

The Mighty Trembling Before the Weak: Fear and Oppression in Exodus 1:6–14 and Its Implications for African Political Theology

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Abstract

This article examines the paradox of the powerful fearing the weak in **Exodus 1:6–14**, exploring how Pharaoh's fear of Israel's growth led to systemic oppression and what this reveals about political power. The study aims to show how misplaced fear within authority structures fosters policies of domination that ultimately highlight the insecurity of the powerful rather than the weakness of the oppressed. Methodologically, the article conducts an exegetical analysis of Exodus 1:6–14, focusing on the narrative's lexical features, theological motifs, and historical context within the Ancient Near East. This textual analysis is complemented by a contextual hermeneutical approach that relates the biblical narrative to contemporary African political realities. It argues that Pharaoh's fear arises not from an immediate threat but from projected insecurity, which results in the institutionalisation of oppression through forced labour and systemic control. By framing this narrative within a broader context of African political theology, the article contributes to ongoing discussions about fear, power, and governance in African settings. It shows that fear-driven political systems often perpetuate cycles of repression and mistrust, whereas constructive dialogue and structural change can pave the way for more just and cooperative political relations. Ultimately, the article suggests that the biblical paradox of the mighty trembling before the weak offers a vital theological perspective for analysing fear-based governance and envisioning political cultures rooted in mutual recognition, solidarity, and the common good.

Keywords: Exodus, Power Reversal, African Political Theology, Contextual Hermeneutics, Pharaoh, Fear-Driven Governance.

Introduction

Fear is an essential aspect of the human experience; its complete absence would be considered abnormal, both psychologically and morally. Fear functions as a safeguard, warning individuals and communities of possible dangers and promoting caution (Zuluchu, 2021). However, when this feeling becomes excessive or distorted by insecurity and prejudice, it can be harmful. Excessive fear may lead to suspicion, hostility, and violence against perceived threats (Zaluchu, 2021).

Without careful examination, one might assume that fear belongs to the weak who are at the mercy of the powerful. However, the biblical narrative often challenges this view by illustrating that those in authority frequently tremble before the very people they oppress. Exodus 1:6–14 (NIV) offers a clear example in which Pharaoh, the supreme ruler of Egypt, fears the rapid growth of a defenceless minority. Rather than deriving confidence from his

military strength and political control, Pharaoh reacts with dread and harsh oppression, revealing that fear often exposes the insecurity of the mighty rather than the weakness of the oppressed.

Throughout Scripture, the theme of the powerful trembling before the weak is clear. Saul, even as king of Israel, was afraid of David, a shepherd turned soldier whose only advantage was divine favour and popular support, resources Saul also possessed (1 Sam 18:12). Herod the Great, under Roman rule, was unsettled by news of a child's birth that threatened his throne (Matt 2:3). The Sanhedrin also feared the apostles—ordinary fishermen—mainly because they had the support of the people (Acts 4:13, 21). In all these cases, the seemingly weak are seen as wielding hidden power that threatens the strong, whether through divine blessing, popular consensus, or moral authority.

This paradox resonates strongly within the African context, where fear of witchcraft remains widespread. As anthropologists have observed, witches rarely target those they perceive as weaker; instead, they direct their hostility towards those considered more prosperous or blessed, driven by envy and insecurity (Geschiere, 1997). Fear, therefore, functions as a means of control, masking the vulnerability of the powerful and shifting social tensions onto those with potential for influence or success (Geschiere, 1997).

Similar patterns appear in African politics. Comparable dynamics can appear in African political contexts when ruling parties and opposition movements interpret one another through suspicion rather than shared responsibility. As a result, both rulers and the ruled are caught in unfounded fears, resulting in cycles of suspicion, hostility, and violence.

Against this background, the present article offers an exegetical study of Exodus 1:6–14, focusing on Pharaoh's fear of Israel's fertility and the oppressive measures it prompted. The analysis will then explore how this biblical paradox of the mighty trembling before the weak can shed light on modern African political realities, particularly the dynamics of fear, oppression, and the possibility of liberation through recognising collective strength and constructive dialogue.

Statement of the Problem

Although Exodus 1:6–14 introduces one of the central conflicts of the Exodus narrative, the passage is often treated mainly as background to the call of Moses and the later liberation drama. As a result, Pharaoh's fear of Israel's demographic growth is not always examined as a theological and political problem in its own right. Yet the text portrays fear as a force that reshapes perception, produces oppressive policy, and exposes the insecurity of imperial power. This study addresses that gap by reading Pharaoh's fear as a paradigmatic instance of oppressive power trembling before the vitality of the vulnerable.

Research Objectives

This study has three objectives. First, it analyses how Exodus 1:6–14 depicts the relationship between fear, power, and oppression. Second, it examines how Pharaoh's perceived insecurity becomes institutionalised through forced labour and systemic control. Third, it

explores how the narrative contributes to African political theology by critiquing fear-based governance and endorsing political practices rooted in dialogue, justice, communal responsibility, and the common good.

Research Questions

The study is guided by three questions. First, how does Exodus 1:6–14 portray the relationship between fear, power, and oppression? Second, in what ways does Pharaoh's fear reveal the insecurity of imperial power rather than an actual threat posed by Israel? Third, how can this narrative inform African political theology's critique of fear-driven governance?

Methodology

The study uses qualitative textual analysis combining biblical exegesis with contextual hermeneutical reflection. The exegetical phase examines Exodus 1:6–14 within its literary context, concentrating on narrative sequence, characterisation, irony, repetition, and significant lexical features, especially the language of Israel's multiplication, Pharaoh's fear, and Egypt's oppressive labour system. The historical-contextual phase places the passage within wider ancient Near Eastern concerns about resident foreigners, labour, ethnic identity, and imperial security.

The constructive stage combines the exegetical findings with African political theology, particularly issues such as fear-driven governance, opposition politics, xenophobia, Ubuntu, and systemic reform. The goal is not to apply modern African realities to the biblical text but to let the text's own portrayal of fear and oppression reveal recurring themes in political life.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is rooted in African contextual hermeneutics and political theology. African contextual hermeneutics interprets biblical texts in dialogue with the specific histories, struggles, and moral issues of African communities, while still paying close attention to the literary and historical particularities of the biblical text (Mburu, 2019). In this context, Exodus 1:6–14 is not viewed as a literal political blueprint but as a theological narrative that reveals patterns of fear, power, and oppression. The concept of fear is seen as morally complex: it can protect communities from real danger, but when distorted by insecurity, prejudice, or the struggle for control, it can become a source of violence and exclusion.

The concept of power reversal describes the biblical pattern where those who seem strong are revealed as insecure before those who appear weak. Ubuntu serves as a constructive African moral horizon in this study, emphasising relationality, dignity, mutual recognition, and communal responsibility (Kavusa, 2025). However, Ubuntu is not assumed to automatically resolve political conflict; it must be embodied in structures and practices that oppose rivalry, exclusion, and fear-driven governance.

Historical and Political Background to Pharaoh's Fear

After Joseph and his generation died, the Israelites multiplied rapidly in Egypt, fulfilling God's command to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). What should have been a testament to divine life-giving power, however, became, for Pharaoh and his court, a cause for fear. Pharaoh's fear is expressed in verses 8–10, where he warns his people that the Israelites have become "too numerous." His anxiety is not based on what the Israelites have actually done but on what they might do—join Egypt's enemies in war or escape their service.

In response, Pharaoh establishes a system of oppression to suppress this perceived threat. The Israelites are enslaved, subjected to harsh labour, and treated without mercy (Exod 1:11–14). Fretheim (1991) explains that the brutal measures serve both to exploit Israel's labour and to weaken its spirit. Still, ironically, "the more they are oppressed, the more they multiply and spread" (v. 12). Pharaoh's strategy highlights the theological theme that human efforts to control life ultimately fail before God's gracious plan (Fretheim, 1991). Brueggemann (2002) claims that the vitality of the powerless in the face of imperial power witnesses to a force beyond human control.

The narrative highlights a recurring pattern in history where the powerful fear the weak and, out of that fear, resort to domination and violence. Levenson (2013) emphasises the irony by viewing Egypt as the very symbol of strength and order in the ancient imagination, yet portrayed as trembling before a small and dependent community. Empires often project their insecurities outward, casting danger onto vulnerable minorities.

Theologically, Exodus 1:6–14 shows the resilience of God's people under oppression. Pharaoh's empire, despite its power, cannot overcome the life-giving promise of God. It is the "mighty" who tremble, while the weak—supported by God's blessing—continue to flourish. This reversal of power dynamics invites reflection on the irony of human strength: fear is not for the defenceless, but for those who wield power without trust in God.

It is crucial to avoid being overly judgmental about Pharaoh's decision without first examining its underlying causes. His actions become clearer when considered within a broader social, political, economic, and religious context that explains his response to Israel's rapid growth. Socially, the increasing population of Israelites raised concerns among Egyptians about protecting their culture and national identity. A rapidly expanding foreign minority was often viewed as a threat to Egyptian unity, especially given the strict distinctions Egyptians maintained between themselves and non-Egyptians. (Sarna, 1989). For instance, Genesis 43:32 shows that the Egyptians despised the Israelites because of cultural and social differences. While Joseph's brothers were served separately, the Egyptians refused to eat with them, since sharing a meal with Hebrews was considered an abomination. This reflects Egypt's strong sense of ethnic superiority and its view of the Hebrews—especially as shepherds (Gen. 46:34)—as socially and ritually inferior. This passage highlights early forms of exclusion rooted in cultural prejudice, foreshadowing the later oppression of Israel in Egypt.

The dynamics in Exodus 1 also highlight a modern issue of xenophobia. Just as Pharaoh feared that a growing foreign community would destabilise Egypt, many contemporary societies also view immigrants and ethnic minorities with suspicion, accusing them of threatening cultural identity, competing for limited economic resources, or aligning with political opponents (Goldberg, 2011). The label of immigrants as potential enemies echoes Pharaoh's concern that the Israelites might side with Egypt's enemies. Xenophobic rhetoric today similarly fuels fears about demographic changes, economic rivalry, and cultural decline, often leading to marginalisation, discrimination, or systemic oppression of minority groups (Mbembe, 2019).

Pharaoh's fear should also be understood within the socio-political context of the Ancient Near East, where large resident foreign populations were often regarded with suspicion. Egyptian texts frequently depict "Asiatics" (a broad term for Semitic peoples) as disruptive and threatening (Redford, 1992). The "Prophecy of Neferti" portrays Asiatics flooding into Egypt and causing chaos, serving as a rhetorical device to justify the need for a strong kingship (Lichtheim, 2006). Similarly, the *Instruction of Merikare* warns of the dangers posed by foreigners within Egypt's borders (Lichtheim, 2006).

Redford (1992) notes that such depictions mirror a consistent Egyptian concern about Semitic populations who migrated into the Delta for economic or pastoral reasons. Historically, memories of the Hyksos period (c. 1650–1550 BCE), when a Semitic dynasty governed northern Egypt, may have heightened fears of foreign domination. Kitchen (2003) observes that New Kingdom Pharaohs (16th–11th centuries BCE) were especially cautious of Asiatic groups, given Egypt's military engagements in Canaan and conflicts with the Hittites. In this context, the presence of a growing Israelite population could easily be seen as a political threat, even without evidence of rebellion.

Meyers (2005) further emphasises the economic aspect: Israel's demographic growth may have been perceived as competition for resources, especially in a Delta environment where agricultural and labour systems were tightly regulated. The Israelites' pastoral and agrarian resilience could seem threatening to Egyptian elites, who aimed to maintain control over labour. Therefore, Pharaoh's response in Exodus is not only a theological irony but also aligns with imperial patterns of oppressing resident minorities. These intertwined social, political, economic, and religious dynamics suggest that Pharaoh's oppressive policies, while morally indefensible, were at least partially understandable within the Egyptian framework of survival and stability.

The biblical text, therefore, offers not only a historical account but also a paradigmatic example of how fear of others can lead to systemic exploitation and violence. Reading Exodus 1:6–14 in the context of xenophobia highlights the continuity of human tendencies to suspect outsiders, but it also challenges modern readers to resist the oppressive drives that fear generates. Instead of responding with hostility or coercion, societies are called to practise hospitality, justice, and to acknowledge the dignity of the stranger—themes that later become central to Israel's own ethical principles (Exod. 22:21; Lev. 19:34).

The fear of the new Pharaoh in Exodus 1 was also a consequence of forgetting history. He had lost sight of the common good that his predecessors, in alliance with the ancestors of Israel, had built. God had used an earlier Pharaoh to dream, and Joseph to interpret and act, thereby safeguarding Egypt and Israel from famine (Gen 41). That alliance represented shared destiny and mutual prosperity. However, the new Pharaoh no longer regarded the Israelites as integral to Egypt's well-being but as a demographic and political menace. His fear led to amnesia, and his insecurity replaced gratitude with suspicion. Pharaoh's fear demonstrates a refusal to acknowledge past blessings, resulting in policies that aim to subjugate rather than cooperate.

A similar pattern is evident in many African contexts today. The generation of political leaders who fought against colonial domination united for their nations' liberation and survival. They acted, like Joseph, as mediators of freedom and hope, leaving a legacy of resilience and independence for their people (Mazrui, 1986). However, many modern African leaders suffer from the same "amnesia" as the Pharaoh of Exodus 1, forgetting the shared struggles and victories of their predecessors. Instead of viewing each other as allies in the pursuit of the common good, they regard political opponents and even fellow citizens as threats to their power (Mamdani, 1996). The spirit of partnership has shifted to suspicion, and unity in diversity has been replaced by rivalry and fear (Falola, 2001).

Pharaoh's fear teaches us that leaders who forget the importance of shared sacrifice risk perceiving difference as a threat and viewing cooperation as a conspiracy. Africa's history of liberation demonstrates the benefits of unity. Overlooking this history can lead to Pharaoh's error—transforming allies into enemies and using fear to justify oppression rather than fostering cooperation.

The story in Exodus 1:6–14 demonstrates a clear example of **destructive fear**. Pharaoh's concern about Israel's growth was exaggerated and unjustified: he feared a people who had caused no harm (vv. 9–10). His fear clouded rational judgment and led him to use oppressive labour as a way of control (Propp, 1999). This reflects African political realities, where political authorities often see ordinary social vitality as a threat, responding with repression rather than dialogue as misguided fear distorts perceptions of strength and sustains cycles of violence, mistrust, and instability (Collier et al., 2003).

However, fear is not necessarily negative. In both biblical and African contexts, fear can act as a protective and guiding force. The Bible consistently highlights the "fear of the Lord" as a source of wisdom and moral conduct (Prov 9:10). Abraham's reverent fear led to obedience and moral insight (Gen 22:12). Likewise, African societies see fear as an essential regulator: fear of social sanctions, taboos, or spiritual repercussions fosters communal harmony and moral responsibility (Mbiti, 1990).

Fear can also serve as a protective response when it signals real danger to individuals or communities. David's flight from Saul (1 Sam 19:11) illustrates fear as a survival instinct, while many modern African communities often adopt precautionary measures against environmental hazards, predators, or spiritual threats (Geschiere, 1997). In these situations,

fear is adaptive, leading to ethical, social, or strategic actions without causing oppression or paralysis.

Thus, fear becomes harmful when it is misplaced, weaponised, or exaggerated, leading to oppression and cycles of mistrust, as seen in Pharaoh's response to Israel. Conversely, fear is beneficial when it guides ethical behaviour, ensures survival, encourages prudence, and maintains social order. Recognising this duality allows for a nuanced understanding of fear in both biblical and African political contexts: it can oppress or protect, paralyse or empower, depending on its origin and application.

Fear is often considered anticipatory, focusing on potential future threats—like Pharaoh's worry that Israel might ally with Egypt's enemies (Exod 1:10) or people's fears of political retaliation. However, it can also respond to immediate situations. For instance, the Israelites feel terror during ongoing oppression (Exod 1:13–14) or confront immediate dangers such as predators or political crackdowns in African contexts. Additionally, fear can be influenced by past experiences; fears in African communities are sometimes linked to memories of colonial violence or civil unrest.

Some might argue that Pharaoh's fear was also justified, as it seems to foreshadow the later divine order in Deuteronomy and Joshua for Israel to eliminate the Canaanites. After all, both scenarios involve a dominant nation fearing the rise of a growing population within their land. However, this comparison breaks down upon closer inspection, because Pharaoh's fear and God's command are fundamentally different realities.

God's command concerning the Canaanites was not motivated by xenophobia or a desire for political power. Instead, it stemmed from the society's moral decline, marked by child sacrifice and dangerous cultic rituals (Deut. 12:31; Lev. 18:21). Block (2012) notes that Israel was instructed to demolish the structures of idolatry precisely because they perpetuated a cycle of life-destroying worship. From an ethical perspective, this judgment mirrors the difficult choice to stop a suicide bomber: although the attacker is already heading towards destruction, intervention can save more innocent lives. Biggar (2013) characterises this as a tragic moral necessity—an act performed not because it's inherently good, but to prevent a greater evil.

Pharaoh's policy, however, reflects the very evil he fears. In ordering the destruction of Hebrew infants (Exod. 1:16, 22), he aligns himself with the Canaanites, who sacrificed their children. His fear was unfounded: the Israelites had never plotted rebellion nor engaged in destructive rites. On the contrary, Joseph's wisdom once saved Egypt during a famine, showing that Israelite presence was beneficial rather than a threat (Gen. 41). Pharaoh's fear thus demonstrates moral and historical amnesia—a refusal to remember the common good that Egypt once shared with Israel.

This contrast highlights an important hermeneutical point: while God's judgment on the Canaanites was intended to break cycles of systemic destruction across generations, Pharaoh's fear was motivated by self-preservation and political paranoia. The two should never be mistaken for each other. Indeed, to do so would be to fall into the same trap as

later colonisers and dictators, who distorted divine justice into a means of human oppression.

Exegetical Analysis of Exodus 1:6–14

Exodus 1:6–14 provides a crucial introduction to the book of Exodus. It emphasises Pharaoh's fear of Israel's rapid growth, which causes him to enslave and oppress them through forced labour. Interestingly, this same Pharaoh, who views Israel as a demographic threat, later refuses to release them—even after Moses insists on their freedom (Exod. 5–12). This creates a clear paradox: if Israel truly endangered Egypt, logic suggests Pharaoh would be eager to let them go. Instead, he maintains control, exploiting their labour and considering them vital to Egypt's economy. This contradiction demonstrates that Pharaoh's fear is not solely about numbers but also about control, power, and dominance. His fear conceals a deeper dependency—he cannot envision Egypt's prosperity without Israel's servitude. This theme highlights how fear of others often masks selfishness and exploitation in biblical storytelling.

The narrative begins by placing the Israelites after the death of Joseph and his generation: "Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died" (v. 6). The text immediately highlights Israel's remarkable growth: "But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them" (v. 7). The Hebrew verbs describing multiplication—פָּרוּ (*paru*), וַיִּשְׁרְצוּ (*vayishretsu*), וַיִּרְבוּ (*vayirbu*), וַיַּעֲצֻמוּ (*vaya'atsumu*)—convey both reproductive and social expansion (Wenham, 1987).

Childs observes that these terms echo the Genesis creation mandate (Gen 1:28), linking Israel's growth to divine blessing and covenantal promise (Childs, 2004). This framing presents Israel not merely as a demographic entity but as a theological sign: their vitality reflects God's faithfulness. It is this very growth, ordained by God, that causes Pharaoh's anxiety. Sarna (1989) points out that Israel's multiplication is described in ways that contrast divine blessing with human fear, emphasising that what the powerful see as a threat is a sign of divine favour.

The narrative introduces a new Pharaoh "who did not know Joseph" (v. 8). The idiom may suggest a deliberate disregard of historical memory or debt (Propp, 1999). Pharaoh expresses fear: "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and stronger than we are. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will join our enemies, fight against us and escape from the land" (vv. 9–10).

Pharaoh's anxiety is rooted both in speculation and politics. He worries about potential rebellion, but there is no proof that Israel has been intentionally disruptive. Fretheim (1991) characterises this as anxious imperialism, where fear of uncontrolled expansion prompts preemptive repression. Brueggemann (2002) notes that Pharaoh's fear underscores the fragile nature of human authority: what appears minor, like the growing numbers of the weak, reveals its underlying vulnerability. Nahum Sarna observes that the Hebrew grammar highlights Pharaoh's concern with hypothetical danger, a fear projected into the future rather than rooted in present reality (Sarna, 1989). This imagined threat reveals the

insecurity of power: Egypt commands armies, wealth, and political structures, yet it trembles before a seemingly powerless, landless, and weaponless people. Their only apparent strength is their fruitfulness, the blessing of God upon them that benefited both Israel and Egypt.

Pharaoh responds with systemic oppression. Taskmasters are appointed over the Israelites to oppress them with forced labour, compelling them to build the store cities of Pithom and Rameses (v. 11). The text highlights the severity of the work: "They made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labour" (v. 14).

Exodus 1:6–14 illustrates a striking reversal of power: the strong tremble before the weak. Israel's vitality, rooted in divine blessing, disrupts the oppressor while providing a theological example of resilience for the oppressed. This story challenges the usual idea of fear: often, it is not the weak who are afraid, but the powerful whose insecurity causes oppression.

The story also critiques the logic of empire and authoritarian rule. Pharaoh's fear causes him to suppress the very population whose loyalty might bring stability. In modern African political contexts, similar patterns appear: regimes oppress opposition and marginalised groups, forgetting that dialogue and inclusion could foster peace and national unity, while opposition groups, despite enjoying popular support, often remain paralysed by fear of reprisals.

Exodus 1:6–14 teaches that fear-based oppression is both morally wrong and practically ineffective. African societies, where children are taught nonviolence, ironically emulate violent competition in politics. Revisiting indigenous governance practices—dialogue, consensus, and collective responsibility—can counteract fear, promote learning among parties, and reduce cycles of oppression. The biblical paradox remains instructive: the mighty tremble before the weak, but mutual respect and constructive engagement transform fear into opportunity.

In summary, Exodus 1:6–14 illustrates a perennial paradox: the powerful often fear the weak, and oppression seldom succeeds in suppressing vitality rooted in moral or divine legitimacy. African political realities mirror this pattern, as ruling parties and opposition groups alike are caught in cycles of misplaced fears that lead to ongoing conflict and instability. By combining biblical insight with historical and anthropological analysis, this study underscores the importance of dialogue, recognising collective strength, and constructive political engagement as effective means to overcome fear-driven oppression.

Ubuntu and Political Belonging

The adversarial nature of politics, characterised by rivalry and opposition, sharply contrasts with the cooperative ethos of family life. This discrepancy raises essential questions: Why is peaceful discussion encouraged within families and schools but often absent in political arenas? If such dialogue is effective in fostering understanding and resolving conflicts in familial settings, why does it fail in the political sphere?

The answer may lie in the fundamental dynamics of power and trust. In families, authority is typically used to nurture and safeguard, fostering trust and cooperation. Conversely, political power is often seen as a zero-sum game, in which one person's gain is another's loss. This perspective weakens trust and hinders collaborative efforts.

The analogy of Pharaoh's fear in Exodus 1:6–14 offers insight into this dynamic. Pharaoh's insecurity stemmed from his inability to view the Israelites as part of his extended family. His fear led to oppression, a response rooted in distrust and a desire to maintain control. Had he recognised the Israelites as kin, the story might have unfolded differently, with cooperation replacing conflict.

For this reason, although Ubuntu is widely recognised as a constructive framework for governance—emphasising human dignity, interdependence, and communal harmony—Africa, the very home of Ubuntu, has nonetheless experienced numerous civil wars and violent conflicts. This paradox demonstrates that Ubuntu, while noble in principle, does not automatically guarantee peaceful governance. When political systems are structured to encourage rivalry, exclusion, or competition over limited resources, Ubuntu cannot function effectively, especially for those seen as outsiders (Mangaliso et al., 2021).

The conduct of political campaigns in many African settings highlights this issue: campaigns are often designed around mutual offence, where rivals are seen as enemies of different origins rather than fellow citizens of the same nation. In such contexts, the very essence of Ubuntu—communal belonging and mutual recognition—is weakened. The Sotho proverb, "*Lefotwana ge e se la gago, o hloba le gaela,*" which translates to "If a baby bird is not yours, you remove its feathers even if it cries bitterly" (Masenya, 2016, p.1), emphasises this point. It demonstrates that systems which divide or exclude inevitably foster resentment and conflict.

Thus, even within an Ubuntu framework, if political and social structures do not embody fairness, inclusivity, and shared national identity, the result is often division rather than peace. Ubuntu, therefore, is not self-executing. It becomes politically meaningful only when embodied in institutions, practices, and habits of justice. Tauetsile (2021) argues that the precise nature of Ubuntu within organisational contexts remains underdeveloped. This perspective encourages African societies to adopt a new approach; rather than construing opposition groups as enemies or outsiders, an Ubuntu-shaped political theology invites political actors to see opponents as co-bearers of national belonging (Zondo, 2022). This does not eliminate democratic contestation, but it rejects Pharaoh's logic, which treats demographic difference as an existential threat.

Pharaoh's Fear and the Power of Systemic Structures

Exodus 1:6–14 illustrates how systemic structures often sustain and deepen fear, rather than relying solely on personal choices. Currid (2000) explains that Pharaoh's oppression of Israel was driven by political strategy, not irrational paranoia, influenced by Egypt's dependence on forced labour. For Currid (2000), even if Pharaoh had wished to treat the Israelites kindly, economic reliance on slavery, military needs, and ethnic hierarchies would have constrained him. Fretheim (1991), Pharaoh's actions were paradoxical: if Israel truly

posed a threat, releasing them would make sense, yet he resisted because the system deemed their labour indispensable. Thus, Pharaoh's cruelty is better seen as a result of systemic exploitation than personal animosity.

Although it is debatable whether Pharaoh's actions were solely motivated by Egypt's political system—especially since the biblical account highlights a specific Pharaoh, suggesting not all Pharaohs were equally oppressive (Exod. 1:8–14)—the text underlines the importance of reforms. This indicates that, in addition to systemic factors, the Pharaoh's personal attitude—his hardened heart—also played a significant role in shaping events. In this context, the cruelty of Egyptian governance cannot be fully attributed to impersonal institutions; it was also amplified and driven by the ruler's moral choices. Conversely, Pharaoh's hardened heart was sustained and justified by the oppressive structures that had long maintained slavery in Egypt. Ultimately, a cycle emerges: a wicked heart and a corrupt political system mutually reinforce each other—corrupt systems promote and normalise cruel leadership, which in turn sustains and reinforces the system (Heifetz, 1994).

This dynamic is relevant in modern African politics. Mahmood Mamdani explains that postcolonial African states inherited political systems built on divided power, which themselves fostered mistrust and hostility between rulers and governed subjects (Mamdani, 1996). In such zero-sum contexts, openness is often seen as a sign of weakness. Ake (1996) notes that many ruling leaders may want genuine dialogue but find it impossible because political systems reward confrontation and penalise cooperation. Conversely, when opposition leaders use conciliatory language, their supporters often accuse them of colluding with the ruling party, which reinforces suspicion (Chabal & Daloz, 1999). This highlights a structural problem rather than just a matter of personalities. The situation echoes Pharaoh's dilemma: systemic structures sustain fear even when leaders personally desire change. Grobler and Sibanda (2023) propose a conceptualisation of spiritual leadership that embraces Ubuntu.

Systemic Reform as the Path Beyond Fear

The biblical account suggests that fear-driven oppression cannot be defeated simply by changing individual leaders; systemic change is essential. As Fretheim (1991) highlights, Israel's liberation was achieved not because Pharaoh reformed his heart, but because the structures supporting slavery were dismantled through divine intervention. Similarly, modern African societies cannot break cycles of mistrust through good intentions alone (Sachikonye & Ramlogan, 2024); what is needed is structural reform in governance and political culture that replaces competition with cooperation (Eze, 2010).

In summary, the fear that influences Pharaoh in Exodus 1:6–14 shares notable similarities with African political life, especially in how leaders and societies view the presence and expansion of others.

First, Pharaoh's fear stemmed from the belief that the Israelites were permanent outsiders. Although they had lived in Egypt for generations, they were not seen as part of Egyptian

society. Pharaoh's policy exploits the alien status of the Israelites to justify oppressive measures (Sarna, 1989). This echoes situations in Africa where xenophobia surfaces against immigrant communities or ethnic minorities perceived as foreigners, even after decades of sharing life. South Africa's recurring violence against African migrants demonstrates how fear of the "outsider within" becomes a political and social fault line.

Second, Pharaoh feared the Israelites' success within his territory. Their multiplication was not inherently problematic; the threat lay in its occurrence within Egypt. Meyers (2005) notes that the text frames Israel's growth as a blessing of fertility that becomes a cause for anxiety among Egyptians (Exod. 1:7–9). Similarly, in Africa, economic or educational success by minority groups is sometimes seen as a threat to dominant groups, provoking resentment rather than celebration.

Third, Pharaoh's narrative was influenced by bias and selective interpretation. There is no evidence that Egyptian fertility was declining, yet Pharaoh focused solely on Israelite growth. In other words, the king's reasoning was overstated, exaggerating danger that was not immediate. This reflects political contexts in Africa where leaders amplify selective demographic data or economic patterns to create fear of certain groups, often as a strategy to consolidate power.

Fourth, Pharaoh considered the possibility of forming an alliance with enemies. He assumed that, in war, the Israelites might support hostile forces, although the text provides no evidence. African leaders similarly often interpret opposition parties, ethnic rivals, or diasporas as potential allies of foreign powers—an assumption that encourages repression. Fifth, Pharaoh's fears could not be addressed through assimilation. The Israelites could not simply become Egyptians to escape oppression; their identity remained distinct. This understanding reflects African realities where efforts to erase cultural or ethnic uniqueness in the name of national unity often fail, exacerbating rather than resolving tensions.

Finally, Pharaoh's fear was paradoxical: while anxious about Israel's growth, he also feared losing them as a labour force. The Israelites were indispensable to Egypt's economic machine, even as they were resented for their very presence (Sarna, 1989). This ambivalence echoes in African political economies where migrant or minority labour is both essential and scapegoated—valued in practice, yet feared and marginalised in rhetoric.

Therefore, the Exodus story provides a perspective for critically examining African leaders' fears about demographic growth, identity, and success. Like Pharaoh, such fears often stem more from perceived threats to power and control than from real dangers.

Findings

The analysis of Exodus 1:6–14 shows that Pharaoh's fear is primarily based on imagination rather than facts. The narrative provides no evidence that the Israelites have rebelled, conspired against Egypt, or shown any hostility towards the state. His reaction is therefore driven not by real events but by a fear of what might happen.

This projected fear also exposes the insecurity underlying imperial power. Despite Egypt's political control, military might, and economic resources, Pharaoh quivers before a local

population that lacks political authority or military strength, showing that imperial authority is often sustained by deep fears about its own stability.

The text also shows that fear is not just a private feeling but becomes part of public policy. Forced labour, surveillance, and ultimately the policy of infanticide are ways through which fear turns into government action. The issue, therefore, is not just Pharaoh's emotional response but the oppressive systems that are built and justified by that response.

However, the narrative also emphasises the futility of fear-driven oppression against a people blessed by divine grace. Instead of weakening Israel's strength, oppression becomes the context in which Israel continues to grow and prosper. The repeated focus on Israel's expansion demonstrates that human power cannot overturn divine plans and that coercion cannot ultimately suppress divine vitality.

Consequently, Exodus 1:6–14 provides a deep critique of fear-driven governance. The narrative shows how political fear alters perception, turning neighbours into enemies, workers into threats, and social differences into dangers. In this way, the text warns that when political leaders rule through fear rather than justice, they create systems of oppression that undermine both human development and the moral legitimacy of their own authority.

Discussion of Findings

This article enhances Exodus scholarship by analysing Exodus 1:6–14 as a political-theological unit rather than just a narrative lead-up to Moses's birth and mission. It emphasises the importance of fear, power, and oppression as key themes within the text. The study also adds to African contextual hermeneutics by showing how Exodus can shed light on fear-driven governance without reducing ancient Egypt to a direct mirror of modern African societies.

Furthermore, it advances African political theology by arguing that overcoming fear-based politics requires structural reform rather than relying solely on good leadership. Simultaneously, the article acknowledges its limitations. It is not an empirical political study, does not offer an in-depth analysis of any single African country, and uses African political realities as a broad contextual framework rather than as specific data.

Conclusion

Exodus 1:6–14 illustrates how misplaced or exaggerated fear can become a destructive force, propping up oppression and blinding leaders to the blessings around them. Pharaoh's fear was rooted in insecurity, selective interpretation, and political paranoia, rather than rational evidence. His reaction—involving systemic exploitation and violence—actually demonstrated weakness rather than strength. The story reveals a paradox: the powerful often tremble before the weak, and by doing so, create the instability they fear.

In African political contexts, this same pattern continues. The political frameworks in Africa influence leaders and opposition figures to see each other as threats rather than opportunities for cooperation and shared success. Fear is intensified by selective memory,

economic reliance, and systems that favour rivalry over dialogue. As in Pharaoh's Egypt, such fear-driven governance leads to cycles of oppression, mistrust, and instability.

The Exodus story also offers a theological counterpoint: God's blessing supports the oppressed and challenges the empire's strategies. Israel's resilience under oppression shows that divine purposes cannot be thwarted by human fear. For Africa, this suggests that liberation from fear requires more than changing leaders; it demands systemic reform rooted in justice, the remembrance of shared struggles, and the recognition of the dignity of every community.

By embracing principles of dialogue, inclusivity, and communal responsibility—values rooted in both biblical tradition and African philosophies such as Ubuntu—societies can turn fear into constructive engagement. Ultimately, Pharaoh's story warns that rulers who weaponise fear cause division and self-destruction, while those who embrace cooperation foster stability and renewal. The paradox of the mighty trembling before the weak remains a timeless lesson: true strength is not in domination but in the courage to replace suspicion with solidarity.

What Africa needs, therefore, is not simply good leaders but transformed structures. Katongole (2011) reminds us that political renewal requires rethinking governance itself, grounding it in memory, reconciliation, and justice rather than suspicion and domination.

Recommendations

The findings of this study recommend that African theological education incorporate Exodus hermeneutics alongside political theology, governance ethics, and conflict transformation to engage more effectively with modern social realities. Church leaders should teach Exodus not only as a story of liberation from oppression but also as a critique of fear-driven leadership and its effects. Political actors should strive to establish dialogue structures that prevent ruling parties and opposition groups from viewing each other as existential enemies. Further research should focus on country-specific studies that explore how fear, ethnicity, migration, and opposition politics contribute to the development and persistence of exclusionary systems.

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