

LESSON ONE
*Women at
Moses' Birth:*
TAKING ACTION TO
HELP CHILDREN

FOCAL TEXT

Exodus 1:15—2:10

BACKGROUND

Exodus 1:1—2:10

MAIN IDEA

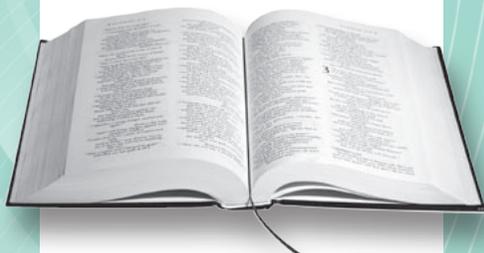
Women acted boldly and courageously to overcome the pharaoh's evil plans and help children, including a special child.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

What will you do to help children?

TEACHING AIM

To lead adults to summarize the ways in which the women at Moses' birth acted to help children and to identify ways they will take action to help children



BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

The Book of Genesis ends on a positive note with the family of Jacob secure in the land of Egypt. The story implies that the sons of Jacob reconciled their differences with one another. Additionally, there is a hint of a future departure from Egypt with the promise that the brothers would carry the mummified body of Joseph with them to the land God promised to Abraham as an inheritance (Genesis 50:24–26).

The Book of Exodus begins at an undetermined time. The opening verses of Exodus look backward to the era of the ancestors and set the stage for the Exodus story in the near future. Between the eighteenth and the sixteenth centuries B.C., Semitic foreigners, known as the Hyksos, invaded Lower Egypt and gained control of the Delta. It is possible that this was the time in which Joseph and the Israelites entered Egypt. By the middle of the sixteenth century B.C., the native Egyptians drove out the foreign invaders. Semitic peoples who remained in Egypt became enslaved by the native Egyptian rulers. The Israelites are a Semitic people. Therefore, the Egyptian Nineteenth Dynasty (began near the end of the fourteenth century B.C.) probably provides the setting for Book of Exodus.

Interpreting the Scriptures

The Israelites Suffer Oppression in Egypt (1:1–22)

1:1–7. The promise of the Lord to Abraham to become a “great nation” (Gen. 12:2) is partially realized in the beginning of the Exodus story. While in Egypt, the Israelites “were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.” Yet, they remained a landless people.

1:8–14. The identification of the new king who “arose over Egypt” and “did not know Joseph” remains unknown. Scholars often mention

Nineteenth Dynasty pharaohs, such as Seti I, Rameses II, or Merneptah as the pharaoh of Exodus 1:8. The term “pharaoh” is an Egyptian term that means *king*. Ancient Egyptians viewed the pharaoh as the son of the sun-god Ra, and as a living god.

The Egyptians became fearful of the Hebrews living in the land and used ruthless tasks to control, or even reduce by genocide, the Israelite population.

1:15–22. Eventually the pharaoh resorted to infanticide to address the out-of-control growth of the Israelites.

1:15–16. The biblical text implies that there were only two midwives for the entire Israelite population in Egypt. Midwives assisted pregnant women in the delivery of their offspring. The names of the two midwives were Shiphrah and Puah. The name *Shiphrah* means *fair one* or *beauty*. Interestingly, the name *sp-ra* appears in an Egyptian list of slaves from the eighteenth century B.C.,¹ although it is unlikely this is the same person. The name *Puah* is not a known Hebrew name. Some interpret the meaning to be *splendor* or *splendid one*. The name appears in the Ugaritic language (a language close to Hebrew) and means *girl*.

1:16b. The Hebrew word translated as “birthstool” is literally *the two stones*. Numerous records from the ancient Near East describe the custom of women kneeling or sitting on two stones or bricks during the delivery of a newborn.

1:16c. The command to kill the male newborns and leave the female newborn infants alive would, in time, eradicate the Hebrew population. The females would eventually become slave-wives for Egyptian men.

1:17. The text states that the midwives “feared God.” The expression *fear of the Lord* or “feared God” often relates to one’s love of God’s instructions. In the context, the midwives had a command from Pharaoh, viewed by the Egyptians as a living god on earth. Implied in the passage, the two midwives had a higher command from God, whose kingship trumped the command of Pharaoh. Therefore, the two women placed their own safety at risk by defying Pharaoh’s explicit orders. This was a case of civil disobedience.

1:18. Pharaoh summoned the midwives to give an account of their disobedience to his commands. Disobedience to a god in any religion can have severe consequences. The midwives had demonstrated great bravery in their act of civil disobedience.

1:19. Were the midwives giving an honest report to the Pharaoh or making an excuse? It is hard to tell from the text. However, the response of the midwives is intended to demonstrate the superiority of the Hebrew women over their Egyptian counterparts. First, Hebrew women were “not like the Egyptian women.” Second, Hebrew women were “vigorous,” that is, *full of life, full of strength*, as opposed to Egyptian women. Third, the Hebrew women delivered their children quickly as opposed to a slow process of labor. The contrast of the Hebrew women to the Egyptian women, particularly women in the royal court, presents a humorous story.

1:20–21. The biblical text does not describe how Pharaoh dealt with the disobedient midwives. However, in contrast to Pharaoh’s unknown actions, God was “good” (NASB) to the midwives, who obeyed the Lord’s instructions. God caused “good” to come to the midwives. The “good” God caused relates to the birth of children as seen in the following expressions—(1) “the people multiplied”; (2) the people (presumably the newborns) became exceedingly “strong”; and (3) the midwives also were given children. The gift of children to the midwives is tied to their fear of God—the love of God’s instructions to them.

1:22. Verse 22 contains the third stratagem (1:11, 16, 22) for the genocide of the Hebrews in Egypt. The Pharaoh commanded “all” his people to execute “every” male infant. The manner of infanticide was by drowning the infants in the Nile River. The Egyptians viewed the Nile River as a god whose name was *Hapy*. There is a possible religious undertone in this command. Casting male infants into the Nile River represents a more rigorous and religious campaign to exterminate the Israelites. The additional command to preserve the lives of the female infants may represent a plan for slave-wives for the Egyptians.

The Birth of Moses (2:1–4)

2:1. The current text does not name the parents of Moses. Exodus 6:20 provides their names.² Amram was Moses' father, and Jochebed was Moses' mother, who was also his father's sister. Moses' father was from the tribe of Levi.

2:2–3. The mother, believing she had no choice except to follow Pharaoh's orders, cast her son into the Nile River. However, she prepared a protective basket or chest in hopes of saving the child's life. It is the same term used for Noah's ark (Gen. 6:14). It would have had a cover. The material used for the basket was the common papyrus stalks that were abundant along the Nile River in ancient times, but are no longer present along the Nile's banks.

She sealed the basket with bitumen and pitch. Bitumen is a by-product of decomposed organic materials. Pitch was a sticky material from resin or bitumen. Bitumen and pitch combined helped to make the basket watertight. Clearly, the mother was not making a sacrifice to the Nile god *Hapy*.

The expression "reeds on the bank of the river" refers to the vast variety of tall grasses that grew along the edge of the river.

2:4. Moses' unnamed sister appears in the narrative without any prior introduction. Verses 1–2 almost imply that Moses was the first child born to the couple. Exodus 15:20 provides the name of a sister of Moses who is named Miriam. It is presumed that this is the same loving sister standing along the Nile River.

The Compassionate Egyptian (2:5–10)

2:5a. Like Moses' sister, the daughter of Pharaoh is unnamed in the narrative. Later traditions provide a variety of names for this daughter of Pharaoh: Thermuthis,³ Tharmuth,⁴ Merris,⁵ and Tithiah.⁶ We cannot associate her with any known Egyptian.

2:5b–6. The princess did not go alone to the river but took her companions with her. On noticing a basket near the shore, she sent an attendant to retrieve the strange box.

The action moves quickly in verse 6 with several interesting verbs: “she opened,” “she saw,” and “she took pity.” The word for “took pity” also suggests the meaning of *spared*. Her compassion for the infant spared his life. She knew that the child was a Hebrew and had been condemned to death by the Pharaoh. Again, a woman had defied the divine command of the Pharaoh, son of Ra.

Did the child’s crying attract her to the box in the water? Or, was the crying noticed only after the basket was retrieved?

2:7–8. The unnamed sister of Moses boldly approached the princess with a proposal. Surely, others would not have been permitted near where the daughter of Pharaoh bathed. This action was bold and dangerous. Moses’ sister is called an *‘almāh*, which is the Hebrew term for a young woman of marriageable age.

Moses’ sister offered to find a wet nurse for the crying child, and the young girl knew exactly where to find such a woman. On the approval from the daughter of Pharaoh, Moses’ sister fetched the child’s natural mother.

Is it possible that Moses’ mother planned on an Egyptian discovering the basket with the child inside? Was the unnamed, older sister instructed to watch over her baby brother, or did she take the initiative to keep an eye on her brother?

2:9. The daughter of Pharaoh hired Moses’ mother to nurse and care for the newborn. Without a wet nurse for the newborn, the child would have died. The daughter of Pharaoh had saved Moses’ life twice. The text gives no indication whether the daughter of Pharaoh knew the wet nurse was the child’s natural mother. The mother who had partially followed Pharaoh’s command by placing the child in the Nile River, but who had also disobeyed the king’s orders by placing her son in a basket in the hope that he might survive, once again held her son to her breast. She probably took the child back to her own home to raise until he was weaned.

2:10. The expression “when the child grew up” refers to weaning the child. Following this milestone, the mother of Moses returned the child to the daughter of Pharaoh. According to ancient Near Eastern tradition, the person who found the child adopted the child. The princess did

not just treat the child as a son; she adopted the child as a son. Acts 7:22 states, "So Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in his words and deeds."

The daughter of Pharaoh, not the mother, named the child Moses, *mōšeh*. The way the story is presented, the naming is a form of etymology. The Hebrew word *mōšeh* means *one who draws out*. Since the daughter of Pharaoh named the child and the name is a Hebrew term, then the name is remarkable coming from an Egyptian. Most modern scholars view the name as an Egyptian name that means *to bear, give birth*. Several pharaohs of the New Kingdom used the name *mose* as part of the names of gods: Thut-mose means the god *Thut is born* or *born of the god Thut*. Numerous Egyptian names from the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasties appear with *mose*: Ah-mose, Ptah-mose, Amen-mose.

Focusing on the Meaning

Only rarely do occasions arise in life that require an individual to defy the government. However, when such times arise, the true follower of God takes a stand.

Most people face decisions of a simpler type. We reach out to infants and children by volunteering during times of worship or Bible study. We volunteer in a local school to assist in the education of children. We prepare gifts for underprivileged children at the beginning of the school year or at Christmas.

Many children across our country go without a healthy meal each day. We can use our resources to provide hearty meals to poor children.

Children cannot survive without the loving care of adults. The women in the story of Moses' birth provide models for how each person can reach out to a child with a comforting smile, a warm embrace, or an understanding ear.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Make this assignment: Think of one of your favorite characters in the Bible (besides Jesus). With a neighbor, discuss why you chose the person and whether this character would be a good role model (why or why not). Allow three minutes for discussion.

Option: Play an icebreaker game where a sticker with the name of a Bible character is placed on the back of each person as the person enters the room. Participants are given time to mingle, asking *yes* or *no* questions about their character (but not, *who am I?*). Each participant tries to figure out the character he or she is. Once a participant has learned his or her identity, the participant can continue to answer questions to help others.

2. Using “Introducing Profiles in Character” and the chart in the *Study Guide*, briefly introduce this new study. Point out that in each lesson we will study a character from the Old Testament in chronological order, learning about them and from them. Today we look at five women. Their story is found in Exodus 1—2. These women helped save both a generation of children and one special child.

Guide Bible Study

3. Ask the group to turn to Exodus 1. State: *The story of baby Moses in the bulrushes is found in most children’s Bibles. It’s a “feel-good” story about the rescue of an important baby, one who would later be used by God to deliver his people from slavery. What is generally left out of the children’s version are the events that preceded Moses’ birth. These are left out for a good reason. In many ways, the Bible is written for adults to read and study, more so than children. Some stories are not appropriate for teaching children. At least parts of this lesson’s story might be labeled, “for adults only,” for it deals with a*

dangerous, threatening, fearful time for young children. Using information in the *Study Guide* and “Bible Comments” in this *Teaching Guide*, explain the circumstances, or simply read Exodus 1:8–10.

4. Divide the class into two listening teams. Team one will listen for all of the *bad* events in the story. Team two will listen for the *good* things. Both teams will be asked to report their discoveries with the class. Have a volunteer read Exodus 1:11–22. Allow individuals to reflect and look for answers for their given team assignment.
5. Call for alternating responses from individuals on both teams, starting with the *bad* events, and then the *good*. Post their responses on a markerboard. Possible items found:

Bad	Good
Egyptians forced Israelites to be slaves	Israelites helped build an empire
Egyptians oppressed Israelites	God caused Israelites to multiply greatly
Egyptians made their lives bitter	Egyptians feared Israelites
King of Egypt wanted to kill boys	Midwives feared God and acted to save boys
Egyptian King challenged midwives	Midwives gave creative answers
Egyptian King still wanted to kill boys	Midwives were given families of their own

Briefly comment as necessary on both the *bad* and *good* events in the story.

6. State: *Sometimes life presents some harsh circumstances. What can we learn from the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah? If you had been in their situation, what do you think you would have done?* (Allow for response)
7. Say: *In Exodus 2, we see a unique creative attempt to save one special child. It's the familiar story of baby Moses in the bulrushes. As we read, watch for actions that were taken to save a helpless child. Enlist someone to read Exodus 2:1–10. After the reading, ask: Who acted to save Moses, and what specifically did they do?* (Allow for response.)

Encourage Application

8. Refer to and read the small article in the *Study Guide* titled “Two Models,” concerning models for ministry. Afterwards, ask: *What ministries have you seen or participated in to help defenseless children? To honor God, what could we do to help children in our community or world?*

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Give everyone a note card and pen. Ask individuals to make a list of the memorable women from their childhood who influenced them (like their mother, grandmother, a teacher, etc.). Allow two or three minutes for this activity. Have the class share with their neighbors the people they wrote down and what the women did to influence them. Allow up to five minutes for this exercise.
2. State: *God uses people to make a difference in each of our lives. Likewise, God wants to use US to make a difference in the lives of others. In this study we will be looking at a variety of Old Testament individuals.* Provide a brief introduction to the study, using information in “Introducing Profiles in Character” and the chart in the *Study Guide*.
3. Continue: *As we study these Bible personalities, we will watch and learn how God worked in their lives to accomplish his purpose as well as used them to make a difference in the lives of others. Just as we looked at the women who played a major role in shaping our lives, today we look at several women used by God to make a difference in the life of Moses.*

Guide Bible Study

4. Display and refer to the lesson outline:

- I. A Mandate to Kill (Exod. 1:15–22)
- II. A Plan to Save (Exod. 2:1–4)
- III. A Son to Raise (Exod. 2:5–10)

5. If you have an interesting story about an unusual birth in your family, share it briefly with the class. Then using information in the *Study Guide* and “Bible Comments” in this *Teaching Guide*, share the circumstances at the time of Moses’ birth. Read Exodus 1:15–16. Say: *Moses’ mother, like all of the women at the time, must have been distraught at what she had been instructed to do if she gave birth to a son.* Ask: *What do you think you would have done if given that kind of order or law today?* (Allow for responses.)
6. Read Exodus 1:17–21. Ask Question 1 from the *Study Guide*. (Allow for response.) Afterwards, have someone read verse 22. Say: *We normally think that new life brings joy. However, it was an unimaginable and awful situation at the time when Moses was born.*
7. Refer to “A Plan to Save” in the lesson outline. Read Exodus 2:1–4. Say: *Moses’ mother, like the midwives, used “creative disobedience” in an attempt to save Moses. Sometimes we do all we can do, and then we have to put the circumstances back in God’s hand. Fortunately for Moses and his family, God was at work in this situation.* Read 2:5–10 and refer to “A Son to Raise.” Explain the verses using information in the *Study Guide* and “Bible Comments” in this *Teaching Guide*.

Encourage Application

8. Have individuals silently review what each of these five biblical women did on behalf of children. Ask, *In your opinion, which one would you nominate for doing the most or being the best advocate on behalf of children? Which one are you drawn to?* (Allow a minute for

review. Remind them there is no one correct answer. Allow several to state their nominations.)

9. Refer to the small article “Two Models” in the *Study Guide* about ways individuals and churches are being advocates for children today. Ask, *What are some other ways we can act on behalf of children today?* As needed, follow up by asking: *as individuals? as a class? as a church?* (Allow for response.) State: *You can never go wrong investing in the lives of children.*

NOTES

1. James Phillip Hyatt, *Exodus*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1971), 60.
2. See also Numbers 26:59.
3. Flavius Josephus in H. St. J. Thackeray, and Allen Paul Wikgren, *Jewish Antiquities*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), II.ix.5.
4. Jubilees 47:5.
5. Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel*, trans. Edwin Hamilton Gifford (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1981), ix, 27.
6. Talmud, B. Meg. 74, 91; B. Ber. 41.