

The Lord's Promises fulfilled

Genesis is often viewed as an introduction to the remaining four books of Moses, as well as to the rest of the Bible. Then Exodus 1 recounts that, following the death of Joseph "and all that generation" (Exod 1:6), "the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty" (Exod 1:7). Pharaoh attempted to control this growth with a series of measures to afflict the Israelites. In the end, though, no matter what he did, the "people multiplied, and waxed very mighty" (Exod 1:20). Eventually the Lord delivered Israel and brought destruction upon Pharaoh's army.

These passages draw on the language of Genesis 1:28: "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth." They also emphasize how the Lord was fulfilling his promise to Abraham: "I will make of thee a great nation. . . . And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee" (Gen 12:2–3). The book of Exodus thus stands as a witness to Israel that the Lord keeps his covenants with those who obey and serve him.

EGYPTIAN TEMPLE OF AMUN AND THE SACRED LAKE AT KARNAK (*in Thebes; modern Luxor*). Amun, the god of Thebes, became the Egyptian national deity during the New Kingdom Period. Remains of this sprawling temple complex date to as early as the fifteenth century B.C. Additions were made by various kings over several centuries. In the foreground is visible a portion of the "sacred lake," a large, artificial body of water used by the priests for purification and symbolizing the primordial waters of creation.

Thebes, Egypt. Used by permission, Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

fabrication, produced to provide later Israelites with a national epic. Other scholars point to the Egyptian elements in the text and to the strong presence of the Exodus theme in later biblical material and assume this experience reflects some historical reality (who would invent slavery as their origins?). There are currently enough connections between biblical and Egyptian texts to confidently place the Exodus in a general historical context sometime during the thirteenth century B.C. (see Detail: Dating Moses and the Exodus, page 95).

The lack of explicit evidence of Israelites in Egypt can be due to a number of reasons. For example, the Egyptians, like other ancient Near Eastern peoples, did not memorialize their defeats. Thus, no monuments to the Israelite exodus will likely ever be discovered. Also, the moist climate and high water table in the eastern Delta have prohibited the survival of papyrus documents that once existed in the cities there. There are thus many questions about the history behind these biblical accounts that we cannot presently answer. However, general contextual evidence, such as our knowledge of West Semites traveling to Egypt in times of drought and famine to pasture flocks in the eastern Delta, is well attested, not only in the Bible, but also in Egyptian literature. Also well attested are the Egyptian use of prisoners of war and others to



do forced labor for the king and his royal projects as well as the discovery of West Semitic artifacts in some tombs excavated in the Delta.

The Egyptian enslavement of Israelites had economic as well as political motivation. With the Hyksos having been forced out, and with the new dynasty seeking to establish itself in the northeast Delta region, plenty of building and rebuilding was undertaken. One of the few historical details in the early chapters of Exodus is that the Israelites became part of the forced labor gangs that made bricks and built the royal cities of Pithom and Rameses (or Ramses) (Exod 1:11).

Brick making was hard work. Egyptian documents from over many centuries specify quotas for crews of brick makers, quotas that were often not met. An entertaining Egyptian text belonging to the genre of "Instruction" literature nicknamed "The Satire on the Trades" relates how a father tries to persuade his son to choose the scribal profession by describing the miserable working conditions of those involved in manual labor. It includes this description:

I'll describe to you also the mason [brick maker]:

His loins give him pain;
Though he is out in the wind,
He works without a cloak . . .
His arms are spent from exertion,
Having mixed all kinds of dirt;
When he eats bread [with] his fingers,
He has washed at the same time. (*COS*, 1.48)

DETAIL

The Cities of Pithom and Rameses

Pithom and Rameses are located about twenty miles apart in the eastern Nile Delta. The sites included large grain storage facilities to support palace, temple, and military staff. The ruins at Tell el-Dab'a, the site of Avaris, have been identified as the Egyptian city Pi-Rameses, "House of Rameses." This huge city was built at the command of Rameses II (1279–1213 b.c.). This is presumably the second of the two supply cities that the enslaved Israelites help build and the starting point of the Exodus (Exod 1:11; 12:37; Num 33:5). If this connection is correct, it provides an important chronological datum for the Exodus.

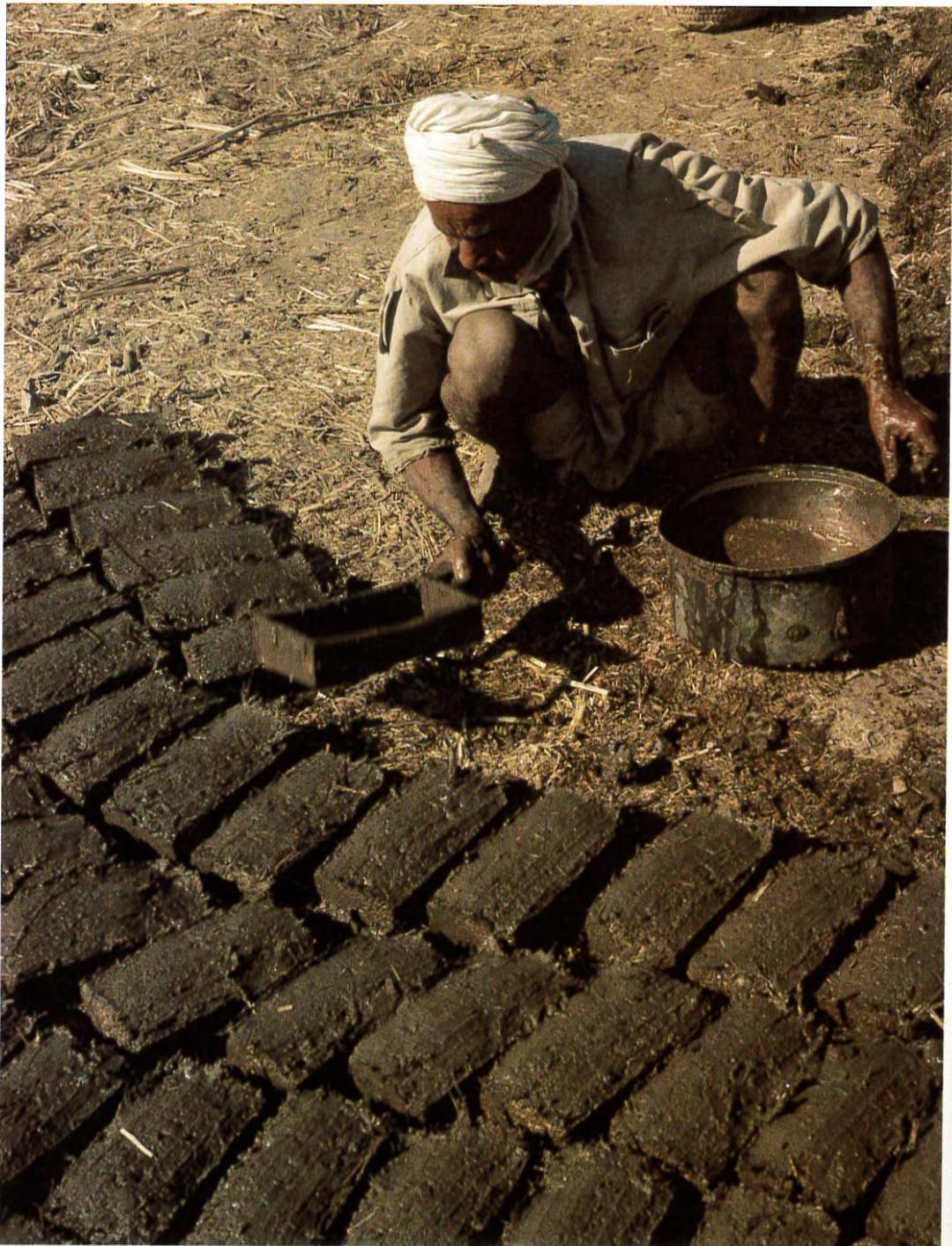


EGYPTIAN WORKER MAKING MUD BRICKS. This tomb painting shows part of a larger scene of brick making activity from the tomb of Rekhmire (in Thebes), who served as vizier to King Thutmose III (1479–1425 B.C.). The worker in this detail is taking mud bricks out of a mold and laying them out to dry in the sun. Sun-dried mud brick was a common building material in much of the ancient Near East.

Thebes, Egypt. Used by permission, Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

MAKING MUD BRICKS. This modern Egyptian worker in Luxor (ancient Thebes) makes mud bricks with a wooden mold and lays them out to dry in the sun. Straw, used as a binding agent, is visible in these bricks, just as it is in surviving ancient ones. Exodus 5:5–8 indicates that the procuring of the straw needed to make mud bricks was assigned to the Israelites in addition to actually making bricks.

Thebes, Egypt. Used by permission, Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY



The New Kingdom Period was a time of Egyptian imperialism, with military domination and economic expansion in Nubia to the south and in Canaan and Syria to the northeast. This era, known as the Late Bronze Age, is also referred to as the International Age because of well-documented interaction between kingdoms at both ends of the Fertile Crescent. Conquest brought not only the spoils of war and recurring tribute, but also control over important trade routes. Thutmose III (1479–1425 B.C.), for example, made numerous campaigns to Canaan, Lebanon, and Syria during the latter half of his reign, extending Egyptian control to new areas. His annals contain a detailed account of his conquest of the city-state of Megiddo (*COS*, 2.2A) as well as many other successes. From such conquests and the ongoing control of these areas by his successors, goods such as gold and other precious metals, agricultural produce, and cedar wood from Lebanon came to Egypt via Egyptian-controlled international trade routes. The city-states in Canaan were now part of the Egyptian Empire.



NEFERTITI. This famous bust of the Egyptian queen Nefertiti, wife of Akhenaten (1352–1336 B.C.), actually consists of a detailed limestone sculpture that was overlaid with plaster and then painted.

CT scans reveal small differences between the underlying sculpture and the plaster exterior. About twenty inches tall, this bust dates to about 1345 B.C. and was found in its sculptor's shop.

Egyptisches Museum, Berlin. Used by permission, Vanni/Art Resource, NY

MOSES' BIRTH AND LIFE IN EGYPT

Moses was born into this general historical context. Exodus mentions that Moses was 80 when he returned to Egypt and 120 when he “died.” Stephen’s speech in Acts 7 provides the age of 40 for Moses when he fled Egypt. If this is accurate, his life divides into three periods of 40 years each: (1) birth to leaving Egypt (Acts 7:23–29), (2) his time away from Egypt in Midian (Exod 7:7), and (3) his return to Egypt followed by the Exodus and the time in the wilderness with the Israelites (Deut 34:7). Whether these numbers are literal, rounded off, or merely symbolic of a long time, each of the first two portions of Moses’ life provided him with experiences and skills that would be valuable to him in his prophetic mission.

Exodus 2 briefly recounts Moses’ rescue from the Nile River by an Egyptian princess and his subsequent upbringing in the Egyptian royal court.

Ancient Near Eastern kings had large harems and numerous children, so the fact that Exodus 2:5 indicates that a “daughter of Pharaoh” retrieved Moses does not provide us with many specifics about his situation once he was taken to his new home. He was presumably raised in one of the capital cities in the Delta. The biblical account contains wonderful irony, in that Pharaoh had ordered the death of Israelite males (Exod 1:22), but one Israelite male—Moses—was raised somewhere in Pharaoh’s own house (Exod 2:10).

Moses’ name is often explained as deriving from the Egyptian verb “to beget,” an element found compounded with a divine name in a number of personal names (e.g., Thutmose, “Thoth begets”). However, it could also derive from a common Egyptian noun meaning “child, boy.” Exodus 2:10 represents Pharaoh’s daughter naming the baby *Mosheb* (Moses), with a wordplay on the Hebrew verb *mashah*, “to draw out,” because she “drew him out of the water” (but if his name were derived from Hebrew, which is not likely, the participial form translates as “one who draws out”).

It was common throughout the ancient Near East for a king’s own sons as well as for promising foreign youth to be raised in royal courts (see Dan 1). They were provided with education in administrative, diplomatic, and military matters, with the expectation that they would be placed in positions of service at maturity.

Moses, when he “was grown,” killed an Egyptian taskmaster to defend a fellow Israelite (Exod 2:11). Compelled to flee Egypt to preserve his own life (Exod 2:11–15), he ended up in the land of Midian. There is no information in the Bible on possible contact between Moses and his biological family while he was growing up in Egypt. And there is no biblical basis for later Jewish traditions about Moses, such as his leading a military expedition to Ethiopia (really Nubia or Kush), as found in the writings of the first century A.D. Jewish author Josephus (*Ant.* 2.243).

MOSES IN MIDIAN

The Bible indicates the Midianites were descended from Abraham’s fourth son with his concubine Keturah (Gen 25:1–2; 1 Chr 1:32). The seminomadic Midianites are mentioned in the Bible and other texts as located in northern Sinai, southern Canaan, and eastward in northwest Arabia. While we do not know for sure where exactly Moses fled when he left Egypt, it is often assumed he was in northwest Arabia. Such a journey would have been treacherous, whatever his exact destination.

Exodus 2:15–3:2 is a highly compressed account of several decades of Moses’ life. While in Midian, Moses married Zipporah, had children, and worked as a shepherd for his father-in-law, Jethro. This provided him with many experiences he had not had in his royal upbringing in Egypt. We do not, however, know how long Moses was in hiding en route to Midian or how long he actually lived in Midian as a family man.