

שמות

EXODUS

their existence in the Realm of the Dead, their illustrations were of agricultural life on river banks – a mirror image of their own lives in Egypt.

The ancient Egyptian belief in rebirth and of existence in the Realm of the Dead, and their art relating to these beliefs, gives modern scholars greater understanding of Egyptian life. Many of the practices used in the tombs – which were believed to enable the dead to be reborn again – also were used in daily Egyptian life to encourage fertility and to reduce infant mortality.

Ancient Egypt's foreign relations, international position, beliefs, and practices may be seen as a possible stage for the biblical narrative of the Exodus

Egyptians decorated their tombs with reliefs and drawings, often executed by the best artists of the time. They were well preserved in Egypt's dry climate. Many scenes depict workshops, feasts, farming, and other aspects of daily life, giving a window into the ancient Egyptians lifestyle – clothing, professions, and diet.

Much of ancient Egyptian religious thought reflected Egypt's physical conditions. Thus, the Egyptian creation myth stated that the creator sun god created himself in the Primordial Waters and stood on the Primordial Mound, the first dry land that emerged from the waters. He made the first family of gods, which the Egyptians called The Ennead. The Egyptian creation myth was a clear allusion to the annual Nile flood that brought the

➤ The pyramids at Giza (L to R): the Pyramid of Menkaure, the Pyramid of Khafre, and the Great Pyramid of Khufu



➤ Statue of Ramesses II, the “Younger Memnon,” from the Ramesseum, Thebes, Egypt, Nineteenth Dynasty, about 1250 BCE

fertile mud, which became new fertile land as the water receded. In the creation myth, the land, like the silt from the Nile, appeared out of the water, allowing the growth of new vegetation.

The ancient Egyptians believed in many gods, some of whom associated with elements in the created world (the sun, sky, soil, and air), while others represented political entities (the dead king, the queen, and the ruling king). There were also city gods, regional gods, and many others. They formed triads, families, and groups. Of all the gods, the sun god was the head of the pantheon, the creator of the entire world. Starting in the Old Kingdom, the sun god was called Re. In the New Kingdom, Thebes, which became Egypt's capital, the local god was Amun. As a political act, Amun was merged with Re, and thus the sun god in the time of the New Kingdom is often called Amun-Re.

Amun was the god of the empire in the times of the New Kingdom, and Egypt's finest monuments were built in his honor. The temple complex in Karnak (ancient Thebes, modern Luxor) was dedicated to Amun. It was second only to the crown, richly funded and politically the country's most powerful institution. In order to build these many fine monuments, Egypt needed a large labor force. Prisoners of war were brought to Egypt through military campaigns in the Levant and in other parts of the empire.

Much is known about New Kingdom Egypt. Ancient Egypt's foreign relations, international position, beliefs, and practices may be seen as a possible stage for the biblical narrative of the Exodus. These elements, forming the cultural dialogue between the biblical narrative of the Exodus and New Kingdom Egypt, will be explored in the articles that follow. ■ RSH



Introduction to ancient Egypt

Egypt was united under a single ruler toward the end of the 4th millennium BCE. Its kingship, despite numerous vicissitudes lasted for more than 3,000 years. Egypt is unique in world history in that the same people lived in the same place, spoke the same language and believed in the same gods for more than 3,000 years.

The ancient Egyptian king, who was believed to be the manifestation of the falcon god Horus, at many times ruled over a kingdom that covered the vast area of the Nile Valley. It spanned from the First Cataract of the Nile – beyond Aswan to the south – north to the Nile delta, reaching the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. The king was called “The Unifier of the Two Lands” – Upper and Lower Egypt. Upper Egypt (the southern part, nearer the Nile’s source) stretched from the First Cataract of the Nile northward to Memphis, in the region of modern Cairo. Lower Egypt (the northern part, downstream) covered the area from Memphis north to the Mediterranean Sea, including the fertile land of the Nile delta. It is possible that the name of Egypt in Hebrew, *Mitzrayim*, preserves the notion of Egypt being a unification of two lands, as the ending *-ayim* in Hebrew usually denotes a dual form.

Memphis had always been the meeting point between Upper and Lower Egypt, and because of its central location, it was Egypt’s capital throughout Egyptian history. Its skyline’s most prominent feature, the Giza pyramids, which were built by the Egyptians as royal tombs in the 26th century BCE, marked the political power

and sophistication of Egypt’s kingship even in these early times. However, there were times in Egypt’s long history when Memphis served as the administrative capital, but the king moved his residence to another city. During the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BCE), Thebes (near modern Luxor), in Upper Egypt, was the location of the king’s palace, while Memphis remained the empire’s administrative center.

As discussed in the introduction, many scholars consider Egypt’s New Kingdom as a possible setting for the Exodus story. Many elements presented in the text make sense against the cultural background of that era in Egyptian history. By then, Egypt had been a long-established state, ruled for more than 1,500 years by a series of god-kings (monarchs who were considered by the people as divine, and worshipped as such). Unlike other countries in the region, Egypt did not suffer from wars or political instability. Egypt in the New Kingdom was the most important political power in the region, forming an empire that stretched from the Fourth Cataract of the Nile in the south, in the heart of Africa, to the Euphrates in the north-east – covering much of the Levant. Egypt’s large cities attracted people from all over the known world, and many languages and cultures mixed in its streets. The

Egyptian economy relied heavily on foreign labor, either immigrants who came to find work in Egypt, or those who were forcefully brought to Egypt as prisoners of war, including people of Semitic origin.

Despite their great victories and the new foreign territories gained for the growing empire by Egypt’s talented kings and army generals, the Egyptians were never enthusiastic about living outside of Egypt. The agricultural sedentary lifestyle, which was enabled by the steady water supply and the fertile mud provided by the annual flood of the Nile, was Egypt’s pride. The resulting reliable food supply was a major factor in Egypt’s security and the stability of its social order. Through their lifestyle, agriculture, clean clothes, and shaven appearance, the Egyptians differentiated themselves from their neighbors, whose nomadic lifestyle they despised. The Egyptians thought so highly of their country that even when they envisioned



➤ The Fields of Reeds, vignette of chapter 110 of the Book of the Dead, the tomb of Sendjem, Deir el-Medina



— ARCHAEOLOGY —

1:7 Semites in Egypt

It was not unusual for Canaanites to move to ancient Egypt – a great political and economic center that was like a magnet, attracting individuals from surrounding peoples and cultures. Evidence from the time of the Middle Kingdom (21st to 17th century BCE) shows that prisoners of war, work immigrants, low-ranking servants to the aristocracy, and merchants all migrated from Canaan to Egypt. In addition, there was probably another group of Canaanite skilled craftsmen in the service of the crown. These were builders of seafaring vessels, and caravan leaders who led royal expeditions to the mines of the Eastern Desert.

Water in the Middle East is always an issue. In ancient times the Canaanite shepherds brought herds to the Nile delta in times of famine, because the Nile provided a steady supply of water that supported agriculture and fertile grazing pastures even when rain was scarce. The Egyptian government blocked infiltrators when it was strong, but when the central administration was weak, shepherds from Canaan would bring their herds to graze there.

The Canaanites living in the delta, though they were foreigners in Egypt, gained power in the 17th to 16th century BCE, the Second Intermediate period. They established a Western Semitic kingship that later expanded to include the Egyptian capital of Memphis. Eventually, they reached Middle Egypt as well. As rulers, they retained Semitic names such as Khmudi and Yakob-Har, but adopted Egyptian royal insignia and titles. The Egyptians called them Khekau-Khasut, meaning the Foreign Rulers – the ancient Greeks called them Hyksos. The Hyksos rule lasted for one hundred years: In 1550 BCE, the Egyptians drove the Hyksos out of Egypt to Canaan, united Egypt, and constituted the New Kingdom.

שמות וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַבָּאִים מִצְרַיִם אֶת יַעֲקֹב אִישׁ אֵל וּבֵיתוֹ בָּאוּ: רְאוּבֵן שְׁמֵעוֹן לֵוִי וַיהוּדָה: יִשְׂשַׁכָּר זְבוּלֹן וּבִנְיָמִן: דָּן וְנַפְתָּלִי גָד וְאַשֶׁר: וַיְהִי כָּל־נַפְשׁ יִצְחָק יַרְדְּ-יַעֲקֹב שְׁבַעִים נַפְשׁ וַיּוֹסֶף הָיָה בְּמִצְרַיִם: וַיָּמָת יוֹסֵף וְכָל־אָחָיו וְכָל־הַדּוֹר הַהוּא: וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל פָּרוּ וַיִּשְׁרְצוּ וַיִּרְבּוּ וַיַּעֲצֻמוּ בְּמֵאֵד מְאֹד וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ אֹתָם:

- 1 1 And these are the names of the sons of Yisrael who came to Egypt with Yaakov, each with his household:
- 2 Reuven, Shimon, Levi and Yehuda; Yissakhar, Zevulun
- 3 and Binyamin; Dan and Naftali; Gad and Asher. The
- 4 descendants of Yaakov were seventy in all, and Yosef was
- 5 already in Egypt. Then Yosef died, and all his brothers,
- 6 and all that generation. But the Israelites were fruitful and
- 7 burgeoned; they multiplied and became exceptionally strong, until the land was filled with them.

Even after this defeat, Canaanites remained in Egypt and maintained their own cultural identity, and newcomers continued to arrive as work immigrants. In the period of the New Kingdom, many Canaanites were captured as prisoners of war. Furthermore, there is a record of an individual Canaanite who came to power during this time and bore high-ranking titles in the Pharaonic administration.

Is it possible to identify the Israelites of the Tanakh with the history of these Canaanites, whose presence is documented in Egyptian sources? With our knowledge of the Exodus story, the thought of this overlap is enthralling – and the question is hard to ignore. However, there are no good answers. The relationship between Egypt and Canaan was always that of a large, ruling empire and a remote, underdeveloped province, and Egyptian records would not have had reason to distinguish between the different Semitic groups. Since the Western Semites who lived in Egypt left no written records of their own, and ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern records are all silent, evidence of the Israelites in Egypt is unlikely to be found. • RSH



— NEAR EAST —

1:5 The number 70

The numbers 7, 10, 12, 40, 60, 70, 300, and their multiples appear many times in the Torah. Rather than representing an exact or historical quantity, these numbers have allegorical and typological meaning. The family of Yaakov consists of 70 souls who immigrate to Egypt. The Israelite nation has 70 elders (Ex. 24), Gideon and Ahab have 70 sons (Judges 8:30; II Kings 10:1), and Adoni-Bezek rules over 70 kings (Judges 1:7).

In ancient Near Eastern texts, the number 70 has referred to gods, kings, and more. The goddess Atirat from the city of Ugarit has 70 children. In the ancient Near East, the number 70 represented totality • NKI

וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ-חָדָשׁ עַל-מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַע אֶת-יוֹסֵף: וַיֹּאמֶר
 אֶל-עַמּוֹ הַזֶּה עִם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רַב וְעַצוֹם מִמֶּנּוּ: הֲבֵיאָה נְתַחֲכֶמָה
 לוֹ פֶּן-יִרְבֶּה וְהָיָה פִּי-תִקְרָאנָה מִלְחָמָה וְנוֹסַף גַּם-הוּא עַל-
 שְׂנְאֵינוּ וְנִלְחַם-בָּנוּ וְעָלָה מִן-הָאָרֶץ: וַיִּשְׁיִמוּ עָלָיו שְׂרֵי מַסִּים
 לְמַעַן עַנְתּוֹ בְּסִבְלָתָם וַיִּבְּן עָרֵי מִסְכָּנוֹת לְפָרְעֹה אֶת-פִּתּוֹם
 וְאֶת-רַעַמְסֵס: וְכַאֲשֶׁר יַעֲנֶה אֹתוֹ כֵּן יִרְבֶּה וְכֵן יִפְרֹץ וַיִּקְצֹוּ
 מִפְּנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ מִצְרַיִם אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּפָרָךְ:

Then a new king arose over Egypt, who had not known 8
 Yosef. And he said to his people, “You see that the Israelite 9
 people are many and more powerful than we. Come, let us 10
 deal wisely with them in case they increase, and if war
 breaks out they may join our enemies and fight against us
 and escape from the land.” So they placed slave masters 11 ●●●
 over the Israelites to oppress them with forced labor; they
 built supply cities for Pharaoh: Pitom and Ramesses. But 12
 the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and
 spread; and the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The 13
 Egyptians imposed back-breaking labor on the Israelites,



EGYPTOLOGY

1:11 Slave masters (*sarei missim*)

The Egyptian slave masters are symbolic of the extent to which the Hebrew slaves were tortured. From the beginning of the Eighteenth Dynasty, prisoners of war, including those from the Levant, were forced to make bricks for royal building projects.

The slaves were controlled in a hierarchical system in which the slave masters, or *sarei missim*, probably of higher rank, established the brick-making quotas. The junior officers, or *nogsim*, supervised the slaves, ready to strike them with their sticks at their discretion.

According to Egyptian documents that were discovered, the brick-making quotas set by the slave masters rarely were reached. This fact is significant in understanding the cruel nature of Egyptian slavery.

Apparently, the quotas were not of practical significance, and never were designed to increase brick-making production per se. It seems that in their attitudes toward the slaves, the ancient Egyptians considered torture and humiliation to be an end in and of itself. • RSH



➤ Nubian prisoners beaten and counted, engraving in the Memphite tomb of Horemhab



EGYPTOLOGY

1:11 Pithom and Ramesses: language

Can we identify the geographic locations of the two supply cities, Pithom and Ramesses, that the Israelites built for Pharaoh? In ancient Egypt, supply cities were probably storage facilities serving palaces and temples, and Pithom and Ramesses may be associated with the Egyptian localities Per-Atum and Per-Ramesses. The Egyptian word “Per,” meaning “house,” was used as the first element in place and temple names. Per-Atum literally means

“the house of Atum,” the creator sun god in Egyptian religion, and Per-Ramesses would mean “the house of Ramesses,” the king. In the Egyptian language, /r/ was often lost at the end of words, and this would explain the transcription of Per-Atum as Pithom.

Per-Ramesses refers to the new capital in the Nile delta that Ramesses II built and named after himself. The new city was located in the eastern delta, on the Pelusiac branch of the Nile, on the site of the earlier Hyksos capital called Avaris (see “Where did the Israelites live?” below).

The location of Per-Atum is less certain. It is not the cult center for Atum in Heliopolis, near what is today the Cairo airport, not far from the eastern delta – as

scholars identify this site as the city On mentioned in Genesis.

Remains of a temple of Atum have been found at Tell el-Rataba in Wadi Tumilat. It is about twelve miles south of Pi-Ramesses, and this may be the site of the “Pithom” referred to here. The storage facilities of these two localities, one a temple and the other a palace, could be the Pithom and Ramesses mentioned in this verse. ■ RSH



Portrait statue of Ramesses II, 13th century BCE, Museo Egizio, Turin, Italy



EGYPTOLOGY

1:11 Where did the Israelites live?

Although no direct evidence has been found of the Israelites’ sojourn in Egypt, archaeological finds indicate that there was a Semite presence in the eastern Nile

delta, a presence that waxed and waned across many centuries of ancient Egyptian history. It is probable that, in this same region, the Israelites were settled by Yosef with the approval of Pharaoh – meaning that this was the actual location of ancient Goshen (Gen. 45:9–10, 46:34; Num. 33:5).

Geographically speaking, the Israelites probably would have been inclined to live in this area in the eastern Nile delta. This part of ancient Egypt was closest to Canaan, making it a more natural destination than other areas of the country that were farther from home. It was also a very fertile land, making it an attractive choice.

Indirect archaeological evidence supports the possibility that this was indeed home to the Israelites. Starting in 1966 and continuing today, the Austrian archaeologist Manfred Bietak began directing a series of digs at Tell el-Dab’a, or “Mount of the Hyena” in Arabic, in the eastern Nile delta region. He identified this site – where he found evidence of a large population – as Avaris, location of the summer palace of the Hyksos. Various called Canaanites, Asiatics, Semites, and *Aamu*, the Hyksos ruled in Egypt from 1650 to 1550 BCE, when they were defeated by Ahmose I and expelled from Egypt.

Bietak found that the Hyksos were not the only residents of Avaris. He uncovered indications of Semitic settlement in the same area after the Hyksos were expelled – starting in the Twelfth Dynasty (19th century BCE) and continuing through the time of Ramesses (12th century BCE) – a lengthy period that, according to some opinions, would cover the time of the Israelite sojourn in ancient Egypt. More importantly, in the 13th century BCE, Pharaoh Ramesses II constructed the new city of Pi-Ramesses (most probably the Ramesses mentioned in this verse) on the older site of Avaris.

Bietak discovered that mud bricks were used in agriculture at Tell el-Dab’a. The bricks were made of chopped straw, which were unusual in ancient Egyptian building practices but are mentioned specifically in the Torah with regard to the enslaved Israelites (see “Brick quotas and straw” on page 30). Furthermore, Bietak found evidence of ancient Near Eastern (but non-Egyptian) burial practices in the area – another hint of the Semitic presence.

Consequently, geography, history, and archaeology all point to the site of Avaris on the eastern Nile delta as a possible location of ancient Goshen. ■ HA



Statue head of an Asiatic official, Avaris, 18th to 17th century BCE

וַיִּמְרְדוּ אֶת־חַיֵּיהֶם בְּעִבְדָּה קָשָׁה בְּחֹמֶר וּבִלְבָנִים וּבְכָל־
 עֲבֹדָה בִּשְׂדֵה אֶת כָּל־עֲבֹדָתָם אֲשֶׁר־עֲבָדוּ בָהֶם בְּפֶרֶךְ:
 וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְמִילֹדֹת הָעִבְרִית אֲשֶׁר שָׂם הָאֱחָת שִׁפְרָה

embittering their lives with harsh work in mortar and brick 14 ●●
 and all field labors; all the work they forced upon them was
 intended to break them. Then the king of Egypt said to 15 ●●
 the midwives of the Hebrews (one named Shifra, the other



EGYPTOLOGY

1:14 Use of Semitic slaves in Egypt

Enslavement of prisoners of war – among them Semitic prisoners of war – was a well-entrenched practice in ancient Egypt. The first evidence of this practice comes from the time of the Middle Kingdom (2055–1650 BCE), but it did not become commonplace until the time of the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BCE), when the Eighteenth Dynasty established a professional army.

Motivation to create a professional army was likely in order to keep away the Hyksos, the foreign rulers who had ruled the delta and large parts of the Nile Valley (see "Where did the Israelites live?" on page 6). Once established, however, the Egyptian army found other reasons to raid Canaan. Beginning in the time of King Thutmose

III (1479–1425 BCE), who was the founder of the ancient Egyptian empire that ruled the Levant for nearly four hundred years, the Egyptian army often entered Canaan on military expeditions until, in the Rameside period (1295–1069 BCE), they established permanent bases there.

One of ancient Egypt's motivations in maintaining an empire may have been the desire for prisoners of war, who were brought over from the Levant as cheap labor that fueled the splendor of the Egyptian kingship. Some of these prisoners were given as trophies to army generals who excelled in battle, and they were used as personal slaves. Others were given as an offering to the gods in the temples, and they were forced to work in royal large-scale building projects, various manual works, agriculture, and works that demanded knowledge of weaponry, chariots, and horses. Prisoner slaves did not always serve for life; some were allowed to marry Egyptian women and, in some cases, could even be freed. ■ RSH



Prisoners of war, Sun Temple of Ramesses II, Abu-Simbel



EGYPTOLOGY

1:14 Making bricks

According to the biblical text, brick making was a primary cause of suffering in the lives of the Hebrew slaves. This difficult, labor-intensive process is illustrated clearly in wall paintings found in the tomb of a high-ranking ancient Egyptian official, Rekhmire, a vizier during the time of Thutimes III and in the first part of Amenhotep II's reign (the last third of the 15th century BCE).



The manufacture and transportation of bricks, Tomb of Rekhmire, 15th century BCE

The paintings in Rekhmire's tomb illustrate the process of brick manufacture by prisoners of war, some of whom are depicted as Nubians – while others are shown as being of Semitic origin, reminiscent of the Hebrew slaves.

In the paintings, two figures are shown drawing up water. Other figures are depicted adding Nile mud and straw. The mud mixture then is passed along to another figure who forms the bricks using molds and lays them out to dry in the sun.

■ RSH



EGYPTOLOGY

1:15 Egyptian midwives in pairs

It was common practice in ancient Egypt that midwives came in pairs. This is frequently depicted in ancient Egyptian art and literature. The most common birthing position at that time was for a woman to squat or sit – positions that work well with the natural force of gravity and with the female physique. Thus, with the birthing mother partly upright, one midwife was needed to stand behind the woman in labor for support while the other was required to kneel in front of her and receive the baby.

Mortality rates in ancient Egypt were high. While delivering a baby, midwives would also call upon deities and chant magical spells during the birth to protect both mother and child.

They would reenact mythological scenes during birth. The midwives would identify the mother with Hathor or occasionally with Isis – goddess mothers associated with royalty – making the baby her divine offspring. They would use magical objects such as small figurines of a dwarf representing the god Bes, who was called upon to ensure a healthy delivery.

Apart from these efforts by the midwives, magic may also have been performed during the birth by other attendants. The Westcar Papyrus (18th to 17th century BCE) includes a story cycle set in the court of King Khufu of the Fourth Dynasty. One of the stories tells about the delivery of triplets who became the three kings of Egypt, in which the nervously waiting husband untied his kilt. Although the story does not give a reason for his action, maybe he was trying to use magic to “open the way” for an easier delivery.

Understanding these customs helps explain the Torah’s depiction of Shifra and Puah. ■ RSH



Pharaoh and the midwives, Golden Haggadah, Catalonia, 14th century CE



EGYPTOLOGY

1:15 The names Shifra and Puah

Shifra and Puah are heroic midwives in the Exodus story who refuse to obey Pharaoh’s command to murder newborn Hebrew boys. Reading the narrative, we are left to wonder about their background and identity, which are omitted from the text.

The name Shifra is derived from the Hebrew root *sh p r*, meaning to be pleasing to the eye. Apparently, the word is related to an Arabic verb denoting the removal of a woman’s veil, and also means to shine. As an adjective, it is used only once in the Tanakh: in Psalms 16:6, where David exclaims, “Indeed my heritage is beautiful [*shafra*] to me.” The name also appears on a list of slaves in Egypt from the reign of Sobekhotep III (late 18th century BCE) – a list that is on a papyrus scroll kept in the Brooklyn Museum known as Brooklyn 35.1446. It appears too in an Aramaic inscription on a stele in Sefire, near Aleppo, Syria.

Puah is probably derived from the root *y p ‘a*. The verb’s sole derivative, the feminine

noun *yip’a*, meaning brightness, radiance, or splendor, is applied only to the king of Tyre (Ezek. 28:7, 17). The name Puah may be related etymologically to the name of Danel’s daughter (Pughat) in the Ugaritic Aqhat Epic (ca. 1400–1200 BCE).

Both names are Semitic. Therefore, Shifra and Puah may have been Israelites or some other Semites pressed into Pharaoh’s service, and therefore not Egyptians. ■ GZ



An ostracon of a new mother nursing her baby

• טז וְשֵׁם הַשִּׁנִּית פּוּעָה: וַיֹּאמֶר בְּיִלְדָּךְ אֶת־הָעִבְרִיּוֹת וְרָאִיתָ עַל־
 • יז הָאֲבָנִים אֲסִפֶּן הוּא וְהַמֶּתֶן אֹתוֹ וְאִם־בֵּת הוּא וְחַיָּה: וְתִירָאן

Puah), “When you help a Hebrew woman give birth, look 16 •
 on the birth-stool. If it is a boy, kill him, and if it is a girl, let
 her live.” But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the 17



EGYPTOLOGY

1:16 Birth-stool

When the Torah narrates how Pharaoh spoke to the Hebrew midwives, commanding them to kill baby boys born to Hebrew women, it uses the Hebrew word *ovna'im*. The word *ovna'im*, birth-stool, is used only once more in the Bible (Jer. 18:3), where the text describes work with clay, and possibly refers to a potter's wheel.

The ancient Egyptian god Khnum was a ram-headed god in charge of the source of the Nile, and closely associated with the fertile soil that the Nile water brought during the annual flood. As a ram, he was also closely connected to male virility and human fertility. These two characteristics, soil and fertility, led to the idea that Khnum was responsible for creating humanity – from clay or mud, on a potter's wheel.

In Egyptian art, depictions of Khnum seated by the potter's wheel, creating a baby, show the moment of conception, after which the baby was believed to be put into a woman's womb.

While it might be tempting to draw a connection between the word *ovna'im* as it appears in Exodus, and the image of Khnum creating babies on a potter's wheel, this would not be accurate. The Exodus text describes the birth of newborn babies, while the Egyptian imagery refers to the moment of conception, even before the embryo was put in the womb.

However, the word *ovna'im* in our story is not entirely disconnected from clay and mud. It most probably refers to two or more stones or stone-like objects that were used in the birthing scene, as *ovna'im* is the plural form of *even*, meaning stone.

In ancient Egypt and in the ancient Near East, women used birth bricks. In ancient Egypt, women probably used a set of four decorated mud bricks, made of black Nile mud, which were stacked in pairs as support for a woman's feet while she squatted during labor. It is plausible that the word *ovna'im* refers to these two stacks of mud bricks.

There is a connection between the idea of creating babies from clay and the use of mud bricks as support for a woman in labor. The fertile black Nile mud left by the Nile flood, which was used by Khnum to create babies, was used also for the manufacture of birth bricks. The mud was possibly a representation of what the Egyptians referred to as the Primordial Mound which, in Egyptian creation myth, was the first land to rise from the Primordial Waters. It is no wonder that two very important elements in ancient Egyptian religious thought, the land of Egypt and humankind, were believed to be created from the same material – the black, fertile mud of the Nile.

A decorated brick dated to the late Middle Kingdom (1700–1650 BCE) found in Abydos, in Upper Egypt, is thought to be one of four birth bricks. The upper side of the brick was decorated with a scene depicting a mother seated on a throne with her newborn baby. Two midwives and fragments of two emblems of the goddess



Squatting woman giving birth, assisted by two Hathor figures, Temple of Hathor at Dendera

Hathor flank the scene. The blue color of the hair of all participants tells us that this scene is in the divine realm, and the Hathor emblems suggest that the birthing mother is identified with the goddess Hathor. The new baby is thus identified with the sun god, who was believed to be born every morning from the loins of the goddess Hathor (see "The calf as an Egyptian deity" on page 180); by re-enacting the divine birth of the sun god, the ancient Egyptian magician protected the newborn child and the mother.

But this was not the only protection provided for the mother and baby. The sides of the brick were also decorated with protective figures that were called upon to ward off dangers from the physical and spiritual realms. These same figures also appeared on magical wands, magical rods, and more rarely on cups for baby feeding, which were part of a common set of religious rituals meant to provide the best magical protection for mother and baby. It is suggested by some scholars that after the baby was born, he or she would be laid on a cushion placed on the bricks, so that the magical protection provided to the baby in the process of birthing would be extended to the postpartum stage.

The birth bricks were identified with the goddess Meskhenet. She was believed to be the embodiment of the birth brick and, as such, she was also a goddess of fate. In laying the newborn baby on the brick – that is, on Meskhenet – the baby's fate was determined.

It is possible that when Pharaoh spoke to the Hebrew midwives and commanded them to look at the baby on the stones and decide its fate – to kill the boys and let the girls live – he was drawing on an ancient Egyptian practice and belief. ■ RSH



EGYPTOLOGY

1:22 Is the *ye'or* the Nile River?

The word *ye'or* refers to the Nile River, both in ancient Egyptian and throughout the Torah. It has its root in the ancient Egyptian *ytrw*, which changed to *yrrw* during the Eighteenth Dynasty (1550–1295 BCE) and was apparently incorporated into Hebrew as the loanword *ye'or*. Initially, the Egyptian word referred only to the Nile River but later was used for any river or water route.

In the Torah, *ye'or* almost always refers to the Nile, although in the two places that it appears in the plural it appears to have a broader meaning (Ex. 7:19 and 8:1). Later in the Tanakh, its meaning was clearly much more generic: in Daniel 12:5–7, it refers to the Tigris River in Mesopotamia, and in Job 28:10, its meaning is further expanded to refer to a tunnel or underground shaft, not even associated with water. In other places, it is used in the plural to denote major branches of the Nile delta or can be a generic reference to river channels, as in Isaiah 33:21. • NKI



Making a boat from papyrus reeds

וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶן מִדּוּעַ עָשִׂיתֶן הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וַתַּחֲיִינן אֶת־הַיְלָדִים: וַיֹּאמְרוּ לָהֶן מִדּוּעַ עָשִׂיתֶן הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וַתַּחֲיִינן אֶת־הַיְלָדִים: וַתֹּאמְרוּן הַמַּיִלֶדֶת אֶל־פְּרֹעָה כִּי לֹא כַנְשִׁים הַמִּצְרַיִת הָעֹבְרִית כִּי־חַיּוֹת הִנֵּה בְטָרִם תָּבוֹא אֱלֹהֵן הַמַּיִלֶדֶת וְיִלְדוּ: וַיִּיטָב כֹּ אֱלֹהִים לַמַּיִלֶדֶת וַיִּרַב הָעָם וַיַּעֲצֻמוּ מְאֹד: וַיְהִי כִי־יִרְאוּ כֹא הַמַּיִלֶדֶת אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם בָּתִּים: וַיִּצְוּ פְּרֹעָה לְכָל־כֹּב עַמּוֹ לֵאמֹר כָּל־הַבֵּן הַיְלֹוֹד הַיְאֹרָה תִּשְׁלִיכוּהוּ וְכָל־הַבֵּת תַּחֲיִינן:

וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לְוִי וַיִּקַּח אֶת־בַּת־לְוִי: וַתַּהַר הָאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד בֵּן בֶּן וַתֵּרָא אֹתוֹ כִּי־טוֹב הוּא וַתַּעֲפֹנְהוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה יָרְחִים: וְלֹא־יָכֹלָה עוֹד הַצִּפְנִינֹו וַתִּקַּח־לוֹ תֵּבַת גֹּמָא וַתַּחֲמֶרָהּ בַּחֲמֹר וּבַצֹּפֶת

- 18 king of Egypt ordered them. They let the babies live. Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and demanded, “Why have you done this; why have you let the children
- 19 live?” But “Hebrew women,” the midwives replied, “are not like Egyptians. They are full of vigor, and have already given
- 20 birth by the time the midwife arrives.” God was good to the midwives; and the people multiplied and grew very strong.
- 21 And because the midwives feared God, He granted them
- 22 households. Then Pharaoh commanded his entire people, saying, “Throw every boy that is born into the Nile, and let all the girls live.”
- 2 1 A man of the house of Levi went and married a daughter
- 2 of Levi. And she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She saw what a fine child he was, and for three months she
- 3 kept him hidden. And when she could no longer hide him, she took a papyrus basket and coated it with tar and pitch. She laid the child in it and placed it among the reeds by the



— FLORA AND FAUNA —

2:3 *Gomeh* papyrus

Gomeh is a generic term for various water plants. In this text, it refers to *Cyperus*

papyrus, a water plant that is extremely common in Lower Egypt and, actually, is its symbol. Papyrus production was well-developed in Egypt, and *Cyperus papyrus* was used to produce an ancient version of paper for writing. • ZA

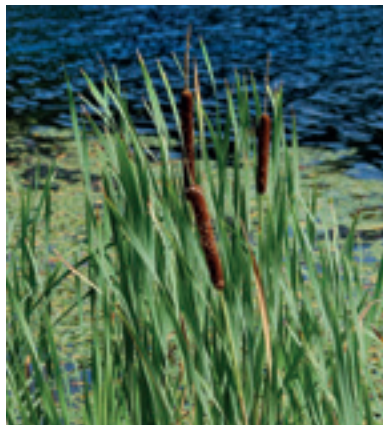


— FLORA AND FAUNA —

2:3 Rushes or reeds

The word *suf* refers to various plants that grow next to a body of water. This appears to be the etymology of *yam suf*, although there is no consensus on the body of water mentioned here and elsewhere in the Tanakh.

In Isaiah, the word *suf* appears in a description of the Nile drying up: “Reeds (*kaneh*) and *suf* shriveled” (19:6). While traditional identifications of *suf* are not consistent, one of the most likely candidates is the plant that is referred to as *suf* in modern Hebrew, namely *Typha* (bulrush). ■ ZA



➤ Reeds



— NEAR EAST —

2:3 Typestory of heroes cast away in infancy: Moshe and Sargon

The seemingly doomed Hebrew infant, Moshe, ends up leading his people from slavery to freedom. Folklorists call this a “typestory” – in this case, of an imperiled child of illustrious parents cast away in infancy and raised by foster parents who rises to become a leader or a hero. Scholars have noted over seventy versions of this tale from ancient times to the present. Moshe’s birth tale parallels a much earlier story of the origins of Sargon, king of Akkad, a Mesopotamian conqueror, ca. 24th to 23rd century BCE. Both were born to noble parents and sent by basket down a river to unknown dangers, both are saved and raised by foster parents, both do menial work, and both rise to become accomplished leaders.

The humanity of the biblical account contrasts with the mythology of the Sargon epic. Sargon tells his own tale which is typical of ancient Near Eastern royal accounts; Moshe’s story is told in third person about him which enables listeners or readers to experience his travails as they happen. Sargon’s mother is a high priestess who gave birth in secret and his father is unknown; Moshe’s parents are from the Levite tribe (which will become priestly) and both his parents are anonymous in the story. Additionally, his father has no role in the story. Sargon works as a gardener, and with the loving support of the goddess Ishtar he becomes king, reigning for 55 years; only mortals take part in Moshe’s birth story and rescue – although God is the one who is responsible for his rise from shepherd to leader of his people.

The stories have many common motifs. Both sets of parents are anonymous. Both infants have mothers who relate to the priesthood. Both mothers give birth in secret. Both fathers are mentioned briefly but are absent from the rest of the story. Both mothers put their babies in a basket



➤ Bust of Sargon of Akkad

lined with pitch. Both infants are rescued from a river. Both are compared to drawn water: Sargon says, “Aqqi, drawer of water, brought me up.” The Torah explains that Moshe’s name is derived from the Hebrew word for drawing water (see “The name ‘Moshe’” on page 14). Both are chosen by the divine to lead their people, but only after a period of menial work.

The biblical narrative differs from the Sargon one by emphasizing the moral dimensions of the story. Where Sargon simply assumes the throne because of the unexplained “love” of the goddess Ishtar, Moshe acts on the side of the oppressed and the innocent: he saves his fellow Israelite from the taskmaster; he saves the innocent Israelite from his fellow; lastly, he saves the foreign women from the oppressing shepherds. One can then readily understand that God chooses Moshe not due to some emotional reason, but because of his moral character. Although both stories are told within an ancient Near Eastern cultural milieu, the Moshe narrative – like the Torah itself – stands out because of its ethical principles. ■ HA



➤ Upper part of the statue of Princess Meritamun, the daughter of Ramesses II

וַתִּשֶׂם בָּהּ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד וַתִּשֶׂם בְּסוּף עַל־שֵׁפֶת הַיַּאֲד׃ וַתִּתְּצַב
 • אַחֲתָיו מִדְּחֹק לְדַעָה מִה־יַּעֲשֶׂה לוֹ׃ וַתֵּרֶד בַּת־פַּרְעֹה לְרַחֵץ
 עַל־הַיַּאֲד וְנַעֲרֹתֶיהָ הִלְכֹת עַל־יַד הַיַּאֲד וַתֵּרֶא אֶת־הַתְּבָה
 בַּתּוֹךְ הַסּוּף וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת־אֲמָתָהּ וַתִּקְחָהּ׃ וַתִּפְתַּח וַתֵּרֶאֱהוּ
 אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד וְהֵנֶה־נֹעֵר בֶּכֶה וַתַּחֲמֵל עָלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר מִי־לִדִּי
 הָעִבְרִים זֶה׃ וַתֹּאמֶר אַחֲתָיו אֶל־בַּת־פַּרְעֹה הַיֵּלֶד וְקִרְאתִי

4 bank of the Nile, and his sister stood by at a distance to
 • 5 see what would happen to him. Pharaoh’s daughter came
 down to bathe in the Nile, while her attendants walked
 by the riverbank. She saw the basket among the reeds and
 6 sent her maid to fetch it. When she opened it she saw him
 there, the child; the boy was crying, and she was moved to
 7 pity for him: “This must be one of the Hebrew boys.” Then
 his sister asked Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and fetch one



— EGYPTOLOGY —

2:5 The daughter of Pharaoh

The biblical text is very concise when it comes to the daughter of Pharaoh. In fact, we know almost nothing about her. The Hebrew *bat parah*, meaning daughter of Pharaoh, could be a translation of an Egyptian title, whose bearer could be a real daughter of the king or a princess of uncertain family ties who was related to the palace in some way. If she was a real daughter, then the biblical story may tell us of a key figure in the Egyptian court.

Understanding the role and significance of the daughter of Pharaoh requires some background regarding the customs of the ancient Egyptian royal court. The queen of Egypt had many official duties. In fact, the king could not function without her. In some cases, when the queen died, or needed temporary or permanent replacement for other reasons, one of her daughters would stand in her place. In this case, the princess would bear the title of

the Great Royal Consort and perform the queen’s official public and religious duties.

Some of the great kings of the New Kingdom appointed their daughters to be their Great Royal Consorts. Based on textual evidence, this was the case with the kings Amenhotep III, his son Akhenaten, and Ramesses II.

Moreover, the Egyptian princesses were very precious to their fathers. In the time of the New Kingdom, when foreign princesses were sent as diplomatic gifts to the king of Egypt, no Egyptian princess was ever sent in return to a foreign ruler.

Unfortunately, there is no way to deduce from the biblical text the name of the daughter of Pharaoh or her exact position. Yet, in the story of Moshe, the daughter of Pharaoh plays the important role of not only saving Moshe but also of adopting him into the Egyptian royal family. ■ RSH

לְךָ אִשָּׁה מִיִּנְקַת מֶן הָעִבְרִיִּית וְתִינַק לְךָ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד׃ וְתֹאמַר־
 לָהּ בַת־פְּרֻעָה לְכִי וְתֵלְךְ הָעֵלְמָה וְתִקְרָא אֶת־אִם הַיֶּלֶד׃
 • וְתֹאמַר לָהּ בַת־פְּרֻעָה הִילִיכִי אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד הַזֶּה וְהִינְקִינֶהוּ לִי

of the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?” “Go,”⁸ said Pharaoh’s daughter. So the girl went away and called the child’s mother. “Take this child,” Pharaoh’s daughter⁹ told her; “nurse him for me, and I will pay you your wage.”



EGYPTOLOGY

2:9 Nurse maids for the wealthy

In pre-modern societies, breastfeeding was the only way women could feed their babies. If a mother was unable to produce milk, or if she was incapacitated or died during childbirth, a wet nurse was hired to feed the baby.

In ancient Egypt, wet nurses were hired not only by families who had no alternative, but also by royal families, families from the social elite, and even families of highly skilled workmen to ease the burden of early motherhood.

A woman who recently had given birth, and perhaps had lost her own baby, would become a wet nurse. She could also have been a woman whose baby was healthy, but who produced enough milk to feed two babies at once.

In some cases, an infant lived with the wet nurse and her family until being weaned. Ancient Egyptian texts tell us that usually a child was weaned at the age of three. Typically, the wet nurse was paid for her own food, and for the care of the baby.

If a wet nurse was hired by the royal household, she moved to the royal palace with her family. Her own children and the royal children grew up together. Due to this very close and almost familial relationship, the royal children and the children of the wet nurse had a sort of “milk brother-

hood” that at times led to their developing close relationships that were maintained throughout their lives. The husband and sons of the wet nurse benefited from this relationship when a little prince became the monarch, perhaps receiving an appointment to a high-ranking position by the new king.

A depiction from the tomb of King Tutankhamun (14th century BCE) shows the royal wet nurse Maia suckling the heir to the throne seated on her lap, dressed in full regalia. In this role, she was a source of pride for her sons and husband, who were grateful to her for the opportunities her position afforded them.

In the Exodus story, the daughter of Pharaoh discovers an abandoned baby and needs to hire a wet nurse. Waiting and watching, Miriam offers her mother’s services, allowing Yokheved unexpectedly to be able to nurse and raise her own son after she had sent him away in his “ark.” Only when he is weaned, probably at the age of three, does he join the household of the daughter of Pharaoh. ■ RSH



➤ Maia, wet nurse of King Tutankhamun



LANGUAGE

2:10 The name “Moshe”

The biblical text provides us with an explicit explanation for the name of Moshe: The Egyptian princess states, “Because I drew him out of the water.” The Hebrew for “drew him out” is *meshitihu*, which has the same root in Hebrew as Moshe.

However, it is unlikely that an Egyptian princess would have spoken Hebrew; she would instead have given her adopted child an Egyptian name.

The name Moshe in Egyptian is derived from the root *m s i* meaning “to bear,” “to give birth,” or “to create.” The root’s form *mose* commonly is used in Egyptian theophoric names – those that have a divine name component, combining the name of the deity with *mose*, meaning (in this form) “the son of”: Amenmose – the son of [the god] Amun; Ramose – the son of [the god] Re; Ahmose – the son of [the moon god] Iah; and Thutmose – the son of [the god] Thot. Thutmose is one of the two most common royal names in the Eighteenth Dynasty.

A cartouche is an oval frame around a hieroglyphic representation of a monarch’s name. Inside Thutmose III’s cartouche, there is an ibis depicting the god Thot, which forms part of the compound Thutmose.

When it stands on its own, the word *mose* means son. A parallel example in modern Hebrew is the name *Ben*, meaning son – as in Binyamin (Benjamin), son of the right (hand). As Moshe was raised in an Egyptian environment, it is possible that *mose* in ancient Egyptian would be how his name was understood in the court in Egypt. = RSH

וַאֲנִי אֶתְנֶן אֶתְשִׁכְרְךָ וְתִקַּח הָאִשָּׁה הַיְלֵד וְתִנְקֶהּ: וַיַּגְדֵּל הַיְלֵד וְתַבְאֵהוּ לְבַת־פַּרְעֹה וַיְהִי־לָהּ לְבֵן וְתִקְרָא שְׁמוֹ מֹשֶׁה וְתֹאמַר כִּי מִן־הַמַּיִם מָשִׁיתִהוּ: וַיְהִי בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם וַיַּגְדֵּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא שְׁלִישִׁי

10 So the woman took the child and nursed him. The child grew, and she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter and he became her son. She named him Moshe, “because,” she said, 11 “I drew him out of the water.” One day, when Moshe had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced



EGYPTOLOGY

2:10 Moshe’s adoption and the *Kap*

In ancient Egypt, it was common for non-elite children and foreign children to grow up together with the future king in the royal palace. As part of the Royal Harem where the royal women lived, there was the *Kap* – where royal children were educated together with children of the closest staff of the royal house, including children of wet nurses, who were hired to breastfeed the royal children (see “Nurse maids for the wealthy” on page 13). Being a “child of the *Kap*” was such a great honor that people kept this title throughout their lives.

Being in the *Kap* meant being reared with the future king of Egypt and constituting part of his innermost circle. The group of children who grew up together with the crown prince sometimes became very influential men – after the prince became the king.

Sometimes, children of non-elite families with no special relation to the royal family were also brought up in the *Kap*. It is not clear how they came to be in the *Kap*, but they were said to be adopted by the king. We do not know what factors caused a king to pick the children who were to be educated in the royal palace.

Another group of children who were edu-



Tutor and princess

cated in the Egyptian royal palace – during the time of the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BCE) – were children of local rulers, who were under the auspices of the ancient Egyptian king. By educating these foreign princes in the royal palace, the Egyptian crown secured the obedience of the next generation who would rule in their homelands with respect, and even sympathy, for the ways of Egyptian kingship and administration. Some scholars believe that these foreign princes were in the *Kap* together with Egyptian royal children, while others assume there was a second institution for these princes.

The biblical story of Moshe’s adoption can be understood in the context of the *Kap*. In addition to Moshe, apparently there were other children – foreign and local – who were brought up in Pharaoh’s court and were effectively adopted by the palace. These children were likely to take on Egyptian practices in their mannerisms and dress. Thus, the education of Moshe in the *Kap* and his full Egyptianization in his early years would explain why, later in the biblical story, the priest of Midian’s daughters identifies Moshe as “an Egyptian man” (Ex. 2:19). = RSH

אֶל-אָחִיו וַיֵּדָא בְּסַבְלָתָם וַיֵּדָא אִישׁ מִצְרִי מַכֶּה אִישׁ-עִבְרִי
 ב מאַחֲיו: וַיִּפֶן כֹּה וְכֹה וַיֵּרָא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ וַיַּךְ אֶת-הַמִּצְרִי
 ג וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ בַחֹל: וַיֵּצֵא בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁנִי וְהִנֵּה שְׁנַיִם אֲנָשִׁים עִבְרִים
 ד נֹצֵים וַיֹּאמֶר לְרֹשֶׁע לָמָּה תִכֶּה רֵעֶךָ: וַיֹּאמֶר מִי שְׁמֹךְ לְאִישׁ
 שָׂר וְשִׁפְטֵ עָלֵינוּ הֲלֹהֲרִגְנִי אֶתְּהָ אִמֹּר פֶּאֶשֶׁר הֲרַגְתָּ אֶת-
 טו • הַמִּצְרִי וַיֵּדָא מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אֲכֵן נֹדַע הַדְּבָר: וַיִּשְׁמַע פְּרַעֲהַ
 אֶת-הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה וַיִּבְקֶשׁ לְהַרְגוֹ אֶת-מֹשֶׁה וַיִּבְרַח מֹשֶׁה מִפְּנֵי

labor. And he noticed an Egyptian striking a Hebrew: one
 of his brothers. Looking this way and that and seeing no 12
 one, he struck down the Egyptian and hid his body in the
 sand. The next day he went out and saw two Hebrews 13
 fighting. He asked the guilty one, “Why are you striking
 your own neighbor?” The man said, “Who made you a ruler 14
 and judge over us? Do you intend to kill me as you killed the
 Egyptian?” Then Moshe was afraid; “Surely,” he thought, “the
 thing has become known.” Word reached Pharaoh and he 15 •
 sought to kill Moshe. But Moshe fled his presence and went



NEAR EAST

2:15-16 Priests in other cultures

Moshe escaped to Midian – a region which, though it appears many times in the Tanakh, is not mentioned elsewhere in ancient Near Eastern literature.

Based on what appears in the Tanakh, the academic consensus is that Midian is located on the eastern side of the modern Gulf of Aqaba, in what is today Saudi Arabia, with its western border along 150 miles of the east side of the Red Sea southeast of the city of Eilat. Because the story of the burning bush takes place in Midian (Ex. 3:2), and Moshe encountered the burning bush on Mount Sinai (Ex. 3:12), many scholars suggest that Midian is the region where Mount Sinai is located.

In a number of instances, Midian is mentioned in the Tanakh in connection with the countries of Moab and Edom (defeated by Edom in the “field of Moab” – Genesis 36:35; as allies of Moab in Numbers 22:4-7; as apparent allies to Edom in I Kings 11:14-17), both located east and southeast of the Dead Sea.



➤ Ushumgal, a priest of the god Shara

The power of Midian was clearly felt by the Israelites during the period of the Judges, as described in Judges 6 and 7, which document how Midian attacked the land and took the Israelites’ property and produce. The proximity of Midian to the land of Israel also can be deduced from Moshe’s request of his brother-in-law, Hovav, in Numbers 10:31: “Please do not leave us, inasmuch as you know where we should camp in the wilderness and can be our guide.” Clearly, Moshe believed that Hovav the Midianite knew the lay of the land and could provide valuable assistance to the Israelites during their journey.

In this verse in Exodus, we read how Moshe’s flight to Midian brought him in contact with the daughters of the priest of Midian – who is one of just three non-Israelite priests mentioned in the Torah. The other two are Melchizedek, Priest of God Most High and King of Shalem (Gen. 14:18); and Poti-phaera, Priest of On – the priest whose daughter married Yosef (Gen. 41:45).

While we do not have details about the role of priests specifically in the Midianite religion, we are familiar with the function of priests in other ancient Near Eastern societies. Generally, priests had two main functions: to be the personal servants of the deity in the temple – which was viewed as the palace of the god; and to inform the people what sacrifices to bring.

As servants of the god, the priests had to keep the temple purified or cleaned; perform sacrifices and libations, which were perceived to be the god’s food and drink; keep the temple well-lit and perfumed by means of candelabras and incense; and generally supervise all aspects of the deity’s “estate” – as ancient Near Eastern temples often had arable land under the authority of the priests. The priests were subject to a range of special purity laws and restrictions on their behavior, since they worked in the sphere of holiness and were expected to maintain a higher degree of sanctification than the rest of the people. Based on his upbringing in Pharaoh’s palace, Moshe would have been familiar with the polytheistic way of life in the home of the Midianite priest. ■ JU



NEAR EAST

2:16 Women drawing water

Women drawing water – a menial task – is mentioned here and is also described in detail in the story of Rivka (Gen. 24:11, 13, 43-46), as well as in I Samuel 9:11 and Nahum 3:14. In ancient times, wells required significant labor to build and were often a shared resource. Meetings took place while drawing water at wells; stories with this setting are also mentioned in other ancient Near Eastern cultures. For example, drawing water at a well is mentioned three times in the Ugaritic Kirta Epic (1.14. iii.9) which describes how “the women drawing water will flee from the spring, from the fountain the women filling [jugs].” • JU

פְּרָעָה וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּאֶרֶץ-מִדְיָן וַיֵּשֶׁב עַל-הַבְּאֵר: וּלְכֹהֵן מִדְיָן שִׁבְעַת
 בָּנוֹת וַתִּבְאֵנָה וַתִּדְלָנָה וַתִּמְלֹאנָה אֶת-הַרְהָטִים לְהַשְׁקוֹת
 צֹאן אֲבִיהֶן: וַיָּבֹאוּ הָרְעִים וַיִּגְרְשׂוּם וַיִּקַּם מֹשֶׁה וַיּוֹשֶׁעַן וַיִּשְׁקֵן
 אֶת-צֹאנָם: וַתִּבְאֵנָה אֶל-דְּעוּאֵל אֲבִיהֶן וַיֹּאמְרוּ מִדּוֹעַ מִהֲרָתָן
 בָּא הַיּוֹם: וַתֹּאמְרֵן אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם הִצִּילָנוּ מִיַּד הָרְעִים וְגַם-דָּלָהּ
 דָּלָהּ לָנוּ וַיִּשְׁקֵן אֶת-הַצֹּאן: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל-בְּנֹתָיו וַאֲיֹ לָמָּה זֶה

to live in the land of Midian. There he sat down beside a well.

- 16 The priest of Midian had seven daughters; they came to draw water and filled the troughs to water their father’s flock.
- 17 Then the shepherds arrived and started to drive the young women away. But Moshe stood up to defend them, and then
- 18 watered their flock. When the sisters returned to Reuel their father, he asked them, “How is it that you have come back
- 19 so quickly today?” They said, “An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds. He even drew water for us and watered the
- 20 flock.” “Where is he?” he asked his daughters. “Why did you leave him there? Invite him in to have something to eat.”



➤ Moshe drawing water for the daughters of the priest of Midian, Botticelli, Sistine Chapel

כא עֲזַבְתָּן אֶת־הָאִישׁ קְרָאֵן לוֹ וַיֹּאכַל לֶחֶם: וַיֹּאֶל מֹשֶׁה לְשֵׁבֶת
 כב אֶת־הָאִישׁ וַיִּתֵּן אֶת־צִפּוֹרָה בְּתוּ לְמֹשֶׁה: וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־
 שְׁמוֹ גֶרְשׁוֹן כִּי אָמַר גֵּר הָיִיתִי בְּאֶרֶץ נְכַרִּיָּה:
 כג • וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָרַבִּים הָהֵם וַיָּמָת מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וַיֵּאָנְחוּ בְנֵי־
 יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן־הָעֲבֹדָה וַיִּזְעְקוּ וַתַּעַל שׁוֹעַתָם אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים מִן־
 כד הָעֲבֹדָה: וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת־נַאֲקָתָם וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת־

Moshe accepted an invitation to stay with the man, and he 21
 gave Moshe his daughter Tzippora in marriage. She gave 22
 birth to a son, and Moshe named him Gershom, “I
 have been a stranger in an alien land.”

Years passed, and the king of Egypt died. The Israelites 23 •
 sighed in their enslavement and cried out, and from their
 servitude their plea for help rose up to God. And God 24
 heard their groaning, and remembered His covenant with



EGYPTOLOGY

2:23 Death of the king

In ancient Egypt, the king was identified with Horus, the falcon god. He was considered to be a descendant of the creator god, and was believed to mediate between humanity and the divine realm. Whoever had contact with the king was considered to have been in touch with a god. Moreover, monuments were built in his honor, and as a god his cult was performed daily.

The king was at the center of every avenue of ancient Egyptian life: economy, law, religion, and all other aspects of existence. The Egyptians believed that – just like the sun, which rises every day – there must never be a morning in which, as stated in the Egyptian language, the king does not “rise on his throne.”

Ideally, kingship passed from a father to his eldest son, when the son was a young

adult capable of ruling the country. In this way, dynastic order was kept and the dynasty continued.

If there was no clear heir to the throne, the death of a king could mark the beginning of political turmoil. To prevent instability, kings appointed their heirs in their lifetime and made them co-regents. A young crown prince ruled together with the elder king learning how to rule and becoming acquainted with the secrets of government. When the old king died, the prince became king, with a smooth transition to the new monarch.

The most traumatic event in Egyptian political life was the assassination of the king. This was a rare event – the result of a conspiracy against the king and his dynasty. A successful assassination meant a change of dynasty. However, a change of dynasty was not always the result of violence; when a king lacked an heir, he appointed someone from outside of his family to become the next king.

Aside from violence, instability could result from having a very young crown prince,



➤ Richly ornamented corridor to the burial chamber of Ramesses V (1150-1145 BCE) and Ramesses VI (1145-1137 BCE), Egypt, Valley of the Kings, Luxor

who was not able to rule the country. In this case, a regent was appointed, normally an older relative, who ran the country in the young king’s name. The regent also guarded the throne from potential usurpers and maintained the position until the young king was old enough to rule on his own.

Because of the paramount role of the king in ancient Egyptian culture and political life, the death of a king was a significant event for the empire, raising fears about instability and change. ■ RSH



— FLORA AND FAUNA —

3:2 *Seneh* – the burning bush

The traditional commentaries unanimously identify the *seneh*, or thorn-bush, as what is now called the holy bramble, *Rubus sanguineus* – a bush that grows in proximity to springs and streams. This identification fits well with the description of the region where Moshe saw this thorn-bush, the area of Mount of Sinai. Later in Exodus the Torah specifically mentions water sources at the feet of Mount Sinai (32:20; Deut. 9:21). Some academics identify Sinai with Sin, the Mesopotamian moon god, who was also worshipped in the southern part of Arabia. ■ ZA



— NEAR EAST —

3:5 Holy ground

The “holy ground” – *admat kodesh* – described here represents the place of divine revelation (Joshua 5:15 uses similar phrasing). In the only other appearance of this phrase in the Tanakh outside of our verse, in the much later verse of Zechariah 2:16, the words seem to refer to the entire land of Judah.

The concept of a space that is holy was common throughout the ancient Near East, where any place in which a god was believed to be present was deemed holy. This was particularly the case in reference to what was believed to be a god’s “house,” that is, a temple. In fact, the Akkadian *qud-dushu*, from the same root as that of the Hebrew *kodesh* and *mikdash*, “temple,” is used when referring to temples such as those of Ishtar and Anu in Mesopotamia.

With this in mind, we can understand that, upon hearing God’s description of the area

בְּרִיתוֹ אֶת־אַבְרָהָם אֶת־יִצְחָק וְאֶת־יַעֲקֹב: וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כֹּה
 אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֵּדַע אֱלֹהִים: וּמֹשֶׁה הָיָה רֹעֵה אֶ
 אֶת־צֹאן יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵנוּ כִּהְיוּ מִדְיָן וַיִּנְהַג אֶת־הַצֹּאן אַחַר הַמִּדְבָּר
 וַיָּבֹא אֶל־הַר הָאֱלֹהִים חֹרֵבָה: וַיֵּרָא מִלְּאֲךָ יְהוָה אֵלָיו בְּלִפְתֵּי־
 אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּנֶה וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה הַסֵּנֶה בֹּעֵר בְּאֵשׁ וְהַסֵּנֶה אֵינְנו
 אֹכְלִי: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶסְדֶּה־נָּא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת־הַמְּרָאֶה הַגָּדֹל אֶ
 הַזֶּה מִדּוּעַ לֹא־יִבְעַר הַסֵּנֶה: וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה כִּי סָר לְרֵאוֹת וַיִּקְרָא
 אֵלָיו אֱלֹהִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּנֶה וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִנִי:
 וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־תִּקְרַב הֵלֶם שַׁל־נַעְלֶיךָ מֵעַל רַגְלֶיךָ כִּי הַמָּקוֹם

25 Avraham, with Yitzhak, and with Yaakov. God saw the
 3 1 Israelites, and God knew. One day Moshe was
 tending the flock of his father-in-law Yitro, priest of Midian.
 He led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came
 • 2 to Horev, the mountain of God. Then an angel of the LORD
 appeared to him in flames of fire from the midst of a bush –
 and he saw – the bush was ablaze with fire but was not
 3 consumed. Moshe said, “I must turn aside to see this wonder.
 4 Why does the bush not burn up?” The LORD saw that he
 had turned aside to look, and God called to him from within
 • 5 the bush: “Moshe, Moshe.” He answered, “Here I am.” Then
 God said, “Do not come close. Remove the shoes from



✦ The plain of el-Raha, beneath Jebel Musa (mountain of Moshe), possible location of Mount Sinai

as “holy ground,” Moshe would have understood this to be an indication of God’s presence.

Furthermore, that the encounter with the Divine Presence took place on a mountain - Horev – would have made sense to Moshe for the concept of a divinity dwell-

ing on a mountain existed in the Near East at that time. For example, in Ugaritic myths, the home of Baal or Hadad is at Mount Zaphon, apparently at the mouth of the Orontes River near modern-day Turkey. Similarly, Ugaritic literature refers to Mount Hamon as the abode of the god El, who also resided in a tent. ■ JU

1 • אֲשֶׁר אֶתָּה עֹמֵד עָלָיו אֲדַמְתָּ קֹדֶשׁ הוּא: וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנֹכִי אֱלֹהֵי
 אָבִיךָ אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב וַיִּסְתֵּר מֹשֶׁה
 2 פָּנָיו כִּי יָרָא מֵהַבְּיַט אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה רְאֵה רָאִיתִי
 אֶת־עַנְי עַמִּי אֲשֶׁר בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶת־צַעֲקוֹתָם שָׁמַעְתִּי מִפְּנֵי
 3 נַגְשָׁיו כִּי יִדְעֵתִי אֶת־מַכָּאֲבוֹיו: וְאָרְדָּה לְהַצִּילוֹ וּמִיַּד מִצְרַיִם
 וּלְהַעֲלֹתוֹ מִן־הָאָרֶץ הַהִוא אֶל־אֶרֶץ טוֹבָה וְרַחֲבָה אֶל־אֶרֶץ

your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. “I,” 6 •
 He said, “am the God of your father, the God of Avraham,
 the God of Yitzhak, and the God of Yaakov.” Then Moshe
 hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. The LORD 7
 continued, “I have seen My people’s suffering in Egypt; I
 have heard them cry out amid their oppressors; I know their
 anguish. So I have come to rescue them from the hand of the 8 •
 Egyptians and bring them up from that land to one that is
 good, spacious, a land flowing with milk and honey, the place



EGYPTOLOGY

3:8,17 Egyptian view of Canaan

Like many other ancient civilizations, ancient Egypt was highly ethnocentric. The Egyptians believed their country was the only place worth living. Even their belief in the ideal existence of the afterlife was viewed as a mirror reflection of life in the Nile Valley.

Until the start of the New Kingdom (1550 BCE), the Egyptians viewed the neighboring peoples that surrounded Egypt as part of a chaotic realm, threatening what they called “the creation” – a term they used only in referring to Egypt.

Canaan, in contrast – according to ancient Egyptian wisdom literature – was short of water, bare of trees, mountainous, and difficult to pass. This was the reason, according to the Egyptian old king addressing his son King Merikare’ (late 21st century BCE), that people who dwelled in Canaan lived as nomads, wandering in permanent search of food – and always fighting.

The ancient Egyptians viewed their own country as standing in complete contrast to these assumed traits of Canaan. For example, Egypt enjoyed a steady and rich supply of water. The land in the Nile Valley was flat, the air was dry, and there was excellent visibility – allowing people to see great distances. The ancient Egyptian way of life was sedentary and agricultural, and they despised the nomadic lifestyle.

In verse 8, God tells Moshe that He will bring the Israelites to a good land, and in verse 17, He instructs Moshe to give that message to the elders when he returns to Egypt. Freed from slavery, the people would be led to a bountiful land, in contrast to the view of Canaan held by their Egyptian hosts. ■ Ed.



➤ Amun-Re’s statue on a boat carried by priests. Karnak, the Red Chapel of Hatshepsut



EGYPTOLOGY

3:6 Hiding his face

Moshe fled Egypt and became a shepherd – living and working with nomads. This was the lowest way of life that an Egyptian aristocrat could imagine. Yet, despite these deplorable conditions for an Egyptian aristocrat, Moshe underwent an incredible personal experience: he encountered God. And the moment he realized this, he hid his face, afraid to look toward God. But why did Moshe hide?

Perhaps the answer can be found in Egyptian culture and religious ritual. Having been raised as part of the Egyptian aristocracy, Moshe was likely to have been familiar with the principals of ancient Egyptian religious ideas. One such principal was the exclusive nature of the Egyptian temple – and of the deity within it.

In Egyptian temples, the innermost compartment was the holy of holies. This room had an elevated floor and low ceiling, and it was maintained in complete darkness. This was where the statue of the deity was kept. It was stored in a sealed cabinet, and no one but the High Priest was allowed to open the cabinet and touch it – or even to enter the holy of holies. On religious festivals, when the statue was taken out on a boat, it was kept in a cabinet with a curtain so no one could look at the statue. Thus, the god was protected from the people, and at the same time the people were protected from the physical damage that might befall them if they had seen the god.

Against this background, it might have been only natural for Moshe, with his Egyptian background, to cover his face before God. Egyptians were in awe and feared their gods, and it would have been his instinctive reaction to hide as soon as he realized he was encountering the Divine. ■ RSH



EGYPTOLOGY

3:14 I will be - Perception of Amun

When Moshe realized he was standing before God, he asked Him for His name (verse 13). God's response in the next verse was somewhat mysterious and has been



King Seti I before the god Amun, Abydos

the subject of much interpretation: "God replied to Moshe: I will be what I will be." Why did God respond to Moshe with an ambiguous answer to his question?

One finds something of a parallel in the ancient Egyptian god Amun whose name means, "The Hidden One." Amun was the god of Thebes, modern-day Luxor, which was the capital of the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BCE). For internal political reasons, the Theban god Amun merged with the sun god Re. In this capacity he was known as Amun-Re. Throughout the period of the New Kingdom, Amun-Re was considered the most powerful god in

זבת חלב ודבש אל־מקום הפנעני והחתי והאמרי והפריזי
 והחוי והיבוסים: ועתה הנה צעקת בני־ישראל באה אלי וגם־
 ראייתי את־הלחץ אשר מצרים לחצים אתם: ועתה לכה
 ואשלחך אל־פרעה והוצא את־עמי בני־ישראל ממצרים:
 ויאמר משה אל־האלהים מי אנכי כי אלך אל־פרעה וכי
 אוציא את־בני ישראל ממצרים: ויאמר כי־איהיה עמך וזה־
 לך האות כי אנכי שלחתיך בהוציאך את־העם ממצרים
 תעבדון את־האלהים על ההר הזה: ויאמר משה אל־
 האלהים הנה אנכי בא אל־בני ישראל ואמרתם להם אלהי
 אבותיכם שלחני אליכם ואמרו־לי מה־שמו מה אמר אלהים:
 ויאמר אלהים אל־משה אשר אהיה ויאמר כה תאמר
 לבני ישראל אהיה שלחני אליכם: ויאמר עוד אלהים אל־

of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites,
 9 and Jebusites. Now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me;
 I have seen the oppression the Egyptians subject them to.
 10 So go: I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring My people,
 11 the Israelites, out of Egypt." But "Who am I," said Moshe to
 God, "to go to Pharaoh, to bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"
 12 God replied, "I will be with you. Proof that I have sent you
 will come when, having brought the people out of Egypt, you
 13 come to serve God upon this mountain." Moshe said to God,
 "When I go to the Israelites and tell them, 'Your fathers' God
 has sent me to you,' they will ask me, 'What is His name?'
 • 14 What shall I say?" God replied to Moshe, "I will be what I
 will be." He said, "This is what you shall tell the Israelites: I
 15 will be sent me to you." Then God said to Moshe, "You shall

Egypt and, as the city god of the capital, he was considered the god of the empire. As such, he was the sun god who created the world, humanity, and other gods. Many hymns were written in his honor. However, being "The Hidden One," he was unknowable to humans and even to other gods.

Amun's hidden nature provides a historical context to God's response, here in this verse. While God's mysterious answer does not reveal anything about His nature, the concept of a mysterious god might have been familiar to Moshe based on his Egyptian upbringing. Furthermore, an

association with Amun was perhaps one way of explaining to the Israelites that God was all-powerful – greater than all other gods. • RSH

מִשָּׁה כֵּן תֹּאמֶר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֵיכֶם אֱלֹהֵי
 אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם זֶה־שְּׁמִי
 לְעֹלָם וְזֶה זִכְרִי לְדֹר דָּר: לֵךְ וְאֶסְפַּתְּ אֶת־זִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ
 אֱלֹהִים יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֵיכֶם נִרְאָה אֵלַי אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם
 יִצְחָק וְיַעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר פְּקֹד פְּקֹדֹתַי אֲתֶכֶם וְאֶת־הָעָשׂוּי לָכֶם
 בְּמִצְרַיִם: וְאָמַר אֵלֶּהָ אֲתֶכֶם מֵעַנִּי מִצְרַיִם אֶל־אֶרֶץ הַכְּנַעֲנִי
 וְהַחִתִּי וְהָאֱמֹרִי וְהַפְּרִזִּי וְהַחִוִּי וְהַיְבוּסִי אֶל־אֶרֶץ זְבַת חֶלֶב
 וְדָבָשׁ: וְשָׁמְעוּ לְקוֹלְךָ וּבֵאתָ אֵתָּה וְזִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־מֶלֶךְ
 מִצְרַיִם וְאָמַרְתֶּם אֵלָיו יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הָעִבְרִיִּים נִקְרָה עָלֵינוּ
 וְעַתָּה גִלְגַּל־נָא דַרְךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים בְּמִדְבָר וְנִזְבַּחָה לַיהוָה

חמישי

say this to the Israelites: The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzhak, and the God of Yaakov, has sent me to you. This is My name forever, and this is how I will be remembered through the ages. “Go, gather the elders of Israel and tell them: The LORD God of your fathers appeared to me – the God of Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov – saying: I have watched over you and I have seen what is being inflicted upon you in Egypt. And I promise to bring you out of the misery of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites and Hittites, the Amorites and Perizzites, the Hivites and Jebusites, to a land flowing with milk and honey. “They will listen to you. Then you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and tell him, “The LORD God of the Hebrews has revealed Himself to us. Send us forth now for a three-day journey into the wilderness to sacrifice



EGYPTOLOGY

3:18 Taking time off for worship

The modern site of Deir el-Medina is located on the west bank of the Nile in the region of ancient Thebes (modern-day Luxor), near the Valley of the Kings. The village of Deir el-Medina was a settlement of artisans, employed by the crown, who built the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings between the Eighteenth and the Twentieth Dynasties (1550–1080 BCE).

The craftsmen were divided into two work gangs, each responsible for one side of the royal tomb, supervised by a foreman. They dug the tomb, plastered its walls, drew the scenes and the hieroglyphs, sculpted them, and finally painted the reliefs. This work required a high level of skill, which was difficult because light and fresh air were scarce.

The foremen had to keep a record of work attendance and reported absences to the scribe; ostraca and papyri found at Deir el-Medina document absences of the royal artisans. The most frequent reason for absence was illness. However, there were many other reasons for the workmen to have a day off: scorpion bites, mourning, drinking, a new baby, and fighting.

A workman could take a day off because he was “offering to his god” or participating in a religious ritual or holiday, often on weekends. The ancient Egyptian work week was ten days long. According to the Deir el-Medina records, the last two days of each week, and often the first day of the following week, were free. In this context, the Israelites’ request to go and worship their God for three days seems in perfect order with an Egyptian norm. ■ RSH

➤ The Tomb of Irynefer at Deir el-Medina, Luxor



EGYPTOLOGY

3:19 **Mighty hand and outstretched arm**

The Hebrew expressions of mighty hand and outstretched arm are familiar as the means by which God delivered the Israelites from Egypt. Both expressions appear for the first time in the book of Exodus, and in the Tanakh they are used almost exclusively in the context of the Exodus. It becomes apparent later – in the book of Deuteronomy, where the two phrases appear together – that their meaning is very close, or even synonymous (see Deut. 4:34, 5:15, 26:8).

Egyptologist James Hoffmeier suggested that the terms mighty hand and outstretched arm in the Torah correspond to the Egyptian terms *khepesh*, meaning “arm” or “power,” and *per-c* (c in Egyptian is equivalent to the Hebrew letter *ayin*), meaning “one whose arm is extended.” In the Egyptian language, titles such as *per-c* that include the word *khepesh* are often used to describe the Egyptian king as a victorious war hero.

According to Hoffmeier, both terms bear military meaning. The Exodus narrative portrays the battle between God and Pharaoh as a military combat in which God subdued Pharaoh using the same terminology that the Egyptians used to describe their own power and conquests. Indeed, the Exodus narrative only uses the terms “mighty hand” and “outstretched arm” when referencing God or Pharaoh.

In Egyptian, the word *khepesh* originally referred to the foreleg of an animal – especially the foreleg of cattle. Later it came to mean both arm and power – i.e., the arm was often used as a metaphor for power.

Beginning with the Hyksos kings (1650–1550 BCE) – but mainly in the time of the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BCE) – *khepesh* was primarily used to describe the power of kings. The kings of the Eighteenth

אלהינו: ואני ידעתי כי לא יתן אתכם מלך מצרים להלך יט
 ולא ביד חזקה: ושלחתי את ידי והפיתני את מצרים בכל כ
 נפלאותי אשר אעשה בקרבן ואחרי כן ישלח אתכם: ונתתני כ
 אתחן העם הזה בעיני מצרים והיה כי תלכו לא תלכו כ
 ריקם: ושאלה אשה משכנתה ומגרת ביתה כלי כסף וכלי כ
 זהב ושמלת ושמלת על בניכם ועל בנותיכם ונצלתם את

- 19 to the LORD our God.’ But I know that even by a mighty
- 20 hand the king of Egypt would not send you forth. So I will
- stretch out My hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders
- 21 I will do there. After that, he will send you forth. And I will
- grant this people favor in the eyes of the Egyptians, so that
- 22 when you leave, you will not leave empty-handed. Every
- woman shall ask her neighbor, ask any woman lodging with
- her, for objects of silver and gold, and clothing, and you
- shall put these on your sons and daughters, and despoil the

and Nineteenth Dynasties (1550–1186 BCE) often bore titles which contained the word *khepesh*. For example, the king in battle scenes would be described as *neb khepesh* (Possessor of Arm/Strength), *weser khepesh* (Mighty of Arm) or ‘a *khepesh* (Great of Arm). In the Ramesside era (1295–1069 BCE), personal royal names were composed of the word *khepesh* and the name of a deity. Thus, three of the sons of King Ramesses II were named *Amun-Her-Khepesh*, meaning, “[The god] Amun is at his arm”; *Montu-Her-Khepesh*, meaning, “[The god] Montu is at his arm”; and *Seth-Her Khepesh*, meaning “[The god] Seth is at his arm.” The use of *khepesh* in royal titles and names reached its peak in the times of the New Kingdom. Later the use of *khepesh* declined.

A synonym of the word *khepesh* was the word ‘arm’. The king in the time of the New Kingdom was often described as *per-c* meaning one whose arm is extended – referring to a champion. Like the word *khepesh*, ‘arm’ is often used as a metaphor for the royal power and ability to fight.

As is the case in Hebrew, the words for arm and hand in Egyptian are often interchangeable. Thus, it is easy to understand



King’s fly whisk, with hieroglyphs of *Neb Khepesh* and *Per-c*, tomb of Tutankhamun, Valley of the Kings

how the Hebrew *yad hazaka*, (mighty hand) and *zero’a netuya*, (outstretched arm) are one and the same and correspond to the Egyptian *khepesh* and *per-c*.

The Egyptian terms *khepesh* and *per-c* were, therefore, part of royal military terminology of the New Kingdom, and the Hebrew terms for mighty hand and outstretched arm were based on these terms. They are used in the Tanakh almost exclusively in the context of the Exodus narrative. Moreover, they are used in the Tanakh only in reference to Pharaoh and God. It therefore seems that the book of Exodus specifically uses New Kingdom Egyptian royal military idioms to emphasize that God won the war against Pharaoh. ■ RSH

ד מִצְרַיִם: וַיַּעַן מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר וְהֵן לֹא־יֵאֱמִינּוּ לִי וְלֹא יִשְׁמָעוּ
 ב בְּקִלְיַי כִּי יֹאמְרוּ לֹא־נִרְאָה אֵלֶיךָ יְהוָה: וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו יְהוָה
 ג מִזֶּה בִּידְךָ וַיֹּאמֶר מַטֵּה: וַיֹּאמֶר הִשְׁלִיכֵהוּ אַרְצָה וַיִּשְׁלַכֵהוּ מִהַיָּדָה

Egyptians.” But Moshe replied, “They will not believe me. 1 4
 They will not listen to me. They will say, “The LORD has
 not appeared to you.” “What is that in your hand?” asked 2
 the LORD. “A staff,” he replied. “Throw it to the ground.” He 3 •
 threw it, and it turned into a snake; and Moshe fled back



EGYPTOLOGY

4:3-8 Competition with staffs and snakes

Moshe complains that no one is going to believe God Himself had spoken to him. To ease his anxiety, God demonstrates His supernatural abilities. Turning Moshe’s staff into a snake and back into a staff – then causing leprosy on Moshe’s arm and healing it instantly – helps Moshe convince his people that God is with him.

Snakes and snake bites were a constant concern in Egypt. Snakes were feared and, consequently, magical spells and charms against their bites were common. Ancient Egyptian mythology and magic channeled the frightening traits of serpents as protection for the kings and gods. Thus, the Egyptian king had a cobra on his crown, so that the goddess represented by the cobra would spit fire and protect the king against his enemies. The sun god would have a cobra on his forehead, who was believed to protect him against his foes. A further protection for the sun god was formed by an encircling frame made of snake coils. In the image that accompanies this article, Heka, the god of magic, is holding a snake as a staff.

In ancient Egyptian art, staffs and wands held by gods and magicians were often shaped as serpents. Interestingly, magic wands made of bronze – and, in some

cases, made of gold – that were shaped as snakes, were found as part of magicians’ equipment. Moreover, as in the story of Aharon’s rod which turned into a crocodile and swallowed the magicians’ rods (Ex. 7:10–12), ancient Egyptian literature and magic give account of wax figurines of crocodiles which, on the magician’s order, would transform into animated beings. These were believed to devour people or animals – on the magician’s order – and then turn back into inanimate objects. By turning Moshe’s staff into a serpent and then back into a staff, God used imagery that was familiar both to the Egyptians and to the Israelites, who had absorbed Egyptian culture during their long sojourn there.

God tells Moshe of a third supernatural deed: turning the Nile water into blood. This, however, was not performed by God at this stage. It was suggested to Moshe as a last resort – in case the people would not believe Moshe after his first two supernatural demonstrations. The theme of the Nile water turning into blood was familiar in ancient Egyptian literature as an indication of the loss of *Maat* (see "Introduction to the plagues and the concept of *Maat*" on page 37) and the prevalence of chaos – an alarming sign that things were out of control. Again, God used familiar imagery to demonstrate that things were no longer as they used to be. New rules, His rules, were now operative.

It is not surprising that none of these deeds, turning a staff into a snake and back, and turning the Nile water into blood, as a supernatural event, was ever documented as part of any historical event in ancient Egypt. Yet, both are well entrenched within the Egyptian cultural sphere and as such, were used by God to show his might and power over Egypt and its gods. • RSH



➤ The sun barque, Amun-Re in the center with his two helpers



— FLORA AND FAUNA —

4:4-5 Moshe took the snake by the tail

Ancient Egyptians revered and feared snakes. The land of the Nile is home to at least eleven kinds of venomous snakes, as well as many other nonvenomous species.



A relief of a cobra on a basket

Snakes played a significant role in ancient Egyptian art and religion. The cobra, one of the most dangerous snakes in Egypt, was considered guardian of the king. A stylized cobra called a uraeus is often placed on the forehead of a royal statue, symbolizing a protective female divine element and representing Lower Egypt.

The safest way to pick up a venomous snake is by the head, not the tail. When attempting to catch a snake, a handler will use a stick to immobilize the head before grabbing the snake by the tail, triggering a panic response that makes the serpent unable to strike.

The Torah is therefore making a point when it relates the fact that Moshe picks up the snake by his tail. The next verse states: "This is so that they will believe that the LORD ... appeared to you." The act of picking up the snake by the tail without immobilizing the head is meant to prove the power and protection of God. ■ IBZ

• ארצה ויהי לנחש ויגס משה מפניו: ויאמר יהוה אל-משה
 שלח ידך ואחז בזנבו וישלח ידו ויחזק-בו ויהי למטה בכפו:
 • למען יאמינו כי-נראה אליך יהוה אלהי אבתם אלהי
 אברהם אלהי יצחק ואלהי יעקב: ויאמר יהוה לו עוד הבא
 נא ידך בחיקך ויבא ידו בחיקו ויוצאה והנה ידו מצרעת
 כשֵׁלֶג: ויאמר השב ידך אל-חיקך וישב ידו אל-חיקו ויוצאה

- 4 from it. The LORD told Moshe, "Reach out your hand and take hold of its tail." He reached out his hand and grasped
- 5 it, and in his hand it turned back into a staff. "This is so that they will believe that the LORD God of their fathers, the God of Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov, appeared to you."
- 6 The LORD spoke to him again: "Put your hand inside your cloak." He put his hand inside his cloak; when he took it out
- 7 it was as white as snow. "Put it back inside your cloak," He said. Moshe put his hand back inside his cloak and when



— NEAR EAST —

4:6 Tzara'at is not leprosy

No evidence has been established for the existence of leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease, in biblical times in the land of

Israel. Therefore, the term *tzara'at* – which appears here as well as in other verses in the Tanakh, and which generally is translated as leprosy – actually refers to a skin disease or a fungus.

Tzara'at is also mentioned in Leviticus 13: 47–59 and 14:34–37, where it is described as sometimes appearing on clothing and buildings. This would imply that it is a kind of fungus. ■ JU



The *metzora* being purified with the two birds. By Dutch engraver Simon Fokke, 1712–1784

ח מִחִיקוֹ וְהִנֵּה־שָׁבָה כְּבָשָׂרוֹ: וְהָיָה אִם־לֹא יֵאֱמִינוּ לָךְ וְלֹא
 יִשְׁמְעוּ לְקַל הָאֵת הָרִאשׁוֹן וְהֵאֱמִינוּ לְקַל הָאֵת הָאַחֲרוֹן:
 ט וְהָיָה אִם־לֹא יֵאֱמִינוּ גַם לְשֵׁנֵי הָאֵתוֹת הָאֵלֶּה וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּן
 לְקַלְךָ וְלִקְחֹת מִמִּימֵי הַיָּאֵר וְשִׁפְכֹת הַיְבֹשָׁה וְהָיוּ הַבָּיִם אֲשֶׁר
 י • תִּקַּח מִן־הַיָּאֵר וְהָיוּ לְדָם בַּיּוֹשֶׁת: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה
 יא בִּי אֲדֹנָי לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אֲנֹכִי גַם מִתְּמוֹל גַּם מִשְׁלָשִׁים גַּם
 יב מֵאִז דְּבַרְךָ אֶל־עַבְדְּךָ כִּי כִבְדַפְּה וּכְבַד לְשׁוֹן אֲנֹכִי: וַיֹּאמֶר
 יג יְהוָה אֵלָיו מִי שֵׁם פֶּה לְאָדָם אוֹ מִי־יִשְׁוֹם אֵלִים אוֹ חֵרֶשׁ אוֹ
 יד פֶּקַח אוֹ עִוֵּר הֲלֹא אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה: וְעַתָּה לָךְ וְאֲנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה עֵס־פִּיךָ
 וְהוֹרִיתִיךָ אֲשֶׁר תִּדְבֹר: וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי אֲדֹנָי שְׁלַח־נָא בְיַד־תְּשַׁלַּח:
 וַיַּחֲרֶאֱף יְהוָה בְּמֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲלֹא אֶהְרֹן אֶחָיֶךָ הֲלוֹי יִדְעָתִי

he took it out the skin color had returned. “If they do not 8
 believe you and are not persuaded by the first sign, they will
 believe the evidence of the second sign. And if they do not 9
 believe either of these signs, and will not listen to you, then
 take some water from the Nile and spill it on the ground.
 The water you take from the Nile will become blood on the
 ground.” Then Moshe said to the LORD, “Please, my LORD, 10 •
 I am not a man of words; I was not yesterday, nor the day
 before, and still I am not since You spoke to Your servant. I
 am slow of speech and tongue.” “Who gives man speech?” 11
 said the LORD to him. “Who makes people dumb or deaf?
 Who gives them sight or blindness? Is it not I, the LORD?
 Now go. I will help you speak and I will teach you what to 12
 say.” But, “Please, my Lord,” he said, “send someone else.” 13
 Then the LORD’s anger blazed against Moshe. “Have you not 14
 a brother, Aharon the Levite? He, I know, is able to speak.



NEAR EAST

4:10 Slow of speech and tongue

What does Moshe mean by this complaint? Literally, the Hebrew reads “heavy – *khevad* – of mouth and heavy of tongue.” And how does that differ from his statement later (6:12) that he is, “of uncircumcised [*aral*] lips”?



A fragment of the queen's face, Amarna period, New Kingdom, 14th century BCE

The roots *kh b d*, heavy, and *'ar l*, uncircumcised, are used elsewhere in Tanakh to express similar concepts. Both words indicate a physical inability to see or to hear or – in the case of Moshe – an inability to speak.

For example, Isaiah 6:10 states, “make its [the people’s] ears heavy...lest it hears with its ears” while Jeremiah 6:10 reads, “their ear is uncircumcised so that they cannot pay heed.” Both verses convey the concept that a heavy or uncircumcised ear is unable to hear. Likewise, Genesis 48:10 states that “Israel’s eyes were heavy with age; he could not see” – the concept of heaviness denoting that his physical sight was diminished.

In the Akkadian language, the cognate of *kbd*, *kabiitu* “heavy,” refers to the affliction of different parts of the body. A few Akkadian texts mention “his mouth is heavy,” which may relate to a speech defect. In Sumerian, in contrast, the word for “heavy” not only refers to physical disorders but also means speaking the Sumerian language badly.

With this background, it seems plausible that, Moshe’s complaints of being literally “heavy of mouth” and “of uncircumcised lips,” are referring to a single problem: a physical speech impediment. And God responds unequivocally: “Who gives man speech?... Who makes people dumb or deaf? Who gives them sight or blindness?” (4:11). God is telling Moshe that his defect is no challenge for Him! As a divinely-appointed agent, Moshe’s achievements are not dependent upon natural ability – but rather, they depend on the words Moshe says and the deeds he does in fulfilling God’s command. ■ JU