham sustains the promise people against every instrument of their destruction — and even the most powerful empire on earth cannot abort what He has decreed will live. He calls His people to respond not with terror but with the fear of God, which is the only fear that makes earthly fear manageable.

Interpretive Evaluation

The fruitfulness language (vv. 7, 12, 20): The repeated language of Israel multiplying and growing strong — using terms (*pārāh*, *rābāh*, *šāraṣ*) drawn from Genesis 1:28 and the patriarchal promises — is sometimes read as merely descriptive demography. This misses the theological freight. The creation-mandate echoes are intentional: God is not simply allowing population growth, He is fulfilling the Abrahamic covenant through it (Genesis 12:2; 17:2; 28:14). The fruitfulness of Israel in Egypt is not background — it is the first theological claim of the chapter. What Pharaoh reads as a threat is God’s covenant fidelity made visible. Reformed reading: the fruitfulness is covenant language, not merely demographic observation.

The midwives’ deception (vv. 17–19): A recurring interpretive debate concerns the morality of the midwives’ deception. Some traditions read this as an unqualified commendation (the deception was right and God blessed it); others read it as God blessing the women despite their lie. A third reading — that the midwives’ answer may have been substantially true, as Hebrew women may well have delivered before the midwives arrived — softens the ethical edge. The text does not explicitly commend the deception; it commends the fear of God that drove their action and God rewarded their households. The Reformed reading here follows the pattern of Rahab and other cases in Scripture: the commendation is of the faith and allegiance demonstrated, not a theological endorsement of deception as an ethical principle. The moral complexity is real; the text does not resolve it abstractly but narrates it concretely. What the text insists on is the primacy of fearing God over fearing Pharaoh — and this is what drove the midwives’ decision, whatever the precise ethics of the deception.

Pharaoh as a “type”: Dispensational readings often focus heavily on the Exodus as a prophetic pattern for Israel’s future national restoration — Pharaoh as a type of end-times oppressor, the Exodus as a template for eschatological deliverance. This reading is not wrong to see typological significance, and the New Testament does draw on Exodus patterns. But the typological freight should not be front-loaded into chapter 1 at the expense of its immediate theological claim. The text is first making a claim about the God of the covenant now, in the life of these people, against this particular oppressor. The typological resonances should reinforce, not replace, the chapter’s own claim.

No significant hermeneutical controversy surrounds the chapter’s primary claim — that God preserves His people against imperial opposition. The debates above are real but secondary to the chapter’s governing argument.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 15:13–14** — God told Abram explicitly that his descendants would be sojourners in a land not their own, afflicted for four hundred years, and that He would bring them out. Exodus 1 is the fulfillment of the affliction side of that prophecy — which means Pharaoh’s program is not catching God off guard; it is unfolding within His foreknown and foreordained purpose.
- **Genesis 17:1–8; 22:17** — The Abrahamic covenant promises multiplication as numerous as the stars and sand. Israel’s fruitfulness in Exodus 1 is not coincidence — it is covenant faithfulness displayed against the most hostile conditions imaginable.
- **Acts 7:17–22** — Stephen’s sermon in Acts explicitly cites Exodus 1 as the moment when the promise given to Abraham was approaching its fulfillment, and the people were growing and multiplying. The early church read Exodus 1 as a covenant-fulfillment chapter, not merely as historical prologue.
- **Psalms 105:23–25** — The Psalmist celebrates precisely the dynamic of Exodus 1: God allowed Israel to be in Egypt, turned Egyptian hearts to hate his people — and through it all, God was working. The oppression was within God’s providential governance, not outside it.
- **Revelation 12:1–6** — The Satanic attempt to destroy the seed of the woman by devouring her child — the great dragon waiting to destroy the male child — recapitulates the Pharaoh-pattern at the cosmic level, and God preserves through the same mechanism: the purpose of God cannot be swallowed by the purposes of the enemy.

Aim: To establish in the reader a settled, theologically grounded confidence that the purposes of God cannot be overturned by earthly power — and to call forth the fear-of-God courage displayed by Shiphrah and Puah as the proper human response to that confidence.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–5	The sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob are listed; seventy persons total	Deliberate bridge from Genesis; names the generations
6	Joseph died, his brothers	The transition sentence —

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	died, and all that generation	the old world is gone
7	The Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly; they filled the land	Creation/covenant language (<i>pārāh</i> , <i>rābāh</i> , <i>šāraṣ</i>); the Abrahamic promise in action
8	A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph	Political rupture; the basis for all that follows
9–10	Pharaoh addresses his people: the Israelites are too many; we must deal shrewdly lest they join enemies and escape	Fear-driven logic; Pharaoh's worldview defined — power must be controlled through power
11–14	Taskmasters set over Israel; forced labor building Pithom and Rameses; brutal hard labor with mortar, brick, fieldwork	First escalation of oppression; but the people multiplied all the more
12b	“But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread”	The central irony of the chapter — Pharaoh's program produces the opposite of its intent
13–14	Egyptians made Israel's life bitter with hard service	The word “bitter” (<i>mārar</i>) anticipates the Passover; slavery is comprehensive and crushing
15–16	Pharaoh summons the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah and commands them to kill male infants at birth	Second escalation — infanticide; moves from economic oppression to genocide
17	The midwives feared God and did not do what Pharaoh commanded; they let the boys live	The pivot: fear of God vs. fear of Pharaoh
18–19	Pharaoh confronts the midwives; they answer that Hebrew women deliver before midwives arrive	The midwives' answer — whether a complete truth, a half-truth, or a deception is debated
20–21	God dealt well with the midwives; the people multiplied; because they	Divine commendation falls on their fear of God and their action from it

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
22	feared God, He gave them families Pharaoh commands all his people to throw every Hebrew son into the Nile	Third escalation — open public decree of genocide; sets stage for Moses' birth

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–7	The Covenant People in Egypt: Fruitfulness Against the Odds
2	8–14	Pharaoh's Fear and the First Assault: Slavery
3	15–21	Pharaoh's Escalation and the Midwives' Courage: Infanticide Resisted
4	22	Pharaoh's Final Decree: Total War Against the Seed

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: God's covenant purposes survive and multiply under the crushing weight of imperial opposition.

Primary Claim: The God who made the promise to Abraham sustains the promise people against every instrument of their destruction — and even the most powerful empire on earth cannot abort what He has decreed will live. He calls His people to respond not with terror but with the fear of God, which is the only fear that makes earthly fear manageable.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] — Read your present suffering inside God's covenant narrative, not inside the empire's narrative. Pharaoh's story says Israel is a demographic threat to be managed and destroyed. God's story says Israel is a covenant people whose multiplication is the fulfillment of a four-hundred-year-old promise. These are two completely different frameworks for reading the same events. When suffering and opposition are large and your resources are small, the question is not "is God still able?" but "which story am I reading my life inside?" Exodus 1 demands that we read our circumstances inside God's covenant

story — which means the very scale of the opposition is evidence that something worth opposing is alive and growing.

2. [Affections/Worship] — Let the repeated failure of Pharaoh’s program move you to worship, not merely to relief. Three times Pharaoh escalates. Three times the text reports that Israel multiplied. This is not coincidence — this is the text forming the reader’s affections toward the God whose purposes cannot be suppressed. The proper response to Exodus 1 is not “that worked out well” but “this God is *sovereign* and *faithful* and *unstoppable*” — and that recognition should produce worship, not just relief. The reader who finishes Exodus 1 without a heightened sense of God’s incomparable power and covenant loyalty has missed the chapter’s intent.

3. [Will/Behavior] — Identify where you are currently more afraid of Pharaoh than of God, and choose differently. The midwives’ choice is presented with disarming simplicity: they feared God, so they did not do what Pharaoh commanded. They made a concrete decision in a concrete moment under real threat. Most of us live with a Pharaoh of some kind — an employer, a cultural consensus, a social consequence, a financial pressure — whose demands conflict with the fear of God. Exodus 1 does not romanticize this; it names Shiphrah and Puah as real women who made a real choice. Where is the place in your life where fear of Pharaoh is winning, and what would it look like to fear God there instead?

4. [Mind/Belief] — Reject the assumption that God’s silence equals God’s absence. The opening verses of Exodus record that Joseph died, his brothers died, and all that generation died — and then four hundred years of silence. God had not spoken since the end of Genesis. Pharaoh is building monuments; Israel is making bricks. There is no burning bush yet, no column of fire, no voice from heaven. And yet the text insists that God is acting — in the fruitfulness of a people, in the conscience of two midwives, in the failure of an empire’s program. Do not mistake silence for absence. Do not mistake hiddenness for abandonment. The God of Exodus 1 is most visibly at work precisely where He is least audibly present.

5. [Affections/Worship] — Feel the weight of what is at stake in the midwives’ decision — and let it produce gratitude. The midwives are protecting the sons of Israel. Among those sons is the tribe of Levi. Among the tribe of Levi, the family of Amram and Jochebed. Among that family, a son who will be born in Exodus 2 — and who, by Exodus 12, will lead a nation out of slavery. The courage of Shiphrah and Puah stands in the genealogical line of Moses. The courage of ordinary, named, faithful women is the instrument God uses to preserve the line of redemption. Let this move you to identify and gratitude for the Shippahrahs and Puahs in your own story — the ordinary acts of faithfulness through which God has preserved you.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Exodus 1 establishes the governing theological logic of the entire book: the sovereign God of covenant keeps His promises through and against all opposition. The fruitfulness of Israel in Egypt is not demographic accident — it is covenant faithfulness made visible. God’s promise to Abraham that his descendants would be a great nation (Genesis 12, 15, 17) cannot be suppressed by imperial decree. The chapter also introduces what will become a sustained Exodus theme: the powers of this age are not neutral — they actively oppose the purposes of God — and yet they operate within limits that God himself defines. Pharaoh’s authority is real; his brutality is real; and it is entirely insufficient to accomplish his purpose. The theological claim is not that God’s people will not suffer — they clearly do, bitterly — but that suffering within God’s covenant purposes cannot produce the outcome the enemy intends.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Exodus 1 is a covenant-fulfillment chapter, and its Reformed significance lies precisely there. The fruitfulness of Israel is not a reward for obedience — there is no record of Israelite faithfulness producing it. It is pure covenant fidelity on God’s side, fulfilling what He swore to Abraham by His own name (Genesis 15:17–18). This is grace in its most elemental form: God keeping His word to a people who can do nothing to secure their own future. The midwives’ fear of God anticipates the Reformation’s insistence that the fear of God is the foundation of all true courage and ethics — they are not heroic by nature; they are obedient by conviction. And the entire chapter sets up what Reformed theology reads as the definitive Old Testament display of salvation by divine initiative alone: God will not save Israel because Israel earns it; He will save Israel because He said He would. Exodus 1 is the darkness before that dawn, shaped entirely by the certainty that the dawn will come.

Main Takeaway

The most powerful empire in the ancient world pointed all of its machinery at the extinction of a slave people — and the slave people kept multiplying. This is not an inspirational story about resilience; it is a theological announcement about God. His covenant cannot be killed. His purposes cannot be enslaved. His promises cannot be drowned in the Nile. Whatever Pharaoh you are facing — whatever power seems to have you without options — Exodus 1 demands that you relocate your fear: God, not Pharaoh, has the final word.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the midwives to a mere ethics case study.** The account of Shiphrah and Puah is frequently hijacked into a debate about whether Christians may lie (the “deception ethics” question). While that question is not illegitimate, it is not the chapter’s concern. The text commends the midwives’ fear of God, not their rhetorical strategy. A sermon that spends its energy on the lying question has abandoned the text’s actual claim. The midwives function in the passage as examples of what the fear of God produces — concrete courage at the cost of personal safety — not as case studies in situational ethics.
- **Preaching fruitfulness as a general prosperity principle.** The multiplication of Israel in Exodus 1 is covenant-specific language tied to the Abrahamic promise. It is not a template for the church’s numerical growth, nor a general principle that God blesses faithfulness with increase. Importing contemporary church-growth application (“the more we’re persecuted, the more the church grows!”) may be true in some historical periods, but it is not what Exodus 1 is saying. The fruitfulness here is God keeping a specific promise to a specific people at a specific point in redemptive history.
- **Skipping the Genesis bridge and losing the covenant frame.** Verses 1–7 are often treated as mere historical scene-setting to be dispensed with quickly. This loses everything. The names in verse 1–4, the number seventy in verse 5, the death notice in verse 6, and the fruitfulness report in verse 7 are the chapter’s theological foundation. Without the Genesis bridge, Exodus 1 becomes a story about a people facing oppression. With it, it becomes a story about the God of the covenant keeping His promise against the most hostile conditions. Do not rush past the first seven verses.
- **Presenting Pharaoh as merely evil rather than as a theological foil.** Pharaoh’s oppression is brutal and unambiguously wrong, but preaching him simply as “the bad guy” misses his structural function in the chapter. He is the power of this age at its most concentrated — intelligent, strategic, resourceful, and absolutely committed to his program. The chapter’s point is not “bad things happen” but “the most sophisticated and powerful instrument of opposition this world can produce cannot accomplish what God has determined will not happen.” Flatten Pharaoh into a villain and you flatten the chapter’s theological claim.
- **Missing the irony as a worship prompt.** The repeated structural pattern — oppression increases, Israel multiplies; more oppression, more multiplication — is not merely narrative texture. It is the text’s primary rhetorical device for producing wonder at God’s sovereignty. If the preacher notes the irony but does not press it toward worship (“this means the God we serve *cannot be stopped by what opposes us*”), the chapter’s intent has been partially fulfilled at best.

- **Neglecting the four-hundred-year silence as a pastoral entry point.** Exodus 1 opens after four centuries of divine silence — no recorded word, no vision, no angelic visitation. This is one of the longest gaps in redemptive history between divine speech and divine speech. The chapter's opening thus addresses not only Israel's historical crisis but the perennial pastoral crisis of the people of God who feel abandoned in a long silence. The preacher who ignores this misses an entry point that is both textually grounded and profoundly contemporary.