The Pharaohs Who Knew Moses

Patricia Berlyn

To the Egyptians, their pharaoh¹ was a literally divine figure, an earthly incarnation of the god Amon-Ra. Yet in encounters with the Israelites and their forebears, god-kings of the Two Lands appear quite human and at times cordial. The one who dealt with Abraham even showed himself rather more ethical than the Patriarch himself (Gen. 12:18-19). Another of them gave a Hebrew slave-convict authority over the highest-ranking Egyptians, received Jacob as a guest, accepted his blessing, and granted the request of his sons not merely to remain in Egypt but to settle in ‘... the best of the land’ (47:6).

That best of the land was the well-watered eastern section of the Nile Delta, which the children of Israel were to recall by the name Goshen. On its north is the Mediterranean Sea. On its east is the coastline of the Sinai Peninsula, along which travelers, traders, nomads seeking pasturage for their flocks, and foreign invaders made their way to Egypt. Goshen was thus a gateway into the Delta and beyond it to Lower and then Upper Egypt; a gateway that any responsible pharaoh must guard. Goshen was indeed of such strategic importance to the security of Egypt that its sovereign might well be concerned about a dubious element in its population, so when one of them permitted Jacob’s clan to settle there he must have been confident that these men were trustworthy.

Here, the Israelites were so comfortable that long after the famine that had driven them from Canaan was over, they did not return to the land promised to them as the seed of Abraham. Instead, they dallied in Egypt, prospering and multiplying: And the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty; and the land was filled with them (Ex. 1:7).

Over the course of millennia, many migrant groups made their way to Egypt, but only these children of Israel formed a coherent society within a society, closely bound to one another, preserving their distinct identity, in good measure their Semitic names and perhaps language as well, the memory of their Patriarchs, and the hereditary covenant with their God. They devel-

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oped their own institutions and structure of leadership, with the tribes separate and distinct from one another, each with its own meticulous genealogical records (Ex. 6:16-19; Num. 1:20-43), and at the same time all were bound together with supra-tribal leaders and councils. Paradoxically, the clan of Jacob became the nation of Israel during the generations of sojourn in the alien clime of Egypt.

**CHRONOLOGY**

There are several data in the biblical record that can be used to estimate dates for the Descent into Egypt, the Sojourn there, and the Exodus: *In the 480th year after the Israelites left the land of Egypt – in the month of Ziv – the second month – the fourth year of his reign over Israel, Solomon built the House of the Lord* (I Kg. 6:1).

This figure would come from the most official historical records, and there is no persuasive reason to doubt its accuracy. Solomon's reign began circa 970 BCE, so his fourth regnal year would be circa 967, and the Exodus circa 1446.

Jephthah informs a King of the Ammonites that 'Israel has been inhabiting Heshbon for 300 years' (Jud. 11:26). His detailed reprise of events recorded in Numbers 21-22 and Deuteronomy 2-3 show enough knowledge of his people's history to make this figure credible, though 300 years is more likely a rounded-off number than a precise one. Jephthah's own date cannot be calculated any more precisely than the first half of the 11th century, but that is enough to bring the Israelites into the land by the first half of the 14th century.

*The length of time that they lived in Egypt was 430 years* (Ex. 12:40). Having dated the Exodus to approximately 1446, adding this figure for the years in Egypt brings the descent of Jacob and his family to circa 1876.²

A Septuagint variation on the length of the sojourn reduces it to only 210 years, which does fit the genealogy that traces a short line of descent from Levi, son of Jacob, through Gershon and Kohath to Amram, father of Miriam, Aaron, and Moses. But even with the fecundity that so worried the Pharaoh-of-the-Oppression, the 73 sons and grandsons of Jacob could not in so short a time have multiplied into the twelve full tribes that went up out of Egypt.³
THE PHARAOH-OF-THE-OppRESSION

Centuries passed and the Israelites flourished, until There arose over Egypt a pharaoh who knew not Joseph (Ex. 1:8). It was long since any pharaoh had personal acquaintance with Joseph, so this statement may be taken to mean that he did not know, or at least did not appreciate, the services Joseph had rendered to the Egyptian crown.

And he said to his people [am], 'Look, the Israelite people [am] are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase, otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground' (Ex. 1:9-10).

With these words he accomplished two historical firsts: He was the first to define the Israelites as an "am [people, nation]," distinct from the Egyptian am among whom they lived, and he was the first to imagine that they were the cause of his discontents and disquietudes. The Israelites had indeed increased abundantly, but they were still a very tiny fraction of the population of Egypt. However, that they filled the land most likely refers to Goshen, where they were still dwelling in a compact community and would be demographically more conspicuous.

If rise up from the ground means that they might leave Egypt, the Pharaoh ought to have been relieved at the departure of a people whose presence so worried him. If it means that they might rise up in alliance with some foreign invader, there is no obvious explanation for such trepidation. He was probably, like so many other pharaohs, overlord of petty Canaanite vassal-kings whose frequent rebellions had to be crushed, and though the Canaanites themselves were too weak to invade Egypt, they could abet a more formidable foe essaying an attack by way of the Canaan-Sinai-Delta route. That the Israelites had come into Egypt from Canaan might lead to an assumption that they were themselves Canaanites, and a pharaoh who knew not Joseph might also know not that they were neither akin to nor partial to the Canaanites. Nor would they have cause to ally themselves with any foreign foe unless they had some grievance against the host country. So this Pharaoh proceeded to give them good cause for grievance.

He ruled over one of the strongest and richest realms of the time, yet he in effect admitted that he lacked confidence in his ability to defend it. He pro-
jected that inner lack of confidence against an outside target, and having thus conjured fear of the Israelites out of his own psychological insecurity, he went on to enact policies based on that fear. In so doing, he began the period of the Oppression that was to last, with varying degrees of severity, for decades to come. That period need not have fallen entirely within his own reign; it might have been passed on to a successor along with the Double Crown.

The first tactic of the Pharaoh-of-the-Oppression was to reduce a free and proud people to subjugation, perhaps hoping thereby to break their spirit while also making use of them:

*Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with their burdens. And they built for Pharaoh store-cities, Pithom and Ramses. But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And they were in dread because of the children of Israel. And the Egyptians made the children of Israel serve with rigor. And they made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field; in all their service, wherein they made them serve with rigor (Ex. 1:11-12).*

This toil is called "oved," from a root that means "work" or "labor," whether performed by a free employee or an indentured servant or a slave. The children of Israel, even with this burden placed upon them, did not become chattel slaves. That is, they were not owned by a master, with no independent lives of their own, as Joseph had been the chattel slave of Potiphar. Rather, they were corvée labor, required to do heavy lifting for a royal master but still maintaining their social structure and tribal assemblies, living in their own homes with their own families, and even enjoying a cuisine that they later recalled with nostalgia (Num. 11:5). The corvée had been commonplace in Egypt since the early kings raised their pyramids, and was accepted by the Egyptians of the working class as part of the natural order of things. The scions of the Patriarchs were not similarly submissive. They were independent, self-confident, prosperous men, whose forefathers had been treated with respect even by kings, and such infringement on their liberty and dignity was intolerable. To this day, the children of Israel recall this period in their history as the time of bondage, and Egypt as the House of Bondage.
The Pharaoh thus exploited but did not break the Israelites, so he went on to a harsher tactic, decreeing that all their male children be murdered at birth. This decree was shameful by the Egyptian standard of "ma'at [truth, justice, order, balance]" that the king was obliged to uphold. It was also foolish, for it would take a generation thereby to eliminate male Israelites, while leaving the current generation of men and boys intact and enraged. It could not have been in effect for long, for it had not applied to Aaron, born three years before Moses, and had it not been rescinded soon after the birth of Moses then even with the best efforts of the audacious midwives there would not have been many children of Israel for him to lead out of the House of Bondage.

In an elegant example of the Law of Unintended Consequences, Pharaoh's intent that the infant son of Jocheved and Amram should die in the waters of the Nile brought him out of his family's common abode and degraded status and into the royal establishment. There, he bore the Egyptian name given to him by the princess.\(^4\) (His real name – the one given to him by his mother Jocheved – remains among the things beyond surmise.)

His adoption by a pharaoh's daughter could not give him royal status, but it could and very likely did give him entrée into the highest levels of Egypt's sophisticated, opulent, sensual society. That would include an education in the palace schools, among sons and nephews of pharaohs and sons of Canaanite vassal-kings indoctrinated to be pro-Egyptian when they themselves became vassal-kings. In such a school, the young Moses would have learned the lore of Egypt, to read and write both Egyptian hieroglyphs and the Akkadian cuneiform that was the lingua franca of the lands of the Fertile Crescent, and be trained in military skills and tactics that would one day stand him in good stead. He would have among his classmates the youths who would in years to come be the ruling class, perhaps including the crown prince. When he was grown up enough to attend palace banquets and entertainments, he would gain knowledge of the outside world through meeting diplomats and emissaries from foreign parts. And all through this period of his life he was exposed to the vast temples, and elaborate rituals and processions devoted to Egypt's multitude of deities, some depicted in human form, some in beast form, and some in grotesque hybrids thereof.

Moses' origins must have been known at court, since so many attendants had seen their royal mistress draw him from the water, so he himself must
have known from an early age that he was an Israeliite. At some time, he learned enough about his people to understand the meaning of the introduction 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob' (Ex. 3:6). And he identified himself with this people, and not the Egyptians among whom he had been raised.

And it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown up, that he went out unto his brethren, and looked on their burdens; and he saw an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew, one of his brethren. And he looked this way and that way, and when he saw that there was no man, he smote the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand. And he went out the second day, and, behold, two men of the Hebrews were striving together; and he said to him that did the wrong: 'Why did you smite your fellow?' And he said: 'Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us? Thinkest thou to kill me, as thou didst kill the Egyptian?' And Moses feared, and said: 'Surely the thing is known.' Now when Pharaoh heard this thing, he sought to slay Moses. But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh . . . (Ex. 2:11-14).

There is no extant code of Egyptian law that defines the crime of manslaughter and sets the punishment therefore. (In the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi it would be a fine paid to the bereaved family, calculated according to the comparative social ranks of the perpetrator and the victim.) Pharaoh could rule by decree, but according to ma’at he ought not to render a judgment without a fair trial. That Moses now feared the Pharaoh would impose a death sentence suggests that he was aware of some court cabal against him that would make sure of that verdict; a guess supported by the later assurance that he could return from Midian to Egypt ‘. . . for all the men who sought to kill you are dead’ (4:19). Perhaps to Pharaoh and his inner circle the heinous offense was not the killing of a mere overseer, but the ingratitude of a young man who was given a high place in the palace, raised and educated as an upper-class Egyptian, and yet chose to align himself to the despised but still-feared children of Israel.

At the same time, those same children of Israel seem to resent him. That resentment appears again in their complaints about his efforts to liberate them (Ex. 5:21-23), and still again in the defiance of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Num. 16). It may be that his own Israelite people, even while he had to
'carry them in [his] bosom like a nursing father' (Num. 11:12), always felt Moses was personally distant from them, as shown in their preference for dealing with him through Aaron as intermediary.

When Moses arrived in Midian, the daughters of Jethro described him to their father as 'an Egyptian man' (Ex. 2:19), but once there he reverted to his ancestral type. In a society with a style of life as free as that of the Patriarchs and an austere contrast to the luxuries and enjoyments of Egypt, he became a shepherd – a return to the days of his forebears and an adumbration of his future role as '. . . one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd' (Num. 27:17).

THE PHARAOH-OF-THE-EXODUS

After an interval vaguely noted as many days, Moses learned that the Pharaoh from whom he had fled was dead – in Egyptian belief promoted to godhood. So, too, were all the others who had sought his life, a collective mortality that seems to limit his enemies to an older generation. That he could now return to Egypt implies that the enemies had not included the prince who had now succeeded as Pharaoh. It is likely that Moses received the Divine command to return to Egypt soon after the ascension of this prince, and if so then the Exodus would come early in the latter's reign.

Moses was probably not a stranger to this Pharaoh. They may well have known one another during Moses' days at court. They may even have been friends. Be that as it may, this Pharaoh is oddly lenient to him. The reappearing fugitive and his brother Aaron do not present themselves to His Majesty respectfully to implore a boon. Rather, they make one bold demand after another and call down one dreadful plague after another. Yet this mighty monarch does not impose any punishment upon them. He does in a moment of extreme exasperation ban them from his presence on pain of death, but he never carries out the threat. Even his own courtiers do not urge him to dispose of these presumptuous men, but to give in to them (Ex. 10:7). The Pharaoh himself comes so close to capitulating that his heart has to be hardened in order for the destined drama to be played out, and the achievement of the Exodus not seem too easy.

This Pharaoh recognizes the power of the Lord of Israel and is aware that he himself has sinned before Him (Ex. 9:27) He asks Moses to 'pray for me'
(Ex. 8:24) as though he himself were the suppliant. At the very start of the Sojourn in Egypt a pharaoh had accepted a blessing from Jacob, and at its very end this one requests that Moses 'bless me too' (Ex. 12:31). It seems as though seated on his throne, wearing his crown, and holding his scepter, he sensed that it was Moses who had the true greatness and power. Only after the commanding and intimidating figure of Moses has departed does Pharaoh suddenly change his mind and set out in vain pursuit of the Israelites, thereby making their successful escape even more dramatic and eternally memorable.

NAMES

The Book of Exodus is called Shemot [Names], but the Pharaoh-of-the-Oppression and the Pharaoh-of-the-Exodus are, like their predecessors in the Book of Genesis, anonymous. The references to pharaohs in Genesis speak only of their relations with the patriarchal family, and those in the Book of Exodus speak only of their treatment of the children of Israel in general and Moses in particular. There is nothing more that might help to give them names. That leaves the way open for complex computations, speculations, disputes, and guesses as to their identities, complicated by the variant dates that Egyptologists assign to alternative High Chronology [HC] or Low Chronology [LC].

All of the candidates have two things in common: They were perpetually building edifices as monuments to their own glory, and they were perpetually fighting wars. War was a permanent condition, as Egyptians, Hurrians, Mitanni, and Hittites wrestled for hegemony over the region; a hegemony that largely depended on control of Syria and Canaan. The Egyptian military garrisons along the Canaan-Sinai coast and the regular traffic of soldiers marching to or from battle were a very good reason for Moses to take the Israelites the long way around the southern Sinai, to make camp inland at Kadesh-barnea, and for Joshua to enter the Land from east of the Jordan River.

In a quest for the names of the Pharaoh-of-the-Oppression and the Pharaoh-of-the-Exodus, there are two clues in the text. One is the extrapolated date of circa 1446 for the Exodus, derived from I Kings 6:1 and more or less supported by Judges 11:26. The other is the reference in Exodus 1:11 to impressed Israeliite labor on the construction of the cities of Pithom and Ramses. These two clues point toward two different father-and-son pairs of pharaohs.
I. Thutmose III: 1504-1450 [HC] or 1479-1425 [LC]

Amenhotep II: 1452-1426 [HC] or 1427-1401 [LC]

These dates correlate well with the calculations that suggest circa 1446 as the year of the Exodus. The High Chronology would point to Thutmose III as Pharaoh-of-the-Oppression, and though he came to the throne when still a child his years of full rule as an adult were themselves long enough to cover that period. Amenhotep II, whose first two years were in co-regency with his father, became sole ruler only a few years before the Exodus, as accords with the impression of Exodus 2:23 and 4:19. The Low Chronology moves the Exodus back to Thutmose III, though not to his early years. His father Thutmose II did not rule long enough to cover all the years of the Oppression, that would have to go back to the preceding Thutmose I.

However, the large-scale building projects of these two pharaohs were mainly in Upper Egypt, and but few in the Delta/Goshen region where Pithom and Pi-Ramses were built. Their capital was at Thebes, far up the Nile from the Delta, remote from the geographical mise-en-scène of a pharaoh's daughter finding Moses near his parents' home in Goshen, and of the frequent easy access that Moses and Aaron had to the Pharaoh-of-the-Exodus.

As to character, Thutmose III was neither insecure and unintelligent like the Pharaoh-of-the-Oppression, nor vacillating and compliant like the Pharaoh-of-the-Exodus. Rather, he was the strongest, most victorious, and all-around successful of the pharaohs; capable, energetic, and bold. His military victories reached even beyond Canaan and Syria, so he need not worry about any foreign invasion of the Delta.5

Amenhotep II, who liked to boast of his prowess at chariot-driving, archery, and rowing, continued his father's policies and campaigns, but not with such outstanding success.

II. Rameses II: 1292-1225 [HC] or 1270-1213 [LC]

Merneptah: 1221-1215 [HC] or 1213-1203 [LC]

These dates would postpone the Exodus to a date incompatible with the precise statement of I Kings 6:1, and the round figure of Judges 11:26.

The only thing that links this pair to the Oppression-Exodus period is the statement that the Israelites built for Pharaoh store-cities, Pithom and Pi-Ramses [House of Rameses] (Ex. 1:11). Rameses II did build or rebuild these
cities and they were in the Delta, the region that a redactor of Genesis 47:11 identified that region as the land of Rameses. He did have a palace in that region, where he was in residence at least some of the time.

His long rule of some 67 years was more than enough to cover the period of the Oppression. An alternative identification as Pharaoh-of-the-Exodus is unlikely, since it is clear in the text that the toil of the Israelites and their departure from Egypt came in two different reigns.

Rameses II was grandiose, vain, and self-exalting even though – or perhaps because – he was born and bred a commoner, already a schoolboy when his grandfather was elevated from chief officer to heir of a pharaoh who had no son. His inscriptions were boastful beyond common, and only he built statues of himself the height of a six-storey building.

For all his bravado, Rameses II might well be anxious about the security of the Delta, as was the Pharaoh-of-the-Oppression. He had tried and failed to break the regional power of the Hittites, against whom he fought fiercely at the Battle of Kadesh in Syria but over whom he could not prevail. The Hittites remained a threat to Egyptian hegemony in Canaan, whence they could sweep down through the Sinai to attack Egypt.

His son Merneptah outlived his father by no more than ten years, and if the Exodus came only after his ascension then there was no more than an implausible 240 years for the generation in the Sinai, the campaigns of Joshua, the Settlement, the period of the Judges, and the reigns of Saul and David.

Another more minor point against identifying him as the Pharaoh-of-the-Exodus is geographical; he dwelt mostly in Memphis, a considerable distance for Moses and Aaron to travel from Goshen. A more crucial point is in the text of a stele which he had had inscribed with a long and quasi-lyrical text of his own composition, in which he congratulates himself for driving off an invasion from Libya and thus securing tranquility for his subjects. At the end of this text, almost as though it were an afterthought, he gives a brief notice of a campaign into Canaan: "Canaan is captive with all woe. Ashkelon is conquered, Gezer seized, Yanoam made non-existent; Israel is wasted, bare of seed."⁶

This is the earliest mention of "Israel" thus far found in any non-Israelite source, and the first known boast of doing it harm. There is no mention of the encounter in the biblical record, and it is not even known whether or not it
was an entirely empty boast. This text does not support an argument that he was the Pharaoh-of-the-Exodus, but actually contradicts it. If the Israelites had not left Egypt until after his accession, they could not have been established in Canaan only five years later. (If he had encountered them during their stay at Kadesh-barnea, he would more likely place them in Sinai than in Canaan.)

CONCLUSION

Unless and until there is some new historical or archaeological discovery, the names of the Pharaohs in the Book of Exodus can be debated but not determined. And efforts to determine them are inspired not by any of the might and grandeur of which they boasted but because they knew Moses . . . a very modest man, more so than any other man on earth (Num. 12:3).

NOTES

1. In the Book of Genesis, the title "pharaoh" for the King of Egypt is an anachronism. The word means "great house," and not until a much later period did it become the title of the man who dwelt in the royal Great House. Pharaohs are not given names in the Tanakh until the time of the Israelite monarchy.

2. This approximate date for Jacob’s descent into Egypt goes against two chronological conventions:

(a) Abraham was dated to the mid-eighteenth century because Amraphel of Shinar (Gen. 14:1) was theoretically identified with Hammurabi of Babylon. There is no strong reason for this identification, and thus no strong reason that Abraham need be placed at this comparatively late date.

(b) It is supposed that Jacob arrived in Egypt during or after the period of the Hyksos kings because of references to horse-drawn chariots (Gen. 41:43, 46:29, 50:9) that they supposedly introduced into Egypt. Those references are not essential to the story, and could be a literary lapse into anachronism, as is the mention of Goshen as the land of Rameses (Gen. 47:11) even though the name Rameses does not appear in Egyptian history until centuries later.

3. After the escape into the Sinai, there were two counts of the male Israelites (Num. 1-2, 16), very precisely made and recorded. Only men of the age of 20 and above (that is, possible to be potential warriors) were counted, for a total of 603 'elef. For the sacerdotal tribe of Levi, the males were counted from the age of one month, for a total of 23 'elef. Reading 'elef in its common usage of "one thousand," there were more than 600,000 men (cf. Ex. 12:37, 38:26), that can be projected to a full population of men, women, and children of about 2,500,000, which is both demographically and logistically impossible.

The word "'elef" appears elsewhere in biblical Hebrew with the connotation of "family" or "clan," as when Gideon protests his assignment to leadership on the grounds that 'my elef is the poorest in Manasseh' (Jud. 6:15). Israelite men went to battle in contingents of kinsmen, and it may be that the census counted by such contingents rather than individuals. If so, there is still no definition of the number of men in an 'elef. In the chain of military command the lowest rank of...
officer was the Captain of Ten, and if the men he led counted as an *elef*, then there was a total of some 6,260 men, bringing a full tally of the Israelites to some 25,000. This is merely a guess, though perhaps a plausible one.

4. "Mose" is a common element in Egyptian names with a connotation of "son." It is generally preceded by the name of a god, as for example in Rameses [Ramose = Ra-has-given-a-son]. If the princess followed that custom, then the first part of the name she actually bestowed on the foundling was dropped from the Hebrew text because it was idolatrous, and only the second part transliterated into Hebrew as מֶשֶׁה. The conventional pronunciation reads the "ש" as "sh," and the name as Moshe. The alternative pronunciation of "ש" as "s" gives a pronunciation much closer to "Mose."

Exodus 2:10 derives the name from the Hebrew verb *mashah* [draw out], an etymology that works only in Hebrew and not in Egyptian. If it was inserted by a later redactor because he did not know the Egyptian meaning, that in itself supports the antiquity of the original text.

5. Some Egyptologists dub Thutmose III "The Napoleon of Egypt." Others reject the comparison on the grounds that Napoleon lost in the end, while Thutmose always won. That latter claim is off on one count: He never got the better of his imperious aunt and mother-in-law Queen Hatshepsut.

6. This monument is often called the Israel Stele, for it is the very brief mention of that name that gives it unique interest.