

# The Birth of Moses

Devotional Reading: Acts 7:17–29

Background Scripture: Exodus 1:15–2:10

Exodus 2:1–10

**1 And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi.**

**2 And the woman conceived, and bare a son: and when she saw him that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months.**

**3 And when she could not longer hide him, she took for him an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch, and put the child therein; and she laid it in the flags by the river's brink.**

**4 And his sister stood afar off, to wit what would be done to him.**

**5 And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash herself at the river; and her maidens walked along by the river's side; and when she saw the ark among the flags, she sent her maid to fetch it.**

**6 And when she had opened it, she saw the child: and, behold, the babe wept. And she had compassion on him, and said, This is one of the Hebrews' children.**

**7 Then said his sister to Pharaoh's daughter, Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee?**

**8 And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, Go. And the maid went and called the child's mother.**

**9 And Pharaoh's daughter said unto her, Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages. And the woman took the child, and nursed it.**

**10 And the child grew, and she brought him unto Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. And she called his name Moses: and she said, Because I drew him out of the water.**

## Key Text

*The woman conceived, and bare a son: and when she saw him that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months.—Exodus 2:2*

# God's Exceptional Choice

## Unit 2: Out of Slavery to Nationhood

Lessons 5–9

### Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Retell the account of Moses' infancy.
2. Explain how an injustice was avoided.
3. Make a concrete plan to act in response to an identified or potential injustice.

### Lesson Outline

#### Introduction

- A. Operation Varsity Blues
- B. Lesson Context

#### I. Unique Response (Exodus 2:1–4)

- A. Hidden at Home (vv. 1–2)
- B. Sheltered in the Stream (vv. 3–4)

#### II. Unexpected Rescue (Exodus 2:5–10)

- A. Daughter's Discovery (vv. 5–6)  
*The Power of Papyrus*
- B. Sister's Suggestion (vv. 7–9)  
*A Fish Out of Water*
- C. Son's Significance (v. 10)

#### Conclusion

- A. Aggressive Compassion
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

### How to Say It

Ahmoose*Ah-mohs.*

Amram*Am-ram.*

Jochebed*Jock-eh-bed.*

Mesopotamia*Mes-uh-puh-tay-me-uh.*

Miriam*Meer-ee-um.*

Midianites*Mid-ee-un-ites.*

Pithom*Py-thum.*

Rameses*Ram-ih-seez.*

Thutmose*Thut-mo-se.*

Pharaoh*Fair-o or Fay-roe.*

## Introduction

### A. Operation Varsity Blues

For many teenagers, the college admission process is the culmination of their many years of hard work. High school students spend years preparing in hopes of being accepted into their dream college or university. Entrance exams, scholarship essays, amateur athletic camps, and local community service all factor into the process, on top of a student's course load and GPA.

However, for other teenagers, the college admissions experience is all about their family's money and connections. In 2019, a scandal rocked the college admission world, revealing the ways that people were unjustly and illegally working the college admission process for their children. An FBI investigation—named Operation Varsity Blues—revealed that dozens of parents conspired to lie, bribe, and cheat in order to get their children into elite colleges and universities. By doing so, other students who had worked hard and earned their spot would be denied admission.

Evidence of life's injustices is all around us. When faced with these realities, the people of God are to respond with boldness and trust in the God who will, in His time, set injustices right

### B. Lesson Context

Centuries before the events of this lesson's Scripture text, God had promised Abraham, a nomadic herdsman from Mesopotamia, that his descendants would be numerous (Genesis 15:5, see lesson 1). One such descendant, Joseph (25:24), was removed from his ancestral land and taken to Egypt. Through God's power and directives, Joseph ended up in a position of high regard in service to the Egyptian pharaoh (41:41–57).

Ultimately, Joseph brought his extended family to live with him in Egypt (Genesis 50:22; Exodus 1:1–5). His descendants would become the Israelites. Centuries later, they "were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied ... and the land was filled with them" (1:7). God's promise of numerous descendants had become a reality.

Jacob's descendants would be in the land of Egypt for a total of 430 years (see Exodus 12:40). Eventually, a new pharaoh came to power and was concerned regarding the growth of the Israelite population (1:8–10).

The exact identity of the pharaoh in question is unknown. The construction of cities "Pithom and Raamses" (Exodus 1:11) has led some scholars to estimate that the pharaoh in question was Rameses II (approx. 1290–1224 BC). He oversaw vast construction projects and kept numerous slaves, realities that align with the first chapters of Exodus.

However, Scripture describes how Solomon began construction on the temple 480 years after the Israelites left Egypt (1 Kings 6:1). This timing would place the exodus at approximately

1447 BC, outside of the reign of Rameses II (compare Exodus 12:40–41; Galatians 3:17). Specific details regarding the exact timing of the exodus and the pharaoh involved may never be recovered.

The pharaoh in question saw the growing presence of Israelites as a threat. To suppress their increase in number and to exert power over them, the pharaoh established hard labor for the Israelites and placed slave masters over them (Exodus 1:11–14). The pharaoh’s oppressive treatment intensified in his declaration that “every son that is born ye shall cast into the river” (1:22).

Despite this oppression, God blessed Jacob’s descendants. Because of the shrewdness of Hebrew women (see Exodus 1:15–20), more Hebrew boys survived infancy than the pharaoh intended. Today’s Scripture text highlights the response of several women to the pharaoh’s unjust declaration. A seemingly small event—the birth of a child and his upbringing—served as the way by which God provided a just response to an unjust situation.

## **I. Unique Response** **(Exodus 2:1–4)**

### **A. Hidden at Home (vv. 1–2)**

#### **1. And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi.**

A later genealogical account provides the names this *man* and his *wife*: Amram and Jochebed (Exodus 6:20). Both were from the lineage of *Levi* (see Numbers 26:57–59).

After the people left Egypt, descendants of Levi would become priests (Exodus 28–30) and religious leaders (Deuteronomy 10:8–9) for the Israelites. This child would be in that same lineage.

#### **2. And the woman conceived, and bare a son: and when she saw him that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months.**

The survival of the woman’s *son* would be in doubt, considering the cruel decree from the pharaoh (Exodus 1:22; see Lesson Context). The text before us does not speak to the birth order of this child. Later texts indicate the presence of an older brother, Aaron (7:7), and an older sister (2:4, below).

The description of the *child* as *goodly* could speak to a variety of attributes. The underlying Hebrew word is elsewhere translated as “good”—a descriptor of God’s intentions in His creation (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, etc.). In this sense, the word could be describing how this child fulfilled God’s plans. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, translates that same Hebrew word into a Greek word that is used in the New Testament to describe the child as “fair” (Acts 7:20) and “proper” (Hebrews 11:23).

Furthermore, the word could also be speaking of the health of the child (compare 1 Samuel 9:2). However, physical appeal or beauty is not a measure for God’s call on a person (16:7, see lesson 9).

The child faced the infanticide of Pharaoh’s tyrannical declaration of Exodus 1:16. The fact that a nursing mother could hide her child for *three months* implied her ability to avoid long hours of outdoor labor described in Exodus 1:13–14. The author of Hebrews reflects on the actions of the child’s parents: “By faith Moses ... was hid three months of his parents, because they saw he was a proper child; and they were not afraid” (Hebrews 11:23).

### What Do You Think?

How should believers respond to human laws that contradict God's moral law?

### Digging Deeper

How do Exodus 1:15–21; Esther 3:12–4:17; Daniel 3; 6; Romans 13:1–7; and Titus 3:1 inform a believer's response to civil obedience or disobedience?

## B. Sheltered in the Stream (vv. 3–4)

**3. And when she could no longer hide him, she took for him an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch, and put the child therein; and she laid it in the flags by the river's brink.**

After three months, the baby could *no longer* stay hidden. The time had come for his parents to deal with the unjust realities of the pharaoh's command.

Ironically, the child's mother did follow the letter of the law of the pharaoh: she *did* cast her son into the river (compare Exodus 1:22). However, she did so in a manner that allowed for the child's survival, thus going against the *spirit* of the pharaoh's law.

The underlying Hebrew word translated as *ark* appears in one other Old Testament narrative: the ark of Noah (Genesis 6–9). In this verse, the ark was built to hold a small child; it was like a basket. In both instances, God provided for His people through an ark. Just as an ark saved Noah and his family from the waters of a flood, this ark would save a child from waters of the river.

The child's mother built the basket using common materials found in the region of the Nile River delta. *Bulrushes* of papyrus would have been obtained from the marshy wetlands of the river delta (compare Job 8:11). These were also used in the construction of seafaring vessels (Isaiah 18:2).

In order to seal the basket, the child's mother *daubed* the basket *with slime*—a sticky substance used in construction (see Genesis 11:3). Here, the substance served to bind the papyrus reeds together to form the vessel. *Pitch* was added as a waterproofing agent, fit to keep the interior of water-borne vessels and their passengers dry (compare 6:14).

In the harsh desert climate, the Nile River served as a key component of daily Egyptian life. The river provided water for drinking (Jeremiah 2:18), bathing (Exodus 2:5), irrigating (Isaiah 19:7), and livestock (Genesis 41:1–4). The river provided sustenance for daily life in general, and God would use the Nile to provide for Moses' life specifically.

Amid the slow moving, marshy waters of the *brink* of this river, *she laid* the papyrus basket. She would have to trust that God would protect her son.

Along the *river's* shore would have grown *flags* of reeds. By placing the basket here, the reeds provided protection and concealed the basket.

**4. And his sister stood afar off, to wit what would be done to him.**

We learn that the child had a *sister* (Miriam; Numbers 26:59). At this point in the narrative, specific details about her life are unknown. In this instance, she *stood afar* of the basket to keep an eye on her brother and take note of his eventual outcome: survival or death.

### What Do You Think?

When, if ever, might it be better for a believer to wait and see God's provision before addressing a situation?

### Digging Deeper

In what ways does this absolve a believer from action? In what ways does it not?

## II. Unexpected Rescue

(Exodus 2:5–10)

### A. Daughter's Discovery (vv. 5–6)

**5. And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash herself at the river; and her maidens walked along by the river's side; and when she saw the ark among the flags, she sent her maid to fetch it.**

The pharaoh would have had many partners, “wives,” and children. The relative power of any one child in the pharaoh's kingdom would have depended on the importance of that child's mother to the pharaoh. This *daughter of Pharaoh* may or may not have been a powerful woman in her father's kingdom (see Lesson Context). In any case, she was far more powerful than Moses' family—for better or worse.

Surely a royal princess would have more appropriate locations *to wash herself*—including royal bathhouses. Her motivations for bathing *at the river* are not obvious. Perhaps she was following the example of her father (see Exodus 7:15).

Most importantly, she noticed *the ark* floating *among the flags* of papyrus. Whether the child's mother and sister intended for him to be found by Egyptian royalty is unknown. The pharaoh's daughter was faced with a problem: abide by her father's commands regarding the treatment of Hebrew sons, or not.

### The Power of Papyrus

Have you considered the importance of papyrus? The plant flourishes in marshy areas like the lands surrounding the Nile River. On first glance, the tall, reed-like plant may not seem to be a valuable natural resource. However, the ancient Egyptians maximized the plant's use.

The plant's husk would be peeled, and the remaining parts would be cut into thin strips. The strips were flattened and left to dry under the sun. The resulting sheets, similar to modern paper, were used for writing. But the use of papyrus was not limited to the creation of paper. Ancient texts speak to its use in making shoes, in decorating buildings, and even during the mummification process.

If not for the papyrus basket and the papyrus rushes, the baby might have been killed. This insignificant plant protected this child through God's saving plan. What “insignificant” part of your daily life has God used to advance His plan? Are your eyes open to noticing it?

—T. Z. S.

**6. And when she had opened it, she saw the child: and, behold, the babe wept. And she had compassion on him, and said, This is one of the Hebrews' children.**

Given that the previous verse refers to both the pharaoh's daughter and "her maid," the antecedent of *she* who *had opened* the basket is unclear. Even if the pharaoh's daughter was not the specific individual who opened the basket, she would have been aware of the resulting interaction. Like any other 3-month-old child, *the babe wept*—perhaps he was startled, fearful, or even hungry.

Despite the ethnic and cultural differences between the child and the princess, a natural response to a vulnerable child is evident. Her privilege and position of power did not diminish her sense of *compassion* for the child. She recognized the child's ethnicity, whether because of his circumcision (see Genesis 17:10–13) or assumed heritage based on his abandonment. The recognition of their cultural differences did not prevent her from helping the child.

Throughout the Old Testament, calling an individual a Hebrew often came from a Gentile person (Genesis 39:14, 17; 41:12; Exodus 1:15–16; 1 Samuel 14:11, 21). Other times, the title was used in regard to the people's experience of slavery (Deuteronomy 15:12; Jeremiah 34:9, 14).

### **What Do You Think?**

What apparent need in your community fills you with a sense of compassion to respond?

### **Digging Deeper**

What is one action step that you can take to help address this need?

## **B. Sister's Suggestion (vv. 7–9)**

**7. Then said his sister to Pharaoh's daughter, Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee?**

From her outpost, the child's *sister* appeared. Her appearance presented a conundrum: why would *Pharaoh's daughter* listen to this strange girl? Further, why choose *a nurse of the Hebrew women* when Egyptian nurses were available for the pharaoh's daughter?

In ancient cultures a mother did not always have the ability to nurse and care for her child. In this case, a nurse was chosen to help both the child and the mother (compare Genesis 24:59). Powerful women might acquire a nurse to avoid the inconveniences of motherhood. However, the precise motives of the pharaoh's daughter desiring a nurse is unknown. In any case, if she was not recently pregnant, she could not have nursed the child.

This interaction linked the child's sister and mother with the Hebrew midwives—women who saved vulnerable babies (Exodus 1:15–17). Further, this text speaks to the resilience of the child's family as they made efforts to survive under hostile and unjust conditions.

By asking whether a Hebrew *may nurse the child*, the pharaoh's daughter was placed in a difficult position. Would she resist the pharaoh's tyranny and take pity on the child and the Hebrew woman who stood before her? Or, instead, would she follow the dehumanizing practices of her powerful father?

**8. And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, Go. And the maid went and called the child's mother.**

The irony of *the child's mother* sending him away, and then having the chance to nurse him would not have escaped the text's audiences. The vulnerable slave woman outwitted the imperial, death-bent system that desired the death of her son. Even more ironic was that this was achieved through the daughter of the very man who instituted the death decree. Audiences of all eras can appreciate the cleverness of the Hebrew women in this narrative.

**9. And Pharaoh's daughter said unto her, Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages. And the woman took the child, and nursed it.**

The attention of *Pharaoh's daughter* turned to the mother of *this child*. Whether the pharaoh's daughter suspected the true identity of this woman is unknown. By telling the baby's mother to *take* him could indicate that the pharaoh's daughter was filled with compassion and desired that the baby boy return to his people.

Because Moses' mother trusted God, she was rewarded. Not only would she raise her own *child*, but she would be given *wages* to care for him, paid out of the royal coffers. She would provide for her family, all while she preserved her son's life.

**What Do You Think?**

What needs do you see in your community that are too challenging for you to tackle alone?

**Digging Deeper**

Who will you recruit to assist you in this regard?

### C. Son's Significance (v. 10a–b)

**10a. And the child grew, and she brought him unto Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son.**

Not only did Jochebed provide for his emotional well-being, but *the child* also *grew*—in a physical sense, and perhaps in understanding of the God of his ancestors. This same God would one day appear to him and direct him (see Exodus 3:4–4:17).

However, the child's time with his mother had a limit. At a prescribed time, unstated by the text, his mother *brought him* to the royal house. The text does not explain the means by which *Pharaoh's daughter* adopted the child. The fact that no one else is mentioned as *he became her son* highlights the moral courage of these two women in the midst of an oppressive system.

As young Moses grew, he would live in the house of the pharaoh, away from his own people (see Exodus 2:11; Acts 7:23). The longer he remained in the pharaoh's household, the more familiar he became with the cultural mores of the Egyptians. At times he was assumed to be an Egyptian (see Exodus 2:19).

**What Do You Think?**

How might you "adopt" a young person from your community with the intention of listening to their possible plight?

**Digging Deeper**

What steps will you take regarding the appropriate action in response to your active listening?

### A Fish Out of Water

Have you ever had a "fish out of water" experience? I sure did when I moved to California. Before the move, I had lived my entire life in the Midwestern United States. I had a certain perspective on life—all based on the Midwestern culture.

After the move, I was ill-prepared for the cultural change. The West Coast culture felt faster and more tense than I was familiar with. After some time, the differences were too much for me to handle. I was ready to move back to a more comfortable culture. I wondered whether my discomfort was based on biblical principles or was a matter of preference.



Moses lived among three different cultures: the Israelites, the Egyptians, and the Midianites (see Exodus 2:11–25). God used each culture to shape him for future work. Are you attentive to how God might use different cultural contexts—even ones that you feel ill-prepared to handle—to shape you to better serve Him?

—C. R. B.

**10b. And she called his name Moses: and she said, Because I drew him out of the water.**

At last, the name of this child is revealed. Undoubtedly the child’s birth mother had given him a name. The text only tells us the *name* he was *called* by the pharaoh’s daughter: *Moses*. The meaning and history of the name is unclear.

As he was given this name by an Egyptian, we can assume connections to the Egyptian language. The Egyptian word for “son” sounds similar to his name. (This name can be seen in the endings of other Egyptian names like Ahmose and Thutmose.)

The name could have connections to the Hebrew language. A Hebrew word indicating being drawn *out of* and rescued from *the water* also sounds like the name (see 2 Samuel 22:17; Psalm 18:16).

Despite these uncertainties, the child’s name provides theological significance. Moses was rescued from certain death, and with God’s guidance, he would rescue his people from future dangers (see Exodus 6:1; 13:3).

## Conclusion

### A. Aggressive Compassion

The story surrounding Moses’ birth and upbringing triggers more questions than answers. One of the biggest unknowns concerns the motives of the pharaoh’s daughter and her desire to help. Scripture does not indicate whether she feared God or not.

Despite her connection to the governing power, she was not overcome by its brutal demands. She was a beneficiary of the same system that allowed the pharaoh to act oppressively. But she managed to defy her upbringing and provided a just response to an unjust situation.

However, the real heroines of this story are the child’s mother and sister. They took great risk to protect Moses. They trusted that God would see their response to the injustice and provide a way out. Their bold actions gave way to the bold actions from the daughter of Egyptian royalty.

God provides justice where injustice reigns. He invites His people to reflect His character by taking bold (and sometimes risky) steps to protect and care for vulnerable individuals. The justice that God requires of His people is not hypothetical—it is active and embodied.

### B. Prayer

God of justice, we ask that You strengthen our compassion to respond to the vulnerable members of our community. Show us how we might be instruments of Your justice and peace to those who experience injustice. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

### C. Thought to Remember

Reflect God's just character by responding to your most vulnerable neighbors.