



# "Moses - The Beginning"

*Exodus 2:1–22*

## ***What can be born out of a mid-life crisis?***

Moses stands as a giant among the people of God. The one chosen by God to lead the Hebrews out of slavery. The one to whom God reveals his name and presents his covenant with Israel.<sup>1</sup> A giant. And we don't usually think of giants as having mid-life crises. Yet, that is exactly where we find Moses in

today's passage from Exodus. The life he thought he had under control was about to be thrown into chaos.

### ***A life under control***

To review from two weeks ago: When the book of Exodus opens, we learn that the Hebrews (Abraham's descendants) are enslaved in Egypt and the current Pharaoh is making life exceedingly difficult and dangerous. Fearing the growing number of Hebrew slaves, Pharaoh had ordered the murder of all male Hebrew babies – including Moses. In order to save her baby, Moses' mother had placed the infant in a small waterproof basket and set him afloat on the Nile river, hoping that someone would save him. Someone did. And not just any someone, but the daughter of Pharaoh herself. Though she knew the baby was a Hebrew, she "took pity on him" and plucked him out of the water. Seeing all this, Pharaoh's sister sought out a woman who could nurse the newborn, finding Moses' mother -- of all people. When Moses was old enough to be weaned, his mother brought him to the palace where Pharaoh's daughter raised him as her own. Terence Fretheim notes that ironies abound in Moses's story:

(1) Pharaoh's chosen instrument of destruction (the Nile) is the means for saving Moses. (2) As in 1:15–22, the daughters are allowed to live, and it is they who now proceed to thwart Pharaoh's plans. (3) The mother saves Moses by following Pharaoh's orders (with her own twist). (4) A member of Pharaoh's own family undermines his policies, saving the very person who would lead Israel out of Egypt and destroy the Dynasty. (5) Egyptian royalty heeds a Hebrew girl's advice! The princess may have been gently conned into accepting the child's own mother as a nurse, but her pity is clearly stated. (6) The mother gets paid to do what she most wants to do, and from Pharaoh's own budget (anticipating 3:22)! (7) Moses is educated to be an Israelite leader, strategically placed within the very court of Pharaoh. (8) The princess gives the boy a name that betrays much more than she knows (including a Hebrew etymology for an Egyptian name): what she has done for Moses, Moses will do for all the people of Israel.<sup>2</sup>

It's not hard to imagine what Moses' life was like in the palace. Being raised as a member of Pharaoh's household meant a life of privilege and luxury. It was a life beyond the imagining of Moses' fellow Hebrews who labored as slaves to their Egyptian masters. Moses' stepmother must have told him about the circumstances of his birth, though surely it was a secret held among the two of them and Pharaoh's sister. Still, I wonder how that knowledge affected Moses. Was he troubled by it? Did he simply accept his own

---

<sup>1</sup> Let's get straight what we mean by "Israel." "Israel" was the collective name of the twelve tribes descended from Jacob, Abraham's grandson. After spending a night wrestling with a stranger who turns out to be God, Jacob was given the name "Israel," which in Hebrew means something like "one who strives with God." From that time on, the name "Israel" would not only designate the ancestor Jacob, but also God's people, as in the twelve tribes of "Israel." Later, it would take on national or political meaning as well. Thus, David would be the king of Israel. Your reading of the Bible will be helped by keeping in mind that "Israel" sometimes refers to the covenant people of God and at other times refers to a political entity. This can get even more confusing when we remember that David's kingdom of Israel splits in two after the death of his son, Solomon. The divided kingdoms were Israel in the north and Judah in the south.

<sup>2</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 37.

“luck”? I’m actually a little inclined to the latter, for it seems that Moses lived just fine with the knowledge for forty years.

In our society, forty is only approaching middle age but in Moses’ world, where the average life span was fifty years or so for the privileged, forty was well into the late stages of middle age. Bearing in mind that forty is often a symbolic number in the Bible, Moses was certainly well along in his life when it was turned upside down.

### ***A life turned upside down***

One day, Moses sees an Egyptian overseer beating a Hebrew slave and Moses seemingly snaps, killing the overseer. But why, after so long a time, does Moses identify with his fellow Hebrews? Why does he care so much that he is willing to kill an Egyptian to save a Hebrew slave from a beating? Perhaps this is how it is with our “mid-life crises.” We reach a point in life when so much of what we have assumed about ourselves, and our world is called into question. It would be foolish to speculate too long about Moses’ motivations, but his aims are clear. He will stand up for the Hebrews, or at least for one.

When Moses kills the Egyptian, he knows exactly what he has done. He tries, unsuccessfully, to cover up the murder but word gets out and Moses has to flee. So, he heads out into the land of Midian. You could hardly imagine a less hospitable place. One day Moses is sitting by a well, perhaps reflecting on how he possibly ended up in such a place, when he comes to the aid of seven sisters and marries one, Zipporah.

After all this, we are told that God heard the cries of the Hebrews and remembered his covenant with Abraham. “God looked upon the Israelites and God took notice of them” (Exodus 2:25). And Moses would soon see a bush that burned without being consumed.

Fretheim challenges us to go a bit deeper with this story, considering God’s absence from the account and the fact that Moses was raised as an Egyptian, not a Hebrew.

Moses’ sense of justice has been learned, not from his Hebrew heritage, but from his Egyptian upbringing (cf. Acts 7:22!). This is a significant testimony to God’s work in creation among those outside the community of faith. This, combined with the absence of God talk in the narrative, again roots this perspective, this activity, and these personal characteristics in a theology of creation. There the value of human life and the giftedness of individuals are given special prominence, becoming the basis for actions taken on behalf of others. By his actions Moses furthers the creational work of God in giving life and blessing. To say that “there is very little here of the hero of faith who decides for God” (Childs, p. 43) is to miss this point. Moses’ sympathies for those less fortunate and his active response on their behalf anticipate God’s will as expressed both in saving action (14:13, 30; 15:1–2) and in written statute (22:21–27). Once again, an ethic grounded in a theology of creation serves as an important basis for both redemption and Torah.<sup>3</sup>

### ***God’s purposes***

Before Moses goes over to check out the burning bush (Exodus 3, next week), there is no mention that Moses was the least bit aware of God nor that he had any real comprehension of what it meant to be a Hebrew. He was simply playing life’s cards as they were dealt him. Even the bush is, at first, only a curiosity.

Perhaps this is how it is with God. We so often look for God’s “big stuff” that we fail to appreciate that God works through the ordinary events of our lives. Just because we don’t see God at work doesn’t mean that God is idle. It is impossible to pull apart God’s workings in this story from those of Pharaoh, Moses’ mother, Pharaoh’s daughter, and the rest. We probably shouldn’t try but simply acknowledge and proclaim that God’s good purposes will continue to roll forward. Certainly, I, for one, have my own mid-life crisis story to tell about God and God’s surprising purposes. What about you...?

---

<sup>3</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 45.