



Moses' Birth Background Article



Background Bible references:

Genesis 15:12-16; Genesis 45:4-11; 16-20; Genesis 46:1-7; Genesis 47:1-6, 11-12;
Genesis 50: 7-8, 15, 19-26

Arrivals and Departures from Goshen Terminal, walking of course!

Flight 1876BC: Route: Canaan – Goshen

Departure: Dawn; Direct route

Passenger list: 70 Hebrew men + wives, children, livestock

Flight 1406BC: Route: Goshen – Midian

Departure: ASAP; Direct route

Passenger list: 1 male, age 40 of Hebrew ethnicity, dressed as an Egyptian

Flight 1445BC: Route: Midian – Goshen

Direct route

Passenger list: 2 males, 80's Hebrew

Flight 1446BC: Route: Goshen – Canaan

Departure: First light; Indirect route avoiding potential conflict zone

Passenger list: 600,000 men + wives, children, 'others', livestock,

The Story so Far

Around 350 years earlier, Joseph had gone to Egypt after being sold as a slave by his brothers. (His own brothers! Really! And this was God's **chosen** family?! That must give hope to the rest of us!)

About 20 years later, the rest of his family followed, due to a 7 year famine in the Near East. They took everything with them as they were still nomadic, and this was for a minimum of 5 years, as they were only 2 years into the famine. However, they continued to live there long after the famine had ended, despite it not being the land promised to their great grandfather Abraham. Had they become too comfortable to leave or did God have a long-term purpose in leaving them there? There are clues that there was a bigger picture here.¹

Like any parent, God wanted to give his children the best possible start in life. As this family grew into a confederation of tribes, he wanted their neighbours and the surrounding culture to be a good, rather than a bad influence on them. Of all the lands in the Near and Middle East, Egypt was the best choice in that respect. The Egyptians had strong family values and their religion was respectful of human life. There was no temple prostitution as in the other religions, and no human sacrifice as sometimes occurred in Canaanite religion. They also weren't particularly interested in inter-marriage, as they considered themselves superior to foreigners, so the Israelites would not be in danger of losing their individual identity.

¹ Genesis 15:13-15

Pharaoh

'A new king rose who did not know Joseph'. Exodus 1:8-16, 22

Egypt was a good place to live, unless you were a slave. It had started out alright. When the Israelites first arrived in Egypt, they were given a very warm welcome by Pharaoh. It's a fair assumption that they were treated well for some years after Joseph's death, because he had done much to strengthen the power of the Middle Kingdom pharaohs.²

However, nothing lasts forever, the dynasty grew weak and lost power to the nobles in the south and a group of Semitic people in the north called the Hyksos or 'foreigners'. Eventually an Egyptian noble from Thebes, named Ahmose, gained power and drove out the Hyksos but not the Israelites. We don't know which ruler first enslaved them, whether it was the Hyksos or Ahmose, but it continued for many decades.

What was Pharaoh so afraid of, and why did he not want them to leave? He obviously wanted to prevent the possibility of another take-over of Egypt by a Semitic group, but why not drive out all the foreigners? The fact that the Hebrews were still seen as foreigners, even after 400 years, shows that there had been little or no integration into the culture or inter-marriage between the races.

Bullies and oppressors are often motivated by fear. They also want to be in control. The economy of Egypt benefitted by their presence, especially after their enslavement. Slaves had been used by Egyptians for centuries, but it now took on a new level.

Slavery

One of the tragedies of the human condition is the way that the strong, that is to say the wealthy and the victors, often exploit others. War and poverty were key factors, as well as kidnapping, which still happens in our world today. We were all created equal in value, but there have always been those who aim to be above as many people as possible.

The labourers who built the pyramids during the Old Kingdom weren't slaves but ordinary Egyptian peasants who worked there in the flood season when they couldn't tend their land. It was seen as working for their god-king and therefore a religious duty. No doubt the pay was the minimum wage or less.

The Ancient Egyptians considered themselves superior to other races. They were happy to employ them as craftsmen and they certainly used them as slaves. Household slaves were usually treated fairly well. It was a different matter for those who worked on the community projects.

It is possible that it was the Hyksos who initially enslaved the Israelites, as their numbers could have been a threat to them. On the other hand, it could have been the pharaohs of the New Kingdom, once they had managed to drive out the Hyksos, wanting to prevent this problem reoccurring. They did not drive the Israelites out at the same time, so either they were already slaves, or they used slavery to solve the potential problem and for economic gain. They certainly did not want them to leave.

² Genesis 47:13-26

From beginning of the New Kingdom, prisoners of war made bricks for royal projects, which is difficult, labour intensive work. Tomb paintings show this work being done by Nubians and Semites some of whom would have been Israelites. Quotas did not aim to be realistic, were rarely reached, and simply show the lack of regard for the lives of the slaves.

Egyptian values which included respect for human life can be seen in the 'Book of the Dead' but whether that included non-Egyptians is another matter and a strong pharaoh would not worry about such matters. It certainly did not necessarily apply to slaves.

1. Midwives of the Hebrews

My great grandmother Caroline Hemmings, born in 1840, could neither read nor write but she was a highly skilled midwife and the local doctors acknowledged that she was better at dealing with difficult births than they were. In later life she passed an oral examination instead of a written one, and was given a brass plaque stating that she was a qualified midwife. She would not only deliver the baby, but sometimes prepare a meal for the family if needed!

Medicine in ancient Egypt was generally much more advanced than elsewhere, but not when it came to childbirth. Midwifery is one of the oldest professions with experienced women training the younger ones. They would be assisted by female relatives of the woman in labour. Men, even doctors were unlikely to be present. Their work included emotional support, encouragement, medical care, and religious help.

Women used a simple 'birthing stool' called an 'obhnayim' which was just 2 stones or bricks. It was probably similar to the 'kuru elwiladeh', or 'birth-seat', still used in rural areas in Egypt today. Ancient Egyptian ones were elaborately decorated with relevant goddesses.

As childbirth was dangerous for both mother and baby, Egyptians called upon the help of a number of their gods, through prayers, special ritual practices, magical objects, and spells such as this one:

Egyptian Spell to Assist the Birth Process:

"Come down, placenta, come down! I am Horus who conjures in order that she who is giving birth becomes better than she was, as if she were already delivered...Look, Hathor will lay her hand on her with an amulet of health! I am Horus who saves her!"

Repeat four times over a Bes-amulet, placed on the brow of the woman in labour.

"Make the heart of the deliverer strong, and keep alive the one that is coming."

The phrase 'Hebrew midwives', could be translated as 'midwives of the Hebrews'. Were these midwives Hebrew or Egyptian? We can't be sure. Shifra and Puah are Semitic names but would Pharaoh really have expected Hebrew woman to kill their own kind? Jewish historian Josephus said they were Egyptian which would make it all the more remarkable that they defied Pharaoh's order to kill all Hebrew baby boys. When he challenged them over this:

¹⁹The midwives answered Pharaoh, "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive." Exodus 1:19

Pharaoh in his ignorance, and respectful of their expertise, especially with its' important religious overtones, believed them! Rock on, Shifra and Puah! A population of this size would need more than 2 midwives so maybe they were the spokeswomen. They risked their own lives to save the lives of many babies and God rewarded them for this by giving them families of their own.

- Like the medical staff in the time of the coronavirus and other plagues, these midwives risked their lives to save others. Can you think of other people who have done/do this?

Hebrew Lives Matter!

I wonder if some Egyptians were shocked at Pharaoh's actions. They may not have known about his instruction to the Hebrew midwives, but the next order was a national proclamation and went completely against Egyptian ethics, depending on whether you regarded slaves as human beings or not.

In any nation, there will be those who have compassion towards all and those who will not. Would an order to kill new-born boys be seen as a contradiction of their moral code? Egyptians believed that they would be judged by many of the gods when they died, and they had to declare their innocence of a long list of wrongdoings, including killing, terrorising, causing affliction or grief, taking milk from the mouths of babe and not 'eating the heart' which probably means not ignoring their conscience. What should they do if their Pharaoh was ordering them to break this code? Unless you saw slaves as sub-human, which some no doubt would!

2. Moses' mother

Sons were highly prized, but at least Jochebed³ had 3-year-old Aaron so I wonder if she had been praying for a girl due to the royal edict? The prospect of losing a new-born to a murdering king must have cast a huge shadow over the pregnancy. Infant mortality was high in those days, and there was no guarantee that a baby would survive the birthing process anyway. But no, this baby was strong, and had something special about him. Jochebed may have still been quite young, perhaps in her 20's. It took a great deal of faith to do what she did. She had to trust God enough to let go of her precious baby without knowing if he would live or die. Not only that, but had they been caught, the whole family could have been in danger.

She planned it carefully. They lived in the Nile delta, not far from the city of Ramses where pharaoh had a palace. She knew the local riverbank, that it was safe for bathing and was used by some of the royal family. The Egyptians valued cleanliness, so palaces had baths, and even showers facilitated by servant with jugs of warm water. Royal children learned to swim, and this could have been the reason for the visit of the princess. It was a calculated risk. She took a small basket⁴ made from papyrus reeds, which were also used to make boats at that time. Like Noah when he built his great ark, she waterproofed it with tar, and placed it carefully in a safe area midst the reeds, near where she knew the royal family might

³ It is unclear whether Amron and Jochebed were Moses direct parents or amongst his ancestors.

⁴ Uses the same word as 'ark' in Noah's story.

visit. She had to rely entirely on the reaction of whoever found him. At 3 months Moses was a lovely baby, full of smiles and taking an interest in everything around him. Would he appeal to a royal lady, who would obviously need a wet nurse if she were to take him into her household?

- What hopes and fears might Moses' mother have had for him?

3. Miriam

How old was Miriam do you think? Her younger brother Aaron was 3 and she may not have been many years older. We don't know.

This was a nerve-racking task for one so young. Her native language was Hebrew, how much Egyptian could she speak? Had her mum coached her in what to say to her if she had the opportunity?

It must have taken a good deal of courage to speak to the princess but her love for her baby brother was strong and helped her to find the courage.

If the princess took a liking to the baby, would she accept an offer for the girl to find a suitable woman to feed the child. This was common practice for royal and wealthy families anyway. There was no formula milk in those days!

- How do you think Miriam would have felt?

4. Pharaoh's daughter

Who was she?

There were few people who could have safely rescued a Hebrew baby, and provided for him in the way that Pharaoh's daughter did. Her role was crucial and yet we know nothing about her, except that she had royal status and even that is obscure.

We don't know her name, age, or marital status - Egyptian girls were usually married young, or whether she had children of her own already or not. She could have been longing for a child of her own, or a mother who could not resist another adorable baby.

There is some speculation that she may have been the Princess Hatshepsut, the only child of Thutmose I's primary wife Ahmose, who became a powerful queen during the reign of her stepson Thutmose III. However, Pharaoh had many daughters, as the pharaohs of the New Kingdom maintained residences and harem in a number of cities and it is more likely that she was one of these. All royal children enjoyed status, respect and were much valued whether they were born of the Queen or a lady in Pharaoh's harem. It was important to him to have plenty of children, and they were his pride and joy, often usefully employed in the royal 'firm' engaged in constructive work. Ramses II had over 100 children!

Exodus simply calls her the '**Bat-Paroh**' which is Hebrew for 'daughter of Pharaoh'.

Josephus names her as Thermuthis, the Greek name for Renenutet, the Egyptian snake god. However, there is an interesting verse in 1 Chronicles 4:18 which refers to a daughter of Pharaoh marrying an Israelite.

*1 Chronicles 4:17-18: The sons of 'Ezrah: Yeter, Mered, 'Efer and Yalon. These are the sons of **Bityah the daughter of Pharaoh**, whom Mered took as his wife: CJB*

This woman is named as **Batyah** (Bityah/Bithiah) which is Hebrew for 'daughter of Yahweh'; evidence that she had changed her religion. Could she be the lady who adopted Moses? Jewish tradition says that she was the same person and had in fact set out that morning to bathe in the Nile for ritual purification in order to convert to Judaism. There could well have been a number of Egyptians who did change their religion, due to the presence of the Hebrews, especially in later years when they were witnesses to the power of their almighty God.

We know for certain that God timed her arrival at the river exactly right so that this baby would be saved in good time. There is no hint that she feared Pharaoh's anger for ignoring the edict. After all, she was his beloved daughter, and it was just one baby!

Wet nurses

If the mother of a newborn died, or was unable to feed her baby, it was essential to find a wet nurse within the community, as animal milk is not suitable and of course there was no formula milk. It was not unusual for wealthy Egyptian families to do this. In some cases, the child lived with their nurse until they were weaned at about 3 years of age. If the nurse was hired by the royal household, she might move to the palace with her family who benefitted from this relationship, especially if the baby was the heir. In Exodus it is clear that Moses lived with his mother, who could now look after him without fear, and he joined the royal household when he was 3 years old.

Naming the baby

What name would you choose for a lost baby if you found one?

Moses' family would have named him when he was born. Jewish tradition says that he was given four names at birth, one by each of his family members and that his mother named him Tuvyah, which means good for "She saw that he was good." Curiously, the name by which he has always been known, is the one given to him by Pharaoh's daughter. His parents would have been so relieved that he was now safe from harm, that they surely happily embraced a new name.

Pharaoh's daughter naturally chose an Egyptian name. Mose/mesu in Egyptian means, to bear, to give birth. Translating ancient languages is tricky so spellings vary. This name was often combined with another, such as that of a god. This format was very popular with the pharaohs such as Ahmose (Ah, the moon god), Ramose (Re, the sun god) and Thutmose (Thoth). On its own, the name 'Mose' means 'son'. It was easily translated into Hebrew as it has the same root, and it is spelt Moshe. (cf. Miriam, Mary, Marie, Maria are all the same name)

It's possible that the princess originally gave Moses a longer name such as Hapmose or Irumose, both of which mean 'one born of the Nile' and that he later shortened it because he did not wish to be known by the name of an Egyptian god. However, the name Mose/Mes can be found on its own in New Kingdom documents. She may have known the Akkadian 'Legend of Sargon' whose mother placed him in a basket on the Euphrates River until he

was drawn from the water by a gardener for Ur-Zababa, the king of the Sumerian city of Kish and later became king himself.

Sometimes upon adopting young children, parents change their names. Some people change their own names. Sometimes God give a person a new name.

- Do you know anyone whose name has changed?

Moses upbringing and education

“Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.” Acts 7:22 NIV

Moses needed to have a good education for the roles to which God would call him. Only by being adopted by a member of the royal family could this come about, and this would not have happened under normal circumstances.

Egypt had had a strong education system for centuries. As an adopted prince, Moses was given the best education available anywhere in the world at that time. All boys from wealthy families attended school from the age of 7 and were taught a wide range of subjects. Outdoor sports included swimming, horse riding, hunting and archery. There was a ‘Princes School’, but royals also had private tutors such as retired officers or court officials.

Priests would teach morality, wisdom, philosophy, and ethics, all of which were highly regarded in Egypt, as well as religious education in the many gods of Egypt. Wisdom was considered to come from valuing justice, integrity, and truth. Children were taught to honour and respect the gods from a young age. Egyptians cherished something called Ma'at, a sense of good order and harmony in both the conduct of their private affairs and their political institutions.

Scribes taught arithmetic, geometry, cartography, geography, science, astronomy, astrology, history, music, and even ceremonial dance. Moses would have learnt hieroglyphics and possibly other languages. We can safely assume that he knew how to write Hebrew, as well as speak it. There is evidence too, of public speech training which is interesting in light of the fact that he claimed a lack of eloquence. Maybe he didn't do well in this subject!

I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.” Exodus 4:10

Higher education was available for the upper classes. It was focused on producing skilled practitioners so there were specialist schools to train boys as doctors or architects. One such school was known as “Instruction of Wisdom.” and consisted of lessons on morality and ethics, possibly for future priests. Princes would learn skills to enable them to help run the country.

Presumably Moses finished his education by the age of around 20 or so. We don't know what he did for the next 20 years as he didn't flee to Midian until he was 40. Josephus believes that he had military experience in a war against Ethiopia, amongst other duties.

A story of adoption from 'Adopted by God' by Jasia Gazda

Tatusiek continued. "But kochana, the story of your coming to us in a beautiful one. It is a miracle, the greatest in our lives. Listen to it, Jasia!"

"On a wet morning in 1951, Mamuska was kneeling on the stone floor of the attic in the apartment where we used to live. She was crying. It was the saddest day of her life. The doctors had said we could not have children."

"In the Old Testament, a lady called Hannah asked God for a baby and God gave her one. Mamuska knew the story so she prayed the same prayer as Hannah. She said: "If you would give me a child, Lord, I promise you one thing: this child would belong to you."

"That day, so long ago, Mamuska felt certain God would answer her prayer too, so she put on her coat and scarf and went outside. As she walked through the wind and rain, she saw Aunt Mila walking towards, her pushing a pram.

"Why do you have the baby out in this dreadful weather?' Mamuska asked.

"I have no choice. I'm taking this child to the orphanage', Aunt Mila said. She had just become a widow for the second time, and she had to go to hospital because of a terrible illness. We think it was cancer. Her older child, a little girl, could stay with relatives but no one could care for you Jasia. So Mamuska offered to take you. Aunt Mila knew we would give you a home full of love and care. That very afternoon, Mamuska brought you to our house and Aunt Mila came as well to finalise everything.

Mamuska finished the story. "Do you see the miracle Jasia? I left home with a prayer in my heart and came home with a baby in my arms. Could any story be more wonderful? God gave you to us! Kochana, I will never forget your first hour in our home. You lay in your pram and, all of a sudden, you lifted your thin little arms to be picked up. But it was not your... it was not Aunt Mila you reached for. It was me. When I lifted you up you nestled against my shoulder as though you had done so all your life. Aunt Mila watched you and said "I believe this is God's answer for Jasia's life. Who knows what kind of life I could give her? I don't even know if I will have much of a life myself.

Sources and further information

Moses and the gods of Egypt: John J Davies

'Adopted by God': Jasia Gazda with Sara Bruce, p 60-62

<https://www.chabad.org>

<https://www.internationalstandardbible.com/M/midwife.html>

<https://www.midwiferysupplies.ca/blogs/ancient-midwifery-blog/295322-ancient-egyptian-midwifery-and-childbirth>

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/midwife/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/06/science/ancient-birth-bricks-found-in-egypt.html>

<https://www.behindthename.com/name/moses>

<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/people/related-articles/was-moses-name-egyptian>

<https://givemehistory.com/education-in-ancient-egypt>

<https://historyswomen.com/miscellaneous-articles/thermuthis/>

<https://www.ancient-egypt-online.com/education-ancient-egypt.html>

Writer: Brenda Lord

Image: Microsoft clip art