

Grammatical Analysis of Exodus 1:8-10

Exodus 1:8
וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ-חָדָשׁ עַל-מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדָע אֶת-יֹסֵף:
Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. (NRSV)

There is a particle conjunction ו beginning this verse in the Hebrew. It implies that the verse is directly related to that which proceeds it. Exodus 1:7 describes how the children of Israel had multiplied and become fruitful in the land of Egypt. This sets the stage for the story about to be told: The rise of a new Pharaoh, one which was not familiar with Joseph as forefather of the Hebrews.

There is a cruel poetic irony to it all, that without Joseph's gift of dream interpretation in generations past, Egypt would not have survived the famine which had struck the land. Yet, the repayment to Joseph's people is enslavement by a reckless young king.

וַיָּקָם – **Verb:** Qal/Imperfect/3rd Masculine, Singular – from קָם

- This word, translated *arose*, has connotations of standing up, from a previously lower stature, possibly in a hostile sense (as one stands up to fight). His rise to power does not bode well for the children of Israel mentioned in 1:7.
- The verb tense is imperfect, meaning that his ascension was in an ongoing state of motion, having not yet been completed at that point in time. It could possibly be more accurately translated as “But a new king *was arising*...” Essentially, it is the beginning of his career as ruler, the story of his kingship still in the making.
- In typical fashion of someone in a newly appointed position of power, the first thing this new *melek* does is institute changes, to the detriment of the status quo.

מֶלֶךְ-חָדָשׁ – **Noun:** Common | **Adjective:** Masculine, Singular, Absolute

- The word *king* is accompanied by the adjective *new*, indicating relative inexperience, as is exhibited by his fear of the Hebrews. Had he been familiar with the back-story around Joseph, he would have realized there was already an established rapport

between Egypt and the children of Israel.

- The fact that this *melek* did not know of Joseph's legacy, while obviously the author of Exodus did, smacks of the ego of most Pharaohs, as discussed in the *Dictionary of the Old Testament* – typically not recording any concession of weakness. Had the Pharaoh whom ruled during Joseph's era properly divulged the happenings regarding the famine, the Pharaoh of Exodus would have been better informed. Instead, we can draw the conclusion that the name יוֹסֵף held no special significance for him.

עַל־מִצְרַיִם – **Particle:** Preposition | **Noun:** Proper, Absolute

- This phrase, translated as *over Egypt*, loses a bit of its impact in English. In the Hebrew, the preposition can have the meaning *on high*, which has more ethereal and regal connotations. Being that Egyptians regarded their Pharaoh as a deity and not just a human leader, this sort of reflects the sense of self-entitlement that the new king brought to his newfound pinnacle of power.
- The NIV translates this verse as: “Then a new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt.” This imposes a meaning that, while accurate, loses some of the nuance as to the position of the king relative to his nation (above it).

לֹא־יָדָע – **Particle:** Negative | **Verb:** Qal/Perfect/3rd Masculine, Singular – from יָדַע

- This phrase simply means “did not know” and is used in reference to Joseph. Obviously, the Pharaoh of Exodus could not himself have known Joseph personally, since they lived during different time periods. The NIV captures this nuance by qualifying the statement: “... did not know *about* Joseph ...”

אֶת־יוֹסֵף – **Particle:** Direct object marker | **Noun:** Proper, Absolute

- The particle used as a direct object marker here, in tandem with the proper noun יוֹסֵף: denotes that this is a particular person named *Joseph*, and not just anyone who may bear the same name.

Exodus 1:9

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-עַמּוֹ הַזֶּה עִם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רַב וְעַצוּם מִמֶּנּוּ:

He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we..."

(NRSV)

This verse begins with a particle conjunction, in which case it need not be separate sentence, as is implied by the NRSV translation. Instead, it could be a compound sentence: "... *and* he said to his people ...". In this case, the KJV and NAS translations most accurately reflect this nuance.

Not unlike a child who is still a bit wobbly on two legs, described here in the midst of ascension to power, this Pharaoh seems uncertain of himself. His automatic assumption that the Hebrews would rally against Egypt shows his lack of understanding of how they got there in the first place.

וַיֹּאמֶר – **Verb:** Qal/Imperfect/Waw-consec/3rd Masculine, Singular – from אָמַר

- This verb, along with the particle conjunction, is used to show the Pharaoh speaking.

אֶל-עַמּוֹ – **Particle:** Preposition | **Noun:** Common, Masculine, Singular, Construct, 3rd

- In the English, is unclear here if *people* is referring to the collective whole of Egyptian citizens, or perhaps only Pharaoh's team of advisors (i.e. *Our people talked to their people*). In the Hebrew however, it is clear that this word could be taken to mean *nation*. As Pharaoh was indeed addressing the entirety of Egypt (possibly through the venue of royal decree), it brings to mind the rise of Hitler before World War II, inciting discriminatory hysteria against the Jews.

הִנֵּה – **Particle:** Interjection

- I thought it worth pointing out that in the English, the KJV and NAS use the word "Behold," whereas NIV and NRSV both say "Look." The word *behold* seems to have more weight to it, as if Pharaoh was calling his people to the realization that they were outnumbered (i.e. *It was a sight to behold*).

עִם – **Noun:** Common, Masculine, Singular, Absolute

- Here, the word *people* is being used to refer to the Hebrews. It is singular, masculine and absolute. As absolute, we know a particular people group was being described.

בְּנֵי – **Noun:** Masculine, Common, Plural, Construct

- This word, which roughly means *sons*, seems to have been lost in translation, simply absorbed and summarized as *Israelite people*. Really though, Pharaoh in the Hebrew seems to be saying “Look at these people, the sons of Israel are many and mighty...”

בְּ – **Particle:** Preposition, Common/Plural/1st

- This word seems to be conspicuously out of place, as far as being contained within verse 9. As a preposition, it carries a connotation of separation, but also negativity, and preemption. It ties verse 9 together with verse 10, as if to say – “Let’s take care of this Israelite problem *before* it’s too late.”

Exodus 1:10
<p>הָבָה נִתְחַכְמָה לּוֹ פְּנֵי־רִבָּה וְהָיָה כִּי־תִקְרָאנָה מִלְחָמָה וְנוֹסַף גַּם־הוּא עַל־שְׂנְאֵינוּ וְנִלְחַם־בָּנוּ וְעָלָה מִן־הָאָרֶץ:</p>
<p>Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">(NRSV)</p>

Here, Pharaoh simply “does the math,” jumping to a preconceived conclusion, and makes a rash decision in order to compensate for his insecurities as a leader. In his concern over retention, he enslaves the Hebrews, which actually prompts the desire to leave. Assuming conditions had been favorable since the time of Joseph, this is an ironic twist: Pharaoh’s preventative actions become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

הָבָה – **Verb:** Qal/Imperfect/Masculine/Singular – from **יָהַב**

- This verb, at its root meaning *to give*, is being used in the imperative in the Hebrew. The tone is that of someone saying “We *must* do [something].” It is worth noting here that **בְּ** from verse 9 relates directly to the beginning verse 10. The core message is “*Because of* [the Israelite numbers] we *must* deal shrewdly with them...”

נִתְחַכְמָה – **Verb:** Hithpael/Imperfect/1st Plural – from **חָכַם**

- This verb, translated *deal shrewdly*, is “cohortive” in both form and meaning. It also carries the nuance of animalistic intelligence/cunning. Essentially, Pharaoh is saying that the Egyptians need to be crafty in their dealings with the Israelites.

לִּי – **Particle:** Preposition, Masculine/Singular/3rd

- This preposition, literally *for* or *in regard to*, is simply translated “or” in the NRSV and NIV, and “lest” in the KJV and NAS. The Hebrew seems to imply more certainty, as if to say “... let us deal shrewdly with them, *for* they will ... escape from the land.” In that regard, these words are almost a hint at the prophetic, rather than a speculation. Again, this ties into the irony that Pharaoh sets into motion that which he is most concerned with preventing – a mass desertion of Egypt.

פָּנִי יִרְבֶּה - **Verb:** Qal/Imperfect/3rd Masculine, Singular – from רבה

- This verb is preceded by a particle conjunction, and is translated *they will increase*. In the Hebrew, the verb is singular and imperfect, relating to the collective *people* of Israel, who are currently in the process of increasing as the Pharaoh is speaking the words. It could be translated “... for they *are increasing* ...” In this case, it is not something that is a future, but a very present concern, already outnumbering the Egyptians in their own land.

וְהָיָה – **Verb:** Qal/Waw-consecutive/Perfect/3rd Masculine, Singular – from היה

- This verb is preceded by the particle conjunction ו and is not directly translated. In essence, it means *it shall come to pass*. It is being used to connect the increasing number of Israelites with the implications of that increase: that they will take up arms, ally with the enemies of Egypt, and escape the land. It is used in the perfect tense, showing that is used in an almost prophetic way.

כִּי תִקְרָאנָה – **Verb:** Qal/Imperfect/3rd Feminine, Plural – from קרא

- There is a particle conjunction adjoined to this verb, taken together to mean *when encounter*, in reference to the next word מִלְחָמָה translated *battle*. It is in the imperfect tense. It is therefore considered in the present and/or future timeframe. It could be that local conflicts had already been seen in municipal Egypt, so that the possibility of an eventual, all-out war was one that Pharaoh wanted to avoid. I found it odd that the wording is feminine in the Hebrew, being that war is typically thought of as a more masculine contest, and would have been especially so during this time.

מִלְחָמָה – **Noun:** Common, Feminine, Singular, Absolute

- I must admit that I am befuddled by the word translated *war/battle* being feminine. If I were to venture a guess, I would say that perhaps the “art of war” was considered one to be that of finesse and agility, the form of a refined contest of tactics. Still, it seems odd that the word is not in the masculine form. In the NRSV, it is translated as “*the event of war,*” so perhaps it is meant to be a formal declaration of war.

וְנִסְּףָ – **Verb:** Niphal/Waw-consec/3rd Perfect, Masculine, Singular – from יָסַף

- This verb, *to add*, is in the perfect tense, meaning that has yet to happen, and may be considered prophetic. It could be thought of as meaning “... they will *increase* (be added), in the event of war, they will [fight against Egypt].”

גַּם־וְ – **Particle:** Conjunction | **Pronoun:** Independent/3rd Masculine, Singular

- Here, the particle conjunction serves as an adjective, denoting the addition and could be translated *moreover*. It ties into the previous verb, translated *increase*. The pronoun, though singular, here refers to the people of Israel. Taken with the preceding verb, together it says: “... they will increase, *moreover they* will [fight against Egypt].” The NRSV simply translates this as “and” but it seems stronger than that. The NIV translates it “... they will become even more numerous ...” which seems to better reflect the nuances of the Hebrew.

עַל־שְׂנְאֵינוּ – **Verb:** Qal/Participle/Masculine Plural, Construct – from שָׂנֵא

- The particle preposition and verb here are in construct relationship. The particle essentially means *according to/on the grounds of* and is tied directly to the verb, which *hate/hatred*. In the context of the sentence, the Pharaoh is worried that the Israelites will rise up because of their hatred for Egypt. Coupled with the grim prospect of them joining Egypt’s enemies, this is disconcerting for the new ruler.

וְנִלְחַם־בָּנוּ – **Verb:** Niphal/Waw-consec/3rd Perfect, Masculine, Singular – from לָחַם

- This verb, literally *to do battle*, is preceded by a particle conjunction. As a result of the anticipated hatred, the Israelites will do battle. It is used in the perfect tense, meaning it is a possibility in the future, and is foreboding to the Pharaoh, in a nearly prophetic sense. It brings to mind a situation in which, because of intuition, someone expects that an imminent conflict might break out in the near future.

עלה – **Verb:** Qal/Waw-consec/3rd Perfect, Masculine, Singular – from עלה

- This verb, literally *to ascend/climb*, is used to describe how Israel might collectively climb out of their position of subservience in the Egyptian society, via partnering with the enemies of, and fighting against Egypt. It is worth noting that this verb is different from the verb עלה used in reference to Pharaoh in 1:8. That verb has more of a nuance of *standing*, whereas the verb associated with Israel here is that of *climbing*. One shows a slight amount of effort, while the other quite a bit of fervor – as one might climb the steps to an altar. This is indicative of the life of ease by which Pharaoh rose to his kingship, yet the arduous process by which Israel would stake its claim as God's chosen nation.

מן־הארץ – **Particle:** Preposition | **Noun:** Common, Feminine, Singular, Absolute

- Here, the particle preposition can be translated *out of* – or – *from*. The noun means *earth* or *land*. Here, it refers contextually to the land of Egypt, from which the Israelites will escape.