

# As It Is Written

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Slavery is first introduced in the Bible in the first chapter of Exodus, verses 7-14. In this narrative we learn that slavery is characterized as involuntary servitude and that is described as harshly and cruelly administered. The idea of *forced* or involuntary servitude is expressed in these verses using the hiphil form of the verb to labor ( **יַעֲבֹדוּ** - *vayya'avidu*). In this case, the literal translation of 1:13 is “the Egyptians caused the sons of Israel labor”. The word ‘caused’ is euphemistic because it does not capture what is really going on. In my opinion, a better translation would be something along the lines of:

“So, the Egyptians imposed labor upon the sons of Israel<sup>1</sup>...”

“So, the Egyptians forced the sons of Israel into labor...”

Or

“So, the Egyptians made the sons of Israel labor ...”

Let’s now step through the relevant portions of these seven verses:

Exodus 1:7-9

**וַיִּשְׂרְצוּ** (*va'yyishr'tzu*) – swarmed, like ants or rodents.

**וְעֲצוּמִים** (*v'atzum*) – mighty because of their numbers, not the strength of any individual

*But the descendants of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong; so that the land va'yyishr'tzu with them.*

<sup>8</sup> Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. <sup>9</sup> And he said to his people, “Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too v'azum for us.

Exodus 1:13-14

**בְּפָרֶךְ** (*b'pharekh*) – harshly, with cruelty

**קָשָׁה** (*qashah*) – severe, hard

**בַּעֲבֹדָה** (*ba'avodah*) - labor

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<sup>1</sup> Sons of Israel is a figure of speech for the Israel nation, or Israelites

*So the Egyptians b'pharekh made the sons-of-Israel work and made their existence bitter with qashah ba'avodah, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field; in all their work they b'pharekh made them serve.*

There you have it. The Israelites had become too numerous for the rulers of Egypt and came to be perceived, rightly or wrongly, as a threat to the Egyptians, or perhaps to the Egyptian culture. So, they subjected the Israelites into forced labor (slavery). Slavery, then, is expressed as the concept of forced labor and especially forced labor that is cruelly administered. A less obvious characteristic is that slaves must first be subjugated, their freedom taken away. The Egyptian rulers knew this and, to control the Israelites, enslaved the Israelites. The harsh conditions that followed were a logical progression of the Israelite's subjugation.

Now, go and study