



edited by Athalya Brenner

dangerous threat to paternal power, the reason for narrative and resulting in a permanent barrier of separation. At the daughter's instigation, the son has cast aside perpetual security, in an outright rejection of the father and his authority. It is at this junction that the two interwoven subtexts merge.

The original commandment to be fruitful and multiply is transformed into the structures of taboo, transgression and punishment. Adam is now a laborer, and Eve is ordered into the creation of family, her presence as daughter permanently eliminated. Significantly, from now on (with the exception of the anomalous story of Ibsan [Judg. 12.9]), biblical fathers assiduously avoid giving daughters away. In fact, the Hebrew Bible avoids daughters almost altogether. Indeed, a father and daughter do not re-enter Genesis until the incestuous tale of Lot.⁴⁰ By then, however, the text has rationalized deflected desire: Lot is 'blamelessly' seduced by his daughters, just as Adam was unwittingly seduced by the woman he fathered.

40. Another mention of 'daughter' precedes that of Lot, but it is the collective catastrophe of Gen. 6.4 brought about by the '[generic] daughters of men'. In this odd (and obscure) fragment, the 'sons of God' are seduced by desire for the 'daughters of men', and their corrupt but heroic offspring provide the motive for God's decision to destroy humanity by the flood. Here, as elsewhere, the problem revolves around a woman positionally coded as 'daughter'.

Every son that is born you shall expose on the Nile, but every daughter you shall let live' (Exod. 1.22).¹ With these words, an Egyptian pharaoh hoped to check the uncanny growth of the Hebrews. P. Trible remarks that had Pharaoh anticipated the effectiveness of women in thwarting this decree, he might better have commanded that all female infants be killed.² The present study seeks to illuminate the role of women in Exod. 1.8–2.10, the story of events surrounding the birth of Moses. It investigates the narrative in its present form on the premise that an understanding of its literary contours will aid us in perceiving its meaning. Analyses that divide the material between the pentateuchal sources, J, E and P, and discussions of the growth of the tradition are available in the commentaries, and it is not my intention to delve into these matters here. There are, to be sure, logical inconsistencies and tensions in the narrative which bear witness to a long and complicated process of development. As they meet us in the narrative now, however, they contribute to

'YOU SHALL LET EVERY DAUGHTER LIVE':
A STUDY OF EXODUS 1.8–2.10
J. Cheryl Exum

* This article appeared first in *Semina* 28 (1993), pp. 63–82, and is reprinted here by permission of Scholars Press.

1. This study was completed during a research leave, 1980–81, at the Albright Institute of Archaeological Research in Jerusalem, supported by a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and was presented in somewhat different form as a paper for discussion in the Women and Religion/Liberation Theology section at the 1981 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion.

2. P. Trible, 'Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation', *JAR 41* (1973), p. 34.

its richness, its irony and its humor, and, as in the case of Moses' sister, who appears suddenly out of nowhere, they surprise us by giving the story a new direction. The present analysis likewise does not endeavor to elucidate the historical background of the narrative. The value of the early chapters of Exodus for historical reconstructions is a much debated issue, and one about which I am highly skeptical. I am interested rather in the Israelite view of events which finds expression in Exodus 1 and 2.

Discussion of women in Exodus 1.8-2.10 requires consideration of their place within the total configuration of the narrative—a narrative that does not become a woman's story until 1.15, and even then, has as its goal the birth of a son who will become the leader of his people. Though space does not permit an adequate analysis of it, we must keep in mind as well the larger context. Exodus 1.1-2.25, the prologue proper to the exodus.³ As the book of Exodus opens, part of the promise to the patriarchs has been fulfilled (Israel has become a great nation), and interest is aroused concerning that part of the promise which has yet to reach consummation (that Israel will possess the land of Canaan). The prologue has three parts. (1) Exodus 1.1-7 points back to Gen. 46.8-27, 47.27 and 50.22-26, and provides the transition from the patriarchal period. (2) Exodus 1.8-2.10 sets forth the problem of Egyptian oppression and recounts the birth of the hero, Moses, who will be instrumental in its resolution, and (3) Exodus 2.11-25 deals with events that occur later, when Moses is an adult. Exodus 1.8-2.10 is thus the centerpiece of the prologue. It is set off from its surrounding context by

3. See M. Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus* (New York: Behrman House, 1969), pp. 57-59; C. G. W. Coats, 'A Structural Transition in Exodus', VT 22 (1972), pp. 129-42; C. Isbell, 'Exodus 1-2 in the Context of Exodus 14: Story Lines and Key Words', in D. J. A. Clines, D. M. Gunn and A. J. Hauser (eds.), *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature* (SOTSUP, 19; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982), pp. 44-53. For verbal and thematic allusions to the patriarchal and pre-patriarchal periods and to the deliverance from Egypt, see esp. J. S. Ackerman, 'The Literary Context of the Moses Birth Story (Exodus 1-2)', in K. R. Gros Louis with J. S. Ackerman and T. S. Warsaw (eds.), *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), pp. 74-119; Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, pp. 18-66; U. Cassuto, *A Commentary of the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), pp. 7-21; Coats, 'A Structural Transition', pp. 134-37.

temporal notices, each of which accomplishes a major time transition in a single verse: 'there arose a new king' (1.8) places us suddenly in a new era only minimally prepared for in v. 6 by the death of the old generation; 'when Moses had grown up' (2.11) takes us from Moses as a child (17, 17) to Moses as a young man (20).

Exodus 1.8-2.10, the center of the prologue and our primary concern here, displays a pattern of organization of two parts with three movements. The two parts deal with a threat to the Hebrews as a people (1.8-2.2) and a threat to one particular Hebrew, Moses (2.1-10). The three movements (1.8-14, 1.15-21, 1.22-2.10) correspond to three solutions of Pharaoh to the problem of Israelite proliferation. Verse 22 functions as the end of the first part and as the beginning of the third movement, producing an overlapping structure.⁴ The command, 'every son you shall let live', rounds off the story of the midwives and forms an inclusion with v. 16, 'if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she may live'. At the same time that it closes the preceding unit, v. 22 opens the following unit by providing the necessary introduction to the birth account. Not only does it contribute the setting (the Nile), but without it the story of Moses' exposure would make no sense. Let us consider first the configuration of the parts, then the movements.

The two parts begin in a similar narrative fashion: summary

4. No doubt to be attributed to the history of the tradition, see B. S. Childs, 'The Birth of Moses', JBL 84 (1965), pp. 117-18; B. S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), pp. 10-11; H. Gressmann, *Mose und seine Zeit* (FRLANT, 18; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913), pp. 2-5; cf. the criticisms of G. von Rad, 'Beobachtungen an der Moseerzählung Exodus 1-14', *Gesammelte Studien*, II (Münster: Kaiser, 1973), pp. 191-93; T. Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 76, in a discussion of narrative embedding, describes precisely the type of narrative situation we find here: Exodus 1.22 supplies 'something excessive' to the story of the midwives, a supplement which remains outside the closed form produced by the development of the plot. At the same time, and for this very reason, this something-more, proper to the narrative, is also something-less. The supplement is also a lack; in order to supply this lack created by the supplement, another narrative is necessary.'

they multiply' (v. 10), he schemes to limit their growth through affliction and hard labor. However, 'the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied' (v. 12). A second plan, involving the cooperation of the midwives, is likewise unsuccessful, and 'the people multiplied and became very strong' (v. 20). The second part of our story, 2.1-10, contains a variation of the multiplication motif. It shows the increase of the people by one, who, though only one, is the most important of all.

The theme of proliferation is sounded again in the strategically placed references to sons and daughters: sons (n) and daughters (n) determine the course of events. The term n appears throughout the story within an increasingly narrow frame of reference and delineates the structural units. The phrase 'n' (literally, 'sons of Israel') forms an inclusion around the introduction, 1.1-7. Its appearance in v. 1 with reference to the twelve sons of Jacob and in v. 7 to all the Israelites achieves a skilful transition from the story of Joseph and his brothers (Gen. 37-50) to the present situation of the Israelites in Egypt. In 1.8-14 'n' refers to Israelites as a people (np), whom Pharaoh fears precisely for the reason that they have become a people (v. 9). In vv. 15-22 the semantic range of n is limited to male babies; n appears for the first time in 1.16, and together the pair n/n forms an inclusion which marks off the story of the midwives' defiance (v. 16 and v. 22). In 2.1-10 the focus narrows as far as possible, with n referring to one particular child, Moses. Here, too, we have an inclusion formed by the pair n/n: the story begins with the birth of a son (n) to the daughter (n) of Levi (v. 2), and ends with his becoming a son (n) to the daughter (n) of Pharaoh (v. 10).⁵ By means of this narrowness of focus, the text turns our attention away from the fruitful... and the land which it began ('the sons of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly and multiplied and became very, very strong, and the land was filled with them', in v. 9 the pharaoh recognizes the incredible expansion and captures it picturesquely, if not hyperbolically, in his outcry, 'Look, the Israelite people is greater and stronger than we are! Then, lest

statements set the stage by describing events that will have momentous consequences.

There arose a new king over Egypt who did not know Joseph (1.8).

A man from the house of Levi went and took (as a wife) the daughter of Levi (2.1).

Neither the new king of 1.8 nor the man of 2.1 is identified. Though they stand at the beginning of the action, it is not their actions but rather the actions of women which will constitute the narrative's primary concern. Indeed, the man of 2.1 disappears immediately from the story. The situation described in 1.8 will lead to Egyptian oppression of the Israelites, 1.8-14, and an attempt to check the ever-increasing Hebrew population through the murder of male babies, 1.15-22. The notice of 2.1 introduces the birth story in which the child's rescue defies the new pharaoh's command to kill male babies. Here the daughter of the pharaoh appears as a counterfoil to her oppressive father. Whereas the oppression theme introduced in 1.8-14 is not resolved until later in the book of Exodus, when the Israelites actually leave Egypt, interestingly, the theme of Egyptian attempts to check Israelite increase is never really resolved. By the time we reach the goal of the narrative, the birth of Moses, the problem of Israelite proliferation is all but forgotten. Having provided the backdrop for the birth account of Moses, the theme of Pharaoh's attempt to counter Israelite proliferation drops from the remainder of the exodus account.

The dominant theme of 1.1-2.10 is the growth of the Hebrew population, in accord with the blessing of Gen. 1.28 ('Be fruitful and multiply and fill the land and subdue it', cf. 9.1, 7) and the promise of numerous descendants to the patriarchs (Gen. 17.4-8, 35.11-12 *et passim*). The theme finds expression in part one of our story in the motif of the multiplication of the people, already prepared for by the introduction, v. 7, 'And the Israelites were fruitful and increased greatly and multiplied and became very, very strong, and the land was filled with them', in v. 9 the pharaoh recognizes the incredible expansion and captures it picturesquely, if not hyperbolically, in his outcry, 'Look, the Israelite people is greater and stronger than we are! Then, lest

5. Between 2.2 and 10 Moses is consistently referred to as a child (n), vv. 3, 6(bis), 7, 8, 9(bis), 10) and once as a boy (n), v. 6). Between the occurrences of n in 1.16 and 2.2, the term n is used for male infants.

Turning to the three movements of the story, we find the narrative flow dictated by three attempts of pharaoh to stem the growth of Israel. The attempt accounts follow a pattern of increasing concentration, as Pharaoh repeatedly undertakes a course of action, only to have it meet with failure at each turn. In two of the three cases his failure results from disobedience on the part of women. We shall begin with an overview of the pattern, after which we shall investigate more closely each of the attempt stories, with a view, in particular, toward illuminating the portrayals of women.

The following outline summarizes the pattern's distinctive features.

Exodus	Initiative	Solution	Response of those addressed
Exod. 1.8-14	Pharaoh speaks to his people	deal wisely	obedience (affliction, increase service)
Exod. 1.15-21	Pharaoh speaks to babies; let midwives kill male babies; let females live	kill male babies; let females live	disobedience (increase)
Exod. 1.22-2.10	Pharaoh commands babies; let all his people females live	kill male babies; let females live	disobedience (on the part of leader of the future Hebrews is spared)

A directive of pharaoh introduces each attempt account. In 1.8-9-14 Pharaoh speaks to his people. His solution to the 'dealing' takes the form of affliction and hard service. As a result, the opposite of what he expected occurs: the Hebrews increase (v. 12). Next, 1.15-21, Pharaoh speaks to the midwives. His solution is to kill male babies, but again the result is the same: the Hebrews increase, v. 20. In the first case, the directive was carried out by the people, but the solution was unsuccessful. In the second case, the directive was not carried out, and the effectiveness of the solution was thus not adequately tested. Consequently, in the third attempt account, 1.22-2.10, Pharaoh tries the same solution (the murder of male babies), but turns

again to the people to carry out his plan.⁶ Now the solution is overt, whereas in the case of the midwives it had been covert; and this time the verb is stronger: he no longer simply speaks (v. 22).⁷

The story has gone full circle, from the Pharaoh speaking to the people, to the midwives, and again to the people. The situation, however, is by no means the same, and pharaoh, though still issuing directives, yields to women his role as the moving force behind events (we should assume also the hidden activity of God). Pharaoh determined the action in 1.8-14. He spoke; his people obeyed. In 1.15-21 the midwives determine the action, and, in fact, engage in dialogue in which they have the last word. In 1.22-2.10 Pharaoh gives the directive, but thereafter a mother, a sister and a daughter determine the course of events, and Pharaoh does not appear again in the story. This increasing concentration on women invites us to consider the significance of the fact that ancient Israelite storytellers gave women a crucial role in the initial stages of the major event in the nation's history.

The First Solution: Exodus 1.8-14

The first attempt to deal with the problem of Israelite proliferation sets the tone for the rest of the chapter. Pharaoh is portrayed humorously, his speech is ironic, his solution not wise, and the very thing he seeks to prevent ('lest they multiply...and go up from the land') will come to pass. As Pharaoh describes the situation, Israel already has the advantage: they are 'more numerous and stronger' than the Egyptians. A frightful scenario looms in Pharaoh's mind: in the event of war Israel might fight against Egypt and 'go up from the land', a phrase which the biblical tradition characteristically uses for the exodus. We have, therefore, in these words a foreshadowing of the exodus event, sharing the problem of Israelite increase with the former and the solution of killing male infants (which provides the background to the birth account) with the latter.

7. Cassuto, *Exodus*, p. 16.

and, ironically, the first person to consider such an idea is the Pharaoh of Egypt!

Pharaoh proposes to 'deal wisely' with the Israelites.⁸ Commentators have traditionally pointed out logical inconsistencies in the problem and the solution of vv. 8-14. Overpopulation is a problem, yet the pharaoh is afraid the Israelites will leave. He wants to check the population growth, yet the fact that he puts the people to work on his building projects suggests that he needs them as slave labor. Explanation of the incongruity is often sought in source-critical theories, but as the story now stands, the absurdity of the solution is only one example of the folly of Pharaoh's wisdom. It is seen again (vv. 15-22) in the decision to kill male babies, a solution that neither alleviates the *present* problem nor represents the logical way to control overpopulation, which would be to kill females.

Following the voicing of the problem by Pharaoh, the Egyptians undertake the solution. It takes two forms, affliction (vv. 11-12) and service (vv. 13-14).⁹ These two variations on the

8. See Childs, 'The Birth of Moses', pp. 119-22, on wisdom motifs in these chapters. The root *dm* in the hitp. occurs elsewhere only in Qoh. 7:16.

9. Scholars have debated whether we have in vv. 13-14 a second solution to the problem of Israelite increase, representing different treatment altogether from vv. 11-12, or whether these verses are simply a variation or intensification of the first solution. That the latter is the case, i.e., that we have in Exod. 1:8-2:10 three solutions to the problem of proliferation and not four, seems clear from the structure outlined above, where, each time, a solution is introduced by a speech of Pharaoh. Greenberg (*Understanding Exodus*, pp. 33-34) suggests taking vv. 13-14 and vv. 15-21 as two aspects of the second stage of countermeasures. In my opinion vv. 11-14 display a balanced structure which argues in favor of seeing vv. 13-14 as another aspect of the first countermeasure.

- v. 11 a They set over it taskmasters in order to afflict it with their burdens
b and it built store cities for pharaoh,
v. 12 a But the more they afflicted it, the more it multiplied and the more it burst forth.
x And they were in dread before the Israelites.

oppression theme are separated by the notice about Israelite increase and the statement that the Egyptians are in dread before Israel (v. 12). Set off and surrounded by reports of the hardships the Egyptians inflict upon the Israelites, v. 12 stands out as witness both to the futility of Egyptian measures against the chosen people and to the evil effects of oppression on the oppressors themselves. Affliction and service¹⁰ fail to solve the overpopulation problem, and again Pharaoh speaks. This time he relies on two women to implement his plan, Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives to the Hebrews.

The Second Solution: Exodus 1:15-21:22

The scope narrows. Attention centers on two women who give life in a double sense: by profession they are midwives, and through their action they defy the death edict of Pharaoh. The midwives let the boys live (777, vv. 17, 18). When asked for an

- v. 13 a And the Egyptians made the Israelites serve with rigor,
v. 14 b and they made their lives bitter with hard service, with mortar and bricks, and with all service in the field,
a' all their service which they made them serve with rigor.

Verses 11-12a form an inclusio in which references to affliction (777) frame the report that the Israelites labored to build Pithom and Raameses. Verses 13-14 also display a balanced structure, with references to the conditions under which the Israelites labor (7777, 'with rigor') surrounding a more specific description of the tasks assigned to them, service with mortar and bricks (of which we hear more in 5:6-21) and labor in the field. The response of dread on the part of the Egyptians (v. 12b) receives special attention by virtue of its position at the center.

10. As Cassuto (*Exodus*, p. 12) and Ackerman ('Literary Context', pp. 83-84) point out, the fivefold repetition of 777 in vv. 13-14 suggests the severity and tediousness of the Israelites' service and also balances the use of five verbs for the increase of the population in v. 7. The root 777 is used frequently of cultic service; thus we have another foreshadowing in 'the recurrent leitmotif that the God of Israel has liberated his people from the "servitude" of Egypt in order to take them into his own "service"' (M. Buber, *Moses* [Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1946], p. 34).

explanation, they reply that Hebrew women are *myt*. Although the precise meaning of this word is not certain, the context makes clear that it refers to the ease with which the women bring life into the world. Even baby females are associated with life, not death, for they are singled out to be spared from the death edict, 'if it is a daughter, she may live' (*tm*, v. 16); 'every daughter you shall let live' (*tm*, v. 22).

The story begins by introducing the characters: the king of Egypt, Shiphrah (whose name means something like 'beauty'),¹¹ and Puah (gtr).¹² In a narrative that shows virtually no concern for names (Pharaoh, Pharaoh's daughter, Moses' mother and father are recorded, thus assuring that they will be remembered throughout generations for their important contribution. The only other name that appears in Exod. 1.8-2.10 is that of Moses. Moses delivers the Israelites in one way: the midwives, in another. Not only do they save countless Hebrew babies (because of them the people increase, v. 20), but perhaps Moses, too, owes his life to them.

The two midwives appear two times before the king of Egypt.¹³ Beginning with their second audience, the major themes of the account occur in reverse order.¹⁴

11. J.J. Stamm, *Hebräische Frauenamen*, in B. Hartmann et al. (eds.), *Hebräische Wortforschung* (FS W. Baumgartner; VTSup. 16; Leiden: Brill, 1967), p. 323. W.F. Albright has identified the name on an eighteenth-century Egyptian list; see 'Northwest-Semitic Names in a List of Egyptian Slaves from the Eighteenth Century BC', *JAO 74* (1954), p. 229.
12. The name is to be connected with Ugaritic *pgt*, 'girl' (Stamm, *Hebräische Frauenamen*, p. 327; cf. Gordon *UT* §2081).
13. Why are there two midwives? The story does not say. The number has been taken as a sign of a different literary source, since two midwives would suggest a very small Hebrew community, a contradiction of the tradition that the Hebrews are too numerous. Some commentators have argued that the two are representatives of a guild (e.g. B. Jacob, *Das zweite Buch der Tora: Exodus* [University Microfilms, 1953], p. 21); others consider the choice of two a feature of the storyteller's art (e.g. Childs, *Exodus*, p. 16; Cassuto, *Exodus*, pp. 13-14). The latter alternative seems best. The many owe their increase (v. 20) to the few.
14. In a recent study ('The Literary Structure of Exodus 1.2-2.10', *JSOT* 24 [1982], pp. 99-107), D.W. Wicke notes the chiasmic structure but divides it somewhat differently.

Context', pp. 84-88 et passim.

16. Ackermann explores the life versus death theme; see 'Literary II/1; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974), pp. 1-2, 5-6.
- (text). For proposals and literature, see W.H. Schmidt, *Exodus* 1-6 (BKAT, birthstones/birthstool' (cf. Jer. 18.3) or 'genitals' (on the basis of the con-

(themes B and C).

The outer members of the chiasmus (A and A') portray Pharaoh as the source of death, the inner members (C and C') focus on the midwives as the source of life.¹⁵ Between them stands the fear of God—as a motivating factor (B) and as an attitude of faith which reaps its reward. Themes C' and B' appear in conjunction with other elements, the midwives' clever response to Pharaoh and the action of the deity, both of which stand out in the story since they appear without counterparts in v. 17

daughter you shall let live.
'Every son that is born you shall expose on the Nile, but every

Then Pharaoh commanded all his people,
Verse 22

feared God, he made (wpr) them houses.
increased and grew very strong. And because the midwives

So God dealt well with the midwives, and the people
Verses 20-21

to them they are delivered'.
women; for (c) they are vigorous; before the midwife comes

'Because (c) the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian
The midwives said to Pharaoh,
male infants live?

'Why have you done (n'wp) this thing (t'wm) and let the
So the king of Egypt called the midwives, and said to them,
Verses 18-19

(t'wm) them, but let the male infants live.
and they did not do (wpr) as the king of Egypt commanded

But the midwives feared God.
Verse 17

she may live'.
birthstool.¹⁶ If it is a son, you shall kill him; but if it is a daughter,

'When you serve the Hebrew women as midwife, and see the
second was Puah.
whom the name of one was Shiphrah and the name of the

Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, of
Exodus 2.15-16

EXOD 'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live'

47

4 and A'. Pharaoh issues his decree of death first to the midwives (A, v. 16) and, when this covert method proves unsuccessful, to all his people (A, v. 22). Verse 15 confronts us with one of the most retelling ambiguities of the text. Does Pharaoh speak to the Hebrew midwives or to the midwives Hebrew or Hebrews? Whereas the Masoretes construed the word 'Hebrew' as an adjective, the consonantal text is ambiguous. The Septuagint and the Vulgate read, 'the midwives of the Hebrews'. No amount of scholarly ingenuity has been spared in marshalling evidence for one side or the other. The names Shiphrāh and Puah are Semitic, but this fact does not constitute a conclusive argument.¹⁷ It has been maintained that Pharaoh would not have trusted Hebrew women to carry out his command; on the other hand, reliance on Hebrew women might be taken as another example of Pharaoh's lack of wisdom, which he demonstrates with remarkable consistency.¹⁸ Whether or not Egyptian midwives would have been accepted by the Hebrew women or Hebrew midwives by the Egyptians (v. 19), or whether the report of v. 19 would make more sense in the mouth of Egyptians or Hebrews remain moot issues. The ancient listener may have known what we cannot now recover with certainty. Our present inability to be specific enables us to emphasize larger possibilities of meaning. If Hebrew, the midwives, like Moses later, are deliverers of their own people. In that case it is important to note that their reason for defiance is 'fear of God', and not simply their loyalty to their people. If Egyptian, their fear of God leads them to defy their pharaoh, considered divine by the Egyptians. Thus the midwives would belong together with the daughter of Pharaoh as examples of 'righteous gentiles' who follow the dictates of conscience and compassion rather than the mandate of a despot. In its very ambiguity, the text

17. See Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, p. 27.
18. Cf. Jacob, *Exodus*, p. 21: 'Von diesem Pharaos soll [?] man gerade das Unverständliche erwarten'. Childs (*Exodus*, p. 16), however, posits that it should come as a surprise to the listener that the midwives do not carry out the command, which is not as likely to be the case if they were Hebrew. For a different view, see Ackermann, 'Literary Context', p. 86, who submits that Pharaoh depends on the demoralized position of slaves.

moves beyond nationalistic concerns to bear witness to the power of faith to transcend ethnic boundaries. After the midwives defy the command to kill male babies and spare females (A, v. 16), Pharaoh issues the directive again, this time to 'all his people' (A, v. 22). The command is varied to fit the situation: 'Every son born you shall expose on the Nile, but every daughter you shall let live'. Exposure¹⁹ was in ancient times a common means of disposing of unwanted children. We should understand 'every son born to the Hebrews' here; the phrase is witnessed by the versions (Samaritan Pentateuch [SP], LXX, I, II). Its omission in the Hebrew text produces the humorous result that, in his anxiousness to include 'all' his people, 'every son', 'every daughter', the pharaoh forgets the most important thing of all, to exclude Egyptian male infants.²⁰

B and B'. The text provides only one motivation for the midwives' defiance. Nothing is said of loyalty to the Hebrews or of anticipation of a reward from God. Indeed, their fear of God leads them to take a considerable risk. To 'fear God' does not mean simply to be afraid of God or God's punishment; it is, on the contrary, a far broader theological concept, having at its center the element of *mysterium tremendum* and extending to conduct that is guided by basic ethical principles and in harmony with God's will.²¹ We may recall from Proverbs that 'the fear of Yhwh is the beginning of knowledge' (1.7), and that 'in the fear of Yhwh is strong confidence, and for one's children it will be a refuge' (14.26). If the midwives are Hebrew, S. Plath's observation that 'fear of God' prevents interference with God's promise of numerous descendants to the patriarchs seems especially fitting, as it connects the midwives' motive with the proliferation theme which plays so large a part in the

19. Following M. Cogan, 'A Technical Term for Exposure', *JNES* 27 (1972), pp. 133-35, in rendering 'את' as 'abandon, expose'.
20. Jacob, *Exodus*, p. 25. The demand to kill male infants is a foreshadowing of the final plague, the death of the first-born, which causes Pharaoh finally to permit the exodus from Egypt.
21. See S. Tertien, 'Fear', *IDB*, II, pp. 258-59; J. Becker, *Gottesfurcht im Alten Testament* (AnBib. 25; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965), pp. 193-94, 196 *et passim*; H.W. Wolff, 'Zur Theematik der elohistischen Fragmente im Pentateuch', *EvTh* 29, pp. 59-72 (BT 'The Elohistische Fragmente in the Pentateuch', *Int* 26 [1969], pp. 158-73).

narrative.²² On the other hand, fear of God is not the exclusive prerogative of the Israelites (Gen. 20.11; 42.18; cf. Deut. 25.18).²³ It may be that the narrative attributes fear of God to the Egyptian midwives just as it later attributes to the Egyptian princess a knowledge of Hebrew. If so, the text again scores an ironic point against the Egyptians: their own midwives fear God (that is, the god of Israel) and not Pharaoh (the god of Egypt). The proper theological attitude receives a divine blessing. Verses 20-21 record the only action of God in Exod. 1.8-2.10. Unfortunately, the sense of these verses is not altogether clear. The text reads literally,

v. 20 So God dealt well with the midwives
and the people increased (sg., but pl. in SP, S&L, TJ)
and grew very strong (pl.).
v. 21 And because the midwives feared God,
he made them (m. pl.) houses.

The house refers to progeny, a blessing traditionally conferred upon men (Exod. 1.1; 20.17; 1 Sam. 25.28; 2 Sam. 7.11; 1 Kgs 2.24; Rachel and Leah are credited with building up the house of Israel, Ruth 4.11). A problem arises with regard to the second verb in v. 21 and the antecedent of 'them'. The Septuagint reads the verbs of v. 21 as plural, 'they made for themselves houses'. Most interpreters take the reference in v. 21 to God's bounty toward the midwives: God gives them a reward that corresponds to their deed. In spite of the difficulty of the pronouns, it is clear that the growth of the Hebrew people has been made possible by the midwives. The prohibition theme which we met in vv. 7, 9, 10 and 12 appears again in v. 20, and the reference in v. 21 to houses presents us with another variation of it (as well as a pun on *na*, 'daughter').

22. S. Plath, *Furcht Gottes: Der Begriff "Furcht" im Alten Testament* (Arbeiten zur Theologie, II/2; Stuttgart: Calwer, 1962), pp. 49-50.
23. See the discussion of Plath, *Furcht Gottes*, pp. 50-52.

EXUM 'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live'

against him: 'Why have you done (n^{wn}) this thing (m^{wt})?' He does not ask out of curiosity; his words take the form of an accusation found in juridical contexts.²⁴ The midwives face a serious charge. They respond with a defense that would strain the guiltability of any pharaoh, and they manage at the same time to poke fun at Egyptian women: unlike Egyptian women, Hebrew women are vigorous and give birth before the midwife arrives. Frustrated a second time in his effort to control Hebrew increase, the pharaoh once again (v. 22) turns to his people, who had earlier cooperated in his plan (vv. 8-14).

The Third Solution: Exodus 1.22-2.10

Exodus 1.22 provides the introduction to this account. It sets the scene for the main action, the Nile, and presents the background against which the mother's unusual behavior in 2.2-3 becomes comprehensible. Moreover, since Pharaoh addresses 'all his people', the introduction makes unmistakably clear that Pharaoh's daughter knowingly acts in defiance of her father's order.

Irony pervades the account. The pharaoh's last recorded words (he dies, 2.23, without having uttered another 'every daughter you shall let live', and immediately (2.1) the story introduces a *daughter* of Levi and soon thereafter (v. 5) the *daughter* of Pharaoh himself, both of whom undermine the success of Pharaoh's plan. Their actions relate ironically to pharaoh's decree. At first glance, Moses' mother seems to be following the command to expose male infants upon the Nile. Is she being a model subject (or even more, since 'all his people', v. 22, appears to mean only the Egyptians)? Or is she, like the midwives, ostensibly obeying Pharaoh while in reality defying him? Whereas Pharaoh had commanded that boys be *exposed* on the Nile (1.22), Moses' mother *places* him there (2.3). Her own stands in contrast to Pharaoh's *n^{wn}* as an indication of the care she lavishes on her child—this is no exposure story.²⁵ The

24. See H.J. Boecker, *Redeformen des Rechtslebens im Alten Testament* (WMANT, 14; Neukirchener: Neukirchener Verlag, 1964), pp. 30-31, 66-67; Schmidt, *Exodus*, p. 44.
25. Cogan, 'A Technical Term for Exposure', pp. 133-35. For extra-biblical parallels to the exposed child motif, of which there are many, see

irony reaches its zenith in the action of Pharaoh's daughter, who does precisely the opposite of Pharaoh's command: *she takes the baby out of the Nile* (מִן הַיָּאָר מִן הַיָּאָר). Many women appear in this tale, all without names,²⁶ but variously identified: Moses' mother (מִיֶּלֶךְ, מִיֶּלֶךְ), his sister (מִיֶּלֶךְ, מִיֶּלֶךְ), the daughter of Pharaoh (מִיֶּלֶךְ, מִיֶּלֶךְ) and her maids (מִיֶּלֶךְ, מִיֶּלֶךְ). Men are strikingly absent (Moses' father disappears from the story after v. 10; otherwise he is the object of the actions of women). It is a women's story insofar as their action determines its direction. But while narrative attention focuses on the activity of women, their attention centers on Moses. Referred to as a 'son' and a 'son', at the end of the story he is given a name. Thereafter he becomes the central character of the exodus. An inherent narrative irony presents itself: without Moses there would be no story, but without the initiative of these women, there would be no Moses!

The speech and action of women shape the contours of the story. Moses' mother acts but, interestingly, does not speak. In contrast, his sister and Pharaoh's daughter both act and speak. The story begins with a detailed account of the action of one woman, a daughter of Levi (vv. 2-3). A small but significant role is assigned to Moses' sister (v. 4). Next we hear of considerable activity on the part of yet another woman, the daughter of

esp. D.B. Redford, 'The Literary Motif of the Exposed Child (cf. Ex. ii 1-10; Numen 14 (1967), pp. 209-28; Gressmann, *Mose und seine Zeit*, pp. 4-13; B. Lewis, *The Sargon Legend* (ASOR Dissertation Series, 4; Cambridge, MA: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1980), pp. 149-272; T.L. Thompson and D. Irlin, 'The Joseph and Moses Narratives', in J.H. Hayes and J.M. Miller (eds.), *Israelite and Jewish History* (London: SCM Press, 1977), pp. 180-202 (Irlin); on the differences, see Childs, 'The Birth of Moses', pp. 115-18.

²⁶ Moses' mother is identified as Jochebed in Exod. 6:20; Num. 26:59; the name may be theophorous; see Stamm, 'Hebräische Frauennamen', p. 315. His sister, Miriam, plays an important role in the exodus; on Miriam in biblical and later tradition, see R. de Dea, 'Miriam, soeur de Moïse, et Marie, mère du Messie', *Bib* 45 (1964), pp. 198-219. Tradition has bestowed upon Pharaoh's daughter many names, e.g., Tharmuth (Josephus, *Ant.* 2.9.5), Meris (Eusebius, *Prep. Ev.* 9.27.3). Tharmuth (*Jub.* 47.5), Balyah (Exod. R. to 2.10), Bitha (Talmud, cf. I Chon. 4.18).

Pharaoh (vv. 5-6), followed by the vital speech of the sister (v. 7). Though she has little action and only one speech, the sister is crucial to the development of the story. She has the critical linking role between the two daughters (vv. 4, 7). Once all three women are involved, narrative attention moves quickly back and forth between them (vv. 7-10), until finally an unnamed daughter gives our hero his identity: 'she called his name Moses', *Verses 2-3*. Moses' mother, called here simply 'the woman', is the subject of a series of verbs (Moses is the object). The first two deal with procreation (she *conceived* and *bore* a son); the next two, with her response to the child she bears (she *saw* how goodly he was²⁷ and *hid* him three months). A negative situation is introduced: she is *able* to hide him no longer. Her reaction takes the form of increased activity: she *takes* a papyrus ark, *'bitumens'* it with bitumen and pitch, *places* the child in it, and *places* it in the reeds along the edge of the Nile. All this activity on her part underscores the mother's concern for her child and her resourcefulness in caring for him. Amid her activity, the text affords us little psychological insight, and I should not wish to contribute to scholarly speculation on this point. Whether she knows the habit of Pharaoh's daughter to bathe in the Nile or simply hopes for a miracle to save her child²⁸ are details that the text does not reveal. What it does reveal is her determination to act rather than to leave things to fate (the deity), and we might note as well that she proceeds without the counsel or assistance of her husband.²⁹

Her decision to prepare for her child a *ma' n* has significant associations, for the only other appearance of the word *ma' n* in the first verb of v. 3 are plural

²⁷ 'she' recalls the refrain of Gen. 1; see W.F. Albright, 'The Refrain "And God Saw that it was Good"', in *Mélanges bibliques dédiés en l'honneur de André Robert* (Paris: Bloud & Gay, 1957), pp. 24-26; cf. J.L. Kugel, 'The Adverbial Use of *ki tob*', *JBL* 99 (1980), pp. 433-35; J.G. Janzen, 'Kugel's Adverbial *ki tob*: An Assessment', *JBL* 102 (1983), pp. 99-106.

²⁸ Schmidt, *Exodus*, p. 68.

²⁹ H. Gressmann, *Die Anfänge Israels von 2. Mose bis Richter und Ruth* (SAT, 1/2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1922), p. 21; *Mutterliebe* hofft alles...

³⁰ LXX apparently felt the need to supply him; the verbs in v. 2b and the first verb of v. 3 are plural.

the Bible refers to Noah's ark (Gen. 6–9). Commentators have not failed to note the connection and draw a parallel between Noah and Moses as deliverers who are rescued from death by drowning; a further parallel may be drawn between Noah who builds the ark that saves humanity and Moses' mother who builds the ark that saves the future deliverer of Israel. The mother prepares the ark with care: she 'bitumened it with bitumen and pitch', v. 3. The verb *batan* is a hapax legomenon. The noun appears only here and in Gen. 11.3 and 14.10. A related word, *batan* 'clay, mortar', is used in 1.14, with reference to the kind of work done by the Hebrews. What for them is associated with toil is for her a labor of love. She places the ark with the baby in it among the reeds. One can scarcely miss here an allusion to the famous deliverance at the Sea of Reeds and thus find a hint of Moses' approaching rescue.

Verses 4. Out of nowhere, a sister appears. The text had not mentioned her before, and indeed v. 2 gives the impression that Moses was his parents' first child. Whereas her appearance comes as a surprise, her presence is essential: it is she who joins the introductory theme of the mother and child with that of the princess and child. Moreover, the sister tempers the harshness of the exposure by keeping watch at a distance.³¹ She stations herself nearby 'to learn what would happen to him'. Matters are now in the hands of the deity.

Verses 5–6. As if by design, pharaoh's daughter comes down to bathe in the Nile. Since her maids are walking beside the Nile, she, and not they, sees the ark among the reeds. A series of actions is attributed to her: she goes down to bathe in the river, she sees the ark among the reeds, she sends her maid to fetch it;³² she opens it and sees the child. Observing his tears, she has compassion. Surmising the situation, she says, 'This is one of the Hebrews' children'. The detailed attention to her activity recalls the elaborate consideration given to the preparations of Moses' mother in vv. 2–3. Her words which culminate her actions are all important. They show that she knowingly ignores her father's command when she accepts the suggestion, soon to

31. Childs, 'The Birth of Moses', p. 18; cf. Childs, *Exodus*, p. 115.
32. Or she takes it, but the context favors attributing this action to the maid.

be proffered by Moses' sister, to keep the child as her own. *Verses 7–10.* Without hesitation the infant's sister addresses the royal bathers. Her daring proposal, ostensibly offered as a helpful suggestion, affords in fact the perfect solution to her brother's plight.³³ Shall I go and call for you a nurse from the Hebrews to nurse this child for you? By suggesting a nurse for you the child, provides the idea that the princess keep the infant, and the repetition of 'for you' creates the impression that she makes the proposal for the sake of the princess.³⁴ By virtue of her quick thinking and persuasive recommendation (the text says nothing about mother and sister having worked out a plan beforehand, though some commentators are inclined to think so), the sister deserves as much credit for saving Moses as her mother or the princess.

The princess accepts the suggestion as readily as it has been offered ('go', v. 8), and the young woman goes to get the child's mother. Two actions of the sister (keeping watch, v. 4, and fetching the mother, v. 8) and her single speech determine her brother's future. Having made her inestimable contribution to the story, she drops out of the picture. With a propitious outcome assured, events draw quickly to a close. In offering to pay wages to the child's mother (v. 9), the princess makes an important addition to the sister's proposal. Whereas many commentators have pointed out the irony of Moses' mother being paid to nurse her own son, there may be even more to the idea than suggest that paying wages to a wet nurse may be a way of attesting the right of possession to a child.³⁵ If this be the case, this, B. Childs presents evidence from extra-biblical sources that the princess accentuates (note the emphatic *wa*) what the sister had only intimated: she claims the child as her own, taking upon herself responsibility for its welfare. The response of the mother in v. 9, like that of the sister in v. 8, is reported as simple action without discourse. Nothing

33. Childs compares her role to that of the counselor in wisdom literature ('The Birth of Moses', p. 120).
34. Cassuto, *Exodus*, p. 20; cf. Jacob, *Exodus*, p. 31–32.
35. Childs, 'The Birth of Moses', pp. 112–14; Schmidt, *Exodus*, p. 71.

more is necessary to indicate their accord with the princess's requests. Verse 10 summarily reports the growth of the child and the fact that his mother brought him to Pharaoh's daughter. This event probably occurred sometime after the weaning, which usually took place about three years after birth. In what appears to be some form of adoption,³⁶ the child 'became a son' to the princess. Thus secured from any further attempts of Pharaoh to deal with the Hebrew population problem, the future liberator grows up in the house of the oppressor.

The story ends with the naming of the child by the princess, another sign perhaps of her claim to the child. Customarily the mother named the child; here the unusual fact that Moses was not named at birth by his mother may be attributed to narrative necessity. 'She named him Moses' (מֹשֶׁה). Scholars are generally agreed that the name Moses is Egyptian, belonging to the same type as Thutmoses, Ahmoses, and Ramesses, but lacking the theophorous element (the god X is born or has borne him).³⁷

36. Whether one may speak of adoption in a strict sense is questionable. No laws pertaining to adoption appear in the biblical legal corpus, and the exiles often brought to bear are all interfamilial (Gen. 30.3; 48.5, 12; 50.23; Ruth 4.16; Est. 2.7, 15; cf. Ps. 2.7; 2 Sam. 7.14). Note, however, that we have here a foreign context. H. Donner, 'Adoption oder Legitimation? Erwägungen zur Adoption im Alten Testament auf dem Hintergrund der altorientalischen Rechte', *Orant* 8 (1969), p. 104, concludes that the situation of 2.10 is the 'Begründung eines Pflegeverhältnisses mit einem Findelkind, dessen Eltern zwar bekannt sind, aber vor der Prinzessin geheimgehalten werden: ein einseitiger Rechtsakt, ganz zweifellos ohne Vertrag mit den früheren Gewalthabern'. Cf. H.J. Boecker, 'Anmerkungen zur Adoption im Alten Testament', *ZAW* 86 (1974), pp. 86-89. Childs ('The Birth of Moses', p. 114) thinks the position of the naming after the weaning may be a part of the traditional sequence in the act of adoption, but admits that this is not certain. There is no evidence later in the exodus account of Moses' having any special relationship to the house of Pharaoh.

37. J.G. Griffiths, 'The Egyptian Derivation of the Name Moses', *JNES* 12 (1953), pp. 225-31; S. Hermann, 'Mose', *EAT* 28 (1968), pp. 303-304; S. Hermann, *Israels Aufenthalt in Ägypten* (SBS, 40; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1970), pp. 66-67 and 66 n. 6 (ET *Israel in Egypt* [SBT, II, 27; London: SCM Press, 1973], pp. 43-44, 77-78 n. 6); Schmidt, *Exodus*, pp. 73-75; for different evaluations, cf. W. Helck, 'Tkw and die Ramses-Stadt', VT 15 (1965), pp. 43-47; J.M. Sasson, 'Bovine Symbolism in the Exodus Narrative', VT 18 (1968), pp. 380-87.

But the text has the princess explain it with a Hebrew etymology, 'I drew him (מִן־הַמַּיִם) out of the water'. M. Noth is of the opinion that the Egyptian origin of the name was unknown to the Hebrew storyteller, who, otherwise, would have used it.³⁸ This conclusion does not leave room for the possibility that the storyteller wanted to give an alternative etymology to the Egyptian one. 'Es ist nicht daran zu rütteln, dass die Tora den Namen als einen hebräischen verstanden wissen will...'.³⁹ The verb *ymw* means 'to draw out'; *ymw* is the active participle, 'the drawer out'. Commentators point out that for the princess's explanation, 'for I drew him out of the water', to fit, the name should be *ymw*, 'the one drawn out'. That the etymology be etymologically precise is neither necessary (this is seldom the case in the Bible)⁴⁰ nor desirable (the irony which results from the allusion to Moses' role in the exodus can scarcely be missed). Since one's name and personality are intimately connected, to give a name is, in a sense, to chart a destiny. In a way, then, the princess contributes to the exodus not only by saving Moses' life, but also by designating him 'the drawer out'.

J.S. Ackerman takes a different view of the naming and, in fact, of the portrayal of the princess altogether. He believes that Hebrew: she means to give a name which designates Moses as passive recipient but ironically bestows upon him an active name.⁴¹ Ackerman's contention that 'there is all the difference in the world between the clever Hebrew midwives and the dumb Egyptian princess' is based on his assumption that the princess is unwittingly controlled by the clever sister. He takes her one word response to the sister's proposal ('go') as a sign of

EXOD 1:10 'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live'

38. M. Noth, *Exodus* (OTL, trans. J.S. Bowden; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), p. 26; cf. Childs, *Exodus*, p. 19; D.B. Redford, 'Exodus 1.11', VT 13 (1963), p. 415; cf. also Y. Zakovitch, 'Explicit and Implicit Name-Derivations', *HAR* 4 (1980), p. 173.

39. Jacob, *Exodus*, p. 37, italics his.

40. The pun here, like many biblical aetiologicals, is based on sound association. On early and later derivatory methods, see Y. Zakovitch, 'A Study of Precise and Partial Derivations in Biblical Etymology', *JSTOT* 15 (1980), pp. 31-50.

41. Ackerman, 'Literary Context', pp. 94-95.

42. Ackerman, 'Literary Context', p. 86.

supreme authority, a brusque manner in dealing with underlings, and perhaps some relief in having the problem so quickly resolved.⁴³ While he makes so much of her simple response, Ackermann has little to say about her compassion, suggesting only that its source may be the same power which hardens Pharaoh's heart. But surely due emphasis should be given to the princess's reaction upon viewing the weeping child. The root *ḥm* means 'to spare', 'to have pity', 'to have compassion'. Lack of compassion is contemptible. Incensed upon hearing Nathan's story of the poor man and his ewe lamb, David condemns the rich man precisely 'because he had no compassion' (2 Sam. 12.6). Just as the midwives' fear of God provides the explanation of their conduct, so the princess's compassion furnishes the motivation for hers. She is not *daped* but simply *prompted* by the sister's recommendation. Her acceptance of it is made possible by her compassion, without which it is unlikely that any amount of persuasion on the part of the sister would have accomplished the desired result. Note that compassion and recognition are linked: 'She had compassion on him, and she said, "This is one of the Hebrews' children"' (v. 6). B. Jacob has observed that the remarkable thing is not that, upon seeing the crying infant, she had compassion, but that she had compassion for a Hebrew child.⁴⁴ She knows that in rescuing the child she is openly defying her father's decree. Such flagrant disobedience on the part of a daughter is certainly no small matter. Moreover, she follows the sister's proposal to its logical conclusion by taking upon herself responsibility for the child.

With regard to the naming of Moses, Ackermann's thesis that the narrative ridicules the princess's inability to handle Hebrew encounters difficulties. If one insists on a scientific etymology, then on the basis of numerous examples (Cain, Noah, Abraham, Samuel, to name a few), one might conclude that the Hebrews could not speak their own language very well. Even Moses

43. Ackermann, 'Literary Context', p. 96. Similarly, he takes the words of the princess to the mother in v. 9 as harsh and condescending (p. 93); cf. Cassuto, *Exodus*, p. 20, who sees in the brief reply of v. 8 a sign that the princess is 'deeply moved'. I view it as no more, or less, than ready assent.

44. Jacob, *Exodus*, p. 31.

Concluding Observations

The paralleling of characters in the story seems to me to offer an additional narrative clue in favor of a positive view of the Egyptian princess. At two points the narrative pace slows to describe in detail the actions of women, the daughter of Levi and the daughter of Pharaoh. The attention they give to the child is comparable, and in fact some of the same terms are used (מָנָה, מָנָה). By the end of the story, the two daughters have something more in common—a son. Thus I follow the majority of commentators, ancient and modern, in viewing Pharaoh's daughter as an example of the 'righteous gentile'. She recognizes the child as Hebrew, saves him from the Nile in spite of her father's decree, determines to keep him, and even hires a Hebrew woman to nurse him. She gives her Hebrew 'son' a Hebrew name, one, in fact, which promises great things for him. Her compassion transcends ethnic distinctions. Appropriately, such distinctions are also set aside as Israelite tradition recounts her important contribution to the nation's history.

EXUM 'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live'

Pharaoh's three attempts to influence the course of history fail. First (1.8-14) the Israelites continue to increase in the face of oppression, a result that can only be attributed to behind-the-scenes activity of the deity. Next (1.15-22 and 1.22-2.10) women prevent the realization of Pharaoh's plan. God acts through women to free the chosen people. Women—at least one of whom is non-Israelite—are credited with the preservation both of the nation and of its greatest leader. In contrast to Pharaoh's people, who act en masse to carry out his will (1.8-14), women respond as individuals who act according to dictates of conscience and compassion. Their stories (1.15-22, 1.22-2.10) are stories of defiance. The defiance of the midwives is subtle: they act by choosing not to act in accordance with Pharaoh's edict. That of Moses' mother and Pharaoh's daughter is open: in direct opposition to Pharaoh's command, they save the child Moses from death by exposure on the Nile. All the women

45. The root is *ḥm*, but Moses explains it as if it were *tm*.

knowingly take positions over against the king of Egypt; all make choices for life, and not death. They do not appear to think of the consequences their disobedience might have for themselves. Fear of God, which takes precedence over allegiance to Pharaoh, motivates the midwives. Pharaoh's daughter is moved by compassion, an emotion that extends to a people despised by her father and dreaded by her people. The midwives' fear of God, the princess's compassion, the resourcefulness of Moses' mother, and the quick thinking of his sister, all work together to overcome the evil designs of the king of Egypt. In the refusal of women to cooperate with oppression, the liberation of Israel from Egyptian bondage has its beginnings.

The prologue to the exodus (Exod. 1.1-2.25) ends with a story about Moses. The repetition of the word 'man' (w) eight times in this account alerts us to its male-centered emphasis. Now Moses, who himself had been rescued by daughters, rescues daughters. Moses, who had been given a name symbolic of his destiny by Pharaoh's daughter, now gives a name, reversals remind us of the patriarchal context of our narrative, they do not supersede what has gone before. Even here, it is through daughters that Moses finds a home, albeit a temporary one.

What are we to make of the considerable role given to women in the prelude to the exodus? To say that the story shows that God uses the weak and lowly to overcome the strong is to give only a partial answer. The question is not *why* does a story of daughters form the prelude to the exodus, but rather: what effect do these stories about women have on the way we read the exodus story as a whole? Exodus begins with a focus on women. Their actions determine the outcome. From its highly positive portrayals of women to its testimony that the courage of women is the beginning of liberation, Exodus 1.8-2.10 presents the interpreter with powerful themes to draw on: women as defiers of oppression, women as givers of life, women as wise and resourceful in situations where a discerning mind and

46. For analysis of this part of the prologue, see esp. Ackerman, 'Literary Context', pp. 96-106; Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, pp. 54-59; Isbell, 'Exodus 1-2', pp. 48-56.

keen practical judgment are essential for a propitious outcome (the midwives' response to Pharaoh, 1.19; the sister's suggestion to Pharaoh's daughter, 2.7). But this is only the beginning. We should not stop with the prologue. It remains for future study to shed further light on the role of women in the remainder of the exodus account; Miriam, in particular, deserves careful attention for her role as leader along with Moses and Aaron (cf. Mic. 6.4, which places her on equal footing with them). At least once more in the story a foreign woman, the resourceful Zipporah, intervenes to save Moses' life (Exod. 4.24-26). As the exodus account continues, Moses, as well as the deity, takes on female attributes, providing for the people on their journey from Egypt to Canaan (see especially Num. 11.11-14 for explicit feminine metaphors). Reassessment of our traditional assumptions about women's roles in the biblical story is in order. The present study has sought to provide some contribution to this task.