



Exposition

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The Exodus

A commentary on Exodus 1–15

C. The birth and early life of Moses—Exodus 2 (Part 2)

Mark Vincent

The format of the commentary

The narrative has been broken down into several **major sections**, of a chapter or two each; some of these will be covered in one month, others will take longer. An **Introduction** is provided for each of these major sections, which sets out the major events and themes dealt with in those chapters.

Each major section is broken into **subsections** or **episodes** (typically between five and twenty verses each). For each the **AV text** is followed by a **Comment**, which draws out the major lessons and items of interest. The AV text also contains **Footnotes**, in which additional 'one-off' points are made for those wanting to work through Exodus more slowly.

Introduction

IN [THE PREVIOUS article](#) we dealt with the first half of Exodus 2, Moses' birth and early experiences in Egypt. Completing the chapter, the outlaw murderer flees for his life to Midian, where he takes refuge with the local priest and his family. It is not long before he finds himself married to one of the priest's seven daughters, who gives birth to his son.

But the story passes swiftly on as the scene shifts back to Egypt. There the Israelites cry to the Lord because of their sufferings. This tiny passage, a mere three verses long, is a crucial turning point in the narrative of the Exodus.

Flight to Midian

- 2:15b But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh,¹ and dwelt in the land of Midian:² and he sat down by a well.
- 2:16 Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters: and they came and drew water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock.
- 2:17 And the shepherds came and drove them away: but Moses stood up and helped them, and watered their flock.
- 2:18 And when they came to Reuel³ their father, he said, How is it that ye are come so soon to day?
- 2:19 And they said, An Egyptian⁴ delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds,⁵ and also drew water enough⁶ for us, and watered the flock.
- 2:20 And he said unto his daughters, And where is he? why is it that ye have left the man? call him, that he may eat bread.⁷

2:21 And Moses was content to dwell with the man: and he gave Moses Zipporah⁸ his daughter.

2:22 And she bare him a son, and he called his name Gershom: for he said, I have been a stranger in a strange land.

Comment

Moses' flight from the face of Pharaoh meant total estrangement from the life he had once known. Indeed, the Egyptian way has made its mark on him to such an extent—even if only in his dress and education—that he is mistaken for an Egyptian when he arrives in the land of Midian (v. 19). The text draws our attention to this misidentification almost in passing, but in doing so it subtly keeps before us the issue of identity we have noticed in our earlier studies. Moses has forsaken Egypt, but he retains its imprint on his person in some sense.

His experiences in Midian also make their mark upon him, however. When, as recorded at the end of the passage, at last his son is born, Moses calls his name Gershom. There are two points of interest behind this name. First, the root *garash*, 'to drive out', has already been used in the narrative to describe what the shepherds sought to do to Jethro's daughters (v. 17). Circumstances had driven Moses from Egypt, but at Midian he has found a home, a wife, and a family. The shepherds had driven Jethro's daughters away, but he helped them, and in doing so he has won himself a home.

Although the connection with the root *garash* would have been obvious to Moses, as to any reader of Hebrew, he chooses instead to make a different link. Moses explains the name Gershom as if it were derived from the phrase *ger sham*, 'a stranger there', for he says: "I have been a stranger in a strange land". This naming scene continues to develop the theme of Moses' confusing identity and the destiny he must choose. Now he has three ways to choose from (Hebrew, Egyptian and Midianite), not two as he had before. It would have been so easy for him to have settled down in Midian with his new family and lifestyle, and for his brethren the slaves in Egypt to have become a remote memory, unfortunate victims for whom nothing could be done. Indeed, perhaps we shall detect something of Moses' inertia to leave in chapters 3 and 4.

The name Gershom, 'a stranger there', poses a question which has not yet been addressed: Where is it that Moses has been a stranger? where is the 'there'? Two possible answers suggest themselves: Midian and Egypt. There is a sense in which he was a stranger in both places, and Acts 7:29 certainly develops the idea of the 'strangeness' of Midian. But there is mileage in considering Egypt as the 'strange land', even though, ironically, it was the place of his birth and formative years. Rather interestingly, the word *ger*, 'stranger', is used to describe Israel in Egypt in a number of places (Ex. 22:21; 23:9; cf. Gen. 15:13). Moses has been (past tense) a stranger (an Israelite) in a strange land (Egypt). Now, by contrast, he is in a land which is foreign to him yet he feels at home—he has a family (a wife and a child) and a wise and caring father-in-law.

A final point supporting the strange land being Egypt comes from the naming of Moses' second son. We have to wait until 18:4 to learn about him, but Moses' second son is named Eliezer, 'God is my help', a name which (as the

verse states) was given to enshrine the fact that God had helped and delivered Moses from the hand of Pharaoh. The name of Moses' second son refers back to his flight from Pharaoh, a fact which makes it more likely that the name Gershom would at the very least include a reference to his experiences in Egypt. He might have grown up in an Egyptian environment, but Egyptian he was not.

But we have jumped ahead. Upon arrival in the foreign land of Midian we find Moses by a well. It is here that Moses encounters the seven daughters of Reuel, one of whom will ultimately become his wife. The location, and the events that transpire, form part of a Biblical pattern: wells and women are associated on at least four occasions in the Scriptures, taking us from Genesis into the New Testament:

- 1 **Genesis 24.** Abraham's servant meets Rebekah by a well; she draws water for him and his flocks, he is taken to her mother's house, and she is persuaded to leave home to marry Isaac. (In contrast to incidents 2 and 3, the woman provides water rather than the man; this is perhaps typical of the way in which Rebekah takes initiative and dominates in her marriage to Isaac.)
- 2 **Genesis 29.** Jacob meets Rachel at a well; he waters her flocks and is taken to her father's home. They eventually marry.
- 3 **Exodus 2.** Moses meets the daughters of Reuel by a well; he helps them and waters their flock. He is taken to their father's house, and marries Zipporah, one of the seven daughters.
- 4 **John 4.** Jesus meets a Samaritan woman by a well and offers living water. They discuss her previous marriages, and she goes to tell her friends of the new and unique man whom she has met. By talking to the Samaritan woman Jesus not only surprised his disciples, but showed that the bride he is preparing will transcend human boundaries of class, race, sex and social convention.

More difficult is the question of why this motif of wells and marriage should be repeated. There is no doubt that the metaphor of waters, wells and springs is used in the Scriptures to speak of the sexual relations which may be enjoyed between a man and woman within marriage. But there must be a more spiritual dimension also. Refreshing water is a powerful metaphor of salvation, and it is interesting that in all cases except the first it is the man, typifying the Lord

Jesus, who offers or provides refreshment. Readers may have their own suggestions or additional points on this which it would be interesting to hear (send to the Section Editor, details at the [head of the section](#)).

Returning to the well in Midian, it is startling to find the seven daughters being driven away by shepherds, of all people! Squabbling over wells is another theme which carries over from Genesis, but more ominous is the realisation that those who should be gentle protectors and leaders can cruelly drive away others from the feeding ground. The leaders of Israel would later be characterised as shepherds devouring their own flock. Yet Jesus would be the exact opposite, a shepherd whose care and concern is foreshadowed here by Moses.

Moses, then, in the characteristic fashion he has already demonstrated in Egypt, stands up for the women and the injustice they face. Now the odds are stacked even more against him than they were when he acted similarly in Egypt, for he is surrounded by a group of hostile shepherds whose language he probably does not even speak! The AV text states that Moses helped the women when the shepherds tried to drive them away, but this translation masks an important point. The word “helped” should be translated

‘saved’ or ‘delivered’; it is the verb from which the names Joshua and Jesus are derived. Moses’ saving actions typify the work of both Jesus and the Lord God. Both Jesus and Moses win a bride through their work of salvation, and our verb is also used to describe the work of God Himself as He saves the Israelites (for example, 14:13,30; 15:2; compare also the word “delivered” in 2:19, which is used of God in 3:8 and 12:27). Moses foreshadows the work of God.

So it is that Moses is invited into the home of Reuel (on the various names of Moses’ father-in-law, see [footnote 3](#)). “Call him, that he may eat bread”, Reuel says, the eating of bread together being something that continues to characterise the relationship of Moses and his father-in-law (18:12). In chapter 18, however, there is an important difference, for this time Reuel brings an offering (for he is a priest), and they “eat bread . . . before God”. This perhaps suggests that with the passing of the years Reuel has come to place his trust wholeheartedly in the God of Israel. He has seen Moses’ faith in the true God in action and, having witnessed the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, comes to share that faith with Moses. Our faith may not appear to make an immediate impact on those we meet, but we do not know what fruit it may ultimately bring.

The Israelites cry unto the Lord

- 2:23 And it came to pass in process of time, that the king of Egypt died:⁹ and the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage.
- 2:24 And God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.
- 2:25 And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God had respect¹⁰ unto them.

Comment

Two points are made with great emphasis in these three verses. The first is the heartfelt cry of the Israelites, stated in no less than four different ways:

- the children of Israel sighed
- they cried
- their cry came up
- they groaned.

They were almost at the limit of what they could bear; there was nothing they could do, and nowhere they could turn to—or so they

thought. But their cry was heard, a fact that is also emphasised with remarkable repetition:

- their cry came to God
- God heard
- God remembered
- God looked upon them
- God had respect unto them (see [note 10](#)).

Notice that this time we have a fivefold emphasis rather than the fourfold one that characterised His people’s cry. God’s hearing goes beyond our speaking, His care extends far past our needs, His arms reach deeper than the deepest trough into which we might sink. It is a wonderful consolation. Sometimes we are disappointed in our fellow humans’ inability to perceive and know what we are going through and the way that we feel. But God knows—and this is ultimately more important. Although He is so great and so far above us, still He knows what we suffer and what we feel.

Our three verses are absolutely crucial—pivotal even—to the book of Exodus. The reason for this is that everything that happens subsequently

depends on what is recorded here. Hitherto, God has been working very much in the background. Yes, He has granted the Hebrews abundant fruitfulness and blessed the midwives. Yes, Moses the future saviour has been born and is being prepared for his future role. But as yet we have not witnessed God taking any active steps to redeem His people and bring them up out of Egypt. We might say, indeed, that God has been surprisingly absent in chapters 1 and 2.

Yet upon this cry of the Israelites everything will change. God immediately takes notice, and in the very next incident of which we read (3:1ff.) God tells Moses that the time has come to return to Egypt, and commissions him for the remarkable work of deliverance that he will accomplish.

In other words, it is because the cry of the Israelites is so intense that the story continues to unfold in the way it does. Look again at what the text says: they cry, and consequently (and immediately) God responds. It is a pattern which is repeated time after time in the Scriptures. The cry of Israel initiates history; God is galvanised into action. His people cry; God is mobilised into activity on their behalf. Not that He has not been working quietly in the background all along—far from it, for the instant they cry Moses is ready to be sent, yet this was a process that was set in motion many years before! But whereas God had been preparing behind the scenes so that everything would be ready once His people cried to Him, now that pivot point has been reached God springs into action. For He is a responsive God; what He does is determined to some extent by the actions of His people. If they cry to Him then He will listen, and potentially intervene on their behalf.

All this has very practical consequences for our own lives. It emphasises the importance of prayer, and shows us why it is so necessary that we make our situations and petitions explicit before God. To say that He already knows what we need misses the point completely and undermines what the Exodus narrative is telling us. Relationships do not work by both parties simply ‘assuming’ the reactions and views of the other. Communication is imperative. We too must cry unto God if we expect Him to act in our lives.

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1. **v. 15 Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh.** There is another occasion when Moses is said

to have fled—in chapter 4 when God transforms his rod into a snake “and Moses fled from before it” (v. 3). God taught him to face his fears, however, by stretching out his hand to take the serpent by its tail. We may imagine the trepidation with which Moses did this, but in a way it was a parable of how he would have to return to Pharaoh from whom he had once fled, in order that God’s people might go free.

2. **v. 15 Midian.** Midian was a son of Abraham by Keturah (Gen. 25:1,2).
3. **v. 18 Reuel.** This means either ‘friend of God’ or ‘shepherd of God’, an appropriate name for a priest.

There is some confusion about the names and identity of Moses’ father-in-law. The name Reuel is used only here of Moses’ relative, coupled with the epithet “priest of Midian” (v. 16). Other Reuels, such as the ones in Numbers 2:14 and 1 Chronicles 9:8, and the son of Esau referred to in Genesis 36:4,10, 13,17 and 1 Chronicles 1:35,37, appear to be different individuals.

The title “priest of Midian” is also attached to the name Jethro in Exodus 3:1, another name for Moses’ father-in-law, which also occurs only in the book of Exodus (*cf.* 4:18; 18:1-12). It seems likely from the use of the same phrase “priest of Midian” with both names (2:18; 3:1; 18:1) that they refer to the same individual. It has been suggested with plausibility that ‘Jethro’ may actually be a title rather than a proper name, carrying the sense ‘his excellency’. This is certainly the meaning of the Hebrew word, and it seems realistic to suppose that the priest of Midian might be addressed with some such title. (There is supporting evidence from the Akkadian and Ugaritic languages for the suggestion that Jethro may be an honorific title.)

More troubling is the fact that Moses’ father-in-law is elsewhere called Hobab, from a root meaning ‘to cherish’ (Num. 10:29; Judg. 4:11; *cf.* 1:16). If the Raguel of Numbers 10:29 is identified with Reuel, then Reuel/Jethro would be the *grandfather* of Moses’ wife rather than Moses’ immediate ancestor-in-law. This is scarcely problematic; if he was the priest of the area and the active head of his house it would be natural enough for the daughters to call him their ‘father’. The only difficulty that remains is to decide the relationship between the events of Numbers 10:29 and Exodus 18. It would not appear to be an insurmountable task.

4. **v. 19 an Egyptian delivered us.** There is something incongruous about the word “Egyptian”

being placed next to the words “delivered us”! Moses, though mistaken for an Egyptian, behaves in the very opposite way to that which has characterised Egyptian males so far in the story. Moses is a kind of Egyptian who serves, helps and stands up for what is right, not one who exploits and dominates as have all the other Egyptians we have so far met in the book of Exodus. We too may be mistaken for Egyptians at first sight, but our behaviour must likewise set us apart.

5. **v. 19 out of the hand of the shepherds.** It is ironic that one should need to be delivered from the hand of shepherds; the phrase from our hymn about our Lord, “None can pluck them from thine hand”, can be placed fruitfully beside this, setting straight their perverse behaviour.
6. **v. 19 drew water enough.** The text does not literally say ‘enough’, a better translation being, ‘he drew exceedingly for us’, or, translating the idiom more slavishly, ‘drawing he drew for us’. Drawing water for a whole flock was a huge enterprise, and serves well to illustrate the kindness and selflessness of Moses. Re-

bekah’s drawing of water for the camels of Abraham’s servant, as recorded in Genesis 24, is a similar feat, given the quantity of water a camel can drink.

7. **v. 20 call him, that he may eat bread.** This is reminiscent of the way in which Rebekah leaves Abraham’s servant at the well and Laban has to go and fetch him, once more urging him to come and eat. See Genesis 24:29,31; the echo seems to be there, though the allusion is not precise. See also Genesis 29:13,14 regarding Laban and Jacob.
8. **v. 21 Zipporah.** This name means ‘little bird’.
9. **v. 23 the king of Egypt died.** Here is another link in the chain connecting the birth of Jesus with the birth of Moses. Joseph was told, “they are dead which sought the young child’s life” (Mt. 2:20), and Moses will soon be sent back to the scene of danger to redeem his people following the death of this Pharaoh.
10. **v. 25 had respect.** Literally, ‘God knew’, using the regular Hebrew verb for ‘know’. God’s knowledge of human suffering is further emphasised in His statement at 3:7, “for I know their sorrows”. It is a staggering concept.



Watchman

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Will we be ready when Christ returns? —The sequence of events (3)

Carlo Barbaresi

THE PREVIOUS article concluded with the land of Israel transformed following the coming of Christ to Jerusalem. Zechariah 14:4 says: “And his feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives”. The mention of the feet indicates that Christ is coming in judgement. In the vision of the Son of man in Revelation 1 we read of his feet: “and his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace” (v. 15).

The mention of brass takes us to the brazen altar in the tabernacle. The altar was for sacrifice, and we now should offer up our lives as a living sacrifice. Where the nations fail to do this they will be offered upon the sacrificial altar of judge-

ment: “the LORD [Yahweh] hath a sacrifice in Bozrah, and a great slaughter in the land of Idumea . . . For it is the day of the LORD’S [Yahweh’s] vengeance, and the year of recompences for the controversy of Zion” (Isa. 34:6-8).

Christ and the saints will have now come “with dyed garments from Bozrah” (63:1) to Jerusalem, which they will conquer from the Gogian host. Their victory is shown in Revelation 14:1: “And I looked, and, lo, a Lamb stood on the mount Sion, and with him an hundred forty and four thousand, having his Father’s name written in their foreheads”. Christ and the saints stand on Mount Zion in victory.