

## **Studies in Exodus No. 2**

**Exodus 2:1-25**

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### **Review**

In chapter 1 we were given an introduction to the material that follows, a setting of the stage. A new Egyptian dynasty, uncaring of the blessing that Joseph had been to Egypt, both fears Israel's growing strength as a minority within the country and wishes to make use of the nation for slave labor. Oppression follows. A secret effort at genocide is foiled by the Hebrew midwives and so a public, systematic pogrom is begun.

### **Text Comment**

- v.1 We are given their names in 6:20: Amram and Jochebed. Here there is no mention of other children. As it happens they already had a daughter, who will figure in this account, and a son, Aaron, three years older than Moses. In any case, what an ordinary beginning. Who can tell what will become of a life when it is born? And how often in the Bible the ordinary conventions are surmounted: it is not the firstborn whose life tells the tale.
- v.2 Literally that he was a “goodly” child; that is healthy and strong and, so, likely to survive. To lose a frail child would be bad enough – and in those days there would have been many frail children – but to lose a strong, healthy boy was something this mother could not contemplate. At first she hid him. But as the baby got older, more active, and his voice stronger, the chances of escaping discovery decreased rapidly.
- v.3 In other words, she hid her child precisely where the Egyptians would be least likely to look for him. The Nile was a place of death for Hebrew babies, not safety. What is more, with the kind of shrewdness demonstrated by the midwives in chapter 1, Moses' mother actually did precisely what the Pharaoh had commanded. She put her infant son in the Nile. This papyrus-reed container is called an “ark,” ( fo desu drow emas eht (הַבַּת Noah's barge. In only two places is this word used in the Bible, the account of Noah and this account. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that a parallel is being drawn. The narrative, in other words, recapitulates the flood story: as the population of the world was saved by a remnant preserved in an ark, so the people of Israel are saved by a child also borne on the waters by an ark.
- v.4 His sister, probably only a girl herself, was appointed to watch. Obviously the mother would feed the baby when she could and would move the basket from place to place as seemed safest.
- v.6 The Egyptian princess is presented in a very favorable light. She took pity on the baby and, even though she knew he was a Hebrew child – that was obvious from the

circumstances – and so marked for death by her own father, she arranged not only for his protection, but for a place in her family.

- v.7 His sister springs into action when she sees the princess' compassion and offers to find a Hebrew wet-nurse for the child. There would have been many Hebrew women who, having lost a child or children to the pogrom, would be able to nurse another. All the heroes of the story so far have been women: the Hebrew midwives, Moses' mother, and his sister, as well as the Egyptian princess.
- v.9 So the baby's mother is paid to do what she longed to do: care for her son in safety.
- v.10 The name Moses, given to him by the Egyptian princess, is an Egyptian name meaning "boy-child" or "son." It is found in a short form in names such as Thutmose. But "Moses" also sounds like the Hebrew verb "to draw out."

Now of the following years we are told nothing. Stephen says, in Acts 7:22, that Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, a fair conclusion to draw from the fact that he was raised at court as a member of the royal family. With the possible exceptions of Solomon, Daniel, and Nehemiah, no other Israelite figure of the Old Testament received such an education. It obviously was important preparation for his role as both the law-giver and the chronicler of Israel's early history. For example, the law code of Hammurabi was widely studied in Egypt in those years. Josephus claims that Moses led an Egyptian army against Nubia (Ethiopia), captured the capital, and married the defeated king's daughter. However, we have no independent confirmation of that account. The biblical writer is interested in other things.

- v.11 Emphasis falls on Moses' identification with the Israelites by the repetition of the phrase "his own brethren." In Hebrew, the phrase the NIV renders "watched them at their hard labor" suggests not just that Moses saw it, but that he was effected by it, moved by their suffering. Moses obviously was not only aware of his identity but had embraced it theologically. How that came about is hard to say. He would still have been a little boy when he was weaned and sent to live at court. Perhaps his mother had time and opportunity to instill in her son the convictions of her faith in the Lord, but we aren't told. Perhaps there was continuing contact with his Israelite family. We can't say.
- v.12 The same word is used for the Egyptian *hitting* the slave and Moses *striking* the Egyptian. So there is some question as to whether Moses actually intended to kill the man. "Hid in the sand" is a touch of local color and eyewitness recollection. There was no sand in Israel's rocky hill country.
- v.13 It happened that he came upon an argument that had turned violent; had come upon it early enough that he could tell who was the aggressor and responsible for the altercation. So he interposes himself to try to achieve a just outcome. One scholar points out that "The first dialogue assigned to a character in biblical narrative typically defines the character." [Alter, 314; cf. Cassuto, 22] We find out, in other words, what kind of man Moses is at this point. He is a mature man by this time, not simply a young adult.

Stephen puts him at 40 years of age (Acts 7:23]. So Moses here shows the qualities of his character: a concern for justice and courage to take action on its behalf. These are qualities that will stand him in good stead in the coming history.

- v.14 No doubt the innocent man was happy to have Moses interfere, but the guilty, as is so often the case, resents the intrusion and shifts the focus away from his behavior to that of his accuser. Apparently the man whom Moses had helped the day before had told others what happened. [Cassuto, 23] In any case, we see here an attitude toward Moses that will surface among Israelites many times in the days and years to come. “Who are you to tell us what to do?”
- v.15 One can’t help but wonder if Moses was already at a disadvantage relative to others at court, being an outsider. Usually in the ANE a royal figure could have rather easily escaped any consequence for the beating death of an underling. After all, Moses could have explained it any way he pleased. But in Hebrews 11:24 we read that by this time “Moses refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter.” Perhaps there was already a clear rift that had opened between Moses and the court, leading Pharaoh to treat him as a renegade.
- v.17 The Midians were nomads and, throughout the OT are said to live in different places east and south of the Dead Sea. Here at the well, we think immediately of Abraham’s servant and Rebecca meeting at a well (Gen. 24) and Jacob and Rachel meeting at a well in Paddan Aram (Gen. 29). Of course, in the ANE one often met at a well. The need for water brought people together. But the similar reports of such things happen so often in the OT it cannot be an accident. We are being reminded that the experience of the fathers prefigures that of their descendants. It is a way of reminding us that God works in and through the lines of generations.

The shepherds were ruthless. They let the young women do the tedious work of drawing the water from the well and filling the troughs before driving them away.

We also notice that Moses is again brave, daring, and sufficiently strong and commanding that he can stand up to several other men in defense of these women. He was, apparently, a lot like Charlton Heston. He was also kind and gentlemanly. He watered the flock for these women when it would have been thought that this was work for them to do themselves.

- v.18 Reuel is also known as Jethro, as we will see in 3:1.
- v.19 Moses’ clothing and accent would have made him immediately recognizable as an Egyptian.
- v.20 The girls were so excited by events at the well that they forgot to ask the man home to dinner, a significant lapse in a culture in which hospitality was a supreme social obligation.

- v.22 The account moves quickly over what may have been at least several years. Gershom sounds like the Hebrew words for “sojourner” and “there.” But what land is Moses talking about? Some say Midian, though what Moses literally says is that “I *have been* an alien in a foreign land,” indicating perhaps that he means Egypt. He is saying, in that case, that from his birth he has never been at home in Egypt; his whole life has been the life of an alien. Here in Midian, on the other hand, he has found a home. He grew up in Egypt, but Midian is home. [Durham, 24] If that is the meaning then Moses, of all men, will understand why Israel needs to leave Egypt and find her home where she belongs.

This entire section begins and ends with the birth of a son. At the conclusion of the first paragraph, in 2:10 the boy is named and the significance of the name is given. At the conclusion of the second paragraph, in 2:22, we have the naming of another son.

All of this material serves to introduce us to Israel’s deliverer and to indicate that he has the qualities of character necessary for the great work that he will be called upon to perform.

- v.23 The death of that Pharaoh meant that Moses could return to Egypt in safety. In 4:19 we will read that all the men seeking Moses’ life were dead.
- v.25 Up to this point God has not been a participant in the story, at least not evidently so. But now God is the subject of four verbs in quick succession: he heard, he remembered (which means in Hebrew “he took to heart”), he looked upon his people and God *knew*. The verb “to know” often carries a deeper meaning in the Hebrew Bible. Here the NIV translates that simple verb as “was concerned about them.” In some ways it is more effective in a more literal form: God looked upon Israel *and he knew*.

These words are often used to describe the personal interest that God takes in people. God *remembered* Noah and Abraham; he *remembered* Rachel in her barrenness; he *saw* the affliction of Leah and the suffering of Jacob in Laban’s house; he *heard* Hagar’s weeping, the voice of Ishmael, and the voices of Leah who was unloved and Rachel who was childless; and now the cries of the Israelites oppressed in Egypt.

It is obvious that these two first chapters are an introduction to what follows. They introduce Israel’s misery and also her deliverer. Next will come God’s call to Moses to lead his people out of Egypt and the story of the exodus.

It is important and striking that so much attention is paid to the life story of a particular individual. We hear of Israel groaning under persecution in Egypt and then suddenly we are reading about the birth and the unusual life of a particular Israelite boy and his growth into manhood. We have not yet been told what this Moses will do but any reader of the Bible knows that he is being introduced precisely because of the role he will play in the history of God’s people and their salvation.

Whether you have thought about this or not, you are well aware that the Bible is the story of the lives and accomplishments of great men. It is a book of heroes from beginning to end. Genesis

is the story of Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and his twelve sons. Moses next takes center stage. But then Joshua, the judges, Samuel, David, some of the kings, especially Hezekiah and Josiah, and the prophets. You cannot tell the history of salvation without telling the life story of these individual men. You cannot give the history of God's grace to sinners without telling the exploits of these men. The Holy Spirit has woven *his* story through *their* story. To be sure, that is true of all of human history. As Thomas Carlyle put it in his influential book, *On Heroes and Hero-worship*, published in 1841, movements in human history do not just arise; they presuppose innovative personalities. [In Stott, *The Incomparable Christ*, 175] But however true in history as a whole, it is strikingly true of biblical history, of salvation history. It is the story of the exploits of great men. All of this prefigures, of course, the fact that you cannot tell the story of the salvation of the world without telling the life story of a single individual human being, Jesus Christ. In the same way you cannot tell the story of the early church without telling of Peter and Paul and you cannot tell the story of the Christian church since without telling it as the story of the life and the achievement of individual men. The story of the second century, as we know it is the story of the apostolic fathers and their successors: Ignatius, Polycarp, Justin, Irenaeus. I don't mean to suggest that the common run of Christian was not important, that the church was not far larger than just these men; to be sure, it was. And we have the evidence of the catacombs and some of the early writings to prove this to us. But, fact is, most of what we know we know because of a few men and what they did and wrote and what, later, others wrote about them. And it is more than simply that we rely on these men for *the record* of what happened. The church herself moved forward behind these men and others like them. It would not be the same history without them. God has made great men vital to the life and progress of his kingdom.

And so in the third century with Origen, Tertullian, Cyprian and the like and the fourth with Athanasius, Chrysostom, and Jerome, and the fifth with Augustine and so on. What is the Reformation but the story of the lives and the impact of the lives of Luther, Calvin, Knox, and others. We cannot imagine that history without those men. The history of the church was then, as it had always been, *the history of her great men*. There were many others, to be sure, but they were taken up into forces and currents that were set in motion and directed by the Lord through a relatively few men, a relatively few men upon who the life's work of other men depended.

It has been so even in our own time. We cannot tell the story of modern Western Christian evangelicalism – not if we would be accurate – without focusing attention on a few very influential men: Lewis, Schaeffer, Graham, Henry, Lloyd-Jones, Packer and some others. I was just reminded the other day that we might never have seen the remarkable impact of the life and work of Phillip Johnson, the University of California law professor turned anti-Darwin pit-bull, had it not been for C.S. Lewis. But, still more to the point, the arguments that Johnson has now pushed to the front of American public life had been around for years; it took a particular man with a particular set of gifts and graces to coalesce those arguments into a movement.

There is more than at first meets the eye in Exodus chapter 2. In cutting away from the account of Israel's oppression to the birth of this baby boy and his boyhood in the Egyptian court and his manhood in Midian we are being given nothing less than a philosophy of history. We meet this everywhere we turn in Holy Scripture. Indeed, we meet it often enough in almost precisely the same terms. How often the account of a birth, the birth of a particular man, interrupts the flow of

the biblical history, because that man is going to accomplish things in and for the kingdom of God and push history in its divinely intended direction. Indeed, so much is it so that you cannot read a commentary on Exodus 2 that does not take you to other passages in the Bible that are so much like it.

Think of all the attention paid beforehand, all the anticipation, the long wait for the birth of Isaac. Then the long and tortured account of the births of the twelve sons of Jacob. Then remember how the account of the Judges, like this account early in Exodus, is interrupted by an angelic announcement to Manoah and his wife that they would bear a son. So Samson steals upon the world. Then there is the attention paid to Hannah's long and bitter childlessness and finally the arrival of her son Samuel. Then jump forward to the extraordinary events that begin the Gospel of Jesus Christ, viz. the events presaging and surrounding the birth of John the Baptist. And then the narrative of the birth of Jesus himself. The Bible is full of accounts of the birth of men whose lives will be turning points in the history of salvation. And, even when there is no account of a man's birth, the Bible nevertheless often breaks away to introduce a man to us whose life is going to figure prominently in the history of the kingdom of God. Think of Abraham himself, or Judah, or David, or Paul. In this sense, the account of Moses' birth, boyhood, and manhood is quite typical. And, as we know, the life of Moses will be, in important respects, the context of the outworking of Israel's salvation for decades still to come. Israel's story in many ways is the story of Moses. His leadership took her from bondage in Egypt to the borders of the Promised Land. This concentration on great men, an obvious feature of biblical revelation, is, as I said, a philosophy of history, and that in several ways.

*I. First, this concentration on individual men in biblical revelation is the emphatic demonstration that God uses men to accomplish his will in the world. Most of what God does in the world he does in and through the life and actions of men. His will for the life of mankind is realized in and through the work of his human servants.*

This may seem a point so obvious that it needn't be made, but, in fact, it is a point often forgotten and, when not forgotten, too little appreciated. We are always wanting God to act directly, immediately, but he rarely does. We want less of God *through men* and more of *God himself* directly, obviously, unmistakably. But that is not God's way in history, or in your life and mine. His hand is revealed in what men say and do. It was always so and it is today.

This point is dramatically underscored in this narrative in Exodus 2. Nothing is said of God or about God until the very end of the chapter. The events are narrated as they were observed: what happened in the world. But, obviously, we are meant to see God's hand at work behind the scenes. One amazing providence after another. The boy is placed in the Nile and discovered, not by some Egyptian who would kill him as the Pharaoh had ordered his citizens to do, but by a princess who was quite willing to ignore her father's instructions. Not only was the baby boy discovered and not only did the Princess' heart go out to him, but arrangements were made so that Moses was actually raised by his own mother for the first years of his life. Then, even without knowing the rest of the story, we are sure that this boy is headed for greatness and has been set apart to do great things when he, a Hebrew boy marked for death, is instead raised in the grandeur of the Egyptian court. We can't help but think of Joseph and how God brought him to power in Egypt by the most remarkable chain of events. A Hebrew boy, raised as an Egyptian

prince, *who never lost or soon regained his loyalty to Israel*. All of these *accidents* were the plan of God and we know it without the biblical writer having to tell us so. *And yet, what we have here is the early life of a particular man*. God is at work, *but his work is in raising up a man*.

None of this would have happened without God's will, without the exercise of God's power. We know that. "The thread on which everything hangs is exceedingly thin. God seems to be taking such an enormous risk to let everything ride on two helpless midwives, a frail ark as protection from the [river]," and a little sister to intervene in just the right way and in the nick of time. [Childs, 24] The same will be the case later with Jesus. Herod the king wishes to kill him, the wise men are enlisted to help, his poor, powerless parents are left to flee to Egypt. Moses is a Christ figure in the remarkable circumstances by which he survived his birth. The power of the world is so impressive. How helpless a little baby. Who will disobey Pharaoh's orders? Well, his own daughter as it turns out. God is mighty and he can use the thinnest thread to hold his people in safety out of the reach of the world's most powerful men. *But, still, it is a man* whom God raises up, protects, nurtures, educates at the Egyptian court, and sends to Midian. Everything in God's plan hinges *on that man*. God uses men.

2. *Second, this emphasis on great men in the Bible is set in the context of the vital role of smaller men and so further teaches us that God's use of men to accomplish his will means that he has a role for every believer to play in the establishment of his kingdom.*

It is not only Moses here but his sister and his mother. The history of the kingdom of God in the world is a *human* history. It is everywhere so in the Bible. As Augustine once put it, "He who created us without us, will not save us without us," nor will he save the world. The salvation of the world is the work of men. It is the gift and the power and the grace of God, but it is in so many ways the work of men. "This gospel will be preached in all the world, *then and only then* the end will come," Jesus said. Well who does that preaching? Men do it. Men and women, boys and girls. What God made possible through the work of the great men was for the lives of smaller men to count, to tell in the right way. It was the great man, Origen, who reminds us that the gospel spread so rapidly in the Roman world because of women who were "gossiping Christ at the laundry." Do you remember Alexamenos? He was a young Christian page in imperial Rome, whose faith in Christ was mocked by his fellows. We know this because the wall of the dormitory where he slept was uncovered by archaeologists. They found scrawled on the wall a graffito – a crudely drawn figure of a man bowing before a cross on which was hung a figure with a human body but the head of a donkey. Next to the picture was the legend: "Alexamenos worships his god." A young man; an otherwise unknown member of the early Christian church. Faithful and true as a witness for Jesus Christ and suffering reproach for it. A Moses in his own way, just much smaller.

We are not all a Moses; very few Christians in the history of the church will be anyone like Moses, or David, or Paul, or even Luther or C.S. Lewis. But what is true of the great men, is also true in a smaller way, and in vastly greater number, of the common run of Christian people. Everywhere, they are the means by which the history of the kingdom of God unfolds according to the divine will. What is true in the macro is also true in the micro. In Christ, we are all, the Bible says, prophets, priests, and kings. The hall of the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 begins with Noah, Abraham, Moses, Samuel and David – great men all, biblical titans everyone. But

that same chapter ends with general accounts of the faithfulness of unnamed “women,” “others” and “some.” The story of the great men is also the story of the small. The titans of spiritual history also stand for and represent the nameless multitude who did the work of God and advanced his kingdom. *That point is also made here.* It is not only about Moses that we read, but the Hebrew midwives, Moses’ mother, his sister. All of these figure prominently in the events from which come the deliverer of Israel. The great man is surrounded by the not so great and their role is crucial also! For every Moses there are thousands upon thousands of his little sisters; for every Paul there are uncounted multitudes of Timothys and Tituses. There would be no Moses without his sister, there would be no use having a Moses if there were no people of Israel to lead out of Egypt; no use having a Joshua if there was no people to bring into the Promised Land.

3. *Finally, this concentration on great men in the history of the kingdom of God prepares us for the role of the supreme man, Jesus Christ.*

The entire story of the world centers around one man, one individual human being. The meaning of every human life turns on its relationship to this one man. And one of the ways in which the Bible demonstrates that fact and prepares for it and interprets it is the role that great men play in the history of salvation. This is typology, the prophetic fingerprint that God left on the history of the world before the incarnation. Moses, Samuel, David are Christ figures, prophecies in flesh and blood of the one man, *the* man who would come to save his people from their sins. And that being the great reality of the world, that reality has been further woven into the fabric of the life of the world and especially the life of the kingdom of God ever since.

There was nothing very obvious about the fact that the world would be saved by *a man*. Knowing what was revealed about God, his might, his grace, his covenant, we might well have supposed that salvation would come directly from God. And, indeed it did. But from God now also a man. No other religion in the world places a man at the center as does the Bible. No other faith looks to a man as we Christians do. The God-Man, to be sure, but a real man who saved his people as a man and, indeed, could save them only because he was a man.

So, in our faith, in this account of Moses, as so many others like it, we move seamlessly from a great man, to many men, to the One Man. We are humanists in the very best sense of the word. Our faith exalts human beings. No religion has such an exalted view of human beings and their importance as Christianity. Man is created in God’s image. Men are the means of God’s work in the world, his agents, his servants – he has linked himself indissolubly to them. There is nothing like this in other faiths, certainly not in the Eastern religions or Islam. And the way of salvation is the way of man. That too is utterly unique; uniquely wonderful. Here we have Moses, a well-educated man, a strong man, a brave man, a loyal and faithful man, a devout man, a great man in every sense of the word. And by God’s grace this man will change the face of the world. And in his greatness and in his role as Mediator between Israel and God he will prefigure the One Man who is to come and who will save the world.

No other faith places human beings – you and I – in such an exalted role as does our faith. No other faith rests so much on your life and mine as does our faith. No other faith offers a Savior so like you and so like me as does the true faith as it is revealed in Holy Scripture. No other faith

is so concerned about the lives of human beings in every way as is our faith. No other faith places human beings next to God himself as does our faith, and supremely as does the incarnation of the Son of God. As the Psalmist said of man, “You made him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet...” That is said of man. It is later said of Jesus Christ, *THE man*. But it is said first of man himself. And it is no empty boast. God himself has made history revolve around what is done by men. The kingdom of God itself and the eternal life of God’s people come to pass by the accomplishments of men – men enabled by God to be sure – but men nonetheless. God has given men vice-regency in this world. And, so great is man, that he will remain a man forever, in weal or in woe. What honor, what importance God has bestowed upon man!

How terrible then man’s fall, to be sure, his rebellion against God. But how great is man when his life is lived in loyalty to God and in service of God’s kingdom. How much comes to pass, how much depends upon what men and women do for God and for God’s kingdom!

The Bible is a book about God from beginning to end. But, as a book about God, it is, from beginning to end, a book about men, and about what good men do and accomplish in this world. In that it is a summons to us to live consequential lives, lives of service to God and man, for that is how the kingdom of God comes to pass in this world. It is always the same: the good that is done, the progress made, it is the work of some man or woman, boy or girl. God has willed that it should be so and it is.