

## UNIT 3: THE PRESUMPTION OF THE DELIVERER (2:11-22)

### INTRODUCTION <sup>1</sup>

#### Text and Textual Notes

**2:11** And it happened in those days<sup>2</sup> when<sup>3</sup> Moses had grown up that he went out to his people<sup>4</sup> and observed<sup>5</sup> their hard labor. And he saw an Egyptian

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter one described how Israel was flourishing in spite of the bondage; chapter two first told how God providentially provided the deliverer; but now when this deliverer attempted to deliver one of his people, it turned out badly, and he had to flee for his life. This section makes an interesting study in the presumption of the leader, what Christian expositors would rightly describe as trying to do God's work by the flesh. The section has two parts to it: the flight from Egypt over the failed attempt to deliver (vv. 11-15), and the renewed vision of his mission while in Midian (vv. 16-22).

<sup>2</sup> the days of bondage

<sup>3</sup> The preterite with the *waw* consecutive is here subordinated to the next and main idea of the verse. This is the second use of this verb in the chapter. In verse 10 the verb had the sense of "when he began to grow" or "when he got older"; but here it carries the nuance of "when he had grown up." See Waltke-O'Connor, *BHS*, pp. 485-490.

<sup>4</sup> Literally, "brothers"

<sup>5</sup> The verb *ra'ah*, "to see," followed by the preposition *bet* can indicate looking on something as an overseer, or supervising, or investigating. Here the emphasis is on Moses' observing their labor with sympathy or grief. It means more than that he simply saw the way his fellow Hebrews were being treated.

This journey of Moses to see his people is an indication that he had become aware of his destiny to deliver his people. This verse says that he looked on their oppression; the next section will say that the LORD looked on it.

man attacking<sup>6</sup> a Hebrew man, one of his brothers. **2:12** He looked this way and that<sup>7</sup> and saw that no one was there,<sup>8</sup> and so he killed<sup>9</sup> the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. **2:13** When he went out<sup>10</sup> the next day,<sup>11</sup> there were<sup>12</sup> two Hebrew men fighting. So he said to the one who was in the wrong,<sup>13</sup> “Why are you striking<sup>14</sup> your fellow?”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The verb *makkeh* is the *hiphil* participle of the root *nakah*. It may be translated “strike, smite, beat, attack.” It can be used with the sense of killing (as in the next verse where it says Moses hid the body), but does not necessarily indicate here that the Egyptian killed the Hebrew.

<sup>7</sup> The text literally says, “and he turned thus and thus” (*wayyipen koh wakoh*). It may indicate that he turned his gaze in all directions to see that the coast was clear before he acted. Or, as Jacobs argues, it may mean that he saw that there was no one to do justice and so he did it himself (pp. 37, 38, citing Isaiah 59:15-16).

<sup>8</sup> Literally, “he saw that there was no man”:

<sup>9</sup> The verb *wayyak* is from the same root *nakah*, “to smite, attack.” The repetition of the verb, especially in Exodus, anticipates the idea of “eye for eye, tooth for tooth.” The problem is, however, that Moses was not authorized to take this into his own hands. Their question the next day is appropriate: “Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?” The answer? No one--yet.

<sup>10</sup> The preterite with the *waw* consecutive is subordinated to the main idea of the verse.

<sup>11</sup> Literally, “on the second day”

<sup>12</sup> The deictic particle is used here to predicate existence, as in “here were” or “there were.” But this use of *hinneh* is intended to indicate that what he encountered was surprising or sudden--as in “Oh, look.”

<sup>13</sup> The term *rasha'* is a legal term, meaning the guilty. Later Pharaoh will declare himself as in the wrong (9:27) and God in the right. This guilty man will reject Moses' intervention for much the same reason Pharaoh later would (5:2)--he did not recognize his authority. The innocent man was probably happy for Moses' help, as indeed later the suffering Israelites were also.

<sup>14</sup> This is the third use of the verb *nakah* in the passage; here it is the *hiphil* imperfect. It may be given a progressive imperfect nuance--the attack was going on when Moses tried to intervene.

<sup>15</sup> The word *re'eka* was traditionally translated “your neighbor.” The Law will have much to say about how the people of Israel were to treat their “neighbors, fellow citizens.”

**2:14** And the man<sup>16</sup> said, “Who made you a prince<sup>17</sup> and a judge over us? Are you planning<sup>18</sup> to kill me just as you killed the Egyptian?” Then Moses was afraid, thinking,<sup>19</sup> “Surely the deed has become known.” **2:15** When Pharaoh heard<sup>20</sup> about this matter, he sought to kill<sup>21</sup> Moses. So Moses fled<sup>22</sup> from Pharaoh and dwelt in the land of Midian.<sup>23</sup> He dwelt<sup>24</sup> by a well.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> “the man” supplied

<sup>17</sup> Literally the text has, “Who placed you for a man, a prince and a judge over us?” The pleonasm does not need to be translated.

<sup>18</sup> The line reads “[is it] to kill me you are planning?” The form *'omer* is the active participle used verbally; it would literally be “[are you] saying,” but in this context it would have the meaning of “thinking, planning.” The *qal* infinitive then serves as the object of this verbal form--are you planning to kill me.

<sup>19</sup> The verb form is “and he said.” But the intent of the form is that he said this within himself, and so it means “he thought, realized, said to himself.” And the form, having the *waw* consecutive, may be subordinated to the main idea of the verse, that he was afraid.

<sup>20</sup> The form with the *waw* consecutive is here subordinated to the main idea that Pharaoh sought to punish Moses.

<sup>21</sup> The repetition of this verb, here the *qal* infinitive of purpose, stresses again the talionic justice involved--a life for a life. This would be a major part of the Law of Moses later on, when the LORD authenticated his leadership.

<sup>22</sup> The *waw* consecutive with the preterite shows result--as a result of Pharaoh's search for him, he fled.

<sup>23</sup> The location of Midyan or Midian is uncertain, but it had to have been beyond the Egyptian borders on the east, either in the Sinai or beyond in the Arabah (south of the Dead Sea) or even on the other side of the Gulf of Aqaba. The Midianites seemed to travel extensively in the desert regions. Cole reasons that since they later were enemies of Israel, it is unlikely that these traditions would have been made up about their great Lawgiver; further, he explains that “Ishmaelite” and “Kenite” might have been clan names within the region of Midian (*Exodus*, p. 60). For further discussion, from a more critical view, see George W. Coats, “Moses and Midian,” *JBL* 92 (1973):3-10.

<sup>24</sup> The verb reads literally, “and he sat” or “and he dwelt.” To translate it “he sat by a well” would seem to be anticlimactic and unconnected. It probably has the same sense as in the last clause, namely, that he dwelt in Midian, and he dwelt by a well.

**2:16** Now a priest of Midian had seven daughters; and they came and began to draw<sup>26</sup> water<sup>27</sup> and fill<sup>28</sup> the troughs in order to water their father's flocks. **2:17** And then some<sup>29</sup> shepherds came and drove them away;<sup>30</sup> but Moses rose up and defended them,<sup>31</sup> and then watered their flock. **2:18** So when the girls<sup>32</sup> came home<sup>33</sup> to Reuel<sup>34</sup> their father, he said, "Why have you come home so early"<sup>35</sup>

<sup>25</sup> The word has the definite article, "the well." Gesenius lists this use of the article as that which denotes a thing that is yet unknown to the reader but present in the mind under the circumstances (GKC, par. 126r). Where there was a well, people would settle; and as Cole says it, for people who settled there it was "the well" (p. 60).

<sup>26</sup> The preterites describing their actions must be taken in an ingressive sense, since they did not actually complete the job. Shepherds drove them away, but Moses watered the flocks.

<sup>27</sup> "water" supplied

<sup>28</sup> This also has the ingressive sense.

<sup>29</sup> The definite article here is the generic use; it simply refers to a group of shepherds.

<sup>30</sup> The verb is *waygar<sup>e</sup>shum*. Some shepherds came and drove the daughters away. The choice of this verb in the narrative will provide the motive for the name of Moses' first son, Gershom. He will sense very clearly that he is a sojourner in a strange land--he has been driven away.

<sup>31</sup> The verb used here is *wayyoshi'an*, "and he saved them." The word means that he came to their rescue and delivered them. By the choice of words the narrator is portraying Moses as the deliverer--he is just not yet ready to deliver Israel from its oppressors.

<sup>32</sup> "the girls" supplied

<sup>33</sup> The verb means "to go, to come, to enter." Here in the context it means that they return to their father, or came home.

<sup>34</sup> The name Reuel is given here. In other places (chapter 18 for example) he is called Jethro. And in Numbers 10:29 he is called Hobab. Some suggest that this is simply a confusion of traditions. But it is not uncommon for ancients like Sabaeen kings and priests to have more than one name. Several of the kings of Israel, including Solomon, did. "Reuel" means "friend of God."

<sup>35</sup> The sentence uses a verbal hendiadys construction: *mihartem bo'*, literally, "you have made quick [to] come home." The finite verb becomes an adverb, and the infinitive becomes the main verb of the clause. Two observations should be made at this point. First, it seems that the

today?” **2:19** And they said, “An Egyptian man rescued us<sup>36</sup> from the hand of the shepherds, and he actually<sup>37</sup> drew water for us and watered our flock!” **2:20** He said<sup>38</sup> to his daughters, “So where is he?<sup>39</sup> Why in the world<sup>40</sup> did you leave him? Call him, so that he may eat<sup>41</sup> a meal.”<sup>42</sup>

**2:21** Moses agreed<sup>43</sup> to dwell with the man. And he gave Zipporah, his daughter, to Moses. **2:22** When<sup>44</sup> she bore a son, Moses<sup>45</sup> called his name

oppression at the well was a regular part of their routine because the father was surprised at their early return, and their answer alluded to the shepherds rather automatically. Secondly, the story forms another meeting-at-the-well account. Continuity with the patriarchs is thereby kept in the mind of the reader.

<sup>36</sup> Continuing the theme of Moses the deliverer, the text now uses another word for salvation, *natsal*, “to deliver, rescue” in the sense of plucking out or away, snatching out of danger.

<sup>37</sup> The construction is emphatic with the use of the perfect tense and its infinitive absolute: *daloh dalah*. Jacobs says, “They showed their enthusiasm through the use of the infinitive absolute--And think of that, *he even drew water for us; a man did this for us girls*” (*Exodus*, p. 41).

<sup>38</sup> Literally, “and he said”

<sup>39</sup> Sometimes the conjunction joins a sentence apparently to what immediately preceded it; this is particular true in direct address (see GKC, par. 154b).

<sup>40</sup> This is the use of the demonstrative pronoun as an enclitic, used for emphasis. It says literally, “Why [is] this [that] you left him?” Williams, *Hebrew Syntax*, par. 118.

<sup>41</sup> The construction uses a sequential *waw* on the imperfect tense; coming after the imperative this indicates purpose.

<sup>42</sup> Literally, “bread, food”

<sup>43</sup> The verb means “and he was willing” to stay with Reuel. The Talmud understood this to mean that he swore; and so when it came time to leave he had to have a word from God and permission from his father-in-law (4:18,19).

<sup>44</sup> The preterite with the *waw* consecutive is subordinated to the next clause which reports the naming and its motivation.

<sup>45</sup>“Moses” supplied

Gershom, for he said, “I have become an alien in a foreign land.”<sup>46</sup>

## Exegetical Analysis

### Summary

When Moses killed an Egyptian for attacking a Hebrew and the thing became known, he had to flee to Midian because no one had made him a ruler and a judge, and in Midian when he rescued some girls from the shepherds he was welcomed into their father’s house where he found a wife and began a family.

### Outline

- I. When Moses killed an Egyptian for attacking a Hebrew he was challenged by his own people for his audacity, which caused him to become afraid that the deed would be found out, and threatened by Pharaoh, which caused him

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<sup>46</sup> Once again a naming with a phonetic word play forms the commemorative summary of the account just provided. Moses seemed to have settled into a domestic life with his new wife and his father-in-law. But when the first son is born, he named it *ger<sup>e</sup>shom*. There is little information for what the name actually might have meant; Noth suggests it is related to the Arabic word for “bell” (*Personennamen*), but there would be little significance to that if true. If it is linked to the verb “deliver” used earlier, *garash*, then the final *mem* would have to be explained as an enclitic *mem*. It seems most likely that that verb was used in the narrative to make a secondary word play on the name. The primary explanation is the popular etymology supplied by Moses himself. He links the name to the verb *gur*, “to sojourn, to live as an alien.” He then adds that he was a sojourner (*ger*, the participle) in a foreign land. The word “foreign” (*nokriyah*) adds to the idea of his being an alien. The final syllable in the word would then be connected to the adverb “there” (*sham*). Thus, the name is given the significance in the story of “sojourner there” or “alien there.” He knew that that was not the actual meaning of the name; the name itself had already been introduced into the family of Levi (1 Chron. 6:1). He chose the name because its sounds and meaning reflected the sentiment of Moses at that time.

But to what is Moses referring? In view of naming customs of the Semites, he is most likely referring to Midian as the foreign land. If Egypt had been the strange land, and he had now found his place, he would not have given the lad such a name. Personal names reflect the present or recent experiences, or the hope for the future. So this naming is a clear expression by Moses that he knows he is not where he is supposed to be. That this is the clear meaning is supported by Stephen in Acts 7:29. So the choice of the name, the explanation of it, and the word play before it, all serve to stress the point that Moses had been driven away from his proper place of service.

- to flee (11-15).
- A. When Moses saw an Egyptian attacking a Hebrew he killed him and hid the body in the sand (11, 12).
  - B. When he later tried to stop a fight between two Hebrews he was confronted over his audacity (13, 14).
    - 1. Moses stopped a fight between two Hebrews (13).
    - 2. One of them wanted to know who made Moses a ruler and judge over them so that he might kill them (14a).
    - 3. Moses feared that his crime was known (14b).
  - C. When Pharaoh sought to kill him for the murder of an Egyptian, he fled to the desert (15).
- II. When Moses came to a well in Midian and saw shepherds driving shepherd girls away, he rescued the girls and watered their animals, for which he was welcomed into the house of their father Reuel, where he married Zipporah and had a son Gershom (16-22).
- A. When Moses came to a well in Midian he rescued some shepherd girls from rough shepherds and watered their animals (16, 17)
  - B. When the girls told their father Reuel about the incidence, Moses was given hospitality by the man (18-20)
  - C. When Moses agreed to stay with the man, he married Zipporah and eventually had a son, Gershom (21, 22).

### Additional Resources

Trent C. **Butler**, “An Anti-Moses Tradition,” *JSOT* 12 (1979):9-15 [on 2:11-22]; Mitchell **Dahood**, “Vocative *Lamedh* in Exodus 2, 14 and Merismus in 34, 21,” *Biblica* 62 [1981:413-415 [on 2:14]; George W. **Coats**, “Moses in Midian,” *JBL* 92 (1973): 3-10 [on 2:11-22]; Fredrick **Holmgren**, “Before the Temple, the Thornbush: An Exposition of Ex. 2:11–3:12,” *The Reformed Journal* 33 (1983):9-11.

### EXPOSITORY DEVELOPMENT

This portion follows in the continuity of the book very well. The first chapter (unit 1) recorded the persecution of Israel in bondage, thus stressing the need of a deliverer. The second chapter (unit 2) started with the report of the

providentially protected birth of the deliverer. Here the deliverer attempts to deliver some of his brethren from persecution and finds that it all turns out rather badly, i.e., he fails to deliver, fears the king of Egypt, and flees to the wilderness.

In the first chapter the providence of God is noted in Israel's flourishing according to the plan and promises of God. In the second chapter this motif continues, but is not directly expressed. First, the child Moses is incredibly saved in the midst of the oppression; and then secondly, a child is born to Moses in Midian that prompts him to recall the people of God.

I would think that the best way to treat this passage is with the presumption of the servant of the LORD. Moses probably knew that he was the man to deliver Israel, or at least a good candidate. (They were to be brought out in 400 years, he had supernatural intervention in his infancy, and he had been trained in the palace in a marvelous way). The text suggests this when it records twice how he went out to see his brothers in bondage. But his attempt to deliver not only fails but finds opposition from the brothers. The story provides a good illustration of what happens when God's servants try to do God's work without him.

The passage may be divided simply into two parts, the flight from Egypt over the failure in delivering his brethren (11-15), and the birth in Midian after the deliverance of the daughters at the well (16-22). I have put these two sections together because I am convinced that the second part adds a note of Moses' sense of destiny to be in Egypt. If I thought that the second section were reporting his delightful life in Midian under the blessing of God, I would not unite it with the first in the exposition. To leave them connected in that way would mean that an expository idea would show blessing resulting from presumption. It would be easier to separate them.

*I. Trying to deliver people by killing the enemy  
is not the work of the deliverer and will fail (11-15).*

First, there is the incident in Egypt (11-15). That Moses knows (or becomes aware of) his destiny is expressed by the fact that he went out and looked on the burdens of his brethren (the next section will say that the LORD has looked on their burdens). When he saw an Egyptian smiting (*makkeh*) “a man, a Hebrew, of his brethren, “he smote (*wayyak*) the Egyptian. Here is swift *talionic* justice, life for life. But it does not work, as the context will tell us. The next unit will

report how the LORD said he was going to smite the Egyptians. The point is that vengeance belongs to the LORD, and if it is going to be divinely appointed, it must be under the power of the LORD (the same problem surfaces in the Old Testament frequently with holy war versus wars of aggrandizement).

The turning point is found in v. 13. On the second day he found two Hebrews fighting and tried to stop it, saying, “Why should you smite your companion?” I think that the point of the story is recorded in the response of the guilty man: “Who appointed you a prince and a judge over us? Are you intending to kill me just as you killed the Egyptian?” The statement tells us that his attempt at deliverance met only with belligerence. But it also tells us that no one appointed Moses a prince and a judge over them (figure: *erotesis* of negation). The Israelite knew it. Now Moses knew it. The book will show that when God appoints Moses as a prince and a judge there will be divine attestation and divine enablement. All that the Israelite knew now was that Moses was a murderer of the Egyptian and possibly of others.

The verb “kill” further conveys *talionic* justice in the narrative. When the Pharaoh heard of the incident, he sought “to kill” Moses. The one who lived by the sword would die by the sword, unless he fled to Midian. So much for his attempt to save Israel from oppression. Moses had tried to take matters into his own hands, to deliver by who he was, a powerful Egyptian-Hebrew, and it failed. God’s work has to be done in God’s way. Moses had not even been called yet. This is presumption.

## *II. Rescuing people by compassion is the work of the deliverer and will be honored and reward (16-22).*

The second half of the story, however, records a successful deliverance (16-22). There is a parallel between the two parts: Moses had attempted to do what he thought he should do, but was driven away; the daughters of Reuel were doing what they were supposed to be doing, and they were driven away. Both needed help.

The verbs used in the deliverance scene at the well are interesting. Shepherds came down and drove the girls away (*garash*). Moses arose and saved them, i.e., delivered them (*yasha'*). When they reported this to their father, they said that an Egyptian man delivered (*natsal*) them. Moses is seen here as a

deliverer.

Two observations should be made at this point. First, it seems that the oppression at the well as a regular part of their routine because the father was surprised that they returned so quickly this day. Secondly, the story forms another of the meeting-at-the-well stories in the Pentateuch. There is a similarity between this account and the Jacob account in the previous book. Continuity with the patriarchs is thereby kept in mind by the reporting of this incident.

Moses settled in to domestic life with his new wife and had a son by her, Gershom. This name is given a popular etymology as well; its understanding will be instructive for the unity of this account. The name could be connect to an Arabic word for "bell," as Noth suggests, but if that is so there is no point to it. If it is related to the verb *garash* with which the name forms a word play in this account--then the final letter "m" would have to be explained as enclitic. The popular etymology explains it with *ger* (<*gur*) "sojourner," and adds "strange land" as a further statement of his life. Thus, the name is given the significance in this story as "sojourner (*ger*) there (*sham*) ."

But to what land does Moses refer? The sentence could be translated "I have been a sojourner in a strange land," "I am a sojourner in a strange land," or "I was a sojourner in a strange land." If we take into consideration the naming customs of the Semites, we would have to conclude that the land of sojourning is Midian. If Moses were saying that he had been in a strange land, i.e., Egypt, and now had found his comfortable place, he would have chosen a positive name to reflect that, not a negative name describing his past experience. Personal names in the Old Testament reflect accurately the present or recent situation, or the hope for the future. So I would have to conclude that Moses' naming of the child is an expressed recognition of the deliverer that he is not where he should be.

That this is the correct interpretation is supported by Stephen's sermon in Acts 7:29 which says that Moses was a stranger in the land of Midian.

The name "Gershom" had already been used in the family of Moses; Gershom, or Gershon (1 Chron. 6:1) was the first son of Levi. The writer knew full well that the name Gershom was not derived from the verb "sojourn." The name was selected (not invented) because its sound and meaning reflected the sentiment of Moses at that time. Moreover, the verb *garash* was probably deliberately

selected in verse 17 to anticipate the significance of this name. So the choice of the name, the explanation of it, and the word play before it, all serve to stress the point that Moses had been driven away from his proper place.

At this point in his life Moses knew that his life and his mission were with his brothers in Egypt. His life in Midian was a banishment and a bitter humiliation. He knew that he belonged to another people, another life, another land. In Midian he knew he was in a strange land, and named his son to commemorate it.

It is interesting to note that Moses had another son, Eliezer. This chapter does not mention him (he will be included later). Rather than accept the critical view that this tradition did not know about him, I would argue that the narrative is constructed here to convey banishment and sojourning. "God is my help" does not fit the theme and is postponed (Ex. 18:4).

## CONCLUSION

The point of the story is that because no one had (yet) made Moses a prince and a judge, his efforts to deliver were presumptuous. Not only did they fail, they prompted rejection by his brethren and opposition from Pharaoh. It is one thing to know that God has a mission for him to complete; it is quite another thing for him to try to do it without the power of God. He will face rejection and opposition again, but not alone.

I would think that such a point of practical theology can be found several places in the Old Testament very vividly, as well as in the New. It is not by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit of the LORD that God's deliverance is accomplished. Stephen again confirms this in Acts 7:35, when he says, "This Moses whom they rejected, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?' is the one God sent to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the Angel who appeared to him in the bush. He brought them out after he had shown wonders and signs . . . ." See also 1 Cor. 3:5-7; John 15:4,5; etc. Presumptuous, worldly efforts at the work of God will discredit the service and fail to accomplish anything. Or, to state it another way, the servant of God must be appointed by God if the ministry is to be a success. (St. Paul could point to the converts in Corinth as the letters of commendation for his ministry [2Cor. 3:2]).

Anyone starting to serve the Lord must answer the question, “Who made you a leader?” Or in the New Testament, “By what authority do you do these things?”