

SHEMOT

NJPS These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household: ²Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; ³Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin; ⁴Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. ⁵The total number of persons that were of Jacob's issue came to seventy, Joseph being already in Egypt. ⁶Joseph died, and all his

RASHI **1 These are the names of the sons of Israel.** Even though the Torah listed them by name during their lifetimes (Gen 46:8-27), it lists them again after their deaths to show God's love for them, by likening them to the stars. For God musters the stars at their rising and their setting by number and by name: "Who created these? He who sends out their host by count, who calls them each by name" (Isa 40:26).

5 Joseph being already in Egypt.

Since he and his sons are included in the total of "seventy," what does this additional phrase come to teach us? Don't we already know that he is in Egypt? It comes to let you know about Joseph's righteousness: It was the same Joseph who was a shepherd with his father's sheep that was in Egypt, became king, and remained as righteous as he had been.

NAHMANIDES Genesis concludes at this point, being the book of creation, which tells of the origin of the world and the creation of everything, and of those incidents from the lives of all the patriarchs that would be, as it were, formative for their offspring. For all those incidents that are depicted hint at what would happen to their offspring in the future. After completing the story of creation, the Torah began a new book to tell the story that followed from those allusions. The unifying theme of the book of Exodus is the first exile—the one decreed in Gen 15:13—and of the redemption from that exile. For this reason it begins with a recapitulation of the names and number of those who came down to Egypt, even though this had already been detailed in Gen 46:8-27, since their descent there was actually the beginning of that exile.

Now that exile would not be over until the day they returned both to their place and to the status of their ancestors. When they left Egypt, even though they were emancipated from slavery, they were still considered to be in exile, for they were in "a land not theirs" (Gen 15:13) and "astray in the wilderness" (Exod 14:3). When they came to Mount Sinai and made the Tabernacle, and the Holy One once again caused his Shekhinah to rest among them, they then returned to the status of their ancestors, "when God's company graced their tents" (Job 29:4)—for as our Sages said, "The patriarchs are the chariot." [A] Then they were considered redeemed. That is why the book of Exodus concludes with the completion of the Tabernacle and its being always filled with the Presence of God.

1 These are the names. The text wishes to count the time of their descent to Egypt as the beginning of the exile, for "they headed the column of exiles" (Amos 6:7), as I have explained in the introduction. So it returns to the beginning of that theme, "he brought with him to Egypt all his offspring" (Gen 46:7), which is immediately followed by the phrase "These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt," with which our chapter begins. For even though Genesis and Exodus are two separate books, Exodus is the sequel to Genesis. So only the introductory statement and the concluding one, "The total number of persons that were of Jacob's issue came to seventy" (= Gen 46:27) are repeated, not the details. A similar repetition links the book of Chronicles, which concludes with the promise of the rebuilding of the Temple, with its sequel, the book of Ezra-Nehemiah, where that story is told. The link between Genesis and Exodus is made the same way. Ibn Ezra says that because Gen 50:23 tells us that Joseph lived to see his great-grandchildren, Exodus begins by noting that his brothers, too, were few when they came to Egypt, but were fruitful and prolific. But this is incorrect. Rashi's explanation, that counting them twice likens them to the stars, is midrashic. It is certainly true with respect to the love God had for them by repeating their names over and over again. But the literary connection is as I have explained. That is why Exodus literally begins by saying "And these are the names"—to establish the link with Genesis.

[A] This saying implies that the Divine Presence rests on the patriarchs in some actually physical way (see Nahmanides' comment to Gen 17:22); this is the status to which their descendants return at Sinai.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS **1 These are the names.** These people were "stars" all their lives, and deserved to be individually recognized; their descendants were not so distinguished (S).

5 Seventy. The number is given to emphasize God's miracle: in only 210 years, the 70 grew into 600,000 (H).

שמות

OJPS Now these are the names of the sons of Israel, who came into Egypt with Jacob; every man came with his household: ²Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; ³Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin; ⁴Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. ⁵And all the souls that came out of the loins of Jacob were seventy souls; and Joseph was in Egypt already. ⁶And Joseph

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַבָּאִים
מִצְרָיִם אֶת יַעֲקֹב אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ בָּאוּ:
רְאוּבֵן וּבְנֵימוֹ: ²וְשִׁמְעוֹן לְיוֹן וְיְהוּדָה:
³וְיִשְׂשָׁכָר וְזְבֻלֹן וּבְנֵימוֹ: ⁴וְדָן וְנַפְתָּלִי גָד וְאַשֶׁר:
⁵וְיְהוּי כָּל-נַפְשׁ יִצְאָי יִרְהִי-יַעֲקֹב שְׁבַעִים
נַפְשׁ וַיֹּסֵף הֵיחָד בְּמִצְרָיִם: ⁶וַיָּמָת יוֹסֵף

ABRAVANEL'S QUESTIONS ♦ Why is the information already provided in Gen 46:8-27 repeated in Exod 1:1-8? ♦ Why does v. 5 tell us what we already know, that Joseph is in Egypt?

RASHBAM **1 These are the names.** Because the text wants to emphasize that "the Israelites were fertile and prolific" (v. 7), it was necessary to repeat that, when they came to Egypt, there were no more than 70 of them. But after the death of that generation, they were "fertile and prolific," and "a new king arose" (v. 8) who tried to deal shrewdly with them in order to diminish their numbers—but it did him no good.

IBN EZRA **1 These are the names.** Literally, "and these are the names." Having mentioned at the end of Genesis that Joseph lived to see his great-grandchildren, the text continues now by noting that his brothers too were few in number when they came down to Egypt, but were fertile and prolific there. **With Jacob.** Including Jacob. The total of persons "of Jacob's issue" (v. 5) only makes 70 if Jacob himself is included in the total. **With his household.** That is, his "issue." Biblical Hebrew never uses the word "house" as a euphemism for "wife" the way rabbinic Hebrew sometimes does.

2 Reuben. The tribes are listed in birth order. [A]

3 Benjamin. Being the son of one of the matriarchs, Benjamin is listed before his older brothers who were the sons of the concubines Bilhah and Zilpah.

5 Of Jacob's issue. OJPS "out of the loins of Jacob." "Loins" is a euphemism here for the genitals. There were a total of 69, which is why they were said in v. 1 to have come "with Jacob" (see my comment to that verse); the parallel passage in Gen 46:8 says more plainly, "Jacob and his descendants." As Deut 10:22 puts it, "Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons in all," including both Jacob and Joseph and his sons.

[A] Not exactly. The eleven brothers who came down to Egypt are listed in birth order for each of the four mothers in turn; see the next comment.

NJPS brothers, and all that generation. ⁷But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them.

⁸A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. ⁹And he said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. ¹⁰Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not

RASHI **7 Fertile.** Their women did not miscarry, and they did not die as infants. **Prolific.** They would have sextuplets.

8 A new king arose. Rab and Samuel dispute over whether this was literally a new king, or the old king (whose death is not recorded) issuing new decrees. **Who did not know Joseph.** If it was the old king, this would mean that he acted as if he did not know him.

9 He said. It was Pharaoh who initiated the plan.

10 Let us deal shrewdly with them. The text literally says *lo*, which could mean “with it” (the people); but our Sages interpret it as dealing shrewdly “with Him,” with the Savior of Israel. Knowing that God punishes measure for measure, they thought: If we kill the children by fire, we can be killed by fire; if by the sword, we can be killed by the sword. But it is safe to kill them by

NAHMANIDES **10 Let us deal shrewdly with them.** Pharaoh and “the sage of his advisers” (Isa 19:11) did not consider slaying them outright, for to do so without cause would be an enormous betrayal of a people which had come down to Egypt in the first place by command of the previous king. Moreover, the Egyptian people (for he consulted their opinion as well) would not have let the king commit such gratuitous violence, especially since the Israelites were “too numerous” (v. 9) and could fight a mighty battle against them. Instead, Pharaoh said, they should act cleverly, so that the Israelites would not sense that they were acting out of enmity toward them. So he set them to do forced labor, as is the custom for those resident in someone else’s land. Solomon did the same thing (2 Chr 2:16-17, 8:7-8). Afterwards (v. 15), Pharaoh secretly commanded the midwives to kill the male children at birth in such a way that even the women who gave birth would not realize that the children had not simply been born dead. Finally (v. 22), he commanded his entire people, “Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile.” He

7 Prolific. The verb used is the same used in the story of Noah and his sons; it is translated “swarm” in Gen 8:17 and “abound” in Gen 9:7. It may mean that the women gave birth to twins or more; I myself have seen a woman who gave birth to quadruplets, and there is medical evidence for up to septuplets. But the story in *The Chronicles of Moses* about Jewish mothers giving birth in the fields like animals (and angels bringing the boys to them after they were grown) is nonsense; this is neither a holy book nor one of tradition. **[B] Very greatly.** Those who are impressed by the fact that the numerical value of this expression in Hebrew, used in Gen 17:20 with reference to Ishmael, is the same as that of “Muhammad”—what do they do with this verse, where exactly the same phrase is applied to Israel? God forbid that Moses should speak in numerological riddles! **The land was filled with them.** “Land” has the sense of “the whole land of Egypt” (rather than “the earth,” which the Hebrew word could also mean). **[C]**

8 A new king arose. “A new king” means just what it sounds like it means—there is no need to add the complication of an old king with new decrees here. But “arose” implies that he was not related to the previous king.

9 His people. The Egyptians.

10 Let us deal shrewdly with them. That is, let us seek a wise course that will prevent them from increasing. **In the event of war.**

[B] *The Chronicles of Moses* fills in the details of Moses’ biography with many fanciful elements. **[C]** In the long commentary Ibn Ezra revised this view, taking “land” to the land of Goshen (that is, the region of Rameses in Goshen; see Gen 47:11) where the Israelites lived in Egypt.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS **6 All that generation.** Had any at all of the Egyptians who knew Joseph still been alive, the new king (v. 8) would not have been able to do what he did (G).

7 Fertile and prolific. In accordance with God’s promise (Gen 46:3), “I will make you there into a great nation” (H). **Increased.** In size (G).

8 A new king arose. If this is the old king, then “arose” implies that he “rose” against Israel like an enemy (H). **Who did not know Joseph.** Though he was undoubtedly recorded in the annals in connection with the imposition of the 20% agricultural tax (Gen 47:26), it never occurred to the new Pharaoh that he could have been a Hebrew (S).

10 Let us deal shrewdly with them. Let us enslave them now, when it is unnecessary, so they are enslaved if it ever becomes

OJPS died, and all his brethren, and all that generation. ⁷And the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty; and the land was filled with them.

וְכָל-אֶחָיו וְכָל הַדּוֹר הַהוּא: וַיִּבְנֶי יִשְׂרָאֵל פָּרוּ וַיִּשְׁרְצוּ וַיִּרְבוּ וַיִּעֲצְמוּ בְּמֵאֵד מְאֹד וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ אֹתָם: פ וַיִּקֶּם מֶלֶךְ-חֲדָשׁ עַל-מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַע אֶת-יֹסֵף: וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-עַמּוֹ הַזֶּה עִם-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רַב וְעֲצוּם מִמֶּנּוּ: יִ0 הַבָּה נִתְחַבְּמָה לוֹ פִּן-יִרְבָּה וְהָיָה כִּי-תִקְרָאנָה

ABRAVANEL'S QUESTIONS ♦ It would seem that v. 8, “A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph,” should immediately follow v. 6, “Joseph died.” Why does the text insert the verse about the Israelites’ fertility (which we know about already anyway from Gen 47:27) in between them? ♦ Since Pharaoh already thought that the Israelites were “too numerous for us” (v. 9), why does v. 10 say that he was worried that they would increase? ♦ What does “the event of war” (v. 10) have to do with it? Why wasn’t Pharaoh afraid they themselves would conquer Egypt? ♦ Why would Pharaoh worry that the Israelites would “get them up out of the land”? He should be delighted that they would leave!

⁸Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who knew not Joseph. ⁹And he said unto his people: “Behold, the people of the children of Israel are too many and too mighty for us; ¹⁰come, let us deal wisely with them, lest they multiply, and it come to pass, that,

RASHBAM **6 All that generation.** The 70 people.

7 Fertile. With regard to conception. **Prolific.** With regard to birth. Thus the womb would not miscarry. The root meaning of the word is “crawl,” as if it meant here “to produce crawlers”—for little children, like all small creatures, crawl on the ground. **Multiplied.** Rather, they “got big”; the little ones grew up and did not die in childhood. **Increased.** They did not die as grown men, but lived long and **increased very greatly**, to the extent that **the land was filled with them**, as the Temple court “was filled with the radiance of the Presence of the LORD” (Ezek 10:4) and “the skirts of His robe filled the Temple” (Isa 6:1). **[A]**

10 Let us deal shrewdly with them. So that they do not increase. For if they

[A] Rashbam’s Hebrew comment is ostensibly grammatical, though somewhat confusing. One wonders whether the examples chosen are meant to suggest that the Israelites’ increase of population filled Egypt with the Divine Presence.

IBN EZRA **6 All that generation.** Since the text has already mentioned the death of Joseph and all his brothers, this phrase must mean “all the Egyptians of that generation.” This is proven by the fact that the king in v. 8 “did not know Joseph.” A biblical “generation” is a genealogical reference (i.e., father and son are two generations); it does not indicate a period of time.

NJPS increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground.”

¹¹So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor; and they built garrison cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Raamses. ¹²But the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out, so that the [Egyptians] came to dread the Israelites.

RASHI water, for He has already sworn never again to destroy the world by water. **Rise from the ground.** That is, leave the country—against our will. But our Sages think their real fear was that they themselves would be forced to leave their own land and that it would be taken over by the Israelites, but that they did not say “lest we rise from the ground” so as not to invoke the evil eye.

11 Taskmasters. Literally, “tax masters”—officials who would collect the tax from them. [A] And what was this “tax”? That they should build store-cities for Pharaoh. **To oppress them with forced labor.** Literally, “with *their* forced labor”—that is, with the Egyptians’ labor. **Garrison cities.** Rather, “store-cities,” as Onkelos and OJPS have it. That this is the correct meaning is shown by Isa 22:15, where the same root is used for the “steward” of the palace. **Pithom and Raamses.** The cities already existed under those names, but they were not suitable for use as store-cities until they strengthened and fortified them.

[A] This is not the word translated as “taskmasters” elsewhere in the story.

NAHMANIDES did not want to order his own executioners to kill them or cast them into the Nile, but told his people to do it whenever any of them found a Jewish boy, and if the boy’s father should cry out to the king or to the governor of the city for justice, they would tell him to bring witnesses and they would take revenge for him. [B] Once the royal restraint against murder was relaxed, the Egyptians would find Israelite houses, go into them at night in disguise, and remove the children. That is why it says that Moses’ mother “could hide him no longer” (2:3). Apparently this only went on for a short time, for the decree was obviously not in force yet when Aaron was born, and it would seem to have been abrogated by the time of Moses’ birth. Perhaps Pharaoh’s daughter asked her father out of pity not to apply it to Moses, or perhaps when it was revealed to be a royal order, he canceled it. Or perhaps the astrologers had canceled the decree, as our Sages wrote. [C] But it was all arranged to be done subtly, so that they would not realize that the violence was being directed against them as a people. This explains why the Israelite foremen told Moses, “May the LORD look upon you and punish you for making us loathsome to Pharaoh and his courtiers — putting a sword in their hands to slay us” (5:21)—now they will increase their hatred of us and, under the pretext that we are rebelling against the kingdom, they will slay us publicly, and will no longer need to keep their violence covert. **They may ... rise from the ground.** Rather, “from the land.” Rashi, following the Sages, explains it to mean, “We may rise from the land,” that is, be expelled against our will. But if it meant this it would say, “they may rise up *against* the land,” as in 2 Kgs 18:13. [D] Perhaps Pharaoh is saying, They may *rise up* against us *from the land* where they are dwelling—the land of Goshen. Or he might be explained as saying, **in the event of war** they will join our enemies in plundering us and *get themselves up out of this land* to the land of Canaan with everything we possess, and we will be unable to revenge ourselves upon them.” This would match the usage in 32:1, “Moses who *brought us up from the land* of Egypt,” and see similarly Jer 23:8 and Hosea 2:2.

11 Taskmasters ... to oppress them. He set the people to forced labor, that is, he seized some of them for the king’s work. He appointed over them Egyptian taskmasters to seize Israelite men at their own discretion, according to the amount of work that needed to be done. For a month or more at a time they would work on the king’s construction projects, and the rest of the time they would be in their homes. These taskmasters commanded them to build cities for Pharaoh, **and they built garrison cities for Pharaoh** under this system of forced labor.

12 To dread the Israelites. When the Egyptians saw that the forced labor did the Israelites no harm, they began to fear for their lives.

[B] Knowing that none of the Egyptians would testify for him. [C] According to b. Sotah 12b, once the astrologers discovered that the one who would save Israel had been thrown into the river, they mistakenly thought that the danger was over. [D] Nahmanides seems to misunderstand Rashi’s comment, which is surprising since it is taken directly from the Talmud. His “misunderstanding” must be deliberate, but it is not clear why.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS necessary (B). **They may join our enemies.** They are so different from us in language and culture—not to mention circumcision—that they would certainly reveal their hatred of us if war broke out (S). **Rise from the ground.** Rise over us and enslave us (B).

11 To oppress them. To fulfill Gen 15:13, “they shall be ... oppressed four hundred years”; “oppression” in this context refers to forced celibacy (H). In order to get them to leave the country (S). **Forced labor.** It would seem that at first this simply involved paying a

OJPS when there befalleth us any war, they also join themselves unto our enemies, and fight against us, and get them up out of the land.” ¹¹Therefore they did set over them taskmasters

מִלְחָמָה וְנוֹסְף גַּם-הוּא עַל-שְׂנְאֵינוּ
וְנִלְחַם-בָּנוּ וְעָלָה מִן-הָאָרֶץ: ¹¹וַיִּשְׂמוּ
עָלֵינוּ שָׂרֵי מַסִּים לְמַעַן עַנְתּוּ בְּסִבְלָתָם
וַיִּבְנוּ עָרֵי מִסְכָּנוֹת לְפָרְעֹה אֶת-פִּתּוֹם
וְאֶת-רַעַמְסֵס: ¹²וּכְבָּאֲשֶׁר יַעֲנוּ אֹתוֹ כֵּן
יִרְבֶּה וְכֵן יִפְרֹץ וְיִקְצוּ מִפְּנֵי בְנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל:

ABRAVANEL'S QUESTIONS ♦ One can understand why the Egyptians might be apprehensive, but why would they “dread” (v. 12) the Israelites?

to afflict them with their burdens. And they built for Pharaoh store-cities, Pithom and Raamses. ¹²But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And they were adread because of the children of Israel.

RASHBAM increase, then **in the event of war** with our enemies, **they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground** to return to the land of their ancestors. It would not be good for us to lose our slaves and be called “a crippled kingdom.”

12 The more they increased. Rather, “the more they would increase” as they

IBN EZRA The word translated here as “event” is plural though “war” is singular, but this is not uncommon. Or perhaps it implies: “war and trouble” or the like. **They may ... rise from the ground.** That is (with OJPS), “get them up out of the land.” Ibn Janah says what he really meant was “Get us up out of the land,” but he did not wish to give Satan an opportunity of making his words come true by pronouncing them aloud. But I think it is to be understood as written.

11 They—the Egyptians—**set taskmasters over them to oppress them.** To dry up the men’s seed. **Raamses.** As I have already explained at Gen 47:1, this is not to be confused with Rameses, the region in Goshen where the Israelites dwelt. Saadia explains the name to mean “Eye of the Sun.”

12 The more they were oppressed, the more they increased. Rather, “even

NJPS ¹³The 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.

¹⁵The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶saying,

RASHI **12 The more they were oppressed.** However the Egyptians set their minds to oppress the Israelites, the Holy One set His mind to spread them out and increase them, and **the more they increased and spread out.** A midrash adds: The Holy Spirit says, You say *pen yirbeh*, Lest they increase (v. 10), and I say *ken yirbeh*, Let them increase! **Dread.** Rather, the Egyptians were weary of their lives. **[B]** But our Sages derive from this word *va-yakutzu* that the Israelites were like *kotzim*—like thorns in the Egyptians' eyes.

13 Rigor. The word implies back-breaking labor.

15 Shiphrah. This was Jochebed, Moses' mother; the nickname comes from how a midwife *meshapheret*, makes the newborn child presentable. **Puah.** This was Miriam, Moses' sister, so named because a midwife will *po'ah*, whisper into the child's ear and murmur to it as women do to soothe a crying baby. But Isa 42:14 suggests that the verb means "to cry out."

[B] See Rashbam's comment and the note there.

NAHMANIDES **13 The Egyptians ruthlessly imposed upon the Israelites.** Since the forced labor had not harmed the Israelites, it was then decreed that all of Egypt should enslave the people. Every Egyptian who needed work done had the power to seize Israelite men to do his work.

14 With harsh labor at mortar and bricks. At first the taskmasters supplied the bricks and the forced laborers would construct the building. Now the whole people was driven into slavery, and they were ordered to bring earth and make the mortar with their own hands and feet, and only straw would be provided for them from the palace. They would give the bricks to the forced laborers to construct the building. Moreover, every kind of hard work that Pharaoh and the Egyptians had in the field, such as digging and clearing out manure, all this was set upon them. They would also harry them, pressuring them so they could not rest, beating and cursing them. This is how the Egyptians **ruthlessly made life bitter for them ... with all sorts of tasks.** The king would provide them with "meager food" (Isa 30:20), as is the custom with the king's laborers. This explains the expression used by the Israelites in Num 11:5, "We remember the fish that we used to eat free in

stop their increase, Pharaoh gave the Egyptians and their taskmasters permission to work them **ruthlessly**—beyond what is ordinarily required even of slaves. When this too failed, he proceeded to give the supervisors of the midwives their instructions to kill the male children. **Ruthlessly.** The Aramaic translation understands this correctly as an adverb. I am surprised at the liturgical hymns that think this root can be used as a verb. That is completely wrong.

14 Mortar and bricks. All kinds of construction work. **Tasks in the field.** Plowing and harvesting, pruning and trimming. OJPS correctly adds "in all their service" to include all the various other forms of work they did for the Egyptians, and "wherein they made them serve," where the verb does double duty. In all their service wherein they made them serve, they made them serve "with rigor."

15 Midwives. They were the supervisors of all the midwives, of which there must have been more than 500. But these two supervised them to make sure Pharaoh collected his tax from their fees. I have seen the same system operative in many places. According to our tradition, the two were Jochebed and Miriam, Moses' mother and sister. And this is correct.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS fixed amount to the king on a regular basis. One who could not afford to pay would fulfill his obligation by doing construction work. So there were a few Israelites who were not doing this work (G). **Garrison cities.** Rather, "Store-cities." According to Gen 47:26, Pharaoh took 20% of all the agricultural produce of Egypt. Since the Israelites lived separately and did not pay this 20%, the Egyptians demanded that they contribute by building the cities in which the produce would be stored (B).

14 They made life bitter for them. The intent was to make them so exhausted at night that they would be unable to procreate. When this failed, they tried killing all the boys (B). The more the Israelites sinned (as Ezek 20:8 tells us), the worse their oppressors treated them (S). **Harsh labor.** Like field work or construction work (G).

15 The Hebrew midwives. They were Egyptian women who were midwives for the Hebrews; how could Pharaoh expect Hebrew women to kill Hebrew babies? (A).

וַיַּעֲבְדוּ מִצְרַיִם אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּפָרֶה׃¹³
וַיִּמְרְרוּ אֶת־חַיֵּיהֶם בְּעֵבֶדָה קָשָׁה
בְּחֹמֶר וּבַלְבָּנִים וּבְכָל־עֲבֹדָה בְּשָׂדֵה אֶת־
כָּל־עֲבֹדָתָם אֲשֶׁר־עָבְדוּ בָהֶם בְּפָרֶה׃
וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְמִי־לֹדֵת הָעִבְרִית
אֲשֶׁר שָׂם הָאֱחָת שְׂפָרָה וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִית
פּוּעָה׃¹⁶ וַיֹּאמֶר בִּילְדָכֶן אֶת־הָעִבְרִיּוֹת

ABRAVANEL'S QUESTIONS ♦ Why did Pharaoh tell the midwives (v. 16) to kill the boys and let the girls live? If his purpose was to limit the population, it would have been smarter to do it the other way around, or simply to kill both boys and girls.

OJPS ¹³And the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigor. ¹⁴And they made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field; in all their service, wherein they made them serve with rigor.

¹⁵And the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, of whom the name of the one was Shiphrah, and the name of the other Puah; ¹⁶and he said: "When ye do the

RASHBAM had before. **They were in dread.** For their lives, as in Gen 27:46 and Isa 7:16. **[B]**

13 Rigor. The word implies back-breaking labor. It is used in the Talmud for cracking nuts.

14 With all sorts of tasks in the field. Plowing and harvesting. OJPS is closer to the Hebrew here: "all manner of service in the field; in all their service, wherein they made them serve" in town as well "with rigor."

15 The Hebrew midwives. Meaning "midwives who were Hebrews" rather than Egyptian women who were midwives for the Hebrews.

[B] Rashbam repeats Rashi's comment (omitting the midrash) and then adds a citation to the Genesis verse where the idiom Rashi cites is used, but also to a verse from Isaiah (without the idiom) which matches the NJPS translation of "dread."

IBN EZRA though they were oppressed, they increased" just as they had in the days before they were oppressed. **Spread out.** It really means "to burst forth." Under the oppression, they did not merely increase naturally, but violated the laws of nature, so remarkable was their increase. **Dread.** Interestingly, this Hebrew verb and its palindrome mean the same thing. For another example, see Isa 7:16, "the ground whose two kings you *dread* shall be abandoned."

13 The Egyptians ruthlessly imposed upon the Israelites. Seeing that forcing them to labor for him was not enough to

NJPS “When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live.”¹⁷The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live.¹⁸So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?”¹⁹The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth.”²⁰And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly.²¹And because the midwives feared God, He established households for them.²²Then Pharaoh charged all his people,

RASHI 16 Birthstool. The word is the same as used for a potter’s wheel in Jer 18:3. **If it is a boy.** Pharaoh cared only about the males because his astrologers told him that a boy would be born who would save the Jews.

17 They let the boys live. Rather, they made them live—by providing them with food.

19 They are vigorous. Following the Targum, this word really means that they are “life-givers”—the same word used for midwives. They are as skilled as the professional midwives. But our Sages read the word in its other meaning, “animals”—implying that, like animals, the Hebrew women did not need midwives. If you are wondering how the text can compare people to animals, see the blessing of Jacob in Genesis 49, where the brothers are complimented by being compared to animals. Ezek 19:2 extends the comparison to all the tribes by saying to the princess of Israel, “What a lion was your mother!”

20 God dealt well with the midwives. And how?...

21 He established households for them. Rather, with OJPS, “houses”—that is, priestly, levitical, and royal dynasties, which are called “houses.” The priestly and levitical houses came from Jochebed, through Aaron, and the royal house came from Miriam, for David was descended from her, as explained in b. Sotah 11b.

22 All his people. The decree applied to the Egyptians as well as to the Israelites. The day that Moses was born, Pharaoh’s astrologers told him, “The one who will save the Jews

NAHMANIDES Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons” and so forth. For fish is quite plentiful in Egypt. They would get them from those who caught them at the king’s order, and would get cucumbers and melons from the gardens, “with no one to molest them” (Jud 18:7). For it was the king’s command. But our Sages say that they were slaves to the kings themselves, not to the subjects of the kings. If so, then **the Egyptians** who **imposed upon** them were Pharaoh’s taskmasters.

obey your command; **they are lively.** The Hebrew women have much more vitality than do the Egyptian women.

20 God dealt well with the midwives. By making “houses” for them.

21 The midwives feared God. And not the king. [E] **He established households for them.** That is, he gave them many offspring, in recompense for having given life to the offspring of the Israelites. But Saadia explains it to mean that God literally made them houses in which He hid them so that they could not be found.

22 Pharaoh. Everyone who sits on the throne of Egypt is called Pharaoh; our text does not give the Pharaoh’s name, as do (e.g.) 2 Kgs 23:29-35 (Pharaoh Neco) and Jer 44:30 (Pharaoh Hophra); these were their names in their own language.

[D] Thus it excludes the descendants of Ishmael, of Esau, and of Abraham’s sons by Keturah, the woman whom he married after Sarah’s death (Gen 25:1-6). [E] The long commentary here includes a discussion of the verb “to fear” in the context of fearing God. Though the discussion is strictly grammatical, Ibn Ezra ends it by saying, “One who is intelligent will comprehend,” suggesting that he is also implying something about the nature of God.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS 16 Birthstool. Rather, “the genitals” (K). **If it is a boy, kill him.** According to v. 10, they were worried about war, in which event the males would be the dangerous ones (H).

21 He established households for them. Rather, “houses” (OJPS)—descendants who would be kings and leaders. And this was the appropriate reward for giving life, for the mark of a complete leader is that he provides for the welfare of those whom he leads (G).

וְרֵאִיתֶן עַל-הָאֲבָנִים אִם-בֵּן הוּא וְהַמֶּתֶן אֹתוֹ וְאִם-בַּת הוּא וְחַיָּה: 17 וְתִירְאֵן הַמִּילְדוֹת אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים וְלֹא עָשׂוּ כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֲלֵיהֶן מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וְתַחֲיִין אֶת-הַיְלָדִים: 18 וַיִּקְרָא מֶלֶךְ-מִצְרַיִם לַמִּילְדוֹת וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶן מְדוּעַ עָשִׂיתֶן הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה וְתַחֲיִין אֶת-הַיְלָדִים: 19 וְתִאֲמַרְנָן הַמִּילְדוֹת אֶל-פְּרֹעֹה כִּי לֹא כַּנְּשִׁים הַמִּצְרַיִת הָעֶבְרִית כִּי-חַיּוֹת הֵנָּה בְטָרִם תְּבֹא אֲלֵהֶן הַמִּילְדוֹת וְיִלְדוּ: 20 וַיִּיטֵב אֱלֹהִים לַמִּילְדוֹת וַיִּרְבּוּ הָעָם וַיַּעֲצֻמוּ מְאֹד: 21 וַיְהִי כִּי-יִרְאֶוּ הַמִּילְדוֹת אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם בָּתָּיִם: 22 וַיִּצַו פְּרֹעֹה

ABRAVANEL'S QUESTIONS ♦ How could the Hebrew midwives, who feared God and were rewarded by him, tell the obvious lie that “Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth” (v. 19)? For if this was so, there would be no need for Hebrew midwives. ♦ What are the “houses” that God made for them (v. 21), and why is “them” in the masculine gender instead of the feminine? ♦ Why is it repeated that “the midwives feared God” (v. 21)? ♦ Why does v. 22 not specify, “Every Hebrew boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile”?

OJPS office of a midwife to the Hebrew women, ye shall look upon the birthstool: if it be a son, then ye shall kill him; but if it be a daughter, then she shall live.”¹⁷But the midwives feared God, and did not as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the men-children alive.¹⁸And the king of Egypt called for the midwives, and said unto them: “Why have ye done this thing, and have saved the men-children alive?”¹⁹And the midwives said unto Pharaoh: “Because the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women; for they are lively, and are delivered ere the midwife come unto them.”²⁰And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied, and waxed very mighty.²¹And it came to pass, because the midwives feared God, that He made them houses.²²And Pharaoh charged all his

RASHBAM 19 They are vigorous. Healthy and competent and quick to give birth.

21 He made them houses. Not “He,” as the translations assume, but “he”—Pharaoh—made houses for them to keep them from going to the Hebrew women who were giving birth. In addition, he ...

22 Charged all his people, saying. And so forth. [C]

[C] Since the midwives would not do Pharaoh’s dirty work, they were put under house arrest, and the entire population was given the task of making sure the Jewish babies were drowned.

IBN EZRA 16 Hebrew women. They are so called because of their descent from Eber; but the word only applies to those who are of the Hebrew faith. [D] **Kill him.** Secretly, so that the matter not become known. For he was committing a violent crime.

17 They let the boys live. Rather, they made them live with all their might, even more than they would have done had there been no decree at all. This must be the meaning of the words, for the verse has already told us that they disobeyed the king’s instructions and did not kill the boys.

18 Why have you done this thing? He was not really asking for a reason; this was his way of saying, “You’re dead for having disobeyed my command.”

19 The midwives said. We did not dis-

NJPS saying, “Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.”

OJPS people, saying: “Every son that is born ye shall cast into the river, and every daughter ye shall save alive.”

2 A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. ²The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she

לְכַל-עַמּוֹ לְאִמֵּר כָּל-הַבְּנֵי הַיְלֹוד הַיֵּאֲרָהוּ
תִשְׁלִיכֵהוּ וְכָל-הַבָּת תַּחְיֶינָן: ס

וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לֵוִי וַיִּקַּח אֶת-בַּת-
לֵוִי: ²וַתַּהַר הָאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתֵּרָא אֹתוֹ

RASHI was born today. We do not know whether he is an Egyptian or an Israelite. But we can see that his end will come by means of water.” So Pharaoh issued his decree that very day, against the Egyptians as well as against the Israelites. Read carefully! It does not say, “every boy that is born to the Hebrews,” but “every boy that is born.” What the astrologers did not understand was that the “waters” through which Moses would come to harm were the waters of Meribah. [C]

2:1 Married a Levite woman. Rather, “took the daughter of Levi.” He had separated from her in order not to conceive children who would then fall victim to Pharaoh’s decree. Now he brought her back and “took” her to wife a second time. She was even turned back into a young woman, though she was 130 at the time. For she had been born on the journey down to Egypt, just as they arrived, and the Israelites were in Egypt for 210 years. Since Moses was 80 when they left, she must have been 130 when she got pregnant with him. But she also became young again, for the text calls her “daughter” of Levi. [D]

2 How beautiful he was. When he was born, the whole house filled with light. [E]

[C] For striking the rock there to get water, Moses is punished by not being allowed to live long enough to cross into the land of Israel. See Num 20:1-13 and Deut 32:50-51. [D] When the descendants of Jacob who came down to Egypt are listed in the book of Numbers, Jochebed is included with the note that she “was born to Levi in Egypt” (Num 26:59), having presumably been conceived in Canaan or on the journey down. The fact that Moses has older siblings implies that Amram and Jochebed had already been married before the marriage described in 2:1. [E] Rashi’s source, b. Sotah 12a, is based on the resemblance of our verse—literally, “She saw him, that he was good”—to Gen 1:4, “God saw the light, that it was good.”

NAHMANIDES 2:1 A certain man of the house of Levi went. Our Sages said that he “went” to get her back after taking his daughter’s advice to end their separation (see below). Ibn Ezra that the Jews lived in many different cities, and he “went” from his own city to hers in order to marry her. But what point would there be for the text to mention this? In my opinion, the text is emphasizing that he ignored the danger posed by Pharaoh’s decree and got married with the intention of having children. For the text uses the expression “went and did” about everyone who bestirs himself to do some new action: e.g. “Reuben went and lay with Bilhah” (Gen 35:22); “he went and married Gomer” (Hos 1:1). This man too “went” and **married a Levite woman**. The text does not mention either of their names, because if it did so it would have had to give their entire genealogies right back to Levi. But at this point, in a hurry to get to the birth of Israel’s savior, the text wished to be brief. Afterwards, in 6:14-25, the text will give the complete genealogy of Reuben and Simeon in order to get down to Levi and to the parents of Moses. According to the straightforward meaning this verse refers not to a reunion after a separation but to their actual marriage; the events in the Torah are not narrated in strict chronological order. For

That is why 6:20, naming her husband Amram, calls her “his father’s sister.” This demonstrates that those who say inbreeding produces defective offspring are wrong; the prohibitions against incest are not for practical reasons, but to make Israel a holy people. [F]

2 The woman conceived. We know that Aaron was older than Moses. This passage does not mention him because nothing happened to him in his youth, as it did to Moses. A similar phenomenon is found in 2 Sam 12:24, where Solomon appears to be David’s first living child; yet according to 2 Sam 5:14, Shammua, Shobab, and Nathan had already been born to him. Miriam, too, was older; our ancestral tradition identifies here with Puah, the midwife, and v. 4 says explicitly that Moses’ sister stationed herself to watch over him. Ben Zuta reads Num 26:59, “she bore ... Aaron and Moses and their sister Miriam,” as implying that Miriam was the youngest; but this

[F] Lev 18:12 prohibits sex with the sister of one’s father. But the examples of Aaron, Miriam, and Moses show that the reason for the prohibition is not that the children will be defective.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS 22 Let every girl live. Pharaoh assumed the girls would marry Egyptians and be assimilated (G).

2:1 A Levite woman. The tradition quoted by Rashi says that Jochebed was 130 when Moses was born. My own calculations, according to the rabbinic assumption that she was born just as the sons of Jacob entered Egypt, make her 145. In either case, this would be a greater miracle than happened to Sarah; one would think the Torah would have mentioned it. But the whole assumption is the height of absurdity. If she was born at the end of Levi’s life, long after he arrived in Egypt, she would have been 58 at Moses’ birth, which is a good deal less strange (G).

2 She hid him for three months. The Egyptians did not realize she was pregnant for three months, at which point they began to count nine months (B). Since Moses was born on the 7th of Adar, he was hidden until the 6th of Sivan—the same day the Torah would later be given (H).

2 And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi. ²And the woman conceived, and bore a son; and when she saw him that he was a

RASHBAM 2:1 A certain man of the house of Levi. It was Amram. **Married Jochebed, a Levite woman.** Literally, with OJPS, “a daughter of Levi”; we know from Num 26:59 that she “was born to Levi in Egypt.” He married her some years before the birth of Moses. For according to Exod 7:7, Aaron was 83 and Moses was 80 when they spoke to Pharaoh, making Aaron, their first child, three years older than his younger brother.

2 The woman conceived at the time of Pharaoh’s decree about casting the boys into the Nile **and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him.** One who explains this to mean that she hid him *because* she saw he was beautiful is a liar. For the mothers of all newborns have maternal instincts for them. So “saw” must be explained as we explained it in Gen 1:31, “God saw all that He had made, and found it very good.” He looked at all He had made and at all the actions He had performed to see whether any of them needed repair. It turned out that everything was fine and in good repair. The same applies here. Moses was presumably born at the end of six months—just as Samuel was born “after

IBN EZRA 2:1 Went. Apparently she lived in another city. All the Israelites lived in Rameses, but there were a number of different cities there. **A Levite woman.** Literally, with OJPS, “a daughter of Levi” the son of Jacob. This is clear from Num 26:59, where she is referred to as “Jochebed daughter of Levi, who was born to Levi in Egypt.” Thus she is the sister of Kohath.