

EXODUS 1-2

GOD'S PRESENCE IN ABSENCE

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INTRODUCTION

The first two chapters of Exodus present a world in which God seems concealed, even as the narrative prepares the reader for a dramatic unveiling of divine presence. This hiddenness does not imply divine inactivity; rather, the text affirms that the God of creation and covenant continues to bless the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The authors intentionally anchor Exodus within the theological arc of Genesis, inviting the reader to recall Jacob's household and especially Joseph, whose leadership shaped the closing chapters of Genesis:

"Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the region of Goshen; and they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly." (Gen 47:27)

Exodus opens by echoing this blessing. The people are fruitful, multiplying, and filling the land—language that unmistakably recalls both the creation mandate and the covenant promise. Even before God speaks or acts, the narrative signals continuity: the God who blessed the patriarchs is still sustaining their descendants.

Thus, the opening chapters of Exodus function as a narrative hinge, carrying forward the covenant promises of Genesis while preparing for the book's central drama: the movement from divine hiddenness, to divine manifestation, to divine indwelling. What begins in silence will soon unfold in revelation—God calling Moses from the bush, confronting Pharaoh, forming Israel at Sinai, and dwelling among the people in the Tabernacle. So, the story's early quiet is not absence but anticipation, a stillness before the unveiling of the God who abides with Israel.

PRELUDE (Exodus 1:1-7)

The story in Exodus concerns the ancestors of the Genesis patriarchs: "Then Joseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation" (Exod 1:6). The narrative thus provides immediate continuity with Genesis even as it signals that something new is beginning—a fresh phase in

Israel's story. Though Jacob's sons have passed from the scene, the hope embedded in God's promise to Abraham remains fully alive. Recall the foundational covenant:

"Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'" (Gen 12:1-3)

Through the covenant, Abraham and his descendants will be blessed and will be a blessing. The language of blessing in Genesis, particularly when God is the subject, is the language of fertility and fecundity. When God blesses, life expands and creation fills:

- In the first creation narrative, God blesses living creatures (Gen 1:22) and human beings (Gen 1:28) and even the sabbath (Gen 2:3). Space and time are filled with life.
- After the flood, Noah is blessed in order to repopulate the earth (Gen 9:1).
- Sarah, though barren, is blessed (Gen 17:6) and will become the mother of nations.

The hope of the promise of Abraham is the hope of fruitfulness—descendants growing into families, tribes, and nations, becoming a blessing to all the world.

This same understanding of blessing frames the opening of Exodus, where God's presence—though still hidden—is discerned through Israel's flourishing:

"But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them." (Exod 1:7)

Notice the cluster of descriptors: "fruitful," "prolific" ("swarming"), "multiplied," and "exceedingly strong." These echo Genesis 1:21-22 and recall God's promise Israel is said to have multiplied, and they "grew exceedingly strong," recalling God's promise to make Abraham's descendants a great and mighty nation (Gen 18:18). Though God is not explicitly named in these verses, the divine presence is unmistakable. The narrative is saturated with creation and covenant motifs, testifying to God's ongoing work of blessing Abraham's descendants—even in unexpected places.

THE OPPRESSION OF ISRAEL (Exodus 1:8-14)

Exodus 1:8 introduces a scene of diametrical opposition—the world's resistance to divine order and blessing described in terms of oppression and death, embodied in the archetypal character of the king of Egypt:

“Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” (Exod 1:8)

The king is left unnamed, almost certainly intentionally, for Pharaoh becomes in the narrative a cosmic symbol of oppression, the antithesis of the LORD’s reign. The LORD, the true cosmic king, is freedom and life; Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, is slavery and death. The LORD’s blessing is fertility and flourishing; Pharaoh perceives that blessing as a threat to his own power.

The reader can assume that the Israelites had lived in Egypt for some time in relative peace. They had gained possession of Goshen and multiplied exceedingly. Genesis 50 even recounts Joseph, his brothers, and the entire household of Jacob returning to Canaan to bury Jacob—hardly the actions of a people already enslaved. Moreover, the launching event of the Joseph narrative was the LORD, through Joseph, saving Egypt from seven years of famine. Now, however, a king has arisen in Egypt “who did not know Joseph”—a king who does not remember what the God of Joseph and the God of the Israelites had done in saving Egypt. This context of forgetting leads the new king to oppress the people of Israel.

The new king thus enslaves the Israelites, stripping them of dignity, identity, and agency—a force of death opposing the Creator who is the source of life. Such a despotic response was not uncommon in the ancient world and remains a discouragingly familiar political strategy: secure loyalty at home by magnifying foreign threats. The tools used to suppress external enemies conveniently become the tools used to control internal populations.

SHIPHRAH & PUAH (Exodus 1:15-22)

The first response in the narrative to the oppression of the Egyptian king comes not from God but from two humble midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. These women “feared god,” though the text does not specify which god. They bear semitic names, and they served among the Hebrews, which was likely a broad designation for foreign peoples. While the god remains unnamed, to assume they “feared” the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is reasonable. Regardless, their reverence for God becomes their motivation for refusing to “do as the king of Egypt commanded” (Exod 1:17).

The midwives possess a clear sense of righteousness and justice against which the killing of the newborn males from among the Hebrews was a violation. The narrative presents two humble, seemingly insignificant women as agents of divine blessing such that it could again be said about the Israelites that they “multiplied and grew very strong” (Exod 1:20). The act of defiance against the king by Shiphrah and Puah allowed for God’s blessing and abundance to flourish, demonstrating that even in the midst of oppression God had not forgotten the promise made to Abraham. Yet God has still not entered the scene as an active player. Instead, the story suggests

that God used the faithfulness of the powerless as instruments to undermine the pretensions of the powerful.

Shiphrah and Puah's courage anticipates the pattern of deliverance that will later define the Passover. In saving the sons of Israel from the king of Egypt, they function as a kind of "angel of death," foreshadowing the saving action of God who will protect Israel's children on the night of liberation. Their resistance becomes the first sign that Pharaoh's tyranny will not stand and that God's hidden presence is already at work through unexpected servants.

THE THREE WOMEN (Exodus 2:1-10)

The birth of Moses in Exodus 2 continues the striking pattern already established in chapter 1: women drive the narrative of deliverance, quietly subverting Pharaoh's power and advancing the divine plan even while God remains hidden. The midwives have already preserved Israel's future; now three more women—Moses's mother, Pharaoh's daughter, and Moses's sister—ensure the survival of the one through whom God will rescue the people. Their actions are not explicitly motivated by faith, as with the midwives, but by the fierce and intuitive impulse to protect life. Even in God's apparent absence, the narrative carries unmistakable echoes of the Creator and the God of the patriarchs, signaling that divine purpose is unfolding beneath the surface.

The account of Moses's birth is brief, offering only essential details. He is born into the tribe of Levi, the lineage that will later become Israel's priestly order—a detail likely emphasized by later Priestly editors to underscore Moses's purity of lineage. His parents remain unnamed here, though Exodus 6 identifies them as Amram and Jochebed. Jochebed's motivation is captured in a single evocative phrase: she "saw him—that he was good" (Exod 2:2). The language unmistakably recalls the first creation narrative, where God "saw" what God made and declared it "good." The birth of Moses thus resonates with the theme of new creation, suggesting that his arrival marks the beginning of a new divine era. Even under the weight of slavery, a Hebrew mother perceives in her child a sign of divine goodness.

To save her son, Jochebed places him in a papyrus basket and sets him among the reeds of the Nile—ironically obeying Pharaoh's command to cast Hebrew boys into the river. The Hebrew word for "basket," *tevah*, is the same used for Noah's ark, creating a rich literary allusion. Like Noah, Moses is helpless before the waters of chaos yet preserved by God for a new beginning. The motifs, themes, and even order of the Moses birth story have parallels and types throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, including among the Greeks, Hittites, and native Canaanites. Two parallels are especially significant:

- Sargon of Akkad—Among the Akkadians, who are the claimed ancestors to both the Assyrians and Babylonians, there is the legend of Sargon. Born in secret and placed in a pitched papyrus basket, Sargon was set adrift on the Euphrates. He was then discovered by Akki, the “Water Drawer,” who raised Sargon in his home. Sargon was destined to rise up and unify his people, forming a new empire.
- Horus of Egypt—Isis, goddess of fertility, placed her son, Horus, in a papyrus thicket by the Nile in order to save him from Set, god of chaos and war. Horus would eventually grow to defeat Set and become the sky god, protector of all Egypt.

It is important to note that these stories do not diminish the uniqueness of Moses’s narrative. Rather, they demonstrate how Israel’s sacred tradition engaged, transformed, and elevated familiar motifs into a theological proclamation of God’s saving work.

In an ironic and subversive twist, the next woman to emerge in the narrative is the king’s own daughter—a member of the king’s own household becomes the instrument of his undoing. While God’s presence still remains hidden, her response to the child she finds in the Nile is a foreshadowing of the divine response to the people’s oppression soon to be revealed. Notice her movement toward the child:

- She “came down to the river (Exod 2:5).
- She “saw” the child and heard “he was crying” (Exod 2:6).
- She “took pity on him” (Exod 2:6).

These actions anticipate God’s actions in Exodus 3:

- The LORD will “come down” (Exod 3:8a).
- God came down after having “seen/observed” Israel’s misery and “heard their cry” (Exod 3:7).
- God came “to deliver them” from the Egyptians (Exod 3:8a).

The king’s daughter provides a glimpse of divine compassion, an embodiment of the *imago dei*—the image of God present in all humanity. Strikingly, she is not a Hebrew but an Egyptian, yet her mercy nonetheless resonates with the divine will. Her humanity becomes a window into God’s character.

The final woman in the scene is Moses’s sister, presumably Miriam, though she is unnamed here. She first appears “standing at a distance” (2:4), watching to see what will happen. When Pharaoh’s daughter discovers the child, Miriam boldly intervenes, offering to find a Hebrew nurse. Her cleverness reunites Moses with his mother, allowing him to be nursed until about

age three, at which point he would have been adopted into the royal household according to Egyptian custom.

Pharaoh's daughter names the child Moses, explaining it through the Hebrew verb *mashah*, "to draw out." This is likely a later Hebrew wordplay. The name is almost certainly Egyptian, derived from the word meaning "to beget." If so, the name subtly connects Moses to themes of fertility and divine blessing, reinforcing his role as the one through whom God will bring life to Israel.

Up to this point, the story of Exodus has been propelled not by divine intervention but by the faithful, courageous, and subversive actions of women. The midwives, Jochebed, Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter all engage in non-violent resistance to imperial power. Their quiet acts of protection and mercy form the foundation upon which God's dramatic work of salvation will soon be built. Deliverance—soon to involve plagues, confrontation, and liberation—begins in silence, beneath the din of Pharaoh's oppression, through the steadfastness of women who choose what is true, good, and life-giving. Their actions prepare the soil in which the divine plan will take root.

MOSES'S RESPONSE TO INJUSTICE (Exodus 2:11-22)

Moses's sudden reappearance (Exod 2:11) marks a dramatic shift in the narrative. After two chapters shaped by non-violent, quiet acts of resistance, the story turns to Moses who responds to oppression with violent force. Indeed, up to this point, every response to oppression had preserved life through fear of God, compassion, and mercy. The actions of the women allowed the divine will of blessing, multiplication, and the growth of God's servant to continue. In contrast, Moses's first act breaks sharply from that pattern.

Moses's impulse is to bring about justice on his own terms. Witnessing an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, Moses kills the Egyptian overseer. His attempt at justice is violent and impulsive, and it is ultimately ineffective. It arises from Moses's own strength and lacks any communal, legal, or divine authority. While his outrage may reflect a learned sense of the value of Hebrew life—something he likely absorbed in the Egyptian court—his action is driven by anger rather than mercy, hatred of the oppressor rather than love of the brother. As Saint Augustine would later comment about this scene,

"This fault needed pruning or rooting up; but yet so great a heart could be as readily cultivated for bearing virtues, as land for bearing fruit."¹

¹ Augustine, *Reply to Faustus the Manichaeon* 22:70

Then, once discovered, Moses was no longer concerned with his brother's safety; his concern, rather, turned entirely to his own self-preservation. Moses flees to Midian.

In Midian, Moses again confronts injustice as he acts to protect the seven daughters of a priest of Midian by driving off a group of oppressive shepherds. By intervening, Moses protects the vulnerable and ensures they can draw water. In this case, Moses succeeds because his intention was to defend the weak, not merely to strike down the oppressor. The narrative subtly contrasts these two episodes: Moses's first act is fueled by anger; his second is shaped by compassion. As a natural outcome of the events at the well, Moses is welcomed into the household of Reuel (or Jethro)² and marries Zipporah. Their son, Gershom, becomes yet another sign of the divine blessing of fertility, continuing the theme of God's quiet faithfulness even in exile.

The Midian narrative serves as a foreshadowing as Moses's deliverance of the seven daughters and his entrance into a marriage covenant anticipates God's deliverance of Israel and the covenant bond made at Sinai. The pattern is clear: deliverance leads to covenant, covenant leads to vocation. As the narrative further unfolds, Moses grows in relationship with God and he moves from self-motivation and self-direction to obedience and reliance on the LORD. Moses's apparent natural inclination toward justice will be honored, but only within the revelation of the LORD's grace, mercy, and compassion.

THE FOUNDATION OF THE THEOLOGY OF DELIVERANCE (Exodus 2:23-25)

Exodus 2:23-25 sets a decisive turning point in the Exodus narrative. After two chapters in which God has remained hidden, acting only in the margins of blessing, fertility, and the courageous resistance of women, the story now announces that God is ready to act openly on behalf of the people:

"After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them." (Exod 2:23-25)

The oppression of the Israelites finally seems to come to the full attention of God. The death of the king signals a shift, but the real turning point is Israel's groaning—a theme that will recur throughout the exodus and wilderness journey. In the last few verses of chapter 2, God's voice (longed for by the reader) echoes strong. There is a compact but powerful sequence of divine

² The priest of Midian is named Reuel in Exodus 2:18, Jethro elsewhere in Exodus, and Hobab in Judges. There is no need to try to harmonize the text – the names simply come from different sources, reflecting a variety of story traditions.

actions: God heard, God remembered, God saw, God took notice. This is not the awakening of a dormant deity but the unveiling of a God who has been present all along. God had always been there. God had always heard and seen. The oppression reached a crescendo and the debasing, abusing, and oppressing of God's people compels God to move from hidden accompaniment to decisive intervention. The God who seemed concealed will soon come down, breaking into our space and time to confront the forces opposed to freedom and life so that God might deliver God's people.

This laconic summary at the end of chapter 2 lays the foundation for a biblical theology of justice and deliverance that reverberates throughout the whole Scripture. The LORD is the God who hears the cry of the oppressed and responds with justice. It is a pattern already found in Genesis when Abel's blood cried out from the earth (GEN 4:10), when God heard the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah (GEN 18-19), and when Hagar's cries against Sarah are heard and remedied (GEN 21:16-19). This identity of God as deliverer of the oppressed becomes one of the central confessions of Israel, especially in the prophetic tradition. Exodus 2:23–25 crystallizes this identity in narrative form.

In Exodus 1-2, distinct literary units have been combined into a cohesive whole, setting the stage for the main event. God's absence was only an apparent absence as the nuanced narrative revealed the hidden or concealed God as the one who saves through creation, fertility, and blessing. Now, at the threshold of chapter 3, God's hiddenness dissolves. The LORD will reveal God's self in human history, calling Moses, confronting Pharaoh, and delivering Israel from slavery.