

(c)Dr Russell Jay Hendel; Jun 2026

VERSES: Ex01-08a, Ex01-08b

Biblical text: A new king arose in Egypt who did not know Joseph.

Literal Rashi text: Rav and Shmuel. One held it was actually someone new while the other held it was the same king but with new policies.

My explanation:

Controversy or complementarity: This text certainly sounds like a controversy; two opinions. But in my doctoral thesis I point out that if a verse has 2 problems then the 2 opinions present, not controversy, but two different scholars addressing two aspects of the verse. In other words, one of Rav and Shmuel would always emphasize the newness of policies while the other emphasized the change in people.

Three verse issues: To fully understand this verse we note three issues with it:

- A. The biblical style indicating new kings is typically *so and so died and was replaced by so and so* (Gn 36:31-39). This verse uses a different style *a new king arose*.
- B. The phrase *new king* can equally refer to a *new king* or *new kingdom (new government)*.
- C. Unlike English, Hebrew will not always distinguish between descriptions of the real world and wishes or potentials about it.
 - For example, Is10:19 literally is translated: *the remaining trees in the forest will only be a few in number; a child will write them*. The underlined phrase is better translated as *a child could write them*. The difference between *will write* and *could write* is exactly the difference between a real-world description and a potential description. English has the auxiliary verb *could* to indicate this while in Hebrew, potential is inferred from context.

Approaches to the grammatical issues: There are a variety of ways to deal with these 3 issues:

- A. Ibn Ezra argues “This new king was not a descendant of the former Pharaohs; rather it represents an overthrow of the government by someone new.” The Midrash Rabbah argues that the Egyptians were concerned about excessive Jewish presence and wanted decrees against them which Pharaoh refused because of all the favors that Joseph did. So, the people removed the king from his throne. He was allowed back on it when he *renewed* his policies against the Jews.
- B. Even if the king was a new person the important aspect of the reign was his new policies.
- C. It is very unreasonable that whoever was king did not know of Joseph. Either he knew him personally, or he knew about him from the history books since Joseph was a vice-king and tremendously benefitted Egypt. So, the statement *who did not know Joseph* should be interpreted as *suppressing knowledge of Joseph and acting as if he didn't know him*. This is another example of Hebrew not distinguishing between real-world events *he did not know Joseph* and *wishes for real-world events*; so that in this verse, *he did not*

know Joseph (a real world statement) means he wished Joseph was unknown and acted accordingly.

Textual issues in the midrash: Before continuing we have noted 3 issues (not 2) in the verse. The Maharzu, a commentary on the Midrash Rabbah points out that there is corruption in the various texts: Some of the themes come from the TB Sotah 11, some come from the Midrash Tanchumah, and finally some are in the Midrash Rabbah. Additionally, the grammatical basis for the interpretations we have given above reflect not modern grammarians but actual statements in the Midrash Rabbah.

Social context: But the above is only grammatical and descriptive. It doesn't explain the underlying societal forces shaping what happened. The midrash identifies two concerns among the Egyptian people:

* Jews were successful; the Egyptians wanted to assimilate with them; similarly, the Jews liked the Egyptians and wanted to assimilate. One opinion in the Midrash Rabbah asserts that they stopped circumcising themselves when Joseph died in order to facilitate assimilation (Moses however circumcised them as they left Egypt).

* Jews were multiplying rapidly. Some Egyptians were concerned about the Jewish presence and wanted decrees against them to prevent their proliferation. We already saw above one approach in which Pharaoh tried to override the people but failed since they dethroned him.

Putting it all together: Combining the grammatical and social issues we would interpret the passage as follows:

Although the Jews descended as only 70 people, they had helped the Egyptian economy and multiplied intensely. There were 2-3 forces at play. The Jews liked the Egyptians since they achieved honor and prestige among them. Many Egyptians wanted to marry into Jewish families because of their success. Other contingents of Egyptians were however concerned about excessive Jewish presence and wanted it curtailed. Although Pharaoh tried to inject some sanity into the process, the people overruled him. The result was that you had Jews assimilating and a segment of the Egyptians concerned about their excessive presence. Additionally, God, as punishment for the Jews wanting to assimilate, changed the love of the Egyptians towards the Jews to hatred.

Thus, this interpretation is relevant and is consistent with numerous assimilation prototypes going back to the Greeks, Christians, Moslems, the Enlightenment, and our own 20th century situations such as the one with Germany and the current situation.
