

## **Initial journey: Rameses to Succoth (Exodus 12:37–42)**

This next section relates the very outset of the Hebrews' escape from the land of Egypt. It provides us with some interesting data regarding geography, chronology and the numbers of people that left Egypt.

12:37. And the children of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children.

The opening leg of the journey begins at 'Rameses', which was one of the cities the Hebrews had helped to build (see commentary on 1:11 for information regarding its location). The first stop in their travels was 'Succoth'. Some researchers suggest that Succoth is to be found at Tell el-Maskhuta. The name Succoth, perhaps derived from Egyptian tkw (Tjeku), has been discovered on numerous monuments at Tell el-Maskhuta. The problem with this identification is the fact that urban occupation did not begin at Tell el-Maskhuta until the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. E. L. Bleiberg has attempted to solve this problem by asserting that Tjeku (Succoth) was originally a region in the Wadi Tumilat area of Egypt and it was later located specifically at Tell el-Maskhuta.

The number of people leaving Egypt was 'six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children' (note that there is no mention of the word 'women' in the original). The term for 'men' distinguishes this group from women, children and non-combatants. For that reason, interpreters often estimate the size of the population of Israel at the exodus to have been between 2,000,000 and 3,000,000 people. In favour of taking these numbers at face value is that they coincide with the data given about the population size in the wilderness from the book of Numbers (see Num. 1:46–47; 2:32; 26:51). In addition, according to Exodus 1, the Israelites were experiencing a great period of growth and increase (see analysis of 1:6–7). Others argue that the figures are hyperbolic. Some insist that the word for 'thousand' (Hebrew 'ēlēph) actually means 'a clan', and thus six hundred clans left Egypt. 'Ēlēph is used that way in Judges 6:15. Others say that 'ēlēph is a military unit of men levied for war.

12:38. And also a mixed multitude went up with them, and flocks and herds, a great number of livestock. The verse begins by saying that 'A mixed multitude went up with them.' 'Mixture' is a Hebrew word which is used of miscellaneous peoples who attach themselves to a group to which they do not naturally belong (see Jer. 25:20; 50:37; Neh. 13:3). Many English translations render the word as 'foreigners'. The point is that various kinds of people who were not part of Israel joined themselves with the people of God. Perhaps some of them were Egyptians who came to believe and fear the word of God (see Exod. 9:20–21). The Hebrews left Egypt with, literally, 'a very heavy flock'. As has been noted previously, the word for 'heavy' (Hebrew kābēd) has defined what God has done to Pharaoh's heart throughout the account of the exodus. As God made Pharaoh's heart heavy, or hard, thus he makes Israel heavy in material possessions.

12:39. And they baked the dough which they brought from Egypt into cakes of unleavened bread because there was no yeast when they were driven from Egypt; they were not able to wait and also they did not make provisions for themselves.

On the first leg of the journey, the Hebrews cooked unleavened bread for their sustenance. The reasons for their having to resort to it were twofold: first, 'They were not able to wait/linger/tarry' in Egypt long enough for their bread to rise. Secondly, the text reports that 'also they did not make provisions for themselves'. The Hebrews were unprepared for the spontaneous nature of their departure.

12:40–41. And the length of time that the children of Israel dwelt in Egypt was 430 years. And it was at the end of 430 years, on this very day, that all the hosts of Yahweh came out from the land of Egypt.

Israel's period of enslavement lasted over four hundred years. This was a fulfilment of God's prophecy to Abraham in Genesis 15:13, where he says, 'Know for certain that your seed will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years.' The discrepancy between the two figures may easily be explained by the Genesis figure simply being a round number, or one that is the minimum figure, that is, at least four hundred years. The number in the present verses would then be

the specific figure for the length of the sojourn. The fact that 430 years is the specific figure is confirmed in verse 41 where it says the Hebrews left Egypt, literally, 'on this selfsame day'.

The opening word of verse 40 is literally 'dwelling'. It is a derivative of the verb used later in the verse ('lived'). This is a unique usage of the noun form because it apparently means in the context 'dwelling-time', length of stay.

12:42. It is a night of watching by Yahweh to bring them out from the land of Egypt; this night is for Yahweh to be watched by the children of Israel throughout their generations.

The final verse of the section begins by saying that Passover is 'a night of watching by Yahweh'. Protection of his people is the main idea behind it. It is night-time, and the God of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps (Ps. 121:4). He is the keeper and guardian of Israel.

In contrast, Pharaoh has to be aroused and awakened in the middle of the night to be told of the plague (12:30). The sun-god Ra is in the nether regions, and unable to come to the aid of his people. Where are the gods of Egypt?

### **Application**

I once heard a missionary Baptist pastor from the Delta region of Mississippi preach on this text. The title of his sermon was 'God Works the Night-Shift'! The point of his sermon needs to be driven home to the church today—and that lesson is the constant, ever-working providence of God. He continually maintains and sustains the universe, and he has ceaseless and endless care and compassion for his people. The Westminster Confession of Faith speaks directly to this latter observation: 'As the providence of God doth, in general, reach to all creatures, so, after a most special manner, it taketh care of his Church, and disposeth all things to the good thereof' (Chapter 5).

As the people of God, we can take great comfort from this doctrine: God's care of his church is uninterrupted and incessant. It has no end.