

CHAPTER 2

1 **A**nd a man from the house of Levi went and took a Levite daugh-
2 ter, and the woman conceived and bore a son, and she saw that
3 he was goodly, and she hid him three months. And when she
could no longer hide him, she took a wicker ark for him and caulked
it with resin and pitch and placed the child in it and placed it in the
4 reeds by the banks of the Nile. And his sister stationed herself at a dis-

1. *took*. This verb is commonly used in biblical Hebrew for taking a wife, even when “wife” is elided, as here. It is worth translating literally because the verb is echoed in the woman’s “taking” the wicker ark (verse 3) and in the Egyptian slavegirl’s “taking” the ark (verse 5).

3. *she took a wicker ark . . . and caulked it with resin and pitch*. The basket in which the infant is placed is called a *tevah*, ark, the same word used for Noah’s ark. (It may be an Egyptian loanword. Such borrowed terms abound in the story, giving it local color. The most prominent is the word for “Nile,” *ye’or*.) As numerous commentators have observed, the story of Moses begins with a pointed allusion to the Flood story. In Genesis, a universal deluge nearly destroys the whole human race. Here, Pharaoh’s decree to drown every Hebrew male infant threatens to destroy the people of Israel. As the ark in Genesis bears on the water the saving remnant of humankind, the child borne on the waters here will save his imperiled people. This narrative recapitulates the Flood story, itself a quasi-epic narrative of global scope, in the transposed key of a folktale: the story of a future ruler who is hidden in a basket floating on a river has parallels in Hittite, Assyrian, and Egyptian literature, and approximate analogues in many other cultures. Otto Rank sees the basket as a womb image and the river water as an externalization of the amniotic fluid. Psychoanalytic speculation apart, it is clear from the story that water plays a decisive thematic role in Moses’s career. He is borne safely on the water, which Pharaoh had imagined would be the very means to destroy all the

tance to see what would be done to him. And Pharaoh's daughter came 5
 down to bathe in the Nile, her maidens walking along the Nile. And
 she saw the ark amidst the reeds and sent her slavegirl and took it.
 And she opened it up and saw the child, and, look, it was a lad weep- 6
 ing. And she pitied him and said, "This is one of the children of the
 Hebrews." And his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and 7
 summon a nursing woman from the Hebrews that she may suckle the
 child for you?" And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go." And the girl 8
 went and summoned the child's mother. And Pharaoh's daughter said 9
 to her, "Carry away this child and suckle him for me, and I myself will
 pay your wages." And the woman took the child and suckled him.
 And the child grew, and she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter and he 10
 became a son to her, and she called his name Moses, "For from the
 water I drew him out."

Hebrew male children. His floating among the reeds (*suf*) foreshadows the miraculous triumph over the Egyptians that he will lead in the parting of the Sea of Reeds (*yam suf*). His obtaining water for the thirsting people will figure prominently in the Wilderness stories.

6. *and saw the child*. The Masoretic text has "she saw him, the child," but other ancient versions show "saw" without the accusative masculine suffix.

and, look, it was a lad weeping. "Lad," *na'ar*, is more typically used for an older child or a young man, but it may be employed here to emphasize the discovery—"and look," *wehineh*—that this is a male child. (It might also be relevant that *na'ar* occurs elsewhere as a term of parental tenderness referring to a vulnerable child.) The fact that this is a male child left hidden in a basket would be the clue to the princess and her entourage that he belongs to the Hebrews against whom the decree of infanticide has been issued. Nahum Sarna notes that this is the sole instance in the Bible in which the verb "to weep" is used for an infant, not an adult.

10. *And the child grew*. The verb clearly indicates his reaching the age of weaning, which would have been around three. This might have been long enough for the child to have acquired Hebrew as his first language. The same verb "grew" in verse 11 refers to attaining adulthood.

became a son to her. The phrase indicates adoption, not just an emotional attachment.

Moses. This is an authentic Egyptian name meaning "the one who is born,"

11 And it happened at that time that Moses grew and went out to his
 12 brothers and saw their burdens. And he saw an Egyptian man striking
 13 a Hebrew man of his brothers. And he turned this way and that and saw
 14 that there was no man about, and he struck down the Egyptian and
 buried him in the sand. And he went out the next day, and, look, two
 Hebrew men were brawling, and he said to the one in the wrong, "Why
 should you strike your fellow?" And he said, "Who set you as a man
 prince and judge over us? Is it to kill me that you mean as you killed
 the Egyptian?" And Moses was afraid and he thought, "Surely, the thing

and hence "son." The folk etymology relates it to the Hebrew verb *mashah*, "to draw out from water." Perhaps the active form of the verb used for the name *mosheh*, "he who draws out," is meant to align the naming with Moses's future destiny of rescuing his people from the water of the Sea of Reeds.

12. *and saw there was no man about.* Although the obvious meaning is that he wanted to be sure the violent intervention he intended would go unobserved, some interpreters have proposed, a little apologetically, that he first looked around to see if there was anyone else to step forward and help the beaten Hebrew slave. "About" is merely implied in the Hebrew. In any case, there is a pointed echoing of "man" (*'ish*)—an Egyptian man, a Hebrew man, and no man—that invites one to ponder the role and obligations of a man as one man victimizes another. When the fugitive Moses shows up in Midian, he will be identified, presumably because of his attire and speech, as "an Egyptian man."

13. *Why should you strike your fellow?* The first dialogue assigned to a character in biblical narrative typically defines the character. Moses's first speech is a reproof to a fellow Hebrew and an attempt to impose a standard of justice (*rasha'*, "the one in the wrong," is a legal term).

14. *Who set you as a man prince and judge over us?* These words of the brawler in the wrong not only preface the revelation that Moses's killing of the Egyptian is no secret but also adumbrate a long series of later incidents in which the Israelites will express resentment or rebelliousness toward Moses. Again, "man" is stressed. Later, "the man Moses" will become a kind of epithet for Israel's first leader.

thing. The Hebrew *davar* variously means "word," "thing," "matter," "affair," and much else.

has become known.” And Pharaoh heard of this thing and he sought to 15
 kill Moses, and Moses fled from Pharaoh’s presence and dwelled in the
 land of Midian, and he sat down by the well. And the priest of Midian 16
 had seven daughters, and they came and drew water and filled the
 troughs to water their father’s flock. And the shepherds came and drove 17
 them off, and Moses rose and saved them and watered their
 flock. And they came to Reuel their father, and he said, “Why have you 18

15. *Midian*. The geographical location of this land in different biblical refer-
 ences does not seem entirely fixed, perhaps because the Midianites were
 seminomads. Moses’s country of refuge would appear to be a semidesert
 region bordering Egypt on the east, to the west by northwest of present-day
 Eilat.

sat down by the well. The verb *yashav*, “sat down,” is identical with the pre-
 vious verb in this sentence, where it reflects its other meaning, “to dwell” or
 “to settle.” It makes sense for the wayfarer to pause to rest and refresh himself
 at an oasis as Moses does here. “The well” has the idiomatic force of “a cer-
 tain well.”

16. *seven daughters . . . came and drew water*. By this point, the ancient audi-
 ence would have sufficient signals to recognize the narrative convention of the
 betrothal type-scene (compare Abraham’s servant and Rebekah, Genesis 24,
 and Jacob and Rachel, Genesis 29): the future bridegroom, or his surrogate,
 encounters a nubile young woman, or women, at a well in a foreign land; water
 is drawn; the woman hurries to bring home news of the stranger’s arrival; he is
 invited to a meal; the betrothal is agreed on. In keeping with the folktale styl-
 ization of the Moses story, the usual young woman is multiplied by the for-
 mulaic number seven.

17. *the shepherds came and drove them off*. Only in this version of the betrothal
 scene is there an actual struggle between hostile sides at the well. Moses’s
 intervention to “save” (*hoshi’a*) the girls accords perfectly with his future role
 as commander of the Israelite forces in the wilderness and the liberator,
moshi’a, of his people.

18. *Why have you hurried back today?* With great narrative economy, the
 expected betrothal-scene verb, “to hurry,” *miher*, occurs not in the narrator’s
 report but in Reuel’s expression of surprise to his daughters.

19 hurried back today?” And they said, “An Egyptian man rescued us from the hands of the shepherds, and, what’s more, he even drew water for
 20 us and watered the flock.” And he said to his daughters, “And where is
 21 he? Why did you leave the man? Call him that he may eat bread.” And
 Moses agreed to dwell with the man, and he gave Zipporah his daugh-
 22 ter to Moses. And she bore a son, and he called his name Gershom, for
 he said, “A sojourner have I been in a foreign land.”

23 And it happened when a long time had passed that the king of Egypt
 died, and the Israelites groaned from the bondage and cried out, and

19. *he even drew water for us and watered the flock.* Their report highlights the act of drawing water, the Hebrew stressing the verb by stating it in the infinitive before the conjugated form—*daloh dalah* (in this translation, “even drew”). The verb is different from *mashah*, the term associated with Moses’s name, because it is the proper verb for drawing water, whereas *mashah* is used for drawing something out of water. In any case, this version of the scene at the well underscores the story of a hero whose infancy and future career are intimately associated with water.

20. *Call him that he may eat bread.* “Call” here has its social sense of “invite,” and “bread” is the common biblical synecdoche for “food.” Reuel’s eagerness to show hospitality indicates that he is a civilized person, and in the logic of the type-scene, the feast offered the stranger will lead to the betrothal.

21. *Zipporah.* The name means “bird.”

22. *Gershom . . . A sojourner have I been.* In keeping with biblical practice, the naming-speech reflects folk etymology, breaking the name into *ger*, “sojourner,” and *sham*, “there,” though the verbal root of the name *g-r-sh* would appear to refer to banishment.

23. *bondage.* The Hebrew *‘avodah* is the same term rendered as “work” in chapter 1.

their plea from the bondage went up to God. And God heard their 24
 moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with
 Isaac, and with Jacob. And God saw the Israelites, and God knew. 25

24. *moaning*. The Hebrew *na'aqah* is a phonetic cousin (through metathesis) to the word for groaning, *'anaḥiah*, reflected in the previous verse, an effect this translation tries to simulate through rhyme.

24–25. Until this point, God has not been evident in the story. Now He is the subject of a string of significant verbs—hear, remember (which in the Hebrew has the strong force of “take to heart”), see, and know. The last of these terms marks the end of the narrative segment with a certain mystifying note—sufficiently mystifying that the ancient Greek translators sought to “correct” it—because it has no object. “God knew,” but what did He know? Presumably, the suffering of the Israelites, the cruel oppression of history in which they are now implicated, the obligations of the covenant with the patriarchs, and the plan He must undertake to liberate the enslaved people. And so the objectless verb prepares us for the divine address from the burning bush and the beginning of Moses’s mission.