



CHAPTER 1

Moses in Egypt

Exodus 1–2

**She took pity on him and said,
“This is one of the Hebrews’ children.”**

Exodus 2:6b

In the days of Moses, Egypt was indisputably the greatest country in the world, with the largest territory, the longest history, and the strongest economy. Peace reigned the full length of the country, from the Nile delta in the north, down nearly as far as Ethiopia. For nearly two thousand years, with only a few interruptions, the Egyptians had enjoyed a strong central government. The Nile valley produced huge wheat harvests, a high-protein durum wheat which nourished the Egyptians themselves and also provided an important export commodity.

The Book of Genesis, the first of the five books of Moses, the Torah, focuses our attention on two nations, Egypt, and Israel. These two nations had the same ancestral roots. Noah had three sons—Shem, Ham, and Japheth (Genesis 5:32). Shem was the father of the Semites, among whom are the Hebrews; Ham was the father of the Hamites, who include the Egyptians (Genesis 10). This connection of Israel and Egypt continued. The Hebrew patriarchs moved westwards and ventured down into Egypt. In a time of famine, Abraham and Sarah went down into Egypt (Genesis 12:10), and decades later, in another time of famine, their grandson Jacob settled there with his sons and flocks (Genesis 46:6–7). Abraham’s great-grandson Joseph even became a high official, administrator of the country in the name of Pharaoh (Genesis 41:44). By the end of the Book of Genesis, the Egyptians and Hebrews have become two peoples occupying a single land. But the descendants of Israel were more fruitful (Exodus 1:7).

As shepherds, the Hebrews settled not in the agricultural land of the Nile valley, but on the edge of the delta region. Their flocks could still pasture in dry land, but they also ate the straw from the Egyptian wheat crop, stalks of wheat discarded after the harvesting of the grain. This fodder was stored for use throughout the year. Hence, the flocks of the Hebrews prospered, and with them the people. In Egypt the Hebrews, fulfilling God’s first command to the human race (Genesis 1:28) experienced blessing and fertility.

The Hebrews dwelt in a frontier region, the land of Goshen (Exodus 8:22). Four centuries before, a foreign people, the Hyksos, had invaded from that direction bringing an end to the Egyptian Middle Kingdom period, and for a while ruled the Nile delta area. Thus, the Egyptians kept an eye on that border, fearful that another group of barbarians might try to do the same thing. In fact, after the lapse of many centuries, the Persians, then, the Greeks, and later yet, the Romans entered Egypt from the northeast, just as the Hyksos had done. For this reason, the growing Hebrew presence made the Pharaoh and his government nervous.



While they were just a small clan related to the important royal administrator Joseph, the Hebrews were welcome guests in the land of Egypt. Around the time of Joseph, the Pharaoh Akhenaten abolished the worship of many gods and instituted the worship of the one God in Egypt. Possibly the presence of the Hebrews was an inspiration for that revolutionary period in Egyptian history. Counter-revolutionary forces rolled back the Akhenaten reforms after his death, however, and that too may have been a factor in making the Hebrews less welcome.

“Now there arose a new king over Egypt” (Exodus 1:8). The author of Exodus sometimes refers to the ruler of Egypt as “king” and sometimes as “pharaoh,” but never by his own proper name. That makes it difficult to determine how many rulers appear in the course of the narrative. The mention of a new king in verse eight hints at a change of dynasty. Soon after the death of Akhenaten, the Eighteenth Dynasty ended, and an assertive new family came to the throne. Ramesses I ruled just a year, but his son Seti I reigned long enough to solidify the family’s hold on power, and then his son Ramesses II had one of the longest reigns in all Egyptian history.

These no-nonsense rulers of the Nineteenth Dynasty had to decide what to do with the Hebrews. They could either expel them from the land, or incorporate them into the Egyptian way of life. Expulsion was dangerous, for the Hebrews could then return as military foes. So the rulers decided on a policy of integration. Egyptians worked in the field for six months of the year, but during the annual flooding of the Nile, they were conscripted for public works projects, like building pyramids. By the time of Exodus, the last pyramid had already been built. So, the new monarchs enlist the Hebrew population in the project of building a new capital city called Pi-Ramesse.

The Hebrews could not adapt very well to their new duties. They were a pastoral people, with flocks of sheep and goats requiring attention year-round. They could not leave their flocks for six months, and then return to find the livestock healthy and thriving. Integration of the Hebrews into the Egyptian state economy meant ripping them out of their pastoral context altogether. The Hebrews were reduced from the status of prosperous shepherds, with year-round independence of life-style, to poverty-stricken slave laborers. Nevertheless, they continued to multiply in the land, so Pharaoh turned to population control, in one of the earliest known examples of human genocide. The Hebrews were too dangerous to expel and too rebellious to integrate, so the king turned to infanticide as his final solution.

“Why have you done this” (Exodus 1:18)? Only fifteen verses into the Book of Exodus, two heroines appear, midwives who helped the Hebrew women in childbirth. They are the first named characters to appear in this book. Their names are *Shiprah*, which means “beauty,” and *Puah*, which means “splendor.” Perhaps these are nicknames, and not their real names. Very likely these are Egyptian women with Egyptian names, which the Hebrew women may have found difficult to pronounce. The Hebrew women gave the midwives gracious, honorary Hebrew titles in gratitude for the service they rendered. They practice already, before the time of Hippocrates, the Hippocratic oath



taken by doctors, to do no harm. They are great heroines of the Exodus story, the first so-called “righteous gentiles” who saved Jewish lives during pogrom and persecution. This demonstrates that many Egyptians had good moral values, despite the wickedness of their government.

Frustrated by his failure to suppress the Hebrew birth rate surreptitiously, Pharaoh orders his subjects to cast all Hebrew male babies into the river. Instead of leaving the manner of death to one’s discretion, Pharaoh commands drowning. In the Egyptian religion, death by drowning in the Nile was seen as a special honor. Temples were built along the riverbank to honor as gods those who had drowned. The Nile was a sacred river, and the Egyptian funeral ceremony had a boat ride across the Nile from the land of the living on the East Bank, to the land of the dead on the West Bank. So Pharaoh may have intended some kind of sick honor to the Hebrew baby boys by having them thrown into the Nile, unlike Herod who killed the baby boys of Bethlehem by the sword.

Government mandated population control has a long, terrible history associated with racism, sexism, and genocide. In Communist China, couples are allowed only one child and there is forced abortion. Girl babies are often aborted, now producing a crisis for young men of marriageable age who cannot find young Chinese women to marry. Minorities and poor people are especially vulnerable. Family planning can be a form of genocide directed against unwanted social or racial groups. The state that attempts to dictate birth control places itself in direct opposition to God’s command to multiply and fill the earth.

The killing of an innocent child is the most heinous form of homicide. The murder of an adult is the wrongful end of a life partially lived, but the murder of a child prevents a life that could and would have been. The Jewish Talmud states: “One who saves a life saves the universe.” The Koran quotes that verse with approval. So, Jews, Christians, and Muslims should all be affirming and protecting life.

<p>Then Pharaoh commanded all the people, “Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live.” (Exodus 1:22)</p>	<p>He sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time he had ascertained from the wise men. (Matthew 2:16b)</p>
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The devil wanted to prevent Moses, and later, Jesus from appearing on the face of the earth. So, the devil influenced governments to subject an entire population to infanticide in the vain attempt to thwart God’s plan. The babies who died instead of Baby Jesus are called the Holy Innocents. Perhaps the same designation could be extended to those who died instead of baby Moses.



... Careful consideration should be given to the danger of this power (of population control) passing into the hands of those public authorities who care little for the precepts of moral law.

Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* (1968), 17.

The inviolability of the innocent human being's right to life "from the moment of conception to natural death" is a sign and requirement of the very inviolability of the person to whom the Creator has given the gift of life. ... The human being must be respected—as a person—from the very first instant of his existence.

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Vitae* (February 27, 1987), I, 4.

No human lawgiver can assert: it is permissible for you to kill, you have the right to kill, or you should kill. Tragically, in the history of our century this has occurred when political forces have come to power, even by democratic means, and have passed laws contrary to the right to life of every human being.

Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Families* (1994), 21.

A similar disregard for innocent human life that was present in the mind of pharaoh so many centuries ago, continues in the minds of some people today, who hold certain lives to be inconvenient and expendable.

“Now a man from the house of Levi took to wife a daughter of Levi” (Exodus 2:1). The fact that this is a priestly family is important, because they belong to what will become the tribe of the Levitical priesthood. The author specifies the tribal affiliation of this man's wife, because in Jewish law, a child belongs to the mother's tribe. This verse shows that the person about to be born, Moses, will belong to the tribe of Levi through the maternal line. Other details of family history evolve later.

It is not until Exodus 6:20 that the names of the couple are revealed. Moses' father's name is Amram, son of Kohath, son of Levi, and his mother's name is Jochebed, the daughter of Levi. In Exodus 2, a daughter is born, but not until Exodus 15:20, do we learn that her name is Miriam.

Exodus 4:14 reveals that the couple has two sons, not only the one who is put into the river, Moses, but another son, named Aaron, as well. Later yet, we learn that Aaron is three years older than his brother, because when Aaron is eighty-three, his brother is eighty (Exodus 7:7). The difference in age explains why Aaron was not put in a basket, because he was already old enough to be exempt from the law.

This method of disclosing information piece meal may be frustrating to modern readers, who like to have their facts served to them in sequence. The original readers of the Book of Exodus, however, already knew these facts well. The book existed to refresh already existing knowledge. As one grows in biblical literacy, the ancient method of narration becomes more comprehensible.



“She took pity on him” (Exodus 2:6b). Just as the midwives were heroines earlier, so Pharaoh’s daughter is also a heroine. Her own father had issued the awful decree that everyone in the land should kill Hebrew boy babies, and yet she takes pity on this little one. She is a strong woman, with a good conscience. No one, not even her royal father, could make her violate her sense of right and duty. A world inhabited by women such as this would be a wonderful place.

There were many strong women among the royal families of Egypt. Several women took the throne and ruled in their own name, most notably Hatshepsut of the Eighteenth Dynasty. Nefertiti, the wife of Pharaoh Akhenaten, appears together with him in a number of paintings, and the naturalistic type of art of the time reveals her amazing beauty alongside his physical deformity. At the very time of Exodus, another queen, Nefertari, had a notable presence in the land alongside her husband, Pharaoh Ramesses II. Temples were built in her honor, but never as large as those honoring her husband.

In Exodus, the Egyptians are never painted as the enemy. Pharaoh may have hardened his heart against the Hebrews, but Pharaoh’s people are not portrayed as hard-hearted. One young Egyptian noblewoman of good will and strong moral fiber saved a baby’s life, and that baby led a whole nation into freedom. That woman made possible the salvation of Israel.

“She named him Moses” (Exodus 2:10). We know the greatest prophet of Israel by the name Moses, which is an Egyptian name. The author of Exodus gives the next best thing to a Hebrew etymology with *Moshe* “I drew him out of the water” (Exodus 2:10), but Pharaoh’s daughter is the one speaking. In fact, a form of this name was very common among pharaohs of that time. During the Eighteenth Dynasty four pharaohs were named Tut-Moses. During the Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties, thirteen pharaohs were called Ra-Moses or Ramesses. *Tut* and *Ra* are gods in the Egyptian pantheon, and when used as a prefix with Moses, mean “Born of Ra” or “Born of Tut.”

Moses certainly had another Hebrew name which his natural mother used during the years when she served as his wet-nurse. That name is lost to history. In fact, the Egyptians probably called him Ramesses or something like that. Thus the name Moses, may be a compromise between a lost Hebrew name and a longer Egyptian name. Moses belonged to two nations, but felt fully at home in neither.

“An Egyptian delivered us” (Exodus 2:19). The Midianites thought they were being saved by an Egyptian! Because Moses had been saved from reprehensible government ordered population control, he lived to save others. The Hebrews, in the bondage of slavery, cried out to God for deliverance. One who had been delivered was chosen to deliver them. Moses’ two mothers, his natural Hebrew mother and his adoptive Egyptian mother, both imparted their value systems to him. Moses represents the best of Egypt as well as of Israel. Both nations deserve to claim him proudly.



1. List the twelve sons of Israel.

Genesis 35:22–25	Exodus 1:1–5

2. Who came up into Egypt? Genesis 46:8–27

3. Identify some reasons that Jacob went to Egypt.

Genesis 41:54–57	
Genesis 45:25–28	
Genesis 46:1–5	



4. What problem did the new king of Egypt identify? Exodus 1:7–9

5. Describe the promise to Abraham fulfilled by God.

Genesis 22:17	
Deuteronomy 10:22	

6. What did the Egyptians do to the Israelites? Exodus 1:10–14

7. How did the Hebrews experience the quality of life? Exodus 1:11–14



8. What solution did the Egyptian king plan for overpopulation? Exodus 1:15–22

9. How does the Catholic Church view this solution? CCC 2268

10. What are the implications of the fifth commandment? CCC 2269

11. Identify three heroines in Exodus 1–2 and explain their heroics.

* Identify a modern day heroine and describe her character.



12. What was the tribe of Moses' family? Exodus 2:1

13. Explain the drama in Exodus 2:1–10.

14. How do the New Testament Christians recall this event?

Acts 7:17–22	
Hebrews 11:23–26	

15. How was Moses educated? Acts 7:21–22



16. What happened in Exodus 2:11–14?

— How old was Moses at this time? Acts 7:23–25

17. Where did Moses flee? Exodus 2:15

18. What did Moses do in Midian? Acts 7:29

19. Identify the members of Moses' family. Exodus 2:15–22

20. Describe what the Israelites were doing at this time. Exodus 2:23–25

* Choose a member of your family to pray for and bless this week.