

## ***THE SUPERHERO OF THE NILE***

### **A SYNTHESIS OF SCRIPTURE AND ANTHROPOLOGY ON THE BEGINNING OF THE BOOK OF EXODUS - CHAPTERS 1:1-22, 2:1-10**

What follows invokes both spiritual and cultural anthropological interpretations of events that unfolded prior to the Exodus and the early formation of the ancient nation of Israel. It details the tremendous impact that the founding Moses would one day bring about in that same region from the banks of the Nile River that echo up to the present era.



These early events ranged from Israelite migration and settlement in Sinai and the land of Canaan; the giving of the Torah, creating a Hebraic culture in a region destined to become almost wholly immersed in Islam; escalation of ethnic, political, and religious conflict; and finally detrimental effects that have been exerted upon land, population, and water resources arising from diverting the flow of the Nile with modern technology.

Recent world news reports widespread unrest in the form of Jihadist cyber and Islamic fundamentalist attacks launched against Christian, Jewish, and Western institutions and troops on foreign soil in Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries. The question of Palestinian statehood continues to strain relations between the State of Israel and many of its Muslim neighbors, particularly those engaged in terrorism.



Finally, the building of the Aswan High Dam in 1971 was meant to keep the Nile from flooding in Egypt but has conversely caused the water table along the Nile to rise above its normal level. Fertile silt from the Nile overflow is trapped upstream in Lake Nasser and farmers who have traditionally depended on the silt to fertilize crops for thousands of years are now forced to use chemical fertilizer. Mineral salts in the rising water table can cause damage to ancient Egyptian monuments situated adjacent to the banks of the Nile.

The Nile is one of the mightiest rivers on Earth. It is classified as the longest at 4,132 miles long, with the Amazon in South America coming in at a close second. An exact determination as to which is the longest has proved elusive. The Nile flows south to north, cascading from its origins in the Mufumbiro and Ruwenzori mountains of Uganda, becoming the White Nile which emanates from Lake Victoria. It then diverts into its second tributary at the Sudanese capital of Khartoum, where it is joined to the source of the Blue Nile near Lake Tana in Ethiopia. Both the White and Blue Niles then converge into the final tributary called Atbara descending from high in the Ethiopian peaks. The gathered waters diverge into multiple tributaries in the Nile Delta, where they finally empty into the Mediterranean Sea.

Farming came to the Nile Valley around 5000 BCE, nourished by the vitalizing waters of the Nile. The Egyptians regarded the Nile as part god, with god-like qualities that were essential to the sustenance of the land and to human life. The kingship itself was closely associated with the rich soil of Egypt and its watering by the annual summer inundation of the Nile.

Romanticized tales of the Nile figure in many literary genres of East and West, making it renown throughout the world. Its name may be traced to the Semitic root of *nahal* meaning a valley or a river valley and, by extension, a river. Some scholars contest this etymology of the name. The Greek form is *Neilos* and the Latin is *Nilus*. The Christian Egyptians, from late second century CE, referred to it by the word *Ar* or the Coptic *Aur* meaning “black.” Nile mud is so black from its sediments that it is said to have given the land its oldest name, *Kem* or *Kemi*, which signifies darkness or blackness.



A widely recognized volume of Nile references is contained within the Hebrew Scriptures with its powerful iconic descriptions of Moses’s confrontations with the Pharaoh of Egypt and his eventual deliverance of the Israelites from slavery at the Exodus. Following is a discussion of these monumental events surrounding Moses’s birth and adoption as they appear in the opening chapter of the Book of Exodus in the Holy Scriptures.

#### **Exodus 1:1-14**

The Book of Exodus begins with an introduction of the names of the sons of Yaakov/Yisrael, those who accompanied him into Egypt after his son Yosef, the viceroy of Egypt, had revealed himself to his brothers.

Yosef's revelation to his family occasioned their move to Egypt, where they ultimately settled in Goshen under the protection of Yosef, who was second to Pharaoh. Seventy souls were numbered to have come out of the loins of Yaakov (though that number is also under debate) through his sons Reuben, Shimone, Levi, Judah, Y'sasschar, Zevulun, Benyamin, Dan, Naftali, Gad, and Asher. Yosef is not counted here as he was already in Egypt when the family relocated.

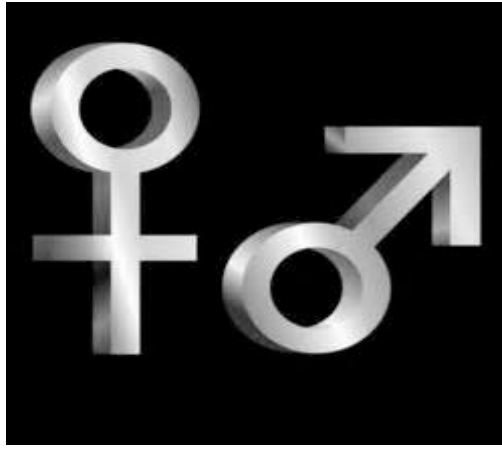
After the eventual death of Yosef, a new pharaoh took office who the Scriptures say had no knowledge of him, therefore the security that Yosef assured the Hebrew population that had multiplied exceedingly over time became jeopardized. The new pharaoh assessed the national situation and declared that the children of Yisrael had become too many and too mighty for comfort. His concern was that the Hebrews would align themselves with enemies in the event of war and aid them in fighting against Egypt or that they would escape and preclude the tyranny that was about to engulf them. The situation was clear; the children of Yisrael had to be stopped.

Taskmasters were set over them to afflict them with labor-intensive work, reducing the Hebrews to slave status. According to the Scriptures, this labor produced the store cities Pithom and Raamses in Upper Egypt which housed the food supply of the mighty Egyptian nation. The tactic, however, had a reverse outcome; the more the Hebrews were afflicted by slave labor, the more they reproduced. This alarmed the Egyptians even more! Clearly, something had to be done to curtail this Hebrew population explosion. The rigorous labor increased, consisting of hard service with brick and mortar, in the fields, and in all categories of service. Reproduction also persisted. The stage was set for a spiritual and dynastic confrontation prompted by a biological impediment fraught with critical political ramifications for successful Egyptian domination. Repercussions would echo throughout human history to this very present moment.

### **Exodus 1:15-22**

Taking an extremely direct approach to rectifying the problem on Egypt's doorstep, Pharaoh called upon the cooperation of the midwives, Shifrah and Puah, who attended the Hebrew women in childbirth. He ordered them to observe at the moment of birth if the child being born was a male, in which case the child was to be murdered. If a female was born, she should be allowed to live. Daughters were allowed to live because of their value in performing domestic and sexual servitude that would contribute to the preservation of the quality of life of the elite Egyptian population that could afford them, not to mention an increase in heirs of Egyptian nationality. The midwives, however, would have no hand in such an atrocity as this that Pharaoh had commanded. Infanticide was **not** an option. They saved the male children alive along with the females.

In many ancient countries and even in some modern countries today, male children are favored as the family inheritors and as laborers on behalf of the family enterprise. Perhaps more importantly, they also have a reproductive edge in that males produce thousands of sperm during a lifetime which can conceivably fertilize one or more female eggs at every sexual encounter and produce offspring. Women, however, are capable of producing a very limited number of offspring within a year's span. Of course, there may occasionally be multiple births that produce high numbers but that is less the norm. The importance of males became skewed among human groups because, not only could they perform hard labor as well as defend the group, but they had an ability to reproduce themselves almost exponentially given the chance. Their ability to increase the *crude birth rate* – the number of live births in a given year for every 1,000 people in a population – has given them a reproductive advantage. But that has proved almost to be a hollow advantage, with human population growth almost outstripping the planet's resources. During the 15<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century BCE (an actual date is still debated) when the events in Exodus would have taken place in Egypt, humankind was still intent upon multiplying, fulfilling the commandment of their Creator. Children, male and female, were considered a blessing...except when they were viewed by the indigenous population as a threat to the political and social order.



But what then, of women? Have they no role in contributing to the perpetuation of the species, you ask? An emphatic “yes” is the answer. If the crude birth rate were to proceed unchecked in a society, consumption of the available food sources that could sustain human life would be depleted in little time, leading to starvation and a malnourished population ripe for death and destruction by war, disease, and other forces, as depicted by Thomas Malthus, early nineteenth century author of political economy, whose work decried the effects of increased human population growth. God, in His infinite wisdom, devised balance in the universe. Women are a force that supports the prevention of humankind from descending into the chaos that could result from unchecked reproduction. The slower reproductive capacity of women achieves evolutionary and cultural balance in allowing them latitude to nurture infants from birth to adulthood, in the case of humans, a long and immensely complex process. Evolutionary and cultural balance is also achieved by spacing childbirth through breastfeeding, when ovulation normally ceases, although not always. This biological restraint naturally and effectively regulates the number and timing of pregnancies. The cessation of childbirth during a woman’s lifetime through menopause is also achieved naturally. Both of these natural occurrences are aimed at preserving the species. God intended humankind to flourish and spread in a biologically sound condition throughout the earth. We see his design toward this end in every phase of nature and culture. Forces at creation out of the waters of chaos put these checks and balances into place. We were not created randomly but with systems of checks and balances, and for a purpose – the glorification of His Name.

God equipped humankind with natural mechanisms in order to be self-sustaining. Times would come when divine intervention would be required but our species was designed with hard-wiring that responds to the challenges of the universe. We were designed to be both self-determining and self-sustaining with the occasional assist from the Divine. These interventions could arise from simple everyday occurrences or from momentous ones like the powerful parting of the waters of the Red Sea.

Often humankind itself seeks, to its own detriment, to disrupt God’s plans. Pharaoh, in his edict to slay all the male infants of the Hebrews, sought to undertake this, to his utter downfall. When the tactic of Shiphrah and Puah of saving the male infants alive was discovered, Pharaoh inquired of them why they had countermanded his instructions. Their reply was no less than pure brilliance – the Hebrew women had more vitality than Egyptian women at birthing and delivered their offspring before the midwives arrived to perform their duties! However Pharaoh may have interpreted this answer is a moot point; it worked. Their response absolved them of any responsibility for the idiosyncrasies of human biology. Not only were the midwives not held accountable, they were blessed for their preservation of male Hebrew infants and their observance of fundamental human law which would soon be upheld in the forthcoming Torah.

The Scriptures then report that because the midwives feared God, He made them houses. This may be interpreted in several ways. It could mean that God established their lineage but this is not likely since lineages were reckoned through men. Another interpretation is that God simply caused the midwives’

households to prosper. It could also mean that they were provided with “birthing houses” where they could expand their obstetrical services.

There existed, however, a well-founded tradition in Egypt whereby wealthy fathers made gifts of houses to their daughters, possibly to ensure that they would always have a home should finances or a marriage fail. Thus, a plausible interpretation of the passage could be that God caused Pharaoh to present the midwives with their own residences, valued resources that women usually only attained through widowhood or an indulgent and affluent father. This would, of course, not have been because they were his daughters but more conceivably because he was impressed with their courage. The “affluent father” in this instance could have been none other than Pharaoh himself. Who else could or would have provided such a resource to these particular midwives in the wake of such subversive behavior? God could have moved an adversary of His people to exhibit generosity toward their midwife allies, thereby rewarding the collaborators for their actions in support of the Hebrew people and rendering them independent. After all, Pharaoh could have summarily had the midwives executed for disobeying his order. Instead, he merely questioned them and accepted their justifications for saving male Hebrew infants. The reward of establishing houses for them would be fitting in this circumstance, given the high risk of the midwives’ actions, and it affirms the benevolence of our Creator toward those who jeopardize themselves on behalf of His people. As a result of the midwives’ contravention, however, Pharaoh had to resort to commanding his own people to cast the offspring of their Hebrew servants into the Nile, a reprehensible solution, indeed, to his growing social problem.

The tradition of granting houses to women in Egypt would later be chronicled in the Elephantine Papyrus written during the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE in the Aramaic language, the international language of the Persian Empire. The papyrus detailed the life and culture of the Judahite military garrison that served as guards for the Persian colonial administration in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE at the Egyptian border with Nubia in Upper Egypt. This document was uncovered at the site where the island of Elephantine was located at the first cataract of the Nile River, now flooded by the Aswan High Dam.



The colony incorporated some Egyptian practices within their community, often through intermarriage. It is recorded in the Aramaic texts that affluent Elephantine Judahite fathers often made gifts of houses to their daughters, demonstrating deep paternal affection toward them. This relationship model may have derived from the earlier overlooked display of paternal indulgence on Pharaoh's part – that the king of Egypt apparently ignored his daughter's flagrant transgression of his edict to murder all Hebrew infant males when she adopted an "abandoned" Hebrew male infant in defiance of that edict. Pharaoh seemingly denied nothing to his "darling daughter," not even a Hebrew foundling from along the Nile River. There is no record of Pharaoh expressing any displeasure with his daughter for what was assuredly an act of treason, punishable by death.

### **Exodus 2:1-10**

The unheralded episode portraying the Egyptian father-daughter relationship model unfolds in Exodus 1 and 2 thusly. While in Egypt, a man of the house of Levi, which would become the priestly tribe of Yisrael, took to wife Yocheved, a daughter of one of his kinsmen. She conceived and bore a healthy, viable son whom she was obliged to hide from the detection of the Egyptians due to Pharaoh's edict. When, after three months, it became impossible to contain her secret any longer, she fashioned a small float made of bulrushes from the marshes along the Nile, cemented it with mud and tar, and put the boy child in it.

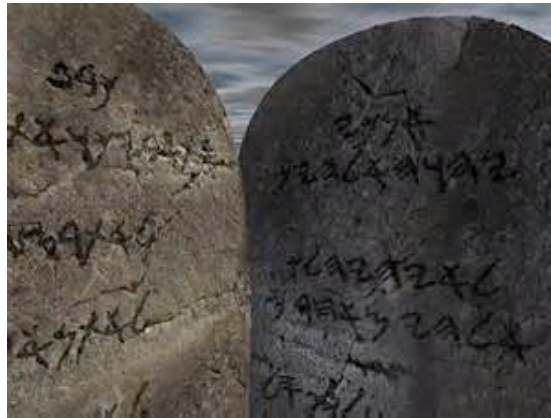


Yocheved laid it among the stones along the riverbank where it nestled undetected for a time in the waters. The infant's sister, Miryam, witnessed her mother's desperate act as she stood apart from the action but remembered its location. We might suppose that perhaps both mother and/or sister surmised beforehand that Pharaoh's daughter would appear at that very location to bathe in the waters of the Nile as usual and she would be attracted by the cries of an infant coming from nearby. They appear to have known intuitively that this possibly childless woman would have a strong maternal response to the helpless infant and would not send him off to be murdered according to her father's command. She was doubtless Pharaoh's delight and knew well that she could have whatever her heart desired from him.

While bathing in the Nile, Pharaoh's daughter had encountered a charming, adorable three-month old baby boy who captured her heart, and the thought of having him put to death was not an option for her, either, as it had not been for the midwives. When she exclaimed, "This is one of the Hebrews' children," the child's sister, Miryam, imaginatively and shrewdly, planted in Pharaoh's daughter's mind the suggestion that Miryam herself should fetch a nurse from among the Hebrew women to nurse the infant boy for her. She recognized that the child had struck a chord within the woman (possibly what she and Yocheved had hoped and perhaps conspired for all along) and that Pharaoh's daughter would maneuver to keep the child alive despite the edict of her father.

Miryam quickly went off to ensure this solution to the problem by stilling the cries of the infant that might invite the curiosity of anyone in the vicinity. This quite possibly could have revealed Pharaoh's daughter's deliberate complicity in flouting the law of the land in a conspiracy to circumvent her father's order condemning male Hebrew offspring to death, knowledge of which would have to be prevented at all costs. When Miryam brought Yocheved, the child's mother, who remained unidentified, to Pharaoh's daughter, she immediately commanded the mother to take the child (away from prying eyes) and nurse him. Upon ordering this, she astonishingly declared that the mother would be compensated for her nursing services. Imagine this lowly servant mother being hired by an Egyptian princess to provide the natural biological function of nursing her own child, which would keep this particular Hebrew infant male alive, against Pharaoh's order! The strong emotional bond of Egyptian father-daughter affection preserved the life of a Nile River foundling and perhaps those of the midwives who factored in keeping him and other Hebrew males alive as well. Unquestionably, the God of the Hebrews had chosen this infant for heroic things. We observe here the magnificence of God's plan being implemented through the simple daily lifeways of human beings in order to bring to pass the promised covenant with Abraham his servant.

This Hebrew boy child was destined to grow up in the house of Pharaoh after being snatched from a muddy swamp, to become a prince of Egypt, privy to all the advantages that the high culture of Egypt could provide. He became known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He was educated, groomed, and polished in a manner befitting a prince. The Scriptures report that she named him "Moses" derived from the Hebrew verb "mashah," to draw out. Some scholars have challenged this derivation of the name. Whatever the origin of his name, this prince of Egypt was destined to be the superhero and deliverer of the Hebrew people from cruel bondage, paving their way toward becoming the nation that would soon commune with God through this very Moses at Mount Sinai.



They would venture forth to subordinate, under the military leadership of Joshua, son of Nun, parts of the land of Canaan to their rule and subsequently establish it as the homeland of the Hebrew people as God had promised. Freedom emerged from the Nile, delivered by God through the hand of Moses.

God endowed Moses with unprecedented power never before exhibited by a charismatic leader of any religious movement. He allowed Moses to circumvent even the natural laws that He had put into effect on the earth in order to secure the freedom of the Hebrews who had been enslaved by Pharaoh. Formidable powers were given to Moses, making the "magic" of the Egyptian magicians ultimately become weak and impotent as they vied for mastery over Moses's successes.

When Moses's attacks upon Egypt for the release of the Hebrews from bondage began, they were powered by the God of the universe, and were swift and devastating. Again and again – 10 times – the Egyptians were suddenly engulfed by catastrophic terror, beginning with the Nile and all Egypt's waters, including that in their vessels, becoming red with blood and befouled with dead fish for seven days. Again and again,

Pharaoh hardened his heart in stubbornness. Even after his country was plagued with frogs swarming through the entire land; after gnats descended upon man and beast; after flies engulfed all of Egypt but not Goshen where the Israelites resided; after murrain, a disease of animals, killed the herds and flocks of the Egyptians but again, not those of the Israelites; after Moses tossed dust into the air that became painful boils upon man and beast of the Egyptians; after thunder and hail with flashing fire rained down upon the Egyptians, their fields, and their livestock, killing all that was out in the open. After the onslaught of all these calamities upon Pharaoh and his terrified nation, his obstinacy endured.

Then Pharaoh tried God even further, against the sound advice of his advisors who themselves questioned whether Pharaoh, having played his power games with Moses, realized that he was now a regent sitting above a nation devastated by his own superciliousness. Yet Pharaoh persisted in his stubbornness and God sent locusts on an east wind that filled the air, darkening the land of Egypt and causing all its vegetation to perish. That darkness was not enough, so God was compelled to send a thicker darkness “which may be felt” all over the land for three days. One person could not see the other.

Pharaoh seemed then to relent but when Moses requested sacrifices for burnt offerings in the form of cattle, the ruler’s heart was hardened again and he sent Moses away angrily, vowing that Moses would see his face no more. This was a demonstration of the extreme arrogance of a ruler who thought himself a god. Moses’s reply was one of foreboding, that Pharaoh, indeed, would see his face no more. Through these plagues, Moses had been empowered to command the very forces of nature against Egypt. Scant literature existed at the time about a common man being invested with such supernatural power.

The final coup de grâce was that Moses was endowed by God with the ability to turn back the Red Sea along the escape route to make a path for the Israelites to evade the Egyptian army. Never had such a profound and majestic act been achieved by a mere mortal. Moses had brought the mighty Egypt to its knees by the power of God. Here was a genuine ancient superhero recorded in biblical history. Such potent power, that compelled the forces of the universe, had been granted to a humble man who had attracted God’s favor from his inception -- a man child drawn from the waters of the Nile who would lead the Children of Israel out of Egypt and into history. His feats remain unmatched in the annals of the world and converged into a narrative that has influenced human relations up to modern times.

The events recorded in the Book of Exodus, that took place along the Nile, recount incidents that continue to exert powerful influences today on the religious, economic, political, social, and cultural forces that coalesce in and around Egypt and Sinai Peninsula sites comparable to those from distant antiquity.

God’s servant Moses – the man – whose mystique emerged from the waters and bulrushes of the Nile and who was endowed by God with the spirit, passion, and power to deliver His people from injustice and slavery, was indeed a *superhero* in the truest sense of the word.





The story of Moses will continue to reverberate around the world, a tale of the superhero drawn from the Nile, the river that signified life, not only for Egypt and its neighbors, but for a moment in time, also for the newly-formed Israelite nation. Moses would go on, aided by Yehoshuah ben Nun, to subdue the Canaanites while carving out a homeland for the tribes of Yisrael



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