

UNIT 2: THE BIRTH OF THE DELIVERER (2:1-10)

INTRODUCTION

Text and Textual Notes

2:1 A man from the tribe¹ of Levi² married³ a daughter⁴ of Levi.⁵ **2:2** And the woman became pregnant⁶ and gave birth to a son. When⁷ she saw that⁸ he was a healthy⁹ child, she hid him for three months. **2:3** But when she was no longer

¹ Literally, “house”

² God chose a man from the tribe of Levi because that was going to be the priestly tribe. Aaron, the brother, would be the High Priest; but Moses would be like God to him (7:1), setting up the priesthood, building the sanctuary, and walking Aaron through the routine and even going into the Holy of Holies with him (Lev. 9).

³ Literally, “went and took”

⁴ The text will play the “daughter of Levi” against the “daughter of Pharaoh.” Using this specific description of Jochebed sets up that contrast.

⁵ The first part of this section is the account of hiding the infant (vv. 1-4). The marriage, the birth, the hiding of the child, and the positioning of Miriam, are all faith operations which ignore the decree of the Pharaoh, or at least work around it to preserve the life of the child.

⁶ Or: “conceived”

⁷ A preterite form with the *waw* consecutive can be subordinated to a following clause: “when she saw . . . she hid him three months.”

⁸ After verbs of perceiving or seeing there are frequently two objects, the formal accusative (“the child”) and then a noun clause that explains what it was about the child that she perceived (“that he was a healthy child”). See GKC par. 117h.

⁹ Or “fine” (Hebrew *tob*). The appearance indicated to her that the child enjoyed divine

able to hide him, she took a papyrus basket¹⁰ for him, and sealed it with bitumin and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and placed it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile.¹¹ **2:4** And his sister stationed herself¹² at a distance, to find out¹³

favor. The construction is parallel to the creation narrative (“and God saw that it was good”). Benno Jacobs says, “She looked upon her child with a joy similar to that of God upon His creation (Gen 1.4ff., ‘and God saw . . . that it was good’)” (*Exodus*, p. 25).

¹⁰ See on the meaning of this basket Chayim Cohen, “Hebrew *tbh*: Proposed Etymologies.” *JANES* 9 (1972):36-51. This term is only used elsewhere of the ark of Noah. It may be connected to the Egyptian word for “chest.” A link to Noah’s flood theologically is difficult from this passage alone; if the discussion includes the deliverance at the sea and the drowning of the Egyptians, and a new life on the other side of that sea, then it will work. The New Testament links the flood and the sea passages with baptism.

¹¹ The circumstances of the saving of the child Moses has prompted several attempts by scholars to compare the material to the Sargon myth. See R. F. Johnson, “Moses,” in *IDB*; for the text see L. W. King, *Chronicles Concerning Early Babylonian Kings, Vol. 2, Texts and Translations* (London: Luzac and Co., 1907), pp. 87-90. Those who see the narrative using the Sargon story’s pattern would be saying that the account presents Moses in imagery common to the ancient world’s expectations of extraordinary achievement and deliverance. In the Sargon story the infant’s mother put him into the basket in the river; he was loved by the gods and destined for greatness. Saying Israel used this would indicate that the account in Exodus was fiction, and that would be an unacceptable determination. But there are also difficulties with the Sargon comparison, not the least of which is the fact that there are no other samples of this type of story for comparison. First, the meaning and function of the story are unclear. Second, there is no threat to the child Sargon. The account simply shows how a child was exposed, rescued, nurtured, and became king (see Brevard Childs’ commentary on Exodus). Third, other details do not fit: Moses is never completely abandoned, never out of the care of his parents; and the finder is a princess and not a goddess. It seems unlikely that two stories, and only two, that have some similar motifs would be sufficient data to make up a whole genre. Moreover, if we do not know the precise function and meaning of the Sargon story, it is almost impossible to use it as a pattern for the biblical account. The idea of a mother abandoning a child to the river would have been a fairly common thing to do, for that is where the women of the town would be washing their clothes or bathing. If someone wanted to be sure the infant was discovered by a sympathetic woman, there would be no better setting (see A. Cole, *Exodus*, p. 57). While we may not be dealing with a genre of story-telling here, it is possible that Exodus 2 might have drawn on some of the motifs and forms of the other account to describe the actual event in the sparing of Moses--if they knew of it. If so it would show that Moses was cast in the form of the greats of the past.

¹² Or: “stood.” The verb is the *hithpael* preterite of *yatsab*), although the form is anomalous and perhaps should be read with Sam. (See GKC, par. 71). The form yields the meaning of “take a stand, position or station oneself.” His sister found a good vantage point to

what would¹⁴ be done to him.

2:5 Then the daughter of Pharaoh¹⁵ came down to wash herself¹⁶ by the Nile, and her attendants were walking along the side of the river.¹⁷ When she saw¹⁸ the basket among the reeds, she sent her servant¹⁹ and she retrieved it.²⁰ **2:6** She opened²¹ the basket²² and saw the child²³--and he²⁴ was crying.²⁵ And she had

wait and see what might become of the infant.

¹³ Literally, “to know”

¹⁴ The verb is a *niphal* imperfect; it should be classified here as a historic imperfect, future from the perspective of the past time narrative.

¹⁵ It is impossible, perhaps, to identify with any certainty who this person was. For those who have taken a view that Rameses is the Pharaoh, there were numerous daughters for Rameses. The Book of Jubilees names her Tharmuth (47:5); Josephus spells it Thermouthis (*Antiq.* 2. 9. 5), but Eusebius has Merris (*Praep. Ev.* ix. 27). Merrill makes a reasonable case for her identification as the famous Hatshepsut, daughter of Thutmose I. She would have been there about the time of Moses birth, and the general picture of her from history would show her to be the kind of princess with enough courage to countermand a decree of her father (*Kingdom of Priests*, p. 60).

¹⁶ Or: bathe

¹⁷ The clause begins with a disjunctive *waw* indicating a circumstantial clause. The picture is one of a royal entourage coming down to the edge of a tributary of the river, and while the princess was bathing, her female attendants were walking along the edge of the water out of the way of the princess. They may not have witnessed the discovery or the discussion. The clause adds detail to the natural scene.

¹⁸ The preterite with the *waw* consecutive is here subordinated to the next sequential verb form as a temporal clause.

¹⁹ The word here is *'amah*, which properly means “female slave.” The word for the “attendants” is *na'arot*, “young women,” referring to attendants and courtiers.

²⁰ The verb is the preterite, 3fsg, with a pronominal suffix, from *laqakh*), “to take.” The form in the text says literally “and she took it.” Some translations smooth out the reading to make this a purpose clause, “to fetch it.”

²¹ Literally, “and she opened”

²² “the basket” supplied

compassion²⁶ on him, and said, “This is one of the children of the Hebrews.” **2:7** Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get²⁷ a nurse for you from the Hebrew women,²⁸ that she may nurse²⁹ the child for you?” **2:8** The

²³ The grammatical construction has a pronominal suffix on the verb as the direct object as well as the expressed object: “and she saw him, the child.” The second object defines the previous pronominal object to avoid misunderstanding (see GKC, par. 131m).

²⁴ The text has *na‘ar*, “lad, boy, young man,” which in this context would mean a baby boy.

²⁵ This clause is introduced with a disjunctive *waw* and the deictic particle *hinneh*, the “behold” of the AV. The particle in this kind of clause introduces the unexpected--what she saw when she opened the basket: “and look, there was a baby boy crying.” The clause provides a parenthetical description of the child when she opened the basket and does not advance the narrative. The clause is an important addition to the narrative, for it explains the compassion in the woman.

²⁶ The verb could be given a more colloquial translation such as “she felt sorry for him.” But the verb is stronger than that; it means “to have compassion, to pity, to spare.” What she felt for the baby was strong enough to prompt her to spare the child from the fate decreed for Hebrew boys. Here is part of the irony of the passage: what was perceived by many to be a womanly weakness--the compassion for a baby--is a strong enough emotion to prompt the woman to defy the orders of the Pharaoh. The ruler had thought sparing women was safe; but in the passages the midwives, the Hebrew mother, the daughter of Pharaoh, and Miriam, all work together to spare one child--Moses. God uses the things that are not to confound the things that are.

A link can be made to the end of the chapter: God heard the “cry” of the Israelites in Egypt and he “knew them” and sent Moses to deliver them.

²⁷ The Hebrew text uses *qara’* followed by the *lamed* preposition; this combination usually means “to summon.” Pharaoh himself will “summon” Moses many times in the plague narratives. Here the word is used for the daughter summoning the child’s mother to take care of him. The narratives in the first part of the Book of Exodus include a good deal of foreshadowing of the events that occur in later sections of the book (see Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture*).

²⁸ The object of the verb “get/summon” is “a woman.” But “nurse” (*meneqet*, the *hiphil* participle of the verb *yanaq*, “to suck”) is in apposition to it, clarifying what kind of woman should be found--a woman, a nursing one. Of course Moses’ mother was ready for the task.

²⁹ The form *w^eteniq* is the *hiphil* imperfect/jussive, 3fsg, of the same root as the word for “nurse.” It is here subordinated to the preceding imperfect (“shall I go”) and its following

daughter of Pharaoh said to her, “Go.” So the young girl³⁰ went and got³¹ the child’s mother.³² **2:9** And the daughter of Pharaoh said to the woman,³³ “Take this child³⁴ and nurse him for me; and I will pay your³⁵ wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed it. **2:10** When the child grew older³⁶ she brought him to the daughter of Pharaoh, and he became her son.³⁷ She called his name Moses,

perfect with *waw* consecutive (“and summon”) to express the purpose: “in order that she may . . .”

No respectable Egyptian woman of this period would have undertaken the task of nursing a foreigner’s baby, and so the suggestion by Miriam is proper and necessary. Since she was standing a small distance away from the events, she was able to come forward when the discovery was made.

³⁰ The word used to describe the sister (Miriam probably) is *‘almah*, the same word used in Isaiah 7:14 where it is translated “virgin” or “young woman.” The word basically means a young woman who is ripe for marriage (and in proper society, and certainly as a divine sign, a virgin). This would indicate that Miriam is a teenager, and so about 15 years older than Moses.

³¹ Literally, “called”

³² During this period of Egyptian history the royal palaces were in the northern or Delta area of Egypt, as opposed to up the Nile in the later periods. The proximity of the royal residences to the Israelites makes this and the plague narratives all the more realistic. There is no way that such direct contact would have been possible if Moses had to travel up the Nile to meet with Pharaoh. In the Delta area things were closer. Here all the people would have had access to the tributaries of the Nile near where the royal family came; but the royal family probably had pavilions and hunting lodges in the area. See also Noel Osborn, “Where on Earth Are We? Problems of Position and Movement in Space,” *Bib Trans* 31 (1980):239-242.

³³ Literally, “her”

³⁴ The verb is the *hiphil* imperative of the verb *halak*, and so is properly rendered “cause to go” or “take away.”

³⁵ The possessive pronoun on the noun “wage” expresses the indirect object: “I will pay wages to you.”

³⁶The verb is the preterite of *gadal*, and so might be normally rendered “and he became big” or simply “grew up.” The context suggests that it refers to when he was weaned and before he was named, perhaps indicating he was three or four years old (see Gen. 21:8).

saying, “for I drew him from the water.”³⁸

³⁷ The idiomatic expression literally reads: “and he was to her for a son.” In this there are two prepositions *lamed*. The first expresses possession: “he was to her” means “she had.” The second is part of the usage of the verb: *hayah* with the *lamed* preposition means “to become.”

³⁸ The naming provides the climax and summary of the story. The name of “Moses” (*mosheh*) is here explained by the sentiment “I have drawn him (*m^eshitihu*) from the water.” It appears that the name is etymologically connected to the perfect tense in the saying, which is from *mashah*, “to draw out.” But commentators have found it a little difficult that the explanation of the name by the daughter of Pharaoh is in Hebrew when the whole background is Egyptian (Cassuto, *Exodus*, p. 20). Moreover, the Hebrew spelling of the name is the form of the active participle (“the one who draws out”); to be a precise description it should have been spelled *mashuy*), the passive participle, “the one drawn out.” The etymology is not precise; rather, it is a word play (called *paronomasia*). Either the narrator merely attributed words to her (which is unlikely unless we were dealing with fiction), or the Hebrew account simply translated what she had said into Hebrew, finding a Hebrew verb with the same letters of the name. Such word plays on names (also called popular etymology) are common in the Bible, especially with names of important people or places.

Most agree that the name is an Egyptian name. Josephus attempted to connect the biblical etymology with the name in Greek, *Mouses*, stating that *Mo* is Egyptian for water, and *Uses* means those rescued from it (*Antiq.* 2.9.6; see also J. Gwyn Griffiths, “The Egyptian Derivation of the Name Moses,” *JNES* 12 [1953]:225). The princess would have thought of the child from the river as the supernatural provision due to the estimation they had of the Nile. It is doubtful that she made the phonetic word play (although they certainly exist in these languages).

But the solution to the name is not to be derived from the Greek rendering. The Egyptian hieroglyphic *ms* can be the noun “child” or the perfective verb “be born.” This was often connected with divine elements for names: *Ptah-mose*, “Ptah is born.” Also the name Rameses (*R'-m-sw*) means “[the god] Re‘ is he who has born him” If the name Moses is Egyptian, there are some philological difficulties (see the above article for their treatment). The significance of all this is that when the child was named by the princess, an Egyptian word related to *ms* was used, meaning something like “child” or “born.” The name might have even been longer, perhaps having a *theophoric* element (divine name) with it--“child of [some god].”

The name’s motivation came from the fact that she drew him from the Nile, the source of life in Egypt. But the sound of the name given to him recalled for the Hebrews the verb “to draw out,” which in their language had the same or similar letters. Translating the words in the account into Hebrew allowed for the effective word play to capture the significance of the story in the sound of the name. It is as if they are saying through this translation: “You called him ‘born one’ in your language and after your custom, but in our language that name means ‘drawing out’--which is what was to become of him. You drew him out of the water, but he will draw us

Composition and Context

The Bible has many stories of miraculous births and deliverances of those destined to lead the people of God. The purpose of such dramatic events is essentially to authenticate their ministry, i.e., if their very existence was effected or preserved by supernatural intervention, then their mission or purpose in life must be of divine origin. So there is Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, and especially Jesus who fit this pattern. In a less direct way the same would be true of David in view of the message of the Book of Ruth, showing that God was sovereignly at work in the family to bring about the birth of David.

In Exodus 2 we have the account of the preservation of a child of the Hebrews by the most unusual of circumstances. And when the story is finished we discover that this was not just some Hebrew infant in antiquity, but Moses, the man who would deliver Israel out of bondage and establish the covenant of God with them, Moses, the Lawgiver, priest, and prophet. The surprising story, then, takes on tremendous dimensions.

As the literature shows, there is some similarity between this account and the account of the story of Sargon from a much earlier age. The alleged parallel is recorded in several places, one being by L. W. King, *Chronicles Concerning Early Babylonian Kings*, Vol. II, *Texts and Translations* (London: Luzac and Co., 1907), pp. 87-90. The fact that Sargon's story records how his mother put him into the basket in the river and how once he was loved by the gods and destined to be a great ruler has led many to conclude that we have an ancient tradition finding its way into the Moses story. R. F. Johnson (*IDB*, s.v. "Moses") says that the folkloristic theme in the nativity resembles the birth of Sargon who was rescued from the Euphrates to found the empire of Akkad. Consequently, the theory runs, Moses is introduced in imagery common to the ancient Near East's expectations of extraordinary achievement and deliverance.

But there are significant difficulties with the comparison to the Sargon story.

out of Egypt through the water." So the circumstances of the story show Moses to be a man of destiny; and this naming episode summarizes how divine providence was at work in Israel. To the Israelites the name forever commemorated the portent of this ominous event in the early life of the great deliverer (see Isa. 63:11).

For one, the meaning and function of the Sargon legend are unclear. If the translation is correct, then it may be that Sargon's mother was a high priestess. If this is so, then the father could have been king and the whole story would function as a claim to royal ancestry (see Childs, *Exodus*, p. 40). But H. G. Guterbock argues that Sargon was illegitimate, the fact that he did not know his father being used to support this idea (ZA 42 [1934]:62-64). He takes the story to be the introduction to a blessing oracle. Thus, it would seem to have no cultic or etiological role. Childs adds the observation that there is no note of threat in the Sargon story. It simply records how a child was exposed, rescued, nurtured, and became king. If the precise function and meaning of the Sargon story is not known with any certainty, it would be difficult to make much of a comparison in the interpretation of the Moses story. In fact, one should ask whether two very generally similar accounts are parallel, or even form a literary type.³⁹

There are other differences too, such as the fact that Moses was not a foundling with unknown parents (he is never completely abandoned). A third difference is that the finder was a princess and not a goddess (she seems to know Hebrew children). Fourth, the meaning of the name of Moses is connected to the incident in Exodus. Naming motivations link the person to the event and make that the chief point of interest—the child was drawn out of the water. There is no link to

³⁹ The text reads:

- 1 Sargon, the mighty king, the king of Agade, am I.
- 2 My mother was lowly, my father I knew not,
- 3 the brother of my father dwells in the mountain.
- 4 My city is Azupiranu, which lies on the bank of the Euphrates
- 5 My lowly mother conceived me, in secret she brought me forth.
- 6 She set me in a basket of rushes, with bitumen she closed my door;
- 7 she cast me into the river, which (rose) not over me.
- 8 The river bare me up, unto Akki, the irrigator it carried me.
- 9 Akki, the irrigator, with lifted me out
- 10 Akki, the irrigator, as his own son reared me.
- 11 Akki, the irrigator, as his gardener appointed me
- 12 While I was a gardener the goddess Ishtar loved me,
- 13 and for [.]-four years I ruled the kingdom.
- 14 The black-headed peoples I ruled, I governed . . .

any other type of story, or any other event.

In evaluating these two stories we may observe that there are many unknowns, many differences, and yet a similar idea. It is possible that the nativity account of the leader of Israel was cast in the very language and form of the great(s) of the past. In this case, then, the narrative would be strengthened in its message that some destiny was at work. But the basic facts of the account could not be mere story-telling. In other words, a factual event would simply be worded to reflect an ancient account.

But it is much more likely that something very simple is at work here. How else would someone “abandon” a baby in the ancient world so that it would be found by compassionate women? There were no hospital doorsteps or orphanages. These two “basket-in-the-river” stories only give evidence of a compassionate way to abandon babies in the ancient world. The shallows of a river near any village would be the ideal place to do it because that would ensure the child's being found by women coming to wash or bathe (see A. Cole, Exodus, p. 57).

Childs suggests that the story of Moses has the basic features of an oral wisdom tale (p. 13). The characters are typical (Pharaoh tries to be shrewd, but becomes the wicked fool, duped by the midwives), the midwives are pious (based on the fear of God they give clever and rational arguments), an open and positive description of the princess is given (a positive attitude toward foreigners is a characteristic of the international flavor of wisdom oracles), and God's role is portrayed in the natural causes (more in line with the Joseph narratives). (The element of irony could also have been mentioned.) The ideas are plausible, for wisdom motifs are an integral part of “Torah” literature. This kind of literary comparison is fine if it does not lead to the conclusion that aspects of the Moses account were made up or embellished (as in calling it a “tale”). If the event being recorded is told in words, expressions, and arrangements that parallel different types of genres, that is one thing; but it is quite another to say the story was made up to give Moses a more auspicious birth narrative.

Exegetical Analysis

Summary

During the time of Pharaoh's decree of death, a Hebrew woman has a son and places him in a basket along the shores of the Nile with the result that an Egyptian woman, Pharaoh's own daughter, saves the life of Israel's future deliverer, names him, and returns him to the mother for care.

Outline

- I. Concealment: During Pharaoh's purge of little boys, when a Levite couple could no longer hide their child they placed him in a basket in the Nile where the women would come to wash and entrusted the infant to his sister's watch-care (1-4).
 - A. The baby boy born during the decree was hid for three months (1, 2).
 - B. When concealment was no longer possible, the baby boy was placed in a basket in the Nile where the women came to wash and was entrusted to his sister's watch-care (3, 4).

- II. Discovery: While taking her customary bath, Pharaoh's own daughter discovered the basket with the baby and was moved to pity when it began to cry (5, 6).

- III. Care: When the baby's sister suggested someone to nurse the infant, Pharaoh's daughter intrusted the baby to her, and thereby to its mother, and then raised the boy in Pharaoh's courts and gave him an Egyptian name that turned out to be prophetic of his mission (7-10).
 - A. The sister asked the princess if she would like a Hebrew woman to nurse the child (7).
 - B. The sister took the infant to its mother, so that the princess in fact hired the child's mother to nurse it for her (8, 9).
 - C. The princess then adopted the boy to be raised in the royal courts, and gave him an Egyptian name that would prove to be prophetic of his mission of drawing the Israelites out of bondage (10).

Additional Resources

Chayim **Cohen**, "Hebrew *tbh*: Proposed Etymologies," *JANES* 9 (1972):36-51 [on 2:3, 5]; B. **Jacob**, "The Childhood and Youth of Moses, the

Messenger of God,” in *Essays in Honor of the Very Rev. Dr. J. H. Hertz*, ed. by I. Epstein, et. al., p. 245; Isaac M. **Kikawada**, “Some Proposals for the Definition of Rhetorical Criticism,” *Semitics* 5 (1977):67-91 [on 2:1-10]; A. B. **Lewis**, “The Sargon Legend: A Study of the Akkadian text and the Tale of the Hero who Was Exposed at Birth,” *Dissertation Abstracts* 38 (1977):755 [on 2:1-10]; Noel **Osborn**, “Where on Earth are We? Problems of Position and Movement in Space,” *Bible Trans* 31 (1980):239-42 [on 2:4].

EXPOSITORY DEVELOPMENT

The story essentially works around the plot for the destruction of the children: Pharaoh's program to kill the male children by throwing them into the river is assumed as the background for this story (1:22). It may be said that in a sense Jochebed “threw” her child into the river—but in a basket with care and love. She did not intend to abandon the child, and never did. That is why Miriam is the key to the story (assuming that is what is meant by the “sister”). She guided the child from the mother to the princess to the mother again. As a result, the child survived.

The first two sections show how Pharaoh was undone by the things that are weak. Although he was afraid of the warriors outnumbering his ruling class, he was not defeated by that. The foil for his plot came from the midwives, a woman, a girl, and Pharaoh's daughter. The note of irony comes out the strongest in the fact that it was Pharaoh's own decree that determined that the females were harmless enough and could be saved.

I. Under the threat of death the faithful ensure that their children will safely develop into the people of God of the future (1-4).

The first part of this section is the account of the hiding of the infant (1-4). The marriage, the birth of the child, the hiding in the river, and the positioning of Miriam, are all faith operations which ignore the decree of Pharaoh, or at least work around it to preserve the life of this little Levite. The “daughter of Levi” had the child. The “daughter of Pharaoh” preserved the child (in the next section). But it was Miriam who coordinated the entire operation.

One of the connecting links between the sections of the story is the verb “when she saw” (*ra’ah*). When the mother saw the child, she desired to protect it.

When the princess saw the child, she had pity on it. Thus, the simple effect of a baby on the two women spoiled the program of the king (who thought girls would not be a problem) and prepared the way for the deliverance of Israel's deliverer.

There are some expressions in the story that suggest that the narrative is making allusions to other famous passages. For example, the expression "and she saw him, that he was good" (v. 2) sounds very much like the creation story's "and God saw that it was good." Or, the fact that the child was placed in an "ark" (the same word as in the flood narratives), and that it was set in the water among the reeds (cf the Reed Sea, *yam suph*). It is awfully difficult to know for certain whether an author is clearly alluding to something or foreshadowing something else. In favor of it would be the fact that the same writer has used these terms and expressions, and it would be hard for him not to think of the similarities. But if these are allusions, there must be some clear point of contact between the passages. For the link to creation there may be enough evidence (a chaotic situation in which something good is created). The other two do not seem to have as clear connections and perhaps should not be pressed at all. If an allusion is being made, the final question that must be asked is why the writer would do that, unless it may be assumed that clever devices were intended.

The idea of the first part of the narrative seems clear enough without the need of these allusions. It is far more than people living by their wits in terrible times. Rather, people who are part of God's covenant, Levites at that, were living responsibly in accord with the covenant promises to promote and save lives. Their efforts, the next section will show, prospered under the providence of God.

*II. God honors the faithfulness of his people
by confounding the powers of the world with the things that weak and low (5-10).*

The second section of the passage records the deliverance of the infant (5-10). The section could be divided further into the discovery (5,6), care (7-9), and naming (10). The story develops quickly and surprisingly. Only the essential details are provided to show the irony of the situation.

The story line traces the activities of the daughter of Pharaoh as she comes down to wash in the Nile and discovers the infant crying. The note of her coming to bathe is clarified by the disjunctive clause that says her young women were

going with her. It seems that Miriam was able to slip in among that company when the basket was discovered and make the suggestion of someone to nurse the child. How that worked is not clear.

Some of the verbs that appear in this section are interesting for the material that is to follow. Pharaoh himself will summon Moses many times (*qara' + l*) in the plague narratives. Here the word is used for the daughter summoning the child's mother to take care of it. Also, "send" (*shalakh*) is a recurring term in the book. It does not in this instance have the same meaning as it does later, but its usage in the development of the material should be noticed, especially in view of the irony of the material anyway. The royal family is sending and summoning to save this child alive, a child that is destined to be the deliverer of Israel..

The story closes with the popular etymology in the last line. Such etymologies are crucial to the theology of the passages, for they all attest to divine intervention in some way. They occur in the Pentateuch with important people and places to help the reader remember the incident within which the naming took place. When each of these passages is studied, it becomes clear that something providential was taking place in the founding or beginning of a new era. Thus, the etymology serves to highlight that providential aspect of the story.

The report of the naming is the climax of the story, as if to capture both the event and the destiny. "Moses" (*mosheh*) is here explained by a similar sounding verb (*mashah > meshitihu*), "I have drawn him out" (the form is the perfect tense). Cassuto finds it a little difficult that the explanation of such a name is in Hebrew while the background is Egyptian (p. 20). Either the narrator merely attributed words to her (which is unlikely), or the tradition records the translation of what she was believed to have said in Egyptian. Furthermore, the form of the name in Hebrew is an active participle ("the one who draws out"); a passive, *mashuy* ("the one drawn out") would have been expected if the etymology was meant to explain the actual meaning of the name. So we may say that the etymology is not precise—it is not a scientific etymology, but a popular etymology, a paronomasia .

Most have agreed that the name is an Egyptian name. Josephus attempted to connect the biblical etymology with the name in Greek, *MO-USES*, stating that Egyptians called water *MO* and those rescued from it *USES* (*Antiq.* ii, 9,6). J. Gwyn Griffiths explains the Greek name as Egyptian *MO*, "water," and *USES* as

“favored, praised” (from Egyptian; see the article “The Egyptian Derivation of the Name of Moses,” *JNES* 12 [19531: 225]). This captures more of the Egyptian flavor of the story. The princess probably would have thought of the child from the river as a supernatural provision due to the estimation the river had. It is doubtful that she made a phonetic sound play (although there is Egyptian and Akkadian literature that employs such popular etymologies), perhaps only the sense play.

But the solution to the name is certainly not to be derived from the Greek name. The Egyptian hieroglyphic *ms* can be the noun “child,” or the perfective verb “to be born.” This is often combined with divine elements: *Ptah-mose*, “Ptah is born,” Ramses [*R’-m-sw*], “Re is he who has born him” (perfect participle here). If the name of Moses is Egyptian, there are philological difficulties with the connection. If you wish to see them discussed and satisfactorily resolved, see the above mentioned article.

The significance of this etymology is as follows. When the child was named by the princess, an Egyptian word related to the root *ms* was used, a word meaning “born” (or “child”). The name may have had a theophoric element attached, but there is no indication of that. The name's motivation came from the fact that she drew him from the river, the source of life in ancient Egypt. Perhaps she thought that the river had born her a child. The sound of the Egyptian name recalled the Hebrew verb *mashah*, “draw out.” It appeared to the narrator that the tradition of what she said lent itself to the use of this verb in the translation. So the name and the point of the explanation could be uniquely bound up in the double use of the verb. It is as if the narrative is saying, “You called him ‘born one,’ after your custom, but in our language that name means ‘drawing out’—which is actually what was to become of him.”

The name then reflects the unusual circumstances of the deliverance of the child from the death-decree of Pharaoh. These circumstances clearly demonstrated him to be a child of destiny, and this was stressed in the etymology that preserved the story in Israel's memory. The fact that the name is an active participle lends itself nicely to the Israelite interpretation that he was the one drawing Israel out of Egypt, the great deliverer (see Isa. 63:11).

CONCLUSION

The theology of the account should not be expressed in terms of irony alone, although that was at work. It was God's providential dealings that turned the prospect of death into triumphant victory, a victory that would undermine the Egyptian empire. It is easy to find many examples of this in the Bible, because it is the way of God to use the weak things and the things that are not, to confound the mighty. Believers must therefore live in the expectation of divine providence, living responsibly according to what they know his will to be, and not fearing the forces of evil. When triumphs come, the righteous can discern clearly the hand of God in it and retain that in their memory so that future opposition may be met with even greater confidence.

The New Testament link perhaps should be to the passage in 1 Corinthians that speaks of God using the things that are not to confound the things that are, the base and weak things to destroy the powerful and strong. The Old Testament is filled with samples of how God does this; and Church has numerous accounts of it. As Paul said to the Corinthians, when we are weak, he is strong. He will accomplish his purpose, even using unusual circumstances and weak people—if they trust and obey he can turn the world upside down with them.

The passage is such a simple account of a mother trying to preserve the life of her baby. Responsible, faithful, caring, obeying God. When Christians today live with these virtues, God will work through the circumstances and the difficulties and use them in a way they never thought imaginable.

