Exodus 1–2

The book of Exodus begins with a paradoxical struggle between life and death. The multitude of descendants resulting from the promises made to Abraham (Gen. 13:16; 15:5) had now become the basis for exterminating the Hebrew people. The more the Egyptians tried to decrease their number, however, the more the Hebrews increased. Pharaoh ultimately decreed the murder of all male Hebrew infants, but his own daughter subverted the process by saving the Hebrews' future leader. The birth of the Hebrew nation began with death. These paradoxes flow from a series of vignettes that move the reader quickly from the suffering of the Hebrews to the introduction of their human savior, Moses. Within a matter of verses, Moses grows from an infant to an adult, and the Hebrews' groaning has captured the attention of their God. The first chapter recounts the general suffering of the Hebrews and their responses to Egyptian

aggression. The second chapter focuses on Moses and sets him within the context of the broader action.

While perhaps not as influential as passages recounting the burning bush, the plagues and the exodus from Egypt, the Ten Commandments, or the golden calf, these opening stories of suffering and resistance to oppression have sparked the imaginations of interpreters throughout the centuries. They have been a source for theological, social, political, ethical, and historical reflection, as well as emotional expression. They have also moved people to action.

These readings reveal that Exodus 1–2 is concerned with more than questions regarding its historicity, the identification of its original context and personalities, or the ancient meaning of certain words and phrases. It also invites consideration of issues such as suffering, oppression, power, hope, gender, race, and class. Subsequent readings illustrate how easily the biblical text is re-contextualized in different settings. They touch on features only hinted at within the biblical text, but nonetheless present. Such aspects, once unearthed, take on new life and even new forms in the world of the interpreter and demonstrate the elasticity of the text.

1:1–14 The Israelites' Suffering

Ancient explanations

One of the first interpretations of this passage comes from a biblical hymn. Psalm 105 encourages the Israelites to give thanks and praise to YHWH, using the exodus to illustrate his faithfulness to the covenant. Two verses recalled the sufferings of Exodus 1. Whereas in Exodus the Hebrews multiplied and as a result provoked cruel measures by the Egyptians, in Ps. 105:24–5 Yahweh precipitated these events to demonstrate that he remembered the covenant. The psalmist makes explicit what in Exodus had been either implied or completely omitted.

The events in Exodus 1, however, garnered little attention from other Hebrew Bible authors. Likewise during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, writers often either skipped over or condensed these events, preferring to explain why the growth of the Hebrews threatened the Egyptians. For the author of *Jubilees*, Egyptian oppression resulted from a Canaanite victory over Egypt: pharaoh subsequently enslaved the Hebrews to prevent them from joining with Egyptian enemies. (*Jubilees* also has them rebuilding all the walls and ramparts destroyed in Egypt [46:11–16, in Charlesworth 1985: vol. 2]). Pseudo-Philo in his *Biblical Antiquities* (*Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*

[Charlesworth 1985: 2. 297–377]) moves directly from Joseph's death to the pharaoh's plan to throw the male babies into the Nile. The Egyptian people responded by asking the pharaoh to give the Hebrew female infants to their slaves as wives, which would in turn produce more slaves (9:1–5, in Charlesworth 1985: vol. 2). Philo also begins his life of Moses with the infanticide, explaining that the males posed a military threat, whereas the females did not, because their "natural weakness" made "a woman inactive in war" (1935: *Life of Moses* 1.8). The writer of Acts summarizes the Hebrew oppression in one verse, mentioning only the infanticide in Stephen's speech before the high priest, while quickly moving to Moses' birth (7:17–20).

Interpreters explained the Hebrews' suffering as either unjustly caused by the Egyptians or as fit punishment for Hebrew misdeeds. Josephus attributed the oppression to Egyptian laziness and envy. When the Egyptians saw that the Hebrews had prospered because of their virtue and love of work, they devised numerous building projects, including cutting river channels and building walls and ramparts, as well as pyramids (1974b: *Antiquities* 2.9.1). (Explaining how a pharaoh could not know Joseph, the *Targum Onkelos*, along with *Targum Neofiti I* and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, contended that the new king did not fulfill the decrees of Joseph [1.8]; that is, he likely knew Joseph, but chose not to follow his policies.) The *Midrash Rabbah: Exodus*, however, blamed the Hebrews, asserting that they abolished circumcision after the death of Joseph in order to be like the Egyptians. Therefore, God made the Egyptians hate the Hebrews (1.8). This explanation continued into the modern period, with only slight modification. According to Saul ha-Levi Morteira, a seventeenth-century Sephardic rabbi in Amsterdam, the Hebrews thought of Egypt as their homeland, became arrogant, and provoked the Egyptians. Using Exodus 1 as a paradigm to account for subsequent Jewish persecution, he explained that Jews had arrived in other countries as destitute refugees, eventually prospered, and then became arrogant and indulgent. The native-born inhabitants then expelled the Jews out of disgust. Morteira then encouraged the Jewish community to behave properly, by living less ostentatiously and serving God (Saperstein 1989: 274, 284–5).

To the ancient rabbis, the nature of the oppression in 1:10–11 demonstrated the Hebrews' degradation. Whereas the Masoretic Text made the object of the action in these verses singular ("let us deal shrewdly with *him* . . . they set taskmasters over *him*"), the Septuagint as well as *Targum Onkelos* translated the objects as plurals referring to the Hebrew people ("let us deal shrewdly with *them* . . . they set taskmasters over *them*"). The Babylonian Talmud, however, found in the singular of verse 11 a reference to the pharaoh (*b. Sotah* 11a). The pharaoh had a brick mold hung around his shoulders. Whenever the Hebrews complained of being too weak to fulfill his commands, they were asked, "Are

you weaker than the pharaoh?" Thus he compelled them to work harder by asking a question that could hardly be answered negatively. Additionally, the rigorous work mentioned in verses 13 and 14 referred to the pharaoh compelling the men to do women's work and vice versa (*b. Sotah* 11a). Such work resulted in an oppressive and unjust degradation. In this way, the rabbis encouraged their Jewish readers to contemplate the plight of their predecessors.

Modern oppression

Modern readers have also related the story to contemporary oppression. George Lockhart of Carnwath (1681–1732) used the reference to a pharaoh who did not know Joseph to reflect upon the union of the British and Scottish crowns and the subsequent Treaty of Union, which formed Scotland and England into one nation in 1707. Almost a century before, Scotland's King James VI had also become king of England (James I). This boded well for Scotland, but the Scottish Parliament did not provide for the separation of the crowns upon James's death. This failure led, Lockhart complains, to Scotland's oppression. The Parliament failed to realize that a king might come to power who would not treat the Scots favorably. Under subsequent rulers, who did not hold James VI's concern for the Scots, Scotland suffered (1995: 247–8).

Whereas Lockhart alluded to Exodus to criticize oppressive national relations, Benjamin Morgan Palmer (1818–1902), pastor of New Orleans' First Presbyterian Church and a highly influential southern clergyman, used it to argue against freedom for African-American slaves, to cast slavery in a positive light, and to boost southern morale. Preaching a fast-day sermon before the South Carolina legislature in December 1863, Palmer warned that freed slaves would confront "taskmasters more unrelenting than those of Egypt" (1864: 16). His analogy suggested that the supposed freedom for slaves sought in the United States would actually result in an exodus-like bondage. Unlike African Americans who appealed to the exodus story in order to validate change, Palmer used it to maintain the status quo.

In Franz Kafka's novel *Amerika*, the increased workload of the Hebrews illustrated the degradation wrought by modern society. The novel was published after his death in 1924, and was later made into two movies, *Klassenverhältnisse* (Germany, 1984) and *Amerika* (Czechoslovakia, 1994). According to Robert Alter, Kafka, a native of Prague, paradoxically employs biblical allusions in which America, conceived as the New Eden and the Promised Land, ultimately becomes "a modern manifestation of the Egyptian house of bondage." Compulsive and incessant work becomes a type of modern enslavement. When

the main character, Karl Rossmann, comes to America from Europe, he experiences various types of bondage, most evident when he is employed, working hard and long, at the Hotel Occident, located in the town of Rameses (cf. Exod. 1:11). Kafka, according to Alter, finds in the Bible "a resonant structure of motifs, themes, and symbols to probe the meaning of the contemporary world." While not a "fixed source of authority," the Bible demanded that he "make sense of his world through it." In this instance, the land of promise and freedom became a land of slavery through its constant demands for work (Alter 2000: 15, 18; Kafka 1946).

Readers continue to find in the oppressive nature of the new pharaonic rule an interpretive lens. A recent historian has characterized the deployment of South Korean troops during the Vietnam War at the behest of the United States as being "in the service of Pharaoh" (Sarantakes 1999). The fact that the phrase is employed in the title of the article without any reference to Exodus indicates how commonly Israel's enslavement has been used to describe oppressive relations. Similarly, another author uses the reference in Exod. 1:8 to "a pharaoh who did not know Joseph" to describe potential pitfalls in US President George W. Bush's proposal to use federal money to fund certain faith-based social programs. The writer warned that just as a pharaoh arose who was not sympathetic to the Hebrews, so faith-based programs that accept federal funding might one day find themselves subject to an unsympathetic government (Rager 2001).

1:15–22 Attempts to Kill Israel's Male Infants

The midwives

Their actions

Most interpreters have focused on the oppression that follows the forced labor of 1:11–14, probably because it connects directly to the birth of Moses (2:1–10). Often discussed are the midwives, Moses' mother, and the pharaoh's daughter. Although some ancient accounts do not mention the midwives (for example, Ezekiel's *Exagoge*, *Jubilees*, Pseudo-Philo, and Philo), others conflate into one event the two orders: to the midwives to kill the infants and to the general populace to throw the infants into the Nile. In the process, Moses' birth takes on added significance. Josephus recorded a message relayed by a sacred scribe predicting to pharaoh that an Israelite child would be born who would weaken Egyptian power and strengthen the Israelites. He would exceed all people in

terms of virtue and be remembered forever. The pharaoh so feared this prediction that he commanded all Israelite male babies to be drowned and the midwives, who according to Josephus were Egyptians, to lend assistance (1974b: *Antiquities* 2.9.2). *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* gives a different version of this legend. Pharaoh dreamed that the land of Egypt and a lamb were placed on a scale; the lamb weighed it down. His chief magicians, Jannes and Jambres, told him that this meant that a child born among the Israelites would destroy Egypt. The pharaoh then ordered the midwives (who were Jewish) to kill the male babies. Both accounts enhance Moses' role, since his birth becomes the reason for the infanticide rather than its product.

Were the "midwives of the Hebrews" Egyptians or Hebrews? In the Septuagint, as in Josephus, they were Egyptians. In the Talmud, however, they were Jewish. One Talmudic tradition, also followed by *Targum Neofiti I* and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, identified Shiphrah as Jocheved, Moses' mother, and Puah as Miriam, his sister. The other understood the midwives to be Jocheved and Elisheba, the wife of Aaron (*b. Sotah* 11b). *Exodus Rabbah* agreed that they were Hebrew and recorded numerous explanations of their names. Their ethnicity made a difference to the story. As Egyptians, they exemplified God's ability to use non-Hebrews to achieve his purposes. As Hebrews, they became symbols of the national struggle for freedom.

These ancient clarifications differ significantly from those of modern scholarship and illustrate how different contexts affect textual meaning. Modern research has endeavored to understand the midwives in light of their ancient historical and literary contexts (e.g., Propp 1999: 137; Childs 1974: 16). Many have tried to identify the original sources of the narrative and show how it developed over time into the present text (Noth 1962: 24). Historians and archaeologists have sought clues in the text (or the lack thereof) to a better historical understanding, to prove or disprove the story's historicity, or to date the event to a specific period (Bright 1981: 121–2; Miller and Hayes 1986: 67–8; Malamat 1988). New Testament scholars have examined the influence of Exodus 1–2 on the pre-Matthean birth narrative of Jesus (R. E. Brown 1977: 111–16).

Such efforts to reconstruct the text in its original setting were of little concern in an earlier age and remain so for many modern readers. In Celia Gilbert's poem "The Midwives," they appear as the tenders of "clandestine liberty" (Atwan and Wieder 1993: 1.115). Their image appears on a poster and a T-shirt as part of the fundraising of the Midwives Alliance of North America. Carla Golembe depicts Shiphrah and Puah tenderly holding an infant, representing the care given by midwives. Their names characterize services related to childbearing: the Shifra and Puah Organization of Teaneck, New Jersey, provides meals for families of new mothers or expectant mothers on bed rest,

and in Des Plaines, Illinois, a similarly named group helps women and their families after the birth of a child and provides children's clothing.

The midwives also symbolize responses to various social and political issues. To the Lutherans for Life of Australia, contemporary midwives are doctors, nurses, lecturers in nursing, and other medical personnel who find themselves in the moral dilemma of whether or not to support or participate in abortion (Kleinig 1995). Similarly, in his encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II cited the midwives as examples sanctioning resistance to unjust human laws dealing with abortion and euthanasia (1995: n. 73). The Mennonite Central Committee (the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches of North America) has invoked the midwives as biblical precedent for civil disobedience with regard to unjust immigration policies, encouraging congregations to adopt, hire, or aid legal or illegal immigrants in response to the United States government's attempts to seal its southern borders (2000: *MCC U.S. Guide to Immigration*). After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, the Mennonite Church Peace and Justice Committee encouraged its congregations to serve their country by reminding the nation's leaders of how nonviolence has historically been effective, in the liberation of India from British rule, the American Civil Rights Movement, and in the midwives' nonviolent resistance ("People of God's Peace"). The Leigh Russell Memorial Panel located in the All Hallows Anglican Church of Leeds illustrates the individual inward spiritual journey, as well as the outward journey to the poor, oppressed, and forgotten, with Shiphrah and Puah, in a panel exemplifying effective nonviolent resistance. Al Axelrad, the Hillel rabbi at Brandeis University during the 1960s, instigated the Shifra and Puah Award to encourage nonviolent resistance to tyranny. Brandeis' Hillel Foundation has awarded it to people like Russian dissident Anatoly Sharansky, South African freedom fighters Robert Sobukwe and Steve Biko, and Poland's Lech Walesa (Axelrad 1987: 40–1; 1985: 156–7). In a sense, then, the midwives' work has continued far beyond the biblical text and opposition to Egyptian oppression. In an overwhelmingly violent story, they provide a place for advocates of nonviolent resistance. Though their resistance ultimately failed to produce nonviolent change, their modern counterparts continue to hope that their methods will produce a different outcome.

Their reward

The midwives' reward for refusing to kill the babies has generated a number of ideas. What reward did the midwives receive for their actions? What did it mean that because they feared God, he "made houses" for them (1:21)? In Josephus's account the midwives fade quickly from the scene, their refusal to carry out the pharaoh's decree unmentioned, probably because as Egyptians (in this version) they played a secondary role in the author's effort to trace the

history of the Jews. The Talmud, however, recorded two traditions. One understood the houses to refer to the priestly and Levitical houses, or Aaron and Moses. The other considered them to indicate the royal houses (*b. Sotah* 11b). *Targum Neofiti I* and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* combined both traditions, asserting that the midwives received the royal house and the house of the high priesthood.

Attention, however, soon turned toward reconciling the lies told by the midwives with the reward given to them by God. Augustine concluded that God rewarded them because of their mercy, and not in approval of their lying (Lienhard 2001: 4–5). During the medieval period, this pericope became the classic passage for discussions of lying (Childs 1974: 23). Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam) in the twelfth century read verse 21 in a way that changes the terms of the debate. Interpreters have understood the subject of "he made them houses" to be God. Rashbam took it to be pharaoh, who had placed the midwives under house arrest to prevent their aiding the Israelite women while giving birth (1997: 16–17). John Calvin contended that lying was sinful, no matter what the circumstances, and that even the best deeds are tainted with sin. While the midwives were courageous, they still sinned by telling a lie. Yet God forgave them. For Calvin the story illustrated God's forgiveness and warned against allowing sin to taint good works (Calvin 1950: 35–6).

Instead of debating the merits of lying, some have tried to understand the midwives' lying from the perspective of oppressed groups. During the nineteenth century, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a champion of the American women's movement, read the passage quite literally and saw it as a tool to oppress women. Apparently God approved of the midwives' lying since he gave them houses as a reward for saving the Hebrews. Yet the portrayal of the women as liars, albeit God-fearing ones, caused Stanton some consternation. Reflecting on the pharaoh's subsequent decision to have all Hebrew male babies thrown into the Nile, Stanton said, "We are so accustomed to the assumption that men alone form a nation, that we forget to resent such texts as these . . . The greatest block to advancing civilization all along the line has been the degradation of woman" (Stanton 1993: 69–70). Almost a century later, Renita Weems has contended that, rather than lying, the midwives did not tell the whole truth. This "weapon of deception" is the "conventional weapon of the powerless . . . against those in power." Although Exodus 1 uses race, gender, and sexual reproduction to comment on the construction of differences between the powerful and the powerless, it does not challenge these differences. It simply recasts them. Weems, therefore, cautions those struggling against modern expressions of racial, gender, or class oppression to be wary of using this story as a positive example (Weems 1992: 29, 33).

The unnamed women

The midwives were not the only women of the story held in esteem. The Talmud recounts that the Israelites were delivered from Egypt because of the righteous women living at that time, including all who conceived under oppression. As they drew water for their households, God filled their pots with both water and fish, which the women then took to the fields where their husbands were working. Not only did they feed, water, anoint, and wash their husbands, but the women also had intercourse with them and conceived. When they gave birth in the fields, God sent assistance from heaven. When the Egyptians sought to kill the women and their children, the ground protected the Hebrews by swallowing them. Even though the Egyptians ploughed the ground, the women and babies were unharmed, and later they emerged to return home (*b. Sotah* 11b). This legend emphasized the divine protection and power given to the women to overcome Egyptian oppression.

2:1–10 Moses' Birth

Moses is born amid great threat and persecution. The story features three women prominently – Moses' mother, his sister, and the daughter of pharaoh. Moses and his father, Amram, play subordinate roles in the biblical text, with Amram mentioned only as "a man from the house of Levi." Thereafter, the three women, all nameless, dominate the action.

Amram

Some early interpreters subtly expanded Amram's presence in the story. While Ezekiel's *Exagoge* and the *Book of Jubilees* actually do not mention the father at all, Philo and the author of Hebrews, by mentioning the "parents" hiding and nurturing the baby, include Amram with the mother (named Jocheved) in these actions (1935: *Life of Moses* 1.8–12; Heb. 11:23). Others detailed Amram's role and made him into a positive example. As the greatest man of his generation, according to a Talmudic legend, he responded to the pharaoh's decree by divorcing his wife in order to avoid the procreation and subsequent death of any male offspring. The Israelites then followed his example. His daughter, however, rebuked him, arguing that his decree was even worse than

the pharaoh's, because it essentially killed both male *and* female offspring. At this, Amram and the other men remarried their wives, Jocheved conceived, and gave birth to Moses without pain (*b. Sotah* 12a). In Josephus's account, Amram responded to the decree by praying. God assured Amram in a vision that he had not forgotten the Israelites' piety: a child born to Amram and Jocheved would fulfill the Egyptian scribes' prophecy of an Israelite baby who would punish the Egyptians. As confirmation, Jocheved painlessly gave birth to Moses. After hiding the child for three months, Amram decided to entrust the child's safety to God, and he and Jocheved prepared the ark. Then God demonstrated the failure of human wisdom and the efforts of those seeking their own security at the expense of others (1974b: *Antiquities* 2.9.3–4).

According to Pseudo-Philo, the elders of Israel decreed that husbands and wives should abstain from sexual intercourse, deeming it better "to die without sons until we know what God may do." Amram, however, refused, vowing to take a wife, produce sons, and thereby fulfill the covenant with Abraham. For such faithfulness, God decided that from Amram would could come one to work his signs and wonders. Amram then married Jocheved, who gave birth to Aaron and Miriam. Miriam later told her parents of her dream that they would have a child who would perform the works of God, and though they did not believe her, soon Jocheved became pregnant. The child was born circumcised, hidden for three months, placed along the bank of the Nile, and found by the pharaoh's daughter. She called the boy Moses, but Jocheved called him Melchiel (Pseudo-Philo 9).

Amram's prominent role in these early versions may reflect efforts to reassert male dominance over the action. Indeed, his relative absence in the biblical account raises questions. What did he think of Jocheved's plan and actions? Why was he not more involved in protecting Moses? At the same time, his elaborated role is clearly bound up with ancient efforts to understand God's involvement in the overcoming of Egyptian might. Apparently Amram's absence in such efforts was inconceivable. Amram, however, soon faded from the imaginations of subsequent interpreters.

Jocheved and Miriam

Just as interpreters used Amram as a vehicle to convey their faith in God's ability to overcome human might, so too with Jocheved, Miriam, and even the daughter of pharaoh. These women worked in concert with God to bring deliverance. According to Philo, Moses' sister remained to watch over the child, motivated by familial love and the providence of God (1935: *Life of Moses* 1.12). *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* pointed out that the pharaoh's daughter had gone to

bathe in the Nile because the Lord had unleashed inflamed scars and blisters throughout Egypt (2:5). During the fourth century, Ephrem, a church leader in Edessa in southern Turkey, commented that when Moses' mother could no longer conceal the baby, in light of the efforts of the Egyptians, she appealed to God on the basis of the covenant with Abraham. She and Miriam, "trusting in God and the child's beauty," hoped that the first person who came by would rescue him. The pharaoh's daughter, who happened to come to the river earlier than usual, due to the unbearable heat, found the child (Salvesen: *Exodus Commentary* 2.2). The Qur'an explained that Moses' mother acted in accordance with God's plan and instructions to her (Suras 20.37–40; 28.1–13).

Not all interpreters, however, have considered the actions of Moses' parents to be commendable. John Calvin found it hard to excuse their timidity and fear, which led them to desert their child. The parents did well to trust the child to the providence of God, but they should also have trusted God to protect them. Nonetheless, Calvin recognized the pain they must have felt and concluded that Amram was too stricken with grief to help hide Moses (1950: 40–1).

In the modern period, the hiding of Moses has been used to address a particularly distasteful social problem. American legislators dubbed a law designed to discourage mothers from leaving unwanted babies to die as the Baby Moses Law. Most states have adopted such laws, and in Texas parents turning over unwanted infants who are younger than sixty days to fire stations and hospitals will receive immunity from prosecution (*Dallas Morning News* 2004). While the legislation is designed to have a positive effect, it subtly implies a negative view of the actions of Moses' mother. She is paralleled to mothers who abandon their babies.

Pharaoh's daughter

Her character

The pharaoh's daughter has generated a multitude of readings, even though she is not the main character. She appears as a somewhat neutral figure, although Brevard Childs believed that the narrator gave a "completely open and positive description of the Egyptian princess" by emphasizing her spontaneous pity and recognition of the child as a Hebrew (1974: 13, 19). Certainly she performs important actions. First, she sees the basket, sends a slave to retrieve it, and has compassion for the child (although the Masoretic Text merely says that "she" had compassion, conceivably referring to the handmaid; the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Septuagint specify the pharaoh's daughter). She also allows Moses' sister to retain her mother as a wet nurse. After the child

has been weaned and brought to the pharaoh's daughter, she names him Moses. Yet she still appears rather passive, being secondary to the text's main action, and might be considered more of a supporting character. Yet this secondary status has not prevented readers from focusing on her, and her nature as a "neutral" figure seems to have created an ambivalent understanding, with readers seeing her both positively and negatively. Some references to her are mundane, such as Mark Twain's comment in *The Innocents Abroad* (1911: 2.406) that during his trip to Cairo he had been shown the very spot where the princess found Moses, or like her appropriation as a geographic metaphor describing the sloping bank of Canada's St Lawrence River. The bank's smooth slope to the water combined with the line of trees reminded one traveler in 1889 of "Pharaoh's daughter and her train to the sacred Nile" (Winthrow 1889: 256). The writer of *Jubilees* presents an early glimpse into the daughter's character development, giving her a name, Tharmuth, and having *her*, instead of a servant, take Moses from the basket. She remains a secondary character as in the Exodus account, but with slightly more personality.

By the first century CE, however, the story had developed a good deal more. According to Philo, she was the pharaoh's only daughter and had been married for a considerable time. Although she greatly desired a male child to succeed her father, she had not as yet conceived one. This generally made her "depressed and loud in lamentation," but she was especially so on the day she found Moses. Moved with a mother's compassion, she began contemplating how to overcome the difficulties involved in her having a Hebrew child. Moses' sister then entered and suggested her mother as a wet nurse (1935: *Life of Moses* 1.12–14). Josephus adds that the daughter's name was Thermuthis, and that as soon as she saw the baby, "she was greatly in love with it." Furthermore, reflecting a Talmudic story (*b. Sotah* 12b), Josephus tells how Thermuthis first tried to have the child nursed by Egyptian women. The child refused them all until Miriam brought her mother (a similar story is in the Qur'an, Sura 28.12). Over the next few years Thermuthis observed Moses' vastly superior abilities, and she, being childless, decided to adopt him. Believing that Moses would one day succeed her father, she brought the child to him, but Moses grabbed the pharaoh's crown and threw it to the ground. Understanding his act to be an evil omen, a sacred scribe then tried to kill Moses, but Thermuthis protected him (1974b: *Antiquities* 2.9.5–7). In all of this, both Philo and Josephus showed God's protection of the boy, a point not made explicitly by the biblical writer.

The first-century pharaoh's daughter had developed substantially from her biblical counterpart. Having acquired a name, her motivation for adopting the child had moved beyond compassion to her own desire to have a son who would succeed her father. She also took a more active role in saving and raising

the child, suggesting that God had protected him through her. The writer of the book of Hebrews, however, appears to be among the first to cast her in a negative light. In chapter 11 he praises Moses' parents for their faith in hiding the child, and Moses for refusing "to be called a son of pharaoh's daughter" and choosing instead to suffer ill-treatment with his people. Moses believed that the future messianic reward was superior to earthly treasures (Heb. 11:23–7). Here the pharaoh's daughter represents earthly power and treasures. She is not a protector or savior of Moses, but a representative of what is to be rejected.

Reflecting more the descriptions of Josephus and Philo than Hebrews 11, the frescos adorning the western wall of the mid-third-century synagogue at Dura-Europos depict the finding of Moses in three scenes. Located on the west bank of the Euphrates River in modern Syria, these frescos contain perhaps the earliest artistic depiction of this episode. Pharaoh's daughter stands naked in the middle of the stream, rescues the child, and hands him to Jocheved and Miriam. In the words of one modern commentator, pharaoh's daughter is a "providential agent of the action" (Sed-Rajna 1985: 75). She nevertheless took on a decidedly negative character in the minds of two prominent Christian writers of the fourth century. Clearly influenced by the Hebrews 11 tradition, Ephrem composed a hymn extolling the virtues of fasting. Moses appears as the "chief of the fasters" and is juxtaposed with the pharaoh's daughter, who pampers him with all the good things royalty could provide. Yet he "cast off the feasts of Egypt," abandoned the pharaoh's daughter, and abhorred her "full table" in preference to "that storehouse that enriches all." For Ephrem, the pharaoh's daughter represents wealth and excess (Anderson, Griffith, and Young, *Hymns on Fasting*, hymn 10). He was not unique in portraying the princess negatively. Writing in the same century, Gregory, bishop of Nyssa, believed that she represented "profane philosophy." Describing her as "childless and barren," Gregory pointed out that "truly barren is profane education, which is always in labor but never gives birth." But even while living with the princess, Moses was not separated from his true mother, because she continued to nurse him. Gregory concludes: "This teaches, it seems to me, that if we should be involved with profane teachings during our education, we should not separate ourselves from the nourishment of the Church's milk." For Gregory, she represents secular wisdom, something that may be necessary, but is certainly inferior to the Church's milk. Both Ephrem and Gregory, therefore, used the pharaoh's daughter to distinguish the Church from secular society (Gregory of Nyssa 1978: *Life of Moses* 2.10–13).

The daughter, however, did not remain in a negative light. The early medieval midrash *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* considered her worthy of eternal life for having saved Moses (chapter 48). In contrast to Gregory of Nyssa's

characterization of her as profane philosophy, opposed to the Church's milk, just the opposite appears in a stained glass window from a series which the abbot Suger included in the twelfth-century reconstruction of the church of St Denis, near Paris. He comments on this portrayal of the finding of Moses, "Moses in the ark is that Man-Child Whom the maiden Royal, the Church, fosters with pious minds" (Panofsky 1979: 75). She now represents the Church and its fostering of the pious. This is hardly the neutral figure found in the biblical text or the inferior character that emerged in many Christian circles. Suger's equating the Church with the princess indicated a position of power and dominance for the Church.

Other works of art continued to depict pharaoh's daughter in diverse ways. At times she is painted as an older, aloof woman, as in Veronese's sixteenth-century work *The Finding of Moses*. The princess is surrounded by her entourage, all attired in sixteenth-century dress. One of her maids speaks to her, perhaps explaining the circumstances of the baby's discovery. The princess appears aloof and even draws back physically from the baby. With hands on hips, she seems almost uncertain about what has been found. During the same century, Fra Damiano da Bergamo, however, produced an aristocratic depiction of the biblical story, but without the aloofness of Veronese's work. Designed by Jacopo Barozzi and included as part of a door composed of intarsia panels made for the governor of Bologna, Francesco Guicciardini, the finding of Moses is placed within an urban setting (see plate 1). Behind the princess and her entourage is an elaborate and busy city, where the finding of Moses goes unnoticed by the people. Yet the biblical story takes center stage, being placed directly in the middle of the foreground. The princess maintains her separation from Moses as she sits, while one of her maidens, or perhaps even Jocheved or Miriam, holds the child. Yet she looks pleasantly upon the child and appears as the benevolent royal maiden. Orazio Gentileschi, more like Veronese than Bergamo, portrayed the pharaoh's daughter surrounded by her maidens with one hand on her hip and the other pointing to the child while she turns her face away as if to make some comment (c.1630–3) (see plate 2). Gentileschi's depiction no doubt appealed to a royal, aristocratic audience. Completed while he served as court painter to England's Charles I and his queen, Henrietta Maria, his *Finding of Moses* was eventually taken to Madrid and given to Spain's Philip IV (*Dictionary of Art* 1996: "Gentileschi"). Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (c.1730) also constructed an aloof, rich, lavish woman who looks with little emotion and perhaps even contempt upon the baby. This tradition continued into the next centuries and can be seen in the work of Gustave Doré (1832–83) and Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836–1912). Both artists constructed scenes with ancient Egyptian characteristics, rather than European ones. Doré's princess dominates the picture and is flanked by servants who fan her. She remains

Plate 1 Jacopo Barozzi da Vignola, *The Finding of Moses*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1912. (12.130.2)

majestic, sedate, and controlled, but also stretches out one hand toward the infant. Alma-Tadema's princess also dominates. As servants carry her along in the royal carriage, two women carry the child beside her. The princess, still calm, aloof, and somewhat detached, looks down on Moses.

Twentieth-century artists have created a more personable figure, emphasizing her youth and compassion. For example, Edna Hibel, winner of the prestigious Leonardo da Vinci World Award of Arts, presents in her lithograph *Pharaoh's Daughter with Moses in the Bulrushes* a young woman, perhaps even

Plate 2 Orazio Gentileschi, *Finding of Moses*. Museo Nacional Del Prado.

a teenager. Surrounded by foliage, the princess, acting more like a mother, tenderly embraces the newfound infant. Both appear calm and peaceful. He Qi, a Chinese artist living in Nanjing, in his *Finding of Moses* has portrayed this scene in non-Western terms (see plate 3). All individuals are Chinese, and a young pharaoh's daughter stands in the water with the child. In contrast with the fully clothed figures of previous works, she is nearly nude, covered only partially with a white cloth. Her head is bent to one side as she looks compassionately on the child who remains in the basket in the water. She appears less imposing than her earlier European counterparts. In Marc Chagall's *Moses Saved from Water*, the princess's care and concern are seen as she opens her arms to receive Moses.

Other artists have shown her as a righteous Gentile. Marsha Maurer, an American artist, places her in the background behind Moses and his mother, but still fills her with symbolic significance. In her stained glass windows located at congregation Temple Sinai of Newport News, Virginia, she uses the princess as an image of "a love that non-Jewish people have demonstrated

Plate 3 He Qi, *Finding of Moses*. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

during the darkest times in Hebrew history. She is the non-Jew who saves Jews as we recently saw during the Holocaust" (Maurer, email with author, November 12, 2001). From this biblical story of Egyptian threat to the Hebrews, Maurer highlights the righteous Egyptian who helps subvert the Egyptian persecution. The pharaoh's daughter becomes a positive symbol. This idea is also reflected by Ellen Frankel in her book, *The Five Books of Miriam*, where the princess is considered a righteous Gentile who daringly threatens to overturn the status quo when she rescues and adopts Moses (Frankel 1996: 96–7).

Modern exemplar

People have used pharaoh's daughter as a positive symbol for a myriad reasons. In a nineteenth-century account of the early colonial days in Canada, Thomas

B. Smith recorded an incident on the St John River in 1769. Based on earlier records, he recounted the journey of the English captain Charles Godfrey, who left Fort Frederick in search of safer accommodations for his wife and children. As the family stopped along the river bank for the night, a single Indian approached Mrs Godfrey and warned her of impending danger – hostile Indians were present on the other side. Having avoided disaster, Mrs Godfrey reportedly said, "It brings to my remembrance what I have read in the Book of books, of Pharaoh's daughter standing at the river's brink and rescuing the babe, and seeing that no harm befell it" (T. B. Smith 1889: 19–20). The river setting likely influenced her comparison. Understanding the princess to be a symbol of divine rescue and protection, she believed that God had sent the Indian for the same purpose. Similarly, during the Sioux War in Minnesota in 1862–3, A. P. Connolly recounted the rescue of American women and children from the Sioux. "As Moses was preserved in the bulrushes and found by Pharaoh's daughter and educated for a purpose – to lead the children of Israel from out the land of bondage and through the Red Sea to the wilderness and the promised land – so, too, was Colonel Sibley [i.e., the regimental leader of the rescuing forces] raised up to frustrate the designs of the Indians and liberate these women and children." While Connolly focused primarily on the analogy of Moses with Colonel Sibley, the role of pharaoh's daughter in rescuing Moses is evident. She had become the divine instrument of rescue in service of a greater purpose (Connolly c.1896: 139–40).

The pharaoh's daughter has facilitated a variety of modern purposes. The Jewish social action group Avodah has used her to inspire others to work for seemingly impossible social change. The organization's executive director, Rabbi David Rosenn, refers to the Talmudic explanation that if the Exodus 2 passage can be translated to read that the princess stretched forth her hand to get the baby (rather than sending forth her maiden), then her hand had to stretch a great distance. Connecting this with the observation by Rabbi Menahem Mendel (a nineteenth-century Hasidic teacher from Kotzk) that the princess could not have known that her arm would stretch such a distance, Rosenn concludes that individuals should not calculate the possibility of success or be restrained by what is rationally possible when doing good deeds. He encourages people to emulate the daughter of pharaoh by attempting the impossible when working for social change (Rosenn 2001). An African Methodist Episcopal Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, points to the pharaoh's daughter as one of many examples of black presence in the Bible. Identifying her as Thermuthis, the daughter of Seti, this church finds in her, as well as other biblical characters, reason to celebrate their cultural heritage (Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church 2002). Some adoption agencies, often associated with the anti-abortion movement, find biblical support for adoption

in her example. The Presbyterian Pro-Life organization, for example, contends that her actions, as well as those of other biblical individuals, "show how God has used adoption to provide for children and to further his purposes and kingdom." When Moses rejected his position as her son, he "did not so much reject his adoptive family as he did their sinful and unrepentant ways as a nation" (Ring 1996). Dr James Dobson, founder and president of Focus on the Family ministries, suggests that telling an adopted child the story of Moses' adoption will help convey dignity and respect to the adoptee (Dobson 2000: 71–2). The Moses Project, an effort sponsored by the Institute for Children and dedicated to the removal of barriers to adoption, also heralds the princess's actions. Putting herself at risk, she provided Moses a secure, permanent environment that developed in him the qualities and character he would need to become a great leader. The movement identifies modern pharaohs as "race-based adoption policies, a federal funding system that rewards states for failure to promote adoption, and child welfare workers and judges who view adoption as a last resort, rather than as a gift from God" (Moses Project 1999). This interpretation implicitly associates the organization, adoptive parents, and religious communities that support adoption with modern daughters of pharaoh.

Moses' birth in retrospect

Some modern readers have understood Moses' birth and early days retrospectively, often in light of the exodus, and in so doing have used it to address contemporary situations. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a prominent African-American abolitionist, held Moses in high regard, as evidenced by her characterization of him in 1859 as the first "disunionist" found in the Jewish scriptures. She emphasizes his decision to break all connections with Egypt's slave power and instead to suffer with the enslaved. Ten years later, she detailed Moses' disunion in a narrative poem entitled "Moses: A Story of the Nile." The poem begins with Moses informing his adopted mother that he will "go to join the fortunes of my race." The princess attempts to persuade him to change his mind by recalling the day she found him. While this heightens Moses' struggle, he still chooses to leave his place in the Egyptian palace. Harper had argued in 1859 that African Americans needed people who were "ready and willing to lay time, talent and money on the altar of universal freedom." Her Moses provided that example (1990: 103–4, 138–45). Moses functioned in a similar way for the people of St Paul's Church in Richmond, Virginia, but for a somewhat different purpose. In 1892 the church installed stained glass windows pairing a young Moses leaving the court of pharaoh (in the spirit of Heb. 11:24–6) with an aged

Moses on Mt Sinai, kneeling and gazing into heaven as the Israelites await his return. The first scene contains an inscription in memory of Confederate general Robert E. Lee, "Commander of the Army of Northern Virginia and Christ's Faithful Soldier and Servant unto His Life's End," while the second bears an inscription giving the dates and places of Lee's birth and death and a quotation from 2 Macc. 6:31. The first scene undoubtedly alludes to Lee's decision in 1861 to leave the United States after his home state of Virginia seceded. The second refers to the stature attained by Lee as perhaps the most revered figure in the Confederacy. Despite the South having lost the Civil War nearly thirty years previously, the parishioners of Saint Paul's found victory by recasting Lee as a modern Moses. His Moses-like courage and virtue suggested the ultimate triumph of southern values. Eleanor Wilner, in her poem "Epitaph," showed the pharaoh's daughter reflecting on her position as the king's firstborn *after* she had been the first to die in Egypt as a result of the last plague. Contemplating her finding of Moses, she retrospectively characterizes herself as a young, bored, pampered princess who had been allowed to keep the baby Moses as a toy. Ironically, as she played with this human toy, she actually sharpened him as a sword, teaching him to hate the pharaoh's palace and even herself (Atwan and Wieder 1993: 1.117). By juxtaposing the finding of Moses with the death of the firstborn, the poem focuses attention on the latent irony of the biblical story, as well as on the attitude of the wealthy toward the poor.

By interpreting Jocheved, Miriam, and the pharaoh's daughter together, rather than separately, some have used the birth of Moses to reflect on the Hebrew exodus. On April 16, 2000, the oratorio *Women of Valor* had its debut in Los Angeles, a world premier, performed by the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony. Composed by Andrea Clearfield, the oratorio highlights ten women from the Bible, including Jocheved and Miriam. The Jocheved libretto, set to music characteristic of a lullaby, but accompanied by foreboding undercurrents, portrays her as placing Moses on the Nile in spite of the crushing agony it caused her. She beseeches the Nile to protect him, but also resolves to suckle him on her love and Hebrew heritage. Miriam, on the other hand, is portrayed with energetic music as the singing and dancing prophetess of Exodus 15. The coupling of the two women captures the agony of Egyptian bondage and the exhilaration of freedom, as well as calls attention to the important role played by women. Artist Judy Chicago connected all three women in a painted and embroidered matzah cover. The cover, which was exhibited in 2001 at the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion in New York, portrays Jocheved nursing Moses, Thermuthis finding Moses, and Miriam dancing with timbrel along the shores of the Red Sea. Celebrating the three central female figures of the Passover story, the cover reflects through ritual art the contribu-

tion of women in bringing about the exodus. Eleanor Wilner envisioned Miriam's feelings after the death of the firstborn in her poem "Miriam's Song." While preparing for the imminent departure of Israel from Egypt, Miriam reflects on the day baby Moses was found. Realizing that their freedom was gained by the death of the Egyptian firstborn, Miriam also understands that she is leaving one Egypt for another. She is reminded of this new Egypt whenever she finds herself at a river and hears the passing Hebrew army filled with men who themselves were once infants who had been hidden in baskets. She also thinks of the pharaoh's daughter lifting Moses from the Nile (Wilner 1989: 8–9; reprinted in Elwell 2002: 52). Wilner reminds the reader of the tragic side of the exodus, as well as the sinister possibilities inherent in it. The transformation from oppressed to oppressor always threatens the exodus story, and in fact often arises among those who have used the exodus in their struggles for freedom.

Israelite suffering and modern suffering

Many have used the sufferings of the Hebrews (Exod. 1:1–2:10) as a lens to understand their own suffering. Various haggadot reminded their communities of the travails of their forebears. The *Venice Haggadah*, dated to 1629, portrayed on a single page the labor of the Hebrews, the drowning of the male infants, and a man and a woman sleeping in separate beds so as to avoid procreation. Images of the pharaoh sitting in a tub and washing himself in the blood of Hebrew male babies to overcome his leprosy appeared in the *Prague Haggadah* of 1526, as well as the *Leghorn Haggadah* of 1837 (Yerushalmi 1975: plates 50 and 92). During the mid-nineteenth century, Jews living in Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia occasionally referred to the *Familiantengesetze*, or family laws, as pharaonic laws. Introduced during the first quarter of the eighteenth century, these laws attempted to decrease the Jewish population by limiting the number of Jewish marriages that could be performed. No Jew could marry and establish a family unless he possessed a government-issued family number. When the holder of the number died, it could pass only to the eldest son; if the deceased only had daughters, the number expired. Those wanting to marry, but unable to obtain a number, had to leave the country (*Der Orient* 1848; see also *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums* 1848; *Encyclopedia Judaica* 1971: "Familiants Laws"; *Jewish Encyclopedia* 1903: "Familianten Gesetz"; Marcus 1991: 2.15).

The Israelite oppression may also have provided a subtext for Ignazio Silone's novel *Fontamara*. Written in 1930, the book explores the plight of the *cafoni* of southern Italy, a landless class of peasant farmers. Alluding to the Israelites, Silone portrayed the *cafoni* as an oppressed people subject to the

Plate 4 Alain Foehr, *Slavery*. J. Nachtwey/Magnum All rights reserved/Al Foehr, *Slavery*, 2001. Reprinted with permission of Al Foehr.

whims and requirements of Italian governmental leaders. One peasant in the book even explains that governments created wars and epidemics to decrease their number (Gatti-Taylor 1994: 62–4; Silone 1960). The Reverend Alain Foehr, who spent one year as a minister in Fort Beaufort, South Africa, similarly interpreted the suffering of blacks in South Africa under apartheid. As a result of his experience and study of liberation theology, Foehr produced a series of computer images interpreting the experience of apartheid in light of the Hebrew experience in Exodus. The first image, entitled *Slavery*, links Exod. 1:13 with the image of a miner working in South Africa (see plate 4). According to Foehr, he met "black people working as beasts" and came to see them as the new Hebrew slaves (Foehr 2002). Likewise, some have viewed the warlords, dictatorial governments, and neo-colonial structures of dependence in countries such as the Congo, Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea, as well as European and American missionary efforts to control African churches, as modern manifestations of Egyptian bondage (Temple, "Theology at AACC"). By linking their suffering with that of the Hebrews, subsequent readers express hope for deliverance and condemnation for their oppressors, while also coun-

tering the degrading effects of oppression by identifying themselves with the people of God.

2:11–25 Moses' Early Life

The biblical text next moves from the birth of Moses to his adulthood. Completely skipping over his childhood, the biblical author left a vacuum that subsequent readers have filled to a variety of purposes. The legend of Moses grew extraordinarily within this lacuna. Some interpreters, such as Pseudo-Philo and *Jubilees*, jumped from Moses' birth to his return to Egypt to deliver Israel. Others attempted to glorify him by filling in the missing details.

Moses kills an Egyptian

Early commentators tried to mitigate the negative repercussions of his murder of the Egyptian and subsequent flight into the desert. Exodus has Moses making sure that no one is watching before he kills the Egyptian, hardly the portrait of a bold defender, and indicates that he fled the country because of the murder. Artapanus, however, portrayed him as a great inventor and administrator who was faithful to the Egyptian pharaoh, but whose exceeding popularity with the people had made the pharaoh envious. Hoping Moses would be killed when given command of a troop of farmers during a campaign against the Ethiopians, the pharaoh continued to plot against Moses even after he valiantly led the farmers to victory. When Aaron informed Moses of another plot, Moses fled to Arabia, where he met Raguel (the name used for Reuel in the Septuagint and the *Exagoge*). Thus Moses left Egypt to avoid threats to his own life, rather than to escape punishment for murder (*Moses* 3.27.4–21, in Charlesworth 1985: vol. 2). Josephus gives a similar description, adding that Moses gained an Ethiopian wife, Tharbis, as a result of his campaigns in the region (cf. Num. 12:1; 1974b: *Antiquities* 2.10–11). Philo glorified him even more as excelling in all things, but also choosing to pursue his Hebrew heritage (although continuing to be grateful to his adopted culture). Though angered by pharaoh's actions against the Hebrews, he was helpless to do anything, save offering words of encouragement and pleas for mercy. Philo defends Moses' killing of the Egyptian by portraying the latter as one of the cruelest overseers, and noting that "righteous it was that one who only lived to destroy men should himself be destroyed." Moses' enemies in turn created such doubt in the pharaoh's mind over his intentions and integrity that Moses had to flee to Arabia.

All the while he prayed that God would overthrow the oppression of his people. Thus Philo characterizes Moses as a defender of justice and portrays his actions at the well in Midian as efforts against injustice (1935: *Life of Moses* 1.5–11). Likewise, Stephen's speech in Acts 7: 22–9 portrays him as the defender of his kinsmen. The Hebrews, however, misunderstood Moses' actions, failing to see that through him God was rescuing them. For Stephen, this incident illustrates the Israelites' lack of discernment.

Praising Moses continued to be a staple of interpretation, but his committing murder also created problems for those seeking to laud him. Augustine questioned whether Moses acted virtuously in killing the Egyptian. But he extrapolates on the basis of Acts 7, that even though Moses lacked authority for this action, he thought his divine call to bring deliverance justified him (Lienhard 2001: 7). Gregory of Nyssa understood the killing as the fight of true religion against idolatry (1978: *Life of Moses* 2.14). The *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* likewise portrayed Moses' actions positively, but identified the two fighting Hebrews as Dathan and Abiram, leaders involved in Korah's rebellion in Numbers 16 (2:13–14; see also *Exodus Rabbah* 1.29). Medieval commentators typically understood the Egyptian taskmaster as a figure of the devil (Lewine 1993: 36). The *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu* (Exod. 1:9) exonerated Moses by recounting a story whereby the Egyptian taskmaster forced the wife of an Israelite to have sexual intercourse with him. When the Israelite discovered what had happened, he was angry, whereupon the Egyptian beat the Israelite. Learning of the incident through the Holy Spirit, Moses intervened. The Qur'an indicates that after Moses had killed the Egyptian, he immediately recognized the event as a work of Satan, and prayed for and received forgiveness. In gratitude for God's graciousness, he vowed never to help those who sin (Sura 28.14–21). Moses' exalted status seems to have mitigated his violent act. As an important figure in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Moses could not in the eyes of subsequent readers have been a common murderer.

Despite Moses' stature in Christianity, he has always played a role subordinate to Jesus. The events of Exodus 2 comprised the majority of scenes portrayed by Alessandro Botticelli in the Sistine Chapel. Commissioned by Pope Sixtus IV, artists began decorating the walls primarily with biblical scenes in 1481. The altar wall originally contained depictions by Perugino of the *Assumption of the Virgin*, the *Nativity*, and the *Finding of Moses*, but they were destroyed when Michelangelo painted the *Last Judgment*. Seeking to demonstrate the parallels between Christ and Moses, the two side walls contained scenes from both their lives. Placed opposite the *Temptation of Christ* scenes (also painted by Botticelli), *Moses in Egypt and Midian* depicts seven events: the killing of the Egyptian, the flight to Midian, the driving away of the shepherds, Moses watering the sheep, the burning bush, Moses removing his sandals, and Moses

leading the people from Egypt. While these events correspond to texts and themes contained in the Roman liturgy (Lewine 1993: 33), Botticelli apparently viewed them in their own right as pivotal in the life of Moses and the freeing of Israel from slavery. Their juxtaposition with events from the temptation of Christ suggests that for Moses this was a time of testing in which even the outcome of the Israelite struggle against oppression was determined. In fact, the *titulus* associated with this fresco reads: "Temptation of Moses, legislator of the written law." At the inauguration of the restored chapel in December 1999, Pope John Paul II remarked that Botticelli had set Christ's temptations in symmetry with Moses' (*Dictionary of Art* 1996: "Rome: Vatican Palace: Decoration" and "Perugino"; *Encyclopedia of World Art* 1996: "Perugino"; and Pope John Paul II 1999). Yet the fresco may suggest that while Christ was obedient during his temptation, Moses was not; he had committed murder (Goffen 1986: 246).

Moses, Zipporah, and the daughters of Jethro

A few decades after Botticelli completed his work, Rosso Fiorentino, in his painting *Moses Defending the Daughters of Jethro*, glorified him as a man of great strength and energy, fighting off five others, with four already knocked to the ground. Around 1609–10, Carlo Saraceni depicted a quite different man. In his *Moses Defending the Daughters of Jethro*, Moses appears to discuss the situation in a reasonable fashion with one of the shepherds. This, however, was an exceptional portrayal. Within about a century of Saraceni's work, three others, by Sébastien Bourdon, Nicolas Colombel, and Sebastiano Ricci, appeared with the same title. They depicted Moses as either physically driving away the shepherds or as standing his ground against them with sword drawn, while the helpless daughters of Jethro watch.

By the late twentieth century the image of the helpless daughters of Jethro had been challenged by the depiction of Zipporah in the animated film *The Prince of Egypt*. She first appears as a captive in the pharaoh's court who defiantly withstands the taunts of the Egyptians and is given to Moses as a prize. She then overcomes the guards and escapes to Midian. Later, when Moses drives away the shepherds in Midian, he falls into a well. As Zipporah's sisters work to pull him up, Zipporah arrives and begins to help until she realizes who she is helping. She promptly releases the rope, sending Moses back into the well. Quite taken with her, he has to pursue and win her heart. Zipporah appears as one who does not need his help, but handles herself with strength and defiance in the face of injustice. Viewed in conjunction with earlier portrayals, the artists' ideas about gender roles become more apparent.

While this passage has provided interpreters with an opportunity to reflect upon gender roles, it has also provoked discussion of other social issues. The Jewish Outreach Institute, an organization devoted to the development of community-based Jewish outreach, has understood Moses' marriage to Zipporah and relations with her family as an example of an interfaith family. Moses' marriage thus illustrates that intermarriage with non-Jews can be successful in some instances ("Moses' Interfaith Family"). Others have understood Moses to have been a polygamist. Arguing that Moses' Cushite wife (Numbers 12) was not the same as his Midianite wife, Zipporah, advocates of polygamy assert that the Bible does not condemn it ("Was Moses a Polygamist?"). The violence of Exod. 2:11–25 has also initiated reflection on the use of violence to bring about social justice. Brevard Childs, in his commentary on Exodus, admits that this question arises within the context of modern society and that the text gives no clear answer. Yet he concludes that, "By uncovering the ambiguities in the act of violence, the reader is forced to confront rather than evade those basic factors which constitute the moral decision" (Childs 1974: 44–6). Struggle with the story's violence has increasingly characterized modern reflection. The midwives' non-violent response stands in tension with Moses' violent reaction to Egyptian violence. It at least raises the question of the appropriate response to oppression.

Moses and Modern Biographies

The first two chapters of Exodus quickly convey the reader from Joseph's death at the end of Genesis to Moses and his involvement with the exodus. They provide important information as regards why the exodus was necessary and introduce the reader to Moses. The biblical author, however, devotes more time to Moses' actions as an adult in delivering the Hebrews from slavery than to the preceding years. These two chapters are a sort of "bare bones" narrative with little comment by the writer(s). The writer makes clear that God blessed the midwives because their actions reflected fear of God. Moses' mother followed in their footsteps by subverting the plan of the pharaoh. Chapter 2 ends with God noticing the suffering of the Hebrews and remembering his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The stage has been set for the deliverance of the Hebrews. The author does not attempt to write a biography of Moses, but does explicate the Hebrews' relationship with YHWH.

While the biblical author did not produce a biography of Moses, later readers found within the Bible the skeletal outline for such a project. Writers have understood and shaped Moses' life in accordance with their own contexts

and societies, while producing divergent portrayals. During the early twentieth century, for example, several poetic and narrative renderings of his life were written. Among them were Edmond Fleg's *Moise reconté par les* Sages (*The Life of Moses*), Werner Jansen's *The Light of Egypt*, Louis Untermeyer's *Moses: A Novel*, and Ivan Franko's *Moses*. The story was dramatized in Carl Hauptmann's *Moses*, Viktor Hahn's *Moses*, and Max Donkhin's *Moysey* (see *Encyclopedia Judaica* 1971: "Moses" for more titles). Two film versions were also produced. One, made by Pathé Frères in 1905 and entitled *La Vie de Moïse* (*The Life of Moses*), depicted Moses' life in six films. The other, produced by the Vitagraph Company of America in 1909 and entitled *The Life of Moses*, portrayed his life in five parts.

The imprint of the novels' respective periods is evident as they develop Moses' character. One reviewer, commenting in 1929 on the works by Fleg, Jansen, and Untermeyer, observed that "The problems which we link with his name [Moses] are not millennial dreams but the practical dilemmas of the living present. We who are plagued with a multiplicity of laws have a special interest in the lawgiver." While the reviewer praised Fleg's work as deserving "to be included with the Bible as one of the Apocrypha," he criticized Jansen and Untermeyer as producing a "strangely distorted and anachronistic Moses." Fleg, in the opinion of the reviewer, clarified the biblical Moses by focusing on "the legendary and poetical process which has given us the Biblical account itself." Untermeyer's Moses was "a labor agitator organizing the Hebrew slaves in a general strike." Jansen's Moses was "a parable for modern Germany," portraying Moses as struggling against Jewish bankers and businessmen who were overrunning Egypt (Seagle 1929). Without debating the merits of the reviewer's assessment, his observations concerning the novels by Untermeyer and Jansen underscore an important point. The meaning of a biblical text does not reside merely in its original meaning, but in the conversation between the "original author's" context and the interpreter's context.

One novel in particular demonstrates this idea, especially in relation to Exodus 1–2 and the life of Moses. Lawrence Langner wrote a little-known play called *Moses: A Play, a Protest, and a Proposal*. Langner, a British-born playwright, director, and producer, and the founder of the Theatre Guild of New York City, attached a long introduction to his play. In it he argues that Moses' monotheistic belief led him to ban the use of graven images. He observes that people worshipping many gods possessed a rich mythology and artistic expression, while those acknowledging only one god, such as Hebrews and Protestants, had a poor mythology and little artistic expression, but placed a high value on science and intellectual activities. One of the chief weaknesses of science, its "failure to realize the need of men for beauty," ultimately leads to materialism. Langner decries the modern industrial system for its degrading

influence on humans and its promise of nothing more than increased goods. He envisions art as the most effective combatant to modern materialism, and asserts that the theater could better demonstrate the importance of Moses to modern life than the Church. While the Church was hostile to "new views on old subjects," the theater welcomed them (Langner 1924: pp. vii–xlix).

The prologue demonstrates Langner's protest against materialism and Moses' role in producing it. When pharaoh's daughter goes to bathe in the Nile, she engages in a debate with Neb-Ket, a priest of Ammon. The princess complains that Egyptians are obsessed with gods and the building of tombs. Neb-Ket retorts that there is nothing better to do. Asserting that devoting oneself to gods is superior to devoting oneself to trade and commerce (like the Israelites and the Phoenicians), the priest proclaims, "We Egyptians are a nation of artists!" He praises the princess's father who has foreseen that those worshipping only one god would have more time for barter and commerce, and ultimately gain the nation's wealth. The pharaoh, therefore, persecutes the Israelites in order to curb the power they have gained by focusing on commerce. But the princess is determined to employ an Israelite as the overseer of her estate, because he will spend his time dealing with her affairs, rather than praying as the Egyptians do. Moses is then discovered in the Nile, and ultimately becomes the princess' overseer.

Scene 1 portrays Moses as a young man who dislikes poetry, but values law. He aspires to lead the Hebrews out of bondage because he abhors the injustices done to them. He contends that Egypt has turned them into traders and cheats. While Moses sees only an Egyptian culture that has produced lust, corruption, and luxury, Miriam argues that it has also produced great temples, images of gods, tombs, and palaces. Moses sees these only as stone images for idolaters. Miriam then upbraids Moses for despising art and charges, "You love the law. Your temples are the temples of justice! Your images are the images of the mind." In the second scene, set in a marketplace, several Israelites argue over business matters. Moses intervenes and upbraids them for their greed, asserting that their aggressiveness in attempting to possess the Egyptians' wealth has caused their oppression. Later Moses tells Miriam that he has given up his dream of leading the Israelites out of slavery. Having discovered their greed and usury, he is repelled by them. Miriam encourages him not to be so intolerant and contends that the Israelites can be changed by changing their dream. Many of them dream of God, but he remains only a dream. Having never seen him, Miriam thinks that an image of God, as a symbol, would better serve the people. Moses denounces this suggestion as idolatry, asserting that God makes himself known through laws protecting the weak and the righteous. A "half-wit" then passes by and is accosted by an Egyptian official. Moses intervenes and accidentally kills the official and flees the country.

During the 1920s, the United States experienced what many historians call a second industrial revolution. This helped create a number of changes. Accordingly, "the 1920s saw an enormous increase in the efficiency of production, a steady climb in real wages, a decline in the average employee's work week, and a boom in consumer goods industries" (Faragher et al. 1997: 723). Langner uses the biblical story of Moses as the skeletal structure for commenting on many of these changes. For him, the basis of the materialism of the Twenties lay in the figure of Moses, especially as distilled through the Church. Langner holds Moses in esteem, calling him the first to have a modern legal mind and characterizing his legal system as being centuries ahead of its time. Yet this system was designed for a nomadic group of people; it was "rough justice." This "law of the desert" had remained, at least in spirit, the law of twentieth-century civilization. Realizing that Moses had become "a tradition, a legendary figure," Langner challenges his stature and calls for a new set of ideals. He contends that "once the fact is clearly recognized that modern materialism can never be combated merely by preaching or legislating against it, but that some different direction must be given to the stream of creative mass-imagination, educators, preachers and leaders of thought may come to realize that the most effective answer to materialism is art." The hope for civilization resides in paying at least as much attention to art as to "the creation of inventions and enterprises." Desiring to liberate civilization from "the domination of Moses, Materialism and the Machine," Langner offered his reinterpretation (Langner 1924: pp. ix–x, xxii–xxiii, xlv, xlix).

Langner's Moses grows up under the influence of a princess who disdains Egyptian religion's preoccupation with art and ritual, and instead values business. While he abhors the Israelites' greed, he believes that setting up a legal system that produces righteousness is the only way to deal with such problems. Ironically, it is his violation of the law that forces him to flee Egypt. Langner seems content to allow Moses the lawgiver to deal with the problems of the ancient Israelites, but believes that this Moses has contributed to the problems of modern society. The traditional Moses, therefore, has to be challenged and recast. In doing so, Exodus 1–2 provides the structure on which to hang the new presentation. In this new version Moses essentially becomes the villain, rather than the hero. The reader is thus encouraged to view Moses from the perspective of the roaring Twenties, rather than the thirteenth century BCE. Furthermore, Langner's presentation of Moses from within the realm of the theater allows him to dislodge Moses from the domain of the Church and the Synagogue. By using the biblical sketch of Moses' life, Langner challenges the traditional sacred presentation and role of Moses.