



מקראות גדולות

*The*

COMMENTATORS'

BIBLE

THE RUBIN JPS MIQRA'OT  
GEDOLOT

EXODUS שמות

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FRIEDMAN FRENCH FOUNDATION

*It is lovingly dedicated to the memory of*

ABIGAIL COHEN ז"ל

*whose life was an inspiration to all*

*and*

RABBI SAMUEL FRIEDMAN ז"ל

REBBETZIN ZEHAVA FRIEDMAN ז"ל

*whose lives were dedicated to Jewish education and scholarship*

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*With the 1917 and 1985 English translations of  
The Jewish Publication Society TANAKH, the questions of Abarbanel,  
the commentaries of Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and Nahmanides,  
and selections from the Masorah and from the commentaries of  
Bekhor Shor, Kimhi, Hizkuni, Gersonides, Abarbanel, and Sforno*

*Edited, translated, and annotated by*

MICHAEL CARASIK



2005 • 5765

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Hebrew text, based on *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, © 1999 by The Jewish Publication Society

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# CONVENTIONS AND ABBREVIATIONS

The commentators always quote the word or phrase on which they will comment from NJPS (the new Jewish Publication Society Bible translation of 1985), with the citation in **bold**. When they quote other biblical phrases, the quotation is either from NJPS, when it is appropriate for the comment, from OJPS (the old JPS translation of 1917) or my own version or revision. When the commentator refers to a particular word in a verse quoted from elsewhere in the Bible, the English translation of that word is *italicized*. In biblical quotations, small caps for LORD (more rarely, GOD) represent the Tetragrammaton (see Glossary). Spellings of biblical names follow NJPS; spellings of other names follow *Encyclopedia Judaica*.

## **The following conventions are used for biblical references:**

- v. 6 a verse in the chapter currently being commented on
- 23:21 a verse from another chapter in Exodus
- ch. another chapter in Exodus
- Gen. 15:15 verses from elsewhere in the Bible are identified by book, according to the following abbreviations:

Gen. – Genesis	Jer. – Jeremiah	Ps. – Psalms
Exod. – Exodus	Ezek. – Ezekiel	Prov. – Proverbs
Lev. – Leviticus	Hosea	Song – Song of Songs
Num. – Numbers	Obad. – Obadiah	Lam. – Lamentations
Deut. – Deuteronomy	Jon. – Jonah	Eccl. – Ecclesiastes
Josh. – Joshua	Mic. – Micah	Esther
Judg. – Judges	Nah. – Nahum	Dan – Daniel
1 Sam. – 1 Samuel	Hab. – Habakkuk	Ezra
2 Sam. – 2 Samuel	Zeph. – Zephaniah	Neh. – Nehemiah
1 Kings	Hag. – Haggai	1 Chron. – 1 Chronicles
2 Kings	Zech. – Zechariah	2 Chron. – 2 Chronicles
Isa. – Isaiah	Mal. – Malachi	

## **Other Abbreviations:**

- b. *ben* or *bar*, “son of”
- R. Rabbi
- B. Babylonian Talmud
- Y. Jerusalem (Yerushalmi) or Palestinian Talmud
- M. Mishnah
- NJPS New Jewish Publication Society translation (1985)
- OJPS Old Jewish Publication Society translation (1917)

**Abbreviations for Tractates of Mishnah and Talmuds**

Ar. – Arakhin	Kil. – Kilayim	Pes. – Pesahim
Av. Zar. – Avodah Zarah	Kin. – Kinnim	RH – Rosh Ha-Shanah
BB – Bava Batra	Ma'as. – Ma'aserot	Sanh. – Sanhedrin
Bek. – Bekhorot	Ma'as. Sh. – Ma'aser Sheni	Shab. – Shabbat
Ber. – Berakhot	Mak. – Makkot	Shek. – Shekalim
Bik. – Bikkurim	Makhsh. – Makhshirin	Shev. – Shevi'it
BK – Bava Kamma	Meg. – Megillah	Shevu. – Shevu'ot
BM – Bava Metzia	Me'il. – Me'ilah	Suk. – Sukkah
Dem. – Demai	Men. – Menaḥot	Ta'an. – Ta'anit
Eduy. – Eduyot	Mid. – Middot	Tam. – Tamid
Er. – Eruvin	Mik. – Mikva'ot	Tem. – Temurah
Git. – Gittin	MK – Mo'ed Katan	Ter. – Terumah
Hag. – Ḥagigah	Naz. – Nazir	Toh. – Tohorot
Hal. – Ḥallah	Ned. – Nedarim	TY – Tevul Yom
Hor. – Horayot	Neg. – Nega'im	Uk. – Uktzin
Ḥul. – Ḥullin	Nid. – Niddah	Yad. – Yadayim
Ker. – Keritot	Oho. – Oholot	Yev. – Yevamot
Ket. – Ketubbot	Or. – Orlah	Zav. – Zavin
Kid. – Kiddushin	Par. – Parah	Zev. – Zevaḥim

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

*What does “Miqra’ot Gedolot” mean?*

“Miqra’ot Gedolot” is a Hebrew expression meaning something like “Large-Format Bible” or, more colloquially, “The Big Book of Bible.” The famous “Second Rabbinic Bible” of R. Jacob b. Hayyim (1525) was a Miqra’ot Gedolot.

*What do you mean “a” Miqra’ot Gedolot? Are there more than one?*

Absolutely. There are “Miqra’ot Gedolot” to the Torah or Pentateuch, to the *Megillot* (the Five Scrolls), and to the other biblical books as well. Moreover, the same biblical book can appear in different versions: “Miqra’ot Gedolot” refers to the format, not the contents.

*So what is the Miqra’ot Gedolot format?*

It consists of the Hebrew biblical text in large print; a “Targum” or translation of the text (in rare cases more than one); and commentaries on the text, often accompanied by explanatory notes. That’s why we have titled this English version *The Commentators’ Bible*.

*Which translation is included in this Miqra’ot Gedolot?*

We have included two translations: the old Jewish Publication Society translation of 1917 and the new JPS translation of 1985.

*Why include both?*

Both were translated by the preeminent Jewish biblical scholars of their day, but the OJPS is more literal and the NJPS freer and more readable. More importantly, the purpose of the Miqra’ot Gedolot is to help explain difficulties in the biblical text. Because translators are often forced to pick a single one of several possible explanations of what the Hebrew text means, comparing two different translations is the best way for someone who doesn’t know Hebrew to judge whether there is a difficulty in the original text. Having two translations should also remind you that it is the Hebrew text that is the “real” Bible, not any particular English version.

*Which commentaries are included?*

We have included the most prominent commentaries of the medieval period—those of Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and Nahmanides—with explanatory notes as well as selected additional comments from other commentators of that era. See “What’s on the Page?” below for biographical information about all the commentators.

*Is this the first time these commentators have been translated into English?*

The four main commentators have all been translated into English before.

*Then why are you translating them again?*

Previous translations were either made for scholars, assume a high level of Hebrew knowledge, or are literal and difficult to follow.

*So this is a free translation?*

Yes. First of all, remember that in their original work the commentators quote and comment on the Hebrew text. In this version, they quote instead the NJPS translation and, if they disagree with it, supplement it with the OJPS or with their own understanding of the meaning. Also, since most of us today do not have as thorough a grounding in Jewish sources as did the Hebrew readers of the original commentaries, the commentators must explain things a bit more fully when they “write” in English. For similar reasons, they omit grammatical comments and explanations that are both complicated and extraneous. For a more detailed look at this topic, see “Principles of the Translation” below.

*Before I get more involved... why should I care about what these medieval commentators think?*

About 900 years ago the commentator Rashi told his grandson that new insights into the Bible were being discovered daily. That’s still true, which means that if you want the latest biblical scholarship, a modern commentary will serve you better than the comments in this book. But there are some very good reasons to go back to the older commentators, even if you do not share the assumptions they make about the Bible.

The first reason is that the medieval commentators read the Bible very, very carefully. They will often note connections, contradictions, or difficulties that modern readers of the text, especially casual readers, have missed. It can be difficult to think carefully, or deeply, about stories or sayings that you’ve known since childhood. But the commentators here will help you look at them from a fresh perspective.

The second reason is that the Bible is not a chemical compound that gives the same result every time it is analyzed, but a book that tells a story and describes a way of life. Its stories and teachings call forth different responses in different ages. By reading the various commentaries on a single page, you can see how attitudes toward the Bible changed over the centuries.

The third reason is that the format and nature of this book are geared toward promoting your *active participation* in learning about the Bible, a process that can offer both intellectual and spiritual rewards. The page is set up as a conversation among the commentators, in which the reader is encouraged to join.

The fourth reason, and the most important, is that *The Commentators’ Bible* gives you the chance to spend “quality time” with four of the greatest of all Bible commentators, and with half a dozen of their colleagues. Shortly after I began working on the book, a friend asked,

“Which of the commentators do you like best?” What he really wanted was to tell me which of them *he* liked best. You too are likely to find, as you read through the book of Exodus, that the commentators will come alive for you, and that one or another of them will begin to seem less like a historical figure, and more like a companion you can learn with.

*How do I read such a complicated book?*

This is not the kind of book you can pick up and read straight through, because too many things on each page are clamoring simultaneously for your attention. You will want to explore the page and learn what path through it works best for you. Ideally, you should study the text with others and together find your own method of making your way through the different commentaries. Here are some different approaches to try as you get started:

- ➔ Compare the two English translations (with the Hebrew, if you can). When the two translations disagree, check to see how the commentators resolve the question.
- ➔ Read a whole chapter at a time, in Hebrew or in either translation. Then read Abarbanel’s questions about the chapter and think about them. Read the chapter again—perhaps in the *other* translation—to see whether you can think of answers to his questions.
- ➔ Pick a particular commentator as your guide, and follow all of his comments to the text as you read along.
- ➔ Read until you find a word or a verse that raises a question in *your* mind. Then check to see what each of the commentators has to say about it. Be sure to check the Additional Comments to see whether there’s another comment on your question there.
- ➔ Follow any, or all, of the commentators through an entire subject, or a complete story. Think about the implications of a particular commentator’s approach for interpreting other biblical passages.
- ➔ Dip into each page as you like until you find a thread you want to pursue.

**Warning!** The commentator will sometimes continue in the voice that is speaking in the verse itself (God’s, or Moses’, for example). After a dash (—) the commentator continues in his own voice. A dash may also separate different voices if the commentator is reconstructing a conversation or working through the steps of an argument.

## WHAT'S ON THE PAGE?

### *Text:*

The **HEBREW TEXT** of the Bible, based on the Leningrad Codex, the oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible. This particular version of the Hebrew text can be found in the 1999 edition of the JPS Hebrew-English TANAKH. This edition is not meant for ritual use, and it thus omits some synagogue-related features. It meets only the traditional rabbinic standards (*halakhah*) for formatting a study Bible, which are less stringent than those for ritual purposes. For a fuller explanation of the difference between the Leningrad Codex and the 1999 JPS edition, see the preface to the latter.

### *Translations:*

The **NJPS** translation of the Hebrew text, prepared in the 1960s by a committee of Jewish Bible scholars from the various movements, under the auspices of The Jewish Publication Society (JPS). This translation attempts to convey the meaning of the text without adhering slavishly to the literal Hebrew.

The **OJPS** translation of the Hebrew text, a revision of the American Standard Version (adapted from the King James Bible) prepared in the years before World War I by a committee of Jewish scholars, again under the auspices of JPS.

### *Questions:*

**ABARBANEL's** questions. These questions, which serve as the basis for the commentary of Isaac Abarbanel (see below), will help the reader understand the *kinds* of questions that the commentators think need answering about the text. (The other commentators do not always make their questions explicit.)

### *Major commentators:*

**RASHI** – R. Solomon b. Isaac (1040–1105), northern France. Universally known by the acronym of his name, Rashi is the quintessential commentator on both Bible and Talmud. Jewish translations of both works often silently follow Rashi's comments when deciding how to render a difficult passage. Rashi's method, as he himself described it, was to explain the biblical text according to its straightforward sense—what the words mean in plain Hebrew—adding only those midrashic comments that fit the context and explain a linguistic feature of the text. According to his grandson Rashbam, toward the end of his life he admitted that, if he had the time, he would completely rewrite his commentary to take account of the new discoveries about the straightforward sense of the Bible being made on a daily basis. (See also “*Peshat* and *Derash*” under “Special Topics.”)

**RASHBAM** – R. Samuel b. Meir (ca. 1085–ca. 1174), northern France. Rashbam, Rashi's grandson, claimed that, though rabbinic interpretation of the Torah text was primary, the work of doing that kind of interpretation—the complicated linkage of every aspect of Jewish law to a letter, word, or phrase in the Torah—was finished. The neglected straightforward sense of the text, however, was only now in the process of being discovered. Rashbam, like his grandfather, was a skilled talmudist, but in his biblical commentary he felt free to interpret the text as it reads in plain Hebrew even when this contradicted rabbinic interpretation. (See also “*Peshat* and *Derash*” under “Special Topics.”)

**IBN EZRA** – R. Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1164), b. Spain, d. England. Ibn Ezra was Rashbam's almost exact contemporary, though scholars continue to disagree on whether they ever met or even knew each other's work. Ibn Ezra lived the first half-century of his life in Muslim Spain and spent the rest of his days wandering through Christian Europe—first in Italy, then in France, and, in his last years, in England. The two-fold basis of his comments, as he explains in the long introduction to his work, is that they must conform to the grammar of the text (a field in which the Jews of the Muslim world were far more advanced than their compatriots in Christian countries) and to the bounds of reason. His attitude toward rabbinic tradition is ambiguous—he was not secure enough to contradict it directly, as did Rashbam, but often hinted at his doubts about one or another aspect of it. (See also “Ibn Ezra's Philosophy” under “Special Topics.”)

**NAHMANIDES** – R. Moses b. Nahman (1195–ca. 1270), b. Spain, d. Israel. Also known by the acronym “Ramban,” Nahmanides was advised to flee Spain after his victory in a “disputation” over the truth of Judaism and Christianity in which he was forced to participate. His careful analysis of the comments of his predecessors Rashi and Ibn Ezra makes him largely responsible for defining the contents of the standard Miqra'ot Gedolot page. (Rashbam is a 20<sup>th</sup>-century addition to the standard page.) In addition to his biblical and rabbinic scholarship, he was immersed in mystical learning. He sometimes explains the straightforward sense of the text and then adds an additional comment, often obscure, giving the meaning of the text “according to the way of Truth”—a reference to mystical interpretation. (See also “Nahmanides' Mysticism” under “Special Topics.”)

*Editor's annotations:*

I have added notes to the text of the major commentators whenever I thought their comments needed some elucidation, or when there is a difficulty that might not be apparent to the reader. I have not generally supplied the rabbinic sources for their comments unless they do so themselves. Nor have I pointed out the reasons for their comments, unless I think the reader would find the comment puzzling without this information. I have generally left it to the reader to discover when the commentators are disputing with each other.

*Additional commentators:*

The **MASORAH** – (ca. 1000) The comments labeled Masorah (“tradition”), dating from the second half of the first millennium C.E., generally catalogue unusual spellings or

word choices in the text, to give scribes assistance in recreating it exactly. Occasional comments were added to the Masorah at the time of the “Second Rabbinic Bible” (1525) by its editor, **Jacob b. Hayyim**, a kabbalist; these comments are not identified as coming from the Masorah, but from him personally.

**BEKHOR SHOR** – Joseph b. Isaac Bekhor Shor (12<sup>th</sup> c.), northern France. As a younger contemporary and student of Rashbam, his comments, like those of his teacher, focus on the straightforward sense of the text.

**KIMHI** – R. David Kimhi (1160?–1235?), Provence. Known by the acronym “Radak,” he belonged to a family of illustrious scholars. Particularly known as a Hebrew grammarian, he is a major commentator to Genesis. (In our Genesis volume, he will be promoted to the main part of the page.) His comments on the rest of the Torah, however, are relatively sparse, since they are abstracted from his works on language.

**HIZKUNI** – R. Hezekiah b. Manoah (mid-13<sup>th</sup> c.), France. He wrote a commentary that is largely an anthology of earlier comments (many now otherwise lost) as well as an analysis of Rashi’s commentary.

**GERSONIDES** – R. Levi b. Gershom (1288–1344), Provence. Known also by the acronym “Ralbag,” he viewed the biblical text largely through the lens of philosophy.

**ABARBANEL** – Don Isaac Abarbanel (1437–1508), b. Portugal, fled Spain, d. Italy. He was a prominent politician and financier in the Iberian Peninsula until the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. His writings mostly date from his Italian period.

**SFORNO** – Obadiah b. Jacob Sforno (1470–1550), Italy. Trained in Jewish learning, humanistic studies, and medicine, he was both literally and metaphorically a Renaissance man.

# PRINCIPLES OF THE TRANSLATION

A basic assumption of the translation is that the **commentators are rewriting their original comments today, in contemporary English, for readers who do not know Hebrew**. This solves a number of the difficulties inherent in turning a Hebrew commentary on a Hebrew text into an English commentary without making the translator look as if he is constantly elbowing his way in between the reader and the commentator. So: **When an added word, phrase, or clause will make the commentator's meaning clear, I add it as if it had been written by the commentator**. When this technique does not suffice, I add a note in my own voice.

## **The following kinds of comments are regularly *omitted* from the translation:**

- 1** The commentator gives a straightforward explanation of the sense of the text when the translation already follows it or makes it unnecessary.
- 2** The commentator gives another Hebrew word synonymous with the one used in the verse.
- 3** The commentator identifies a form grammatically (when there is no disagreement about it).
- 4** Rashbam or Ibn Ezra offers essentially the same comment as Rashi.
- 5** Rashbam offers a different verse than Rashi that explains the same phenomenon in the same way.
- 6** Nahmanides cites an explanation of Rashi or Ibn Ezra in full.
- 7** In his explanation, a commentator uses another biblical example, or a rabbinic citation, that would require more explanation than the biblical verse itself.
- 8** A commentator quotes a biblical verse in full when that verse is close enough to the verse being explicated for the reader to find it easily.

In addition, certain extended discussions in the commentaries of Ibn Ezra and Nahmanides have been condensed, summarized in a note, or (in some cases) omitted entirely.

## **The following kinds of comments are nonetheless *retained* in the translation:**

- 1** The comment includes a straightforward explanation of the sense of the text when the translation already follows it or makes it unnecessary, if one of the other commentators disagrees with it.

The comment includes grammatical remarks that can be easily explained, that give some

- 2 of the commentator's flavor, or that other commentators disagree with.
- 3 Nahmanides for stylistic reasons includes citations from other biblical books, which are not themselves necessarily relevant but can be integrated smoothly into the translation.

**The following kinds of comments are regularly *changed*:**

- 1 Discursive comments explaining more than one verse at a time are changed to fit the citation-comment pattern, when this is possible.
- 2 When the comment to one verse adds an explanation of a verse elsewhere in the text, I move that comment to the appropriate place.
- 3 When the English translation changes the order of the Hebrew text for clarity, I rearrange the comments to follow the English order and rephrase them if necessary.
- 4 Ibn Ezra's commentary has been thoroughly revised: it is based on the same "short" commentary that is the standard Ibn Ezra commentary in other books of the Torah, but plentiful material has been added from the "long" commentary, especially where the short commentary is a bit obscure. No attempt has been made to keep the two separate. (In traditional versions of the Miqra'ot Gedolot, Ibn Ezra's comments to Exodus are from a separate, "long" Torah commentary, because the "short" commentary to Exodus was lost for many centuries. Even Nahmanides, who lived only a century after Ibn Ezra, already knew his comments to Exodus only from the "long" commentary. I have made sure to include all the comments to which Nahmanides responds.)

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# EXODUS שמות



SHEMOT

**NJPS** These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household: <sup>2</sup>Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; <sup>3</sup>Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin; <sup>4</sup>Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. <sup>5</sup>The total number of persons that were of Jacob's issue came to seventy, Joseph being already in Egypt. <sup>6</sup>Joseph died, and all his

**RASHI 1 These are the names of the sons of Israel.** Even though the Torah listed them by name during their lifetimes (Gen. 46:8–27), it lists them again after their deaths to show God's love for them, by likening them to the stars. For God musters the stars at their rising and their setting by number and by name: "Who created these? He who sends out their host by count, who calls them each by name" (Isa. 40:26).

**5 Joseph being already in Egypt.**

Since he and his sons are included in the total of "seventy," what does this additional phrase come to teach us? Don't we already know that he is in Egypt? It comes to let you know about Joseph's righteousness: The very Joseph who was a shepherd with his father's sheep was the same Joseph who was in Egypt, became king, and remained as righteous as he had been.

**NAHMANIDES** Genesis concludes at this point, being the book of creation, which tells of the origin of the world and the creation of everything, and of those incidents from the lives of all the Patriarchs that would be, as it were, formative for their offspring. For all those incidents that are depicted hint at what would happen to their offspring in the future. After completing the story of creation, the Torah begins a new book to tell the story that follows from those allusions. The unifying theme of the Book of Exodus is the first exile—the one decreed in Gen. 15:13—and of the redemption from that exile. For this reason it begins with a recapitulation of the names and number of those who came down to Egypt, even though this had already been detailed in Gen. 46:8–27, since their descent there was actually the beginning of that exile.

Now, that exile would not be over until the day the Israelites returned both to their place and to the status of their ancestors. When they left Egypt, even though they were emancipated from slavery, they were still considered to be in exile, for they were in "a land not theirs" (Gen. 15:13) and "astray in the wilderness" (14:3). When they came to Mount Sinai and made the Tabernacle, and the Holy One once again caused his Shekhinah to rest among them, they then returned to the status of their ancestors, "when God's company graced their tents" (Job 29:4)—for as our Sages said, "The Patriarchs are the chariot." [A] Then they were considered to be redeemed. That is why the Book of Exodus concludes with the completion of the Tabernacle and its being always filled with the Presence of God.

**1 These are the names.** The text wishes to count the time of their descent to Egypt as the beginning of the exile, for "they headed the column of exiles" (Amos 6:7), as I have explained in the introduction. So it returns to the beginning of that theme in the verse "he brought with him to Egypt all his offspring" (Gen. 46:7), which is immediately followed by the phrase "These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt" (Gen. 46:8) with which our chapter begins. For even though Genesis and Exodus are two separate books, Exodus is the sequel to Genesis. So only the introductory statement and the concluding one, "The total number of persons that were of Jacob's issue came to seventy" (Gen. 46:27), are repeated here, not the details. A similar repetition links the book of Chronicles, which concludes with the promise of the rebuilding of the Temple, with its sequel, the book of Ezra-Nehemiah, where that story is told. The link between Genesis and Exodus is made the same way. Ibn Ezra says that because Gen. 50:23 tells us that Joseph lived to see his great-grandchildren, Exodus begins by noting that his brothers, too, were few when they came to Egypt, but were fruitful and prolific there. But this is incorrect. Rashi's explanation, that counting them twice likens

[A] This saying implies that the Shekhinah, or Divine Presence, rests on the Patriarchs in some actually physical way (see Nahmanides' comment to Gen. 17:22); this is the status to which their descendants return at Sinai. The "chariot" is a way of describing God's throne, referring to the vision of Ezekiel 1.

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS 1 These are the names.** These people were "stars" all their lives, and deserved to be individually recognized; their descendants were not so distinguished (Sforno).

**5 Seventy.** The number is given to emphasize God's miracle: in only 210 years, the 70 grew into 600,000 (Hizkuni).

**OJPS** Now these are the names of the sons of Israel, who came into Egypt with Jacob; every man came with his household: <sup>2</sup>Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; <sup>3</sup>Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin; <sup>4</sup>Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. <sup>5</sup>And all the souls that came out of the loins of Jacob were seventy souls; and Joseph was in Egypt already. <sup>6</sup>And Joseph

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַבָּאִים  
מִצְרָיִם אֶת יַעֲקֹב אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ בָּאוּ:  
רְאוּבֵן שְׁמֵעוֹן לְוִי וַיהוּדָה:<sup>2</sup> יִשָּׁשְׂכָר  
זְבֻלֹן וּבְנֵימִן:<sup>4</sup> דָּן וְנַפְתָּלִי גָד וְאַשֶּׁר:<sup>5</sup>  
וַיְהִי כָל-נַפְשׁ יִצְחָק יִרְיָה־יַעֲקֹב שְׁבַע־עִים  
נַפְשׁ וַיֹּסֶף הֵיחָדָּה בְּמִצְרָיִם:<sup>6</sup> וַיָּמָת יוֹסֵף

**ABARBANEL'S QUESTIONS** ♦ Why is the information already provided in Gen. 46:8–27 repeated in Exod. 1:1–8? ♦ Why does v. 5 tell us what we already know, that Joseph is in Egypt?

**RASHBAM 1 These are the names.** Because the text wants to emphasize that "the Israelites were fertile and prolific" (v. 7), it was necessary to repeat that, when they came to Egypt, there were no more than 70 of them. But after the death of that generation, they were "fertile and prolific," and "a new king arose" (v. 8) who tried to deal shrewdly with them in order to diminish their numbers—but it did him no good.

**IBN EZRA 1 These are the names.** Literally, "and these are the names." Having mentioned at the end of Genesis that Joseph lived to see his great-grandchildren, the text continues now by noting that his brothers, too, were few in number when they came down to Egypt, but were fertile and prolific there. **With Jacob.** Including Jacob. The total of persons "of Jacob's issue" (v. 5) only makes 70 if Jacob himself is included in the total. **With his household.** That is, his "issue." Biblical Hebrew never uses the word "house" as a euphemism for "wife" the way rabbinic Hebrew sometimes does.

**2 Reuben.** The tribes are listed in birth order. [A]

**3 Benjamin.** Being the son of one of the Matriarchs, Benjamin is listed before his older brothers who were the sons of the concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah.

**5 Of Jacob's issue.** OJPS "out of the loins of Jacob." "Loins" is a euphemism here for the genitals. There were a total of 69 males "of Jacob's issue," which is why they were said in v. 1 to have come "with Jacob" (see my comment to that verse); the parallel passage in Gen. 46:8 says more plainly, "Jacob and his descendants." As Deut. 10:22 puts it, "Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons in all," including both Jacob and Joseph and Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh.

[A] Not exactly. The 11 brothers who came down to Egypt are listed in birth order for each of the four mothers in turn; see the next comment.

**NJPS** brothers, and all that generation. <sup>7</sup>But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them.

<sup>8</sup>A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. <sup>9</sup>And he said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. <sup>10</sup>Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not

**RASHI** **7 Fertile.** Their women did not miscarry, and they did not die as infants. **Prolific.** They would have sextuplets.

**8 A new king arose.** Rab and Samuel dispute over whether this was literally a new king, or the old king (whose death is not recorded) issuing new decrees. **Who did not know Joseph.** If it was the old king, this would mean that he acted as if he did not know him.

**9 He said.** It was Pharaoh who initiated the plan.

**10 Let us deal shrewdly with them.** The text literally says *lo*, which could mean “with it” (the people); but our Sages interpret it as dealing shrewdly “with Him,” with the Savior of Israel. Knowing that God punishes measure for measure, they thought: If we kill the children by fire, we can be killed by fire; if by the sword, we can be killed by the sword. But it is safe to kill them by water,

**NAHMANIDES** them to the stars, is midrashic. It is certainly true with respect to the love God showed for them by repeating their names over and over again. But the literary connection is as I have explained. That is why Exodus literally begins by saying “And these are the names”—to establish the link with Genesis.

**10 Let us deal shrewdly with them.** Pharaoh and “the sage of his advisers” (Isa. 19:11) did not consider slaying them outright, for to do so without cause would be an enormous betrayal of a people that had come down to Egypt in the first place by command of the previous king. Moreover, the Egyptian people (for he consulted their opinion as well) would not have let the king commit such gratuitous violence, especially since the Israelites were “too numerous” (v. 9) and could fight a mighty battle against them. Instead, Pharaoh said, they should act cleverly, so that the Israelites would not sense that they were acting out of enmity toward them. So he set them to do forced labor, as is the custom for those

biblical “generation” is a genealogical reference (i.e., father and son are two generations); it does not indicate a period of time.

**7 Prolific.** The verb used is the same used in the story of Noah and his sons; it is translated “swarm” in Gen. 8:17 and “abound” in Gen. 9:7. It may mean that the women gave birth to twins or more; I myself have seen a woman who gave birth to quadruplets, and there is medical evidence for up to septuplets. But the story in *The Chronicles of Moses* about Jewish mothers giving birth in the fields like animals (and angels bringing the boys to them after they were grown) is nonsense; this is neither a holy book nor one of authentic tradition. **[B] Very greatly.** Those who are impressed by the fact that the numerical value of this expression in Hebrew, used in Gen. 17:20 with reference to Ishmael, is the same as that of “Muhammad”—what do they do with this verse, where exactly the same phrase is applied to Israel? God forbid that Moses should speak in numerical riddles! **The land was filled with them.** “Land” has the sense of “the whole land of Egypt” (rather than “the earth,” which the Hebrew word could also mean). **[C]**

**8 A new king arose.** “A new king” means just what it sounds like it means—there is no need to add the complication of an old king with new decrees here. But “arose” implies that he was not related to the previous king.

**9 His people.** The Egyptians.

**10 Let us deal shrewdly with them.** That is, let us seek a wise course that will prevent them from increasing. **In the event of war.**

**[B]** *The Chronicles of Moses* fills in the details of Moses’ biography with many fanciful elements. **[C]** In his long commentary Ibn Ezra revised this view, taking “land” to mean the land of Goshen (that is, the region of Rameses in Goshen; see Gen. 47:11) where the Israelites lived in Egypt.

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS** **6 All that generation.** Had any at all of the Egyptians who knew Joseph still been alive, the new king (v. 8) would not have been able to do what he did (Gersonides).

**7 Fertile and prolific.** In accordance with God’s promise (Gen. 46:3), “I will make you there into a great nation” (Hizkuni). **Increased.** In size (Gersonides).

**8 A new king arose.** If this is the old king, then “arose” implies that he “rose” against Israel like an enemy (Hizkuni). **Who did not know Joseph.** Though he was undoubtedly recorded in the annals in connection with the imposition of the 20% agricultural tax (Gen. 47:26), it never occurred to the new Pharaoh that he could have been a Hebrew (Sforno).

**10 Let us deal shrewdly with them.** Let us enslave them now, when it is unnecessary, so they are enslaved if it ever becomes

**OJPS** died, and all his brethren, and all that generation. <sup>7</sup>And the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty; and the land was filled with them.

וְכָל־אֶחָיו וְכָל הַדּוֹר הַהוּא: <sup>7</sup>וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל פָּרוּ וַיִּשְׁרְצוּ וַיִּרְבוּ וַיַּעֲצְמוּ בְּמֵאֹד מְאֹד וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ אֹתָם: פ  
<sup>8</sup>וַיִּקֶּם מֶלֶךְ־חָדָשׁ עַל־מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדַע אֶת־יֹסֵף: <sup>9</sup>וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־עַמּוֹ הַזֶּה עִם־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רַב וַעֲצוּם מִמֶּנּוּ: <sup>10</sup>הֲבֵיאָה נִתְחַכְמָה לּוֹ פְּנֵי־יְרֵבָה וְהִיָּה כִּי־תִקְרָאנָה

**ABARBANEL’S QUESTIONS** ♦ It would seem that v. 8, “A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph,” should immediately follow v. 6, “Joseph died.” Why does the text insert the verse about the Israelites’ fertility (which we know about already, anyway, from Gen. 47:27) in between them? ♦ Since Pharaoh already thought that the Israelites were “too numerous for us” (v. 9), why does v. 10 say that he was worried that they would increase? ♦ What does “the event of war” (v. 10) have to do with it? Why wasn’t Pharaoh afraid they themselves would conquer Egypt? ♦ Why would Pharaoh worry that the Israelites would “get them up out of the land” (OJPS)? He should be delighted that they would leave!

**RASHBAM** **6 All that generation.** The 70 people.

**7 Fertile.** With regard to conception. **Prolific.** With regard to birth. Thus the womb would not miscarry. The root meaning of the word is “crawl,” as if it meant here “to produce crawlers”—for little children, like all small creatures, crawl on the ground. **Multiplied.** Rather, they “got big”; the little ones grew up and did not die in childhood. **Increased.** They did not die as grown men, but lived long and **increased very greatly**, to the extent that **the land was filled with them**, as the Temple court “was filled with the radiance of the Presence of the LORD” (Ezek. 10:4) and “the skirts of His robe filled the Temple” (Isa. 6:1). **[A]**

**10 Let us deal shrewdly with them.** So that they do not increase. For if they increase, then **in the event of war** with our enemies, **they may join our enemies in**

**[A]** Rashbam’s Hebrew comment is ostensibly grammatical, though somewhat confusing. One wonders whether the examples chosen are meant to suggest that the Israelites’ increase of population filled Egypt with the Divine Presence.

**IBN EZRA** **6 All that generation.** Since the text has already mentioned the death of Joseph and all his brothers, this phrase must mean “all the Egyptians of that generation.” This is proven by the fact that the king in v. 8 “did not know Joseph.” A

**NJPS** increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground.”<sup>11</sup> So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor; and they built garrison cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Raamses.<sup>12</sup> But the more they were oppressed, the more they

**RASHI** for He has already sworn never again to destroy the world by water. **Rise from the ground.** That is, leave the country—against our will. But our Sages think their real fear was that they themselves would be forced to leave their own land and that it would be taken over by the Israelites, but that they did not say “lest we rise from the ground” so as not to invoke the Evil Eye.

**11 Taskmasters.** Literally, “tax masters”—officials who would collect the tax from them. [A] And what was this “tax”? That they should build store-cities for Pharaoh. **To oppress them with forced labor.** Literally, “with their forced labor”—that is, with the Egyptians’ labor that they forced upon the Israelites. **Garrison cities.** Rather, “store-cities,” as Onkelos and OJPS have it. That this is the correct meaning is shown by Isa. 22:15, where the same root is used for the “steward” of the palace. **Pithom and Raamses.** The cities already existed under those names, but they were not suitable for use as store-cities until they strengthened and fortified them.

**12 The more they were oppressed.** However the Egyptians set their minds to

[A] This is not the word translated as “taskmasters” elsewhere in the story.

**NAHMANIDES** resident in someone else’s land. Solomon did the same thing (2 Chron. 2:16–17, 8:7–8). Afterward (v. 15), Pharaoh secretly commanded the midwives to kill the male children at birth in such a way that even the women who gave birth would not realize that the children had not simply been born dead. Finally (v. 22), he commanded his entire people, “Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile.” He did not want to order his own executioners to kill them or cast them into the Nile, but told his people to do it whenever any of them found a Jewish boy, and if the boy’s father should cry out to the king or to the governor of the city for justice, they would tell him to bring witnesses and they would avenge the boy’s death. [B] Once the royal restraint against murder was relaxed, the Egyptians would find Israelite houses, go into them at night in disguise, and remove the children. That is why it says that Moses’ mother “could hide him no longer” (2:3). Apparently this only went on for a short time, for the decree was obviously not in force yet when Aaron was born, and it would seem to have been abrogated by the time of Moses’ birth. Perhaps Pharaoh’s daughter asked her father out of pity not to apply it to Moses, or perhaps when it was revealed to be a royal order, he canceled it. Or perhaps the astrologers had canceled the decree, as our Sages wrote. [C] But it was all arranged to be done subtly, so that they would not realize that the violence was being directed against them as a people. This explains why the Israelite foremen told Moses, “May the LORD look upon you and punish you for making us loathsome to Pharaoh and his courtiers—putting a sword in their hands to slay us” (5:21)—now they will increase their hatred of us and, under the pretext that we are rebelling against the kingdom, they will slay us publicly, and will no longer need to keep their violence covert. **They may ... rise from the ground.** Rather, “from the land.” Rashi, following the Sages, explains it to mean “We [the Egyptians] may rise from the land,” that is, be expelled against our will. But if it meant this, the text would say “They may rise up *against* the land,” as in 2 Kings 18:13. [D] Perhaps Pharaoh is saying, “They may *rise up* against us *from the land* where they are dwelling—the land of Goshen.” Or he might be explained as saying, “**in the event of war** they will join our enemies in plundering us and *get themselves up out of this land* to the land of Canaan with everything we possess, and we will be unable to revenge ourselves upon them.” This would match the usage in 32:1, “Moses who brought us up from the land of Egypt,” and see similarly Jer. 23:8 and Hosea 2:2.

**11 Taskmasters ... to oppress them.** He set the people to forced labor, that is, he seized some of them for the king’s work. He appointed over them Egyptian taskmasters to seize Israelite men at their own discretion, according to the amount of work that needed to be done. For a month or more at a time they would work on the king’s construction projects, and the rest of the time they would be in their homes. These taskmasters commanded them to build cities for Pharaoh, **and they built garrison cities for Pharaoh** under this system of forced labor.

**12 To dread the Israelites.** When the Egyptians saw that the forced labor did the Israelites no harm, they began to fear for their lives.

[B] Knowing that none of the Egyptians would testify for him. [C] According to B. Sotah 12b, once the astrologers discovered that the one who would save Israel had been thrown into the river, they mistakenly thought that the danger was over. [D] Nahmanides seems to misunderstand Rashi’s comment, which is surprising since it is taken directly from the Talmud. His “misunderstanding” must be deliberate, but it is not clear why.

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS** necessary (Bekhor Shor). **They may join our enemies.** They are so different from us in language and culture—not to mention circumcision—that they would certainly reveal their hatred of us if war broke out (Sforno). **Rise from the ground.** Rise over us and enslave us (Bekhor Shor).

**11 To oppress them.** To fulfill Gen. 15:13, “they shall be ... oppressed four hundred years”; “oppression” in this context refers to forced celibacy (Hizkuni). In order to get them to leave the country (Sforno). **Forced labor.** It would seem that at first this simply

**OJPS** when there befallth us any war, they also join themselves unto our enemies, and fight against us, and get them up out of the land.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore they did set over them taskmasters to afflict them with their burdens. And they built for Pharaoh store-cities, Pithom and Raamses.<sup>12</sup> But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the

מִלְחָמָה וְנוֹסֵף גַּם-הוּא עַל-שְׂנְאֵינוּ  
וְנִלְחַם-בָּנוּ וְעָלָה מִן-הָאָרֶץ: 11 וַיִּשְׂמוּ  
עָלֵינוּ שָׂרֵי מִסִּים לְמַעַן עַנְתּוֹ בְּסִבְלָתָם  
וַיִּבְנוּ עָרֵי מִסְכְּנוֹת לְפָרְעֹה אֶת-פִּתּוֹם  
וְאֶת-רַעַמְסֵס: 12 וְכִבְּאֶשֶׁר יַעֲנוּ אֹתוֹ בְּןֹ

**ABARBANEL’S QUESTIONS** ♦ One can understand why the Egyptians might be apprehensive, but why would they “dread” (v. 12) the Israelites?

**RASHBAM** fighting against us and rise from the ground to return to the land of their ancestors. It would not be good for us to lose our slaves and be called “a crippled kingdom.”

**12 The more they increased.** Rather, “the more they would increase” as they

**IBN EZRA** The word translated here as “event” is plural, though “war” is singular, but this is not uncommon. Or perhaps it implies “war and trouble” or the like. **They may ... rise from the ground.** That is (with OJPS), “get them up out of the land.” Ibn Janah says what Pharaoh really meant was “get us up out of the land,” but he did not wish to give Satan an opportunity to make his words come true by pronouncing them aloud. But I think it is to be understood as written.

**11 They—the Egyptians—set taskmasters over them to oppress them.** To dry up the men’s seed. **Raamses.** As I have already explained at Gen. 47:1, this is not to be confused with Rameses, the region in Goshen where the Israelites dwelt. Saadia explains the name to mean “Eye of the Sun.”

**12 The more they were oppressed, the more they increased.** Rather, “even

**NJPS** increased and spread out, so that the [Egyptians] came to dread the Israelites.

<sup>13</sup>The Egyptians ruthlessly imposed upon the Israelites <sup>14</sup>the various labors that they made them perform. Ruthlessly they made life bitter for them with harsh labor at mortar and bricks and with all sorts of tasks in the field.

<sup>15</sup>The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, <sup>16</sup>saying,

**RASHI** oppress the Israelites, the Holy One set His mind to spread them out and increase them. So the more they were oppressed, **the more they increased and spread out.** A midrash adds: The Holy Spirit says, You say *pen yirbeh*, Lest they increase (v. 10), and I say *ken yirbeh*, Let them increase! **Dread.** Rather, the Egyptians were weary of their lives. [B] But our Sages derive from this word *va-yakutzu* that the Israelites were like *kotzim*—like thorns in the Egyptians' eyes.

**13 Ruthlessly.** The word implies backbreaking labor.

**15 Shiphrah.** This was Jochebed, Moses' mother; the nickname comes from how a midwife *meshapheret*, makes the newborn child presentable. **Puah.** This was Miriam, Moses' sister, so named because a midwife will *po'ah*, whisper into the child's ear and murmur to it as women do to soothe a crying baby. But Isa. 42:14 suggests that the verb means "to cry out."

[B] See Rashbam's comment and the note there.

**NAHMANIDES** **13 The Egyptians ruthlessly imposed upon the Israelites.** Since the forced labor had not harmed the Israelites, it was then decreed that all of Egypt should enslave the people. Every Egyptian who needed work done had the power to seize Israelite men to do his work.

**14 With harsh labor at mortar and bricks.** At first, the taskmasters supplied the bricks, and the forced laborers would construct the building. Now the whole people was driven into slavery, and they were ordered to bring earth and make the mortar with their own hands and feet, and only straw would be provided for them from the palace. They would give the bricks to the forced laborers to construct the building. Moreover, every kind of hard work that Pharaoh and the Egyptians had in the field, such as digging and clearing

another example of this verb, see Isa. 7:16, "the ground whose two kings you *dread* shall be abandoned."

**13 The Egyptians ruthlessly imposed upon the Israelites.** Seeing that forcing them to labor for him was not enough to stop their increase, Pharaoh gave the Egyptians and their taskmasters permission to work them **ruthlessly**—beyond what is ordinarily required even of slaves. When this too failed, he proceeded to give the supervisors of the midwives their instructions to kill the male children. **Ruthlessly.** The Aramaic translation understands this correctly as an adverb. I am surprised at the liturgical hymns that think this root can be used as a verb. That is completely wrong.

**14 Mortar and bricks.** All kinds of construction work. **Tasks in the field.** Plowing and harvesting, pruning and trimming. OJPS correctly adds "in all their service" to include all the various other forms of work they did for the Egyptians, and "wherein they made them serve," where the phrase "they made them serve" does double duty, going both with what precedes it and with what follows it: In all their service wherein they made them serve, they made them serve "with rigor."

**15 Midwives.** They were the supervisors of all the midwives, of which there must have been more than 500. But these two supervised them to make sure Pharaoh collected his tax from their fees. I have seen the same system operative in many places. According to our tradition, the two were Jochebed and Miriam, Moses' mother and sister. And this is correct.

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS** involved paying a fixed amount to the king on a regular basis. One who could not afford to pay would fulfill his obligation by doing construction work. So there were a few Israelites who were not doing this work (Gersonides). **Garrison cities.** Rather, "store-cities." According to Gen. 47:26, Pharaoh took 20% of all the agricultural produce of Egypt. Since the Israelites lived separately and did not pay this 20%, the Egyptians demanded that they contribute by building the cities in which the produce would be stored (Bekhor Shor).

**14 They made life bitter for them.** The intent was to make them so exhausted at night that they would be unable to procreate. When this failed, they tried killing all the boys (Bekhor Shor). The more the Israelites sinned (as Ezek. 20:8 tells us), the worse their oppressors treated them (Sforno). **Harsh labor.** Like field work or construction work (Gersonides).

**15 The Hebrew midwives.** They were Egyptian women who were midwives for the Hebrews; how could Pharaoh expect Hebrew women to kill Hebrew babies? (Abarbanel).

**OJPS** more they spread abroad. And they were adread because of the children of Israel.

<sup>13</sup>And the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigor. <sup>14</sup>And they made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field; in all their service, wherein they made them serve with rigor.

<sup>15</sup>And the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, of whom the name of the one was Shiphrah, and the name of the other Puah; <sup>16</sup>and he said: "When ye do the

יִרְבֶּה וְכֵן יִפְרֹץ וַיִּקְצוּ מִפְּנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

<sup>13</sup> וַיַּעֲבְדוּ מִצְרַיִם אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּפָרֶךְ: <sup>14</sup> וַיִּמְרְרוּ אֶת־חַיֵּיהֶם בְּעִבְדָּה קָשָׁה בְּחֹמֶר וּבִלְבָנִים וּבְכָל־עֲבֹדָה בַשָּׂדֶה אֵת כָּל־עֲבֹדָתָם אֲשֶׁר־עָבְדוּ בָהֶם בְּפָרֶךְ:

<sup>15</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְמִילְדֹת הָעִבְרִיּוֹת אֲשֶׁר שָׂם הָאֱחָת שִׁפְרָה וְשֵׁם הַשְּׁנִיית פּוּעָה: <sup>16</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר בְּיַלְדֻכֶּן אֶת־הָעִבְרִיּוֹת

**ABARBANEL'S QUESTIONS** ♦ Why did Pharaoh tell the midwives (v. 16) to kill the boys and let the girls live? If his purpose was to limit the population, it would have been smarter to do it the other way around, or simply to kill both boys and girls.

**RASHBAM** had before. They were in dread for their lives, as in Gen. 27:46 and Isa. 7:16. [B]

**13 Ruthlessly.** Or, as OJPS translates, "with rigor." The Hebrew noun in this phrase implies backbreaking labor. The same root is used in the Talmud for "cracking nuts."

**14 With all sorts of tasks in the field.** Plowing and harvesting. OJPS is closer to the Hebrew here: "all manner of service in the field; in all their service, wherein they made them serve" in town as well, "with rigor."

**15 The Hebrew midwives.** Meaning "midwives who were Hebrews" rather than Egyptian women who were midwives for the Hebrews.

[B] Rashbam repeats Rashi's comment (omitting the midrash) and then adds a citation to the Genesis verse where the idiom Rashi cites is used, but also to a verse from Isaiah (without the idiom) that matches the NJPS translation of "dread."

**IBN EZRA** though they were oppressed, they increased" just as they had in the days before they were oppressed. **Spread out.** It really means "to burst forth." Under the oppression, they did not merely increase naturally, but violated the laws of nature, so remarkable was their increase. **Dread.** Interestingly, this Hebrew verb (קָרַץ) and its palindrome (צוֹק) mean the same thing. For

**NJPS** “When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live.”<sup>17</sup> The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live.<sup>18</sup> So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?”<sup>19</sup> The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth.”<sup>20</sup> And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly.<sup>21</sup> And because the midwives feared God, He established households for them.<sup>22</sup> Then Pharaoh charged all his people,

**RASHI 16 Birthstool.** The word is the same as used for a potter’s wheel in Jer. 18:3. **If it is a boy.** Pharaoh cared only about the males because his astrologers told him that a boy would be born who would save the Jews.

**17 They let the boys live.** Rather, they *made* them live—by providing them with food.

**19 They are vigorous.** Following the Targum, this word really means that they are “life-givers”—the same word used for midwives. They are as skilled as the professional midwives. But our Sages read the word in its other meaning, “animals”—implying that, like animals, the Hebrew women did not need midwives. If you are wondering how the text can compare people to animals, see the blessing of Jacob in Genesis 49, where the brothers are complimented by being compared to animals. Ezek. 19:2 extends the comparison to all the tribes by saying to the princess of Israel, “What a lion was your mother!”

**20–21 God dealt well with the midwives.** And how? **He established households for them.** Rather, with OJPS, “houses”—that is, priestly, levitical, and royal dynasties, which are called “houses.” The priestly and levitical houses came from Jochebed, through Aaron, and the royal house came from Miriam, for David was descended from her, as explained in B. Sot. 11b.

**22 All his people.** The decree applied to the Egyptians as well as to the Israelites. The day that Moses was born, Pharaoh’s astrologers told him, “The one who will save the Jews

**NAHMANIDES** out manure, all this was set upon them. The Egyptians would also harry them, pressuring them so they could not rest, beating and cursing them. This is how the Egyptians **ruthlessly made life bitter for them ... with all sorts of tasks.** The king would provide them with “meager food” (Isa. 30:20), as is the custom with the king’s laborers. This explains the expression used by the Israelites in Num. 11:5, “We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons” and so forth. For fish

**19 The midwives said.** We did not disobey your command; **they are lively.** The Hebrew women have much more vitality than do the Egyptian women.

**20 God dealt well with the midwives.** By making “houses” for them.

**21 The midwives feared God.** And not the king. **[E] He established households for them.** That is, He gave them many offspring, in recompense for having given life to the offspring of the Israelites. But Saadia explains it to mean that God literally made them houses in which He hid them so that they could not be found.

**22 Pharaoh.** Everyone who sits on the throne of Egypt is called Pharaoh; our text does not give the Pharaoh’s name, as do, e.g., 2 Kings 23:29–35 (Pharaoh Neco) and Jer. 44:30 (Pharaoh Hophra); these were their names in their own language.

**[D]** Thus it excludes the descendants of Ishmael, of Esau, and of Abraham’s sons by Keturah, the woman whom he married after Sarah’s death (Gen. 25:1–6). **[E]** The long commentary here includes a discussion of the verb “to fear” in the context of fearing God. Though the discussion is strictly grammatical, Ibn Ezra ends it by saying, “One who is intelligent will comprehend,” suggesting that he is also implying something about the nature of God.

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS 16 Birthstool.** Rather, “the genitals” (Kimhi). **If it is a boy, kill him.** According to v. 10, they were worried about war, in which event the males would be the dangerous ones (Hizkuni).

**21 He established households for them.** Rather, “houses” (OJPS)—descendants who would be kings and leaders. And this was the

**OJPS** office of a midwife to the Hebrew women, ye shall look upon the birthstool: if it be a son, then ye shall kill him; but if it be a daughter, then she shall live.”<sup>17</sup> But the midwives feared God, and did not as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the men-children alive.<sup>18</sup> And the king of Egypt called for the midwives, and said unto them: “Why have ye done this thing, and have saved the men-children alive?”<sup>19</sup> And the midwives said unto Pharaoh: “Because the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women; for they are lively, and are delivered ere the midwife come unto them.”<sup>20</sup> And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied, and waxed very mighty.<sup>21</sup> And it came to pass, because the midwives feared God, that He made them houses.<sup>22</sup> And Pharaoh charged all his

וְרֵאִיתֶן עַל־הַאֲבָנִים אִם־בֵּן הוּא וְהַמֶּתֶן אֹתוֹ וְאִם־בַּת הִיא וְחַיָּה: 17 וְתִירָאן הַמִּילְדוֹת אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים וְלֹא עָשׂוּ כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֲלֵיהֶן מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וְתַחֲיִין אֶת־הַיְלָדִים: 18 וַיִּקְרָא מֶלֶךְ־מִצְרַיִם לַמִּילְדוֹת וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶן מְדוּעַ עָשִׂיתֶן הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וְתַחֲיִין אֶת־הַיְלָדִים: 19 וְתִירָאן הַמִּילְדוֹת אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים וְלֹא כִנְשִׁים הַמִּצְרַיִת הָעֵבְרִית כִּי־חַיִּוֹת הֵנָּה בְטָרָם תָּבוֹא אֲלֵהֶן הַמִּילְדוֹת וְיִלְדוּ: 20 וַיִּטֵּב אֲלֵהֶם לַמִּילְדוֹת וַיִּרְבּוּ הָעָם וַיַּעֲצֻמוּ מְאֹד: 21 וַיְהִי כִי־יִרְאוּ הַמִּילְדוֹת אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם בָּתִּים: 22 וַיִּצַּו פְּרָעֹה

**ABARBANEL’S QUESTIONS** ♦ How could the Hebrew midwives, who feared God and were rewarded by Him, tell the obvious lie that “Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth” (v. 19)? For if this was so, there would be no need for Hebrew midwives. ♦ What are the “houses” (OJPS) that God made for them (v. 21), and why is “them” in the masculine gender instead of the feminine? ♦ Why is it repeated that “the midwives feared God”? ♦ Why does v. 22 not specify, “Every Hebrew boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile”?

**RASHBAM 19 They are vigorous.** Healthy and competent and quick to give birth.

**21 He made them houses.** Not “He,” as the translations assume, but “he”—Pharaoh—made houses for them to keep them from going to the Hebrew women who were giving birth. In addition, he “charged all his people” (v. 22), and so forth. **[C]**

**[C]** Since the midwives would not do Pharaoh’s dirty work, they were put under house arrest, and the entire population was given the task of making sure the Jewish babies were drowned.

**IBN EZRA 16 Hebrew women.** They are so called because of their descent from Eber; but the word only applies to those who are of the Hebrew faith. **[D] Kill him.** Secretly, so that the matter does not become known. For Pharaoh knew he was committing a violent crime.

**17 They let the boys live.** Rather, they *made* them live with all their might, even more than they would have done had there been no decree at all. This must be the meaning of the words, for the verse has already told us that they disobeyed the king’s instructions and did not kill the boys.

**18 Why have you done this thing?** He was not really asking for a reason; this was his way of saying, “You’re dead for having disobeyed my command.”

**NJPS** saying, “Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.”

**OJPS** people, saying: “Every son that is born ye shall cast into the river, and every daughter ye shall save alive.”

**2** A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. <sup>2</sup>The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she

לְכָל-עַמּוֹ לְאִמֶּר כָּל-הַבֶּן הַיְלֹוֹד הַיְאָרָה תִשְׁלִיכֶהוּ וְכָל-הַבֵּת תַּחֲיֶינָהּ: ס

**ב** וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לֵוִי וַיִּקַּח אֶת-בִּתּוֹ לְאִשׁ: <sup>2</sup>וַתַּהַר הָאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתֵּרָא אֹתוֹ

**RASHI** was born today. We do not know whether he is an Egyptian or an Israelite. But we can see that his end will come by means of water.” So Pharaoh issued his decree that very day, against the Egyptians as well as against the Israelites. Read carefully! It does not say, “every boy that is born to the Hebrews,” but “every boy that is born.” What the astrologers did not understand was that the “waters” through which Moses would come to harm were the waters of Meribah. [C]

**2:1 Married a Levite woman.** Rather, “took the daughter of Levi.” He had separated from her in order not to conceive children who would then fall victim to Pharaoh’s decree. Now he brought her back and “took” her to wife a second time. She was even turned back into a young woman, though she was 130 at the time. For she had been born on the journey down to Egypt, just as they arrived, and the Israelites were in Egypt for 210 years. Since Moses was 80 when they left, she must have been 130 when she got pregnant with him. But she also became young again, for the text calls her “daughter” of Levi. [D]

**2 How beautiful he was.** When he was born, the whole house filled with light. [E]

[C] For striking the rock there to get water, Moses is punished by not being allowed to live long enough to cross into the land of Israel. See Num. 20:1-13 and Deut. 32:50-51. [D] When the descendants of Jacob who came down to Egypt are listed in the book of Numbers, Jochebed is included with the note that she “was born to Levi in Egypt” (Num. 26:59), having presumably been conceived in Canaan or on the journey down. The fact that Moses has older siblings implies that Amram and Jochebed had already been married before the marriage described in 2:1. [E] Rashi’s source, B. Sotah 12a, is based on the resemblance of our verse—literally, “She saw him, that he was good”—to Gen. 1:4, “God saw the light, that it was good.”

**NAHMANIDES** is quite plentiful in Egypt. The Israelites would get them from those who caught them at the king’s order, and would get cucumbers and melons from the gardens, “with no one to molest them” (Judg. 18:7). For it was the king’s command. But our Sages say that they were slaves to the kings themselves, not to the subjects of the kings. If so, then **the Egyptians** who **imposed upon** them were Pharaoh’s taskmasters.

**2:1 A certain man of the house of Levi went.** Our Sages said that he “went” to get her back after taking his daughter’s advice to end their separation (see below). Ibn Ezra says that the Jews lived in many different cities, and he “went” from his own city to hers in order to marry her. But what point would there be for the text to mention this? In my opinion, the text is emphasizing that he ignored the danger posed by Pharaoh’s decree and got married with the intention of having children. For the text uses the expression “went and did” about everyone who bestirs himself to do some new action: e.g., “Reuben went and lay with Bilhah” (Gen. 35:22); “he went and married Gomer” (Hosea 1:1). This man too “went” and **married a Levite woman**. The text does not mention either of their names, because if it did so it would have had to give their entire genealogies right back to Levi. But at this point, in a hurry to get to the birth of Israel’s savior, the text wished to be brief. Afterward, in 6:14-25, the text will give the complete genealogy of Reuben and Simeon in order to get down to Levi and to the parents of Moses. According to the

produces defective offspring are wrong; the prohibitions against incest are not for practical reasons, but to make Israel a holy people. [F]

**2 The woman conceived.** We know that Aaron was older than Moses. This passage does not mention him because nothing happened to him in his youth, as it did to Moses. A similar phenomenon is found in 2 Sam. 12:24, where Solomon appears to be David’s first living child; yet, according to 2 Sam. 5:14, Shammua, Shobab, and Nathan had already been born to him. Miriam, too, was older; our ancestral tradition identifies her with Puah, the midwife, and v. 4 says explicitly that Moses’ sister stationed herself to watch over him. Ben Zuta reads Num. 26:59, “she bore ... Aaron and Moses and their sister Miriam,” as implying that Miriam was the youngest; but this

[F] Lev. 18:12 prohibits sex with the sister of one’s father. But the examples of Aaron, Miriam, and Moses show that the reason for the prohibition is not that the children will be defective.

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS** appropriate reward for giving life, for the mark of a complete leader is that he provides for the welfare of those whom he leads (Gersonides).

**22 Let every girl live.** Pharaoh assumed the girls would marry Egyptians and be assimilated (Gersonides).

**2:1 A Levite woman.** The tradition quoted by Rashi says that Jochebed was 130 when Moses was born. My own calculations, according to the rabbinic assumption that she was born just as the sons of Jacob entered Egypt, make her 145. In either case, this would be a greater miracle than happened to Sarah; one would think the Torah would have mentioned it. But the whole assumption is the height of absurdity. If she was born at the end of Levi’s life, long after he arrived in Egypt, she would have been 58 at Moses’ birth, which is a good deal less strange (Gersonides).

**2 She hid him for three months.** The Egyptians did not realize she was pregnant for three months, at which point they began to

**2** And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi. <sup>2</sup>And the woman conceived, and bore a son; and when she saw him that he was a

**RASHBAM 2:1 A certain man of the house of Levi.** It was Amram. **Married Jochebed, a Levite woman.** Literally, with OJPS, “a daughter of Levi”; we know from Num. 26:59 that she “was born to Levi in Egypt.” He married her some years before the birth of Moses. For according to 7:7, Aaron was 83 and Moses was 80 when they spoke to Pharaoh, making Aaron, their first child, three years older than his younger brother.

**2 The woman conceived** at the time of Pharaoh’s decree about casting the boys into the Nile **and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him.** One who explains this to mean that she hid him *because* she saw he was beautiful is a liar. For the mothers of all newborns have maternal instincts toward them. So “saw” must be explained as we explained it in Gen. 1:31, “God saw all that He had made, and found it very good.” He looked at all He had made and at all the actions He had performed to see whether any of them needed repair. It turned out that everything was fine and in good repair. The same applies here. Moses was presumably born at the end of six months—just as Samuel was

**IBN EZRA 2:1 Went.** Apparently she lived in another city. All the Israelites lived in Rameses, but there were a number of different cities there. **A Levite woman.** Literally, with OJPS, “a daughter of Levi” the son of Jacob. This is clear from Num. 26:59, where she is referred to as “Jochebed daughter of Levi, who was born to Levi in Egypt.” Thus she is the sister of Kohath. That is why 6:20, naming her husband Amram, calls her “his father’s sister.” This demonstrates that those who say inbreeding

**NJPS** hid him for three months. <sup>3</sup>When she could hide him no longer, she got a wicker basket for him and caulked it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the

**OJPS** goodly child, she hid him three months. <sup>3</sup>And when she could not longer hide him, she took for him an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch; and she put the child therein, and laid it in

בִּיטוּב הוּא וְתַצְפְּנָהּוּ שְׁלֵשָׁה יָרְחִים:  
 וְלֹא-יִכְלָה עוֹד הַצְּפִינֹו וְתַקַּח-לוֹ תַבַּת

גְּמָא וְתַחְמָרָהּ בַּחֲמֵר וּבְזֹפֶת וְתָשֶׂם בָּהּ  
 אֶת-הַיֶּלֶד וְתָשֶׂם בְּסוּף עַל-שֹׁפֶת הַיְאֹר:

**RASHI** 3 She could hide him no longer. For the Egyptians had been calculating the days since her husband brought her back. She actually gave birth to Moses after six months and a day, which is quite possible, for B. Nid. 38b tells us that “a woman who bears at seven months may give birth before the full number of months has been completed.” The Egyptians finally came around to check up on her at the end of the ninth month. **Wicker.** It is strong and pliable. **Bitumen and pitch.** Not “bitumen,” but “mortar.” [F] Unlike Noah’s ark, which was caulked with pitch inside and out, Moses’ was caulked with clay inside and pitch only on the outside, so that the righteous child should not have to smell the pitch.

[F] See Gen. 11:3.

**ABARBANEL’S QUESTIONS** ♦ Why did Moses’ mother put him in the Nile (v. 3)? Wasn’t this exactly what Pharaoh had decreed? Didn’t she realize how easily the ark might have overturned, or that Moses might be found by someone who would carry out Pharaoh’s decree?

**RASHBAM** born “after the seasons of the days” (1 Sam. 1:20), implying two seasons of three months each, plus two days. This would explain why she was able to hide him for three months. For the Egyptians would check up on all the pregnant women at the end of nine months. So when Moses was born, she looked to see whether he was a stillbirth, in which case she need not bother to hide him, and saw that he was good and fine. For he had hair and nails, which are signs of viability according to B. Yev. 80b. So she knew that he would live, and she hid him for three months, until the end of the nine months that are the normal period of gestation. And when they came to check on her, she told them she had miscarried. For otherwise they would have thrown him into the Nile.

**3 Hide him.** Note that the unusual pointing means this word should be pronounced *ha-tz’fi-no*. **With bitumen** on the inside **and pitch** on the outside, to make it watertight. **Among the reeds** in the water **by the bank of the Nile.** She hid it well, so that passersby along the bank of the Nile could not see the basket. But those who actually bathed in the river could see it, for Jochebed did not go into the river to make sure it was hidden on every side. That is how Pharaoh’s daughter, who was bathing in the river, saw it. But her maidens, who were walking along the bank of the Nile (v. 5), were unable to see it.

**NAHMANIDES** straightforward meaning, this verse refers not to a reunion after a separation but to their actual marriage; the events in the Torah are not narrated in strict chronological order. For they were married, and she bore Miriam and Aaron, before Pharaoh’s decree. After the decree that every boy who was born should be cast into the Nile, she bore this “beautiful” (v. 2) son. The text does not describe the births of Miriam and Aaron, because there was nothing unusual about them. According to our Sages, this was a remarriage, for the man had separated from his wife in order not to father a child who would be killed by Pharaoh’s decree and brought her back after Miriam prophesied that her mother would bear a son who would save Israel. [E] In this case, “married” implies that they celebrated the reunion as if it were a marriage: He brought her back to his home in a bridal palanquin, with Miriam and Aaron dancing joyfully before them, for by this means Israel would be redeemed. Even though Aaron was still too young to understand this, God put joy in his heart about it. Or perhaps his sister Miriam told him to rejoice.

**2-4 When she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him.** It is well known that women love their children, beautiful or not, and they would all hide them to the best of their ability; there was no need to say that he was beautiful to explain why she hid him. The reason why this detail was included is that she saw in him an unprecedented beauty and thought that a miracle might be done for him, and he would be saved. So she set her mind to devise a plan. When she saw that **she could hide him no longer**, she thought he

[E] In 15:20, Miriam is called “the prophetess, Aaron’s sister,” which the Sages took to imply that she had prophesied before Moses’ birth, when she was the sister only of Aaron, and not (yet) of Moses.

**IBN EZRA** blind man has forgotten the many biblical examples showing that word order has nothing to do with chronology. [G]

**How beautiful he was.** Literally, not “beautiful” but “good.” In reference to a grown man, “good” can refer to intellectual or spiritual qualities; but with reference to a baby, it can only refer to physical ones. **Three months.** Some say this implies he was born at the beginning of the seventh month of her pregnancy, when the Egyptians expected her to still be pregnant for another three months. But this is a midrash—the Egyptians had no way of knowing when a woman got pregnant. The text is merely telling us how long she was able to hide him. It is extremely farfetched to think that a child born at six months could survive. Everyone knows that the standard length of pregnancy is nine months, so much so that the date of conception can be figured by subtracting nine months from the date of birth. I have done this five times myself. [H]

**3 When she could hide him no longer.** The text does not tell us why, but perhaps the Egyptian neighbor women heard his voice. We know from 3:22 that there were Egyptians living among them even in Goshen. **Bitumen.** Etymologically related to the word translated “caulked”; as used here, it refers to a sticky red clay found in the land of Israel. Arabic has the same word. **She put the child into it.** She thought, like Hagar, “Let me not look on as the child dies” (Gen. 21:16). Or perhaps Miriam had prophetically told her to do so. God’s designs are subtle indeed; it may well be that He arranged the whole affair so as to have Moses grow up in the palace, at a high intellectual level, rather than in the debased environment of a slave. Moreover, his kinsmen would not have respected him when it was time for him to lead them out of slavery if he had grown up among them. **Reeds.** The Hebrew word is the name of a plant found in a riverine environment.

[G] Eleazar b. Zuta was a 10<sup>th</sup>-century Karaite biblical commentator. Among Ibn Ezra’s counter examples are the frequent listing of Noah’s sons as “Shem, Ham, and Japheth” vs. the reverse order in Genesis 10, and “there Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried” (Gen. 49:31), though Sarah (who was buried by Abraham) was obviously buried first. [H] Ibn Ezra goes on to discuss the astrological implications of the nine-month delay between conception and birth. His comment suggests that he himself had five children, but little is known about his family.

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS** count nine months (Bekhor Shor). Since Moses was born on the 7<sup>th</sup> of Adar, he was hidden until the 6<sup>th</sup> of Sivan—the same day the Torah would later be given (Hizkuni).

**3 When she could hide him no longer.** A three-month-old cries much more loudly than a newborn (Gersonides). **Wicker.** Wicker is a reed; so the basket would not be noticed when she placed it in the reeds (Bekhor Shor). **Among the reeds by the bank of the Nile.** Sugarcane is grown on the banks of the Nile, and this is where she placed the basket—not in the river (Abarbanel).

**NJPS** bank of the Nile. <sup>4</sup>And his sister stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him.

<sup>5</sup>The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She spied the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to fetch it. <sup>6</sup>When she opened it, she saw that it was a child, a boy crying. She took pity on it and said, “This must be a Hebrew

**RASHI** **5 Her maidens walked along the Nile.** Literally, “were going, the Nile at hand.” The idiom comes from the closeness of a man’s hand to his body. But our Sages say “going” means they were “going” to die (as in Gen. 25:32, where Esau says, “I am going to die”), because they tried to prevent

her from taking Moses out of the water. The text gives them some support, for why do we need to be told that her maidens were going with her? **Her slave girl.** The Sages read *amatah* in its other meaning, “her forearm” (though grammatically this would require a double *m*), the same word that in the plural means “cubits.” They take it to mean that her arm lengthened as many cubits as it took to reach the basket.

**6 When she opened it, she saw that it was a child.** That is the straightforward meaning. But the verse can also be read to say, “She saw it *with* the child,” which can be

**NAHMANIDES** might be rescued by some other scheme and made a **wicker basket** for him. **His sister stationed herself at a distance** so as not to be recognized, **to learn what would befall him.** All this supports the words of our Sages, who explained that the radiant beauty of the baby Moses filled the whole house with light and that Miriam had prophesied, “My mother is going to bear a son who will save Israel.”

**5 Came down to bathe in the Nile.** Literally, “on” the Nile. It may be that there were terraces in the Nile, and she came down from the palace to bathe on the first terrace. So she did not enter the actual current of the Nile, but saw the ark in the reeds at a distance from her **and sent her slave girl to fetch it.** Or “on the Nile” is simply idiomatic for “in” the Nile, as the translations take it.

**6 A boy crying.** Rashi explains that he had the voice of a boy, not a baby. But R. Nehemiah in B. Sotah 12b has already refuted this explanation: “If so, you have made our master Moses into one possessed of a blemish.” [F] Moreover, why would the text mention the depth of his voice? Ibn Ezra thinks that his limbs were shaped like those of a boy rather than those of an infant and that this was to add to the description of his beauty, which is what made Pharaoh’s daughter save him. But it would be more correct to explain it that he was crying as powerfully as a boy and that this is why she took pity on him. The legend is that even as a baby he was acting like a grown boy—until the angel Gabriel came and hit him to make him cry and arouse pity in Pharaoh’s daughter. But in my opinion there is no need for all this. A baby can be called a boy from the very day of his birth, as when Samson’s father asks for instructions about “how to act with the boy that is to be born” (Judg. 13:8). Similarly, Samuel is called a “boy” when Hannah brings him to Shiloh, though he cannot be older than 24 months, for he has just been weaned off milk (1 Sam. 1:23–24). **This must be a Hebrew child.** She realized he must have been put there either in order to save him or so as not to “look on as the child dies” (Gen. 37:22). And why would an Egyptian need to do this? Some say that she could tell he was a Hebrew because she saw that he was circumcised. But in order to know this she would have had to take off his clothes and check him. And there is no need for this explanation. [G]

[F] The Levites were singers in the Temple; but if this explanation were correct, Moses would have an abnormal voice and be disqualified from serving. [G] Nahmanides does not accept the rabbinic midrash (see Rashi to 1:22) that the decree applied to Egyptian as well as Hebrew boys.

length—to keep it from being visible to any passerby; and a Pharaoh’s daughter would not plunge into the reeds in this way.

**6 She saw that it was a child.** Literally, as in OJPS, “she saw it—the child.” **A boy crying.** His limbs were formed as if he were already a full-grown boy. She saw that he was circumcised and, because of his beauty, she took pity on him; this is why v. 2 makes such a point of his being beautiful.

[I] Since Aaron, the oldest sibling, is three years older than Moses (see 7:7), Miriam could not have been more than two, too young to be the “sister” in this passage.

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS** **4 His sister.** She must have been about 15, but her age is nowhere mentioned (Abarbanel). **Stationed herself.** Literally, “she [her mother] stationed her” (Bekhor Shor). **To learn what would befall him.** She assumed some Egyptian would take him in; the Egyptians were so promiscuous that many illegitimate children must have been abandoned (Sforno).

**6 A Hebrew child.** Who had been cast into the Nile (Bekhor Shor).

**OJPS** the flags by the river’s brink. <sup>4</sup>And his sister stood afar off, to know what would be done to him.

<sup>5</sup>And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the river; and her maidens walked along by the river-side; and she saw the ark among the flags, and sent her handmaid to fetch it. <sup>6</sup>And she opened it, and saw it, even the child; and behold a boy that wept. And she had compassion on him, and said: “This is one of the Hebrews’

וַתַּעֲבֹב אֶחָתוֹ מֵרֶחֶק לְדַעָהּ מִה־יַּעֲשֶׂה לּוֹ: <sup>4</sup>

וַתֵּרֶד בַּת־פַּרְעֹה לְרַחֵץ עַל־הַיָּאֵר וַנְּעַרְתִּינָהּ הַלְכַת עַל־יַד הַיָּאֵר וַתֵּרֶא אֶת־הַתַּבָּה בְּתוֹךְ הַסּוּף וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת־אִמָּתָהּ וַתִּקְחָהּ: <sup>5</sup> וַתִּפְתַּח וַתֵּרְאֶהוּ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד וְהִנֵּה נֹעֵר בְּכָה וַתַּחֲמֵל עָלָיו <sup>6</sup>

**RASHBAM** **5 Her slave girl.** Not “her forearm.”

**6 When she opened it, she saw that it was a child.** This translation is mistaken. Who doesn’t know that if she opened the basket she would see it was a child? What it means is that she opened the basket and looked at the child to see whether it was male or female, and saw that it was a **boy**, that is, that it was male and not female. She saw that his penis was circumcised and realized that it was not an abandoned baby—as she might have thought had it been a girl—but had been deliberately hidden. Note that in the story of Samson we find the expression, “how to act with the boy that is to be born” (Judg. 13:8)—it is called a “boy” on the very day that it is born. **A boy crying. She took pity on it.** She took pity on it because it was crying. And because she saw that it was a circumcised boy, she said, **This must be a Hebrew child.** [D]

[D] Thus the text responds to “a boy” and “crying” in reverse order—first to “crying” (she took pity) and then to the child’s being a boy (“This must be a Hebrew child”). Rashbam notes a similar literary phenomenon in the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1.

**IBN EZRA** **4 His sister.** This may merely mean a female relation of some kind. [I]

**5 The daughter of Pharaoh came down.** “Down” because water is always at a lower level; and of course Pharaoh’s daughter came down from the palace. **To bathe.** This was the custom of the Egyptian ladies. **Her maidens.** That is, her maid-servants, who attended her. **She ... sent her slave girl.** One of the maidens. Grammatically, *amah* cannot possibly mean “her arm,” as the midrash has it. In any case, the *amah* that means “cubit” is a unit of measure—it does not mean “forearm.” Moreover, why would the text have bothered to mention her maidens if she got the baby herself? In any case, the basket was placed quite far from shore—certainly more than an arm’s

**NJPS** child.” <sup>7</sup>Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for you?” <sup>8</sup>And Pharaoh’s daughter answered, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother. <sup>9</sup>And Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will pay your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed it. <sup>10</sup>When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses, explaining, “I drew him out of the water.”

<sup>11</sup>Some time after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian

**RASHI** interpreted midrashically as follows: What did she see with the child? The Shekhinah. **A boy crying.** He already had the voice of a boy, not a baby.

**7 A Hebrew nurse.** For she had taken him to a number of Egyptian nurses, but he would not suck from them with the mouth that would one day speak with the Shekhinah.

**8 The girl went.** She went with alacrity. The text uses the unusual word *almah* for “girl” to suggest *alimut*, “vigor.”

**9 Take this child.** When Pharaoh’s daughter told Jochebed, “Take,” *heilichi*, she had no idea that she was speaking prophetically: *Hei lichi*: “He is yours.”

**10 I drew him out.** Hebrew *m’shitihu*. The Targum explains this word correctly. Menahem derives the name from מוש, but I say the correct root is משה, “to take out” (as in 2 Sam. 22:17 and Ps. 18:17, “He drew me out of the mighty waters”). To be from מוש, it would have to be *mashti*, not *mashiti*.

**11 When Moses had grown.** V. 10 already says “when the child grew up”; the verbs are exactly the same in the Hebrew. R. Judah says: V. 10 means that he attained his full growth; v. 11 means that he had grown in power, for Pharaoh put him in charge of his household. **Witnessed their labors.** Literally, “he saw *in* their labors”—he saw himself in

**NAHMANIDES 11 When Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk.**

That is, when he had grown to be a man. The “growing up” in v. 10 merely implies that he had grown too old to nurse, so his mother brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter and she adopted him, so he might “attend upon kings” (Prov. 22:29). Afterward he grew to the age of maturity. **He went out to his kinsfolk.** He had been told that he was a Jew, and he wanted to see them because they were his kinsfolk. But when he saw their toilsome labors, he could not bear it, so he killed the Egyptian who was beating the oppressed Jew.

a single person has two names, the text states this clearly: “Esau—that is, Edom” (Gen. 36:1); “Abram, that is, Abraham” (1 Chron. 1:27). Otherwise one would presume that two different names referred to two separate people. There are innumerable cases where two biblical names are identified midrashically as being the same person, [K] but the bottom line is what the *ge’onim* say: There is no need to reconcile contradictions with, or within, the midrash. **Explaining.** Perhaps she learned our language, or asked someone.

**11 He went out of the palace to his kinsfolk.** The Egyptians. [L]

[J] “Monius” has been explained as a rendering of the name Menes, the legendary first king of Egypt. [K] Ibn Ezra goes on to deal at length with the cases of Nehemiah and of Caleb. [L] This is incomprehensible, unless Ibn Ezra thinks that “one of his kinsmen” refers to the attacker, rather than the victim. The commentators disagree on whether to read “the Egyptians” as a mistake for “the Hebrews,” or whether Ibn Ezra referred to the Israelites who were living in Egypt (as opposed to those living in Goshen) as “Egyptians.” Neither solution is completely satisfying.

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS 7 A Hebrew nurse.** For an Egyptian nurse would not be willing to suckle a Hebrew child (Hizkuni).

**8 The child’s mother.** The milk of his own mother is better for a child than that of any other (Gersonides).

**10 She named him Moses.** Either she had converted to Judaism and learned Hebrew, as our rabbis suggest, or Jochebed named him and explained the name to her (Hizkuni). The grammatical form has been misunderstood. The verse means: She (Jochebed) named him Moses, explaining to Pharaoh’s daughter, “You drew him out of the water” (Abarbanel).

**11 He went out to his kinsfolk.** Either it was well known in the palace that Moses was a Hebrew, or else Pharaoh’s daughter told him (Gersonides).

**OJPS** children.” <sup>7</sup>Then said his sister to Pharaoh’s daughter: “Shall I go and call thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee?” <sup>8</sup>And Pharaoh’s daughter said to her: “Go.” And the maiden went and called the child’s mother.

<sup>9</sup>And Pharaoh’s daughter said unto her: “Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages.” And the woman took the child, and nursed it. <sup>10</sup>And the child grew, and she brought him unto Pharaoh’s daughter, and he became her son. And she called his name Moses, and said: “Because I drew him out of the water.”

<sup>11</sup>And it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown up, that he went out unto his brethren, and looked on their burdens; and he saw an Egyptian smiting a

וְתֹאמֶר מִיִּלְדֵי הָעִבְרִים זֶה׃ 7 וְתֹאמֶר אָחִתּוֹ אֶל-בֵּית-פַּרְעֹה הָאֵלֶּף וְקָרָאתִי לָךְ אִשָּׁה מִיִּנְקַת מִן הָעִבְרִיִּת וְתִינַק לָךְ אֶת-הַיֶּלֶד׃ 8 וְתֹאמֶר-לָהּ בַת-פַּרְעֹה לְכִי וְתִלְךְ הָעֵלְמָה וְתִקְרָא אֶת-אִם הַיֶּלֶד׃ 9 וְתֹאמֶר לָהּ בַת-פַּרְעֹה הֲלִילִכִי אֶת-הַיֶּלֶד הַזֶּה וְהִינֵקְהוּ לִי וְאֲנִי אֶתֵּן אֶת-שְׂכָרְךָ וְתִקַּח הָאִשָּׁה הַיֶּלֶד וְתִנְיָקֵהוּ׃ 10 וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וְתִבְאָהוּ לְבַת-פַּרְעֹה וַיְהִי-לָהּ לְבֵן וְתִקְרָא שְׁמוֹ מֹשֶׁה וְתֹאמֶר כִּי מִן-הַמַּיִם מִשִּׁיתָהּ׃

שלישי 11 וַיְהִי | בְּיָמַימ הָהֵם וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל-אָחָיו וַיִּרְא בְּסַבְּלָתָם וַיִּרְא אִישׁ מִצְרִי

**ABARBANEL’S QUESTIONS** ♦ How did Pharaoh’s daughter imagine she could bring Moses up in the palace (v. 10), and how could Pharaoh’s advisers not notice this? ♦ If Moses grew up as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, how did he know that the Israelites were his kinsfolk (v. 11)? ♦ Why did Moses leave the palace to associate with the pitiable Jews, when any one of them would have *disassociated* himself from them if he could?

**RASHBAM 10 I drew him out.** Hebrew *m’shitihu*. The verb משה is a variant of מוש “to pull” with the particular meaning of “pull out of the water”; see also Ps. 18:17, “He drew me out of the mighty waters.”

**11 Beating a Hebrew.** Except for the archaism, OJPS “smiting” is a more accurate translation, since the same Hebrew word may mean either “kill” or “beat”; but NJPS may well be correct.

**IBN EZRA 9 Take this child.** Saadia reads “take,” *heilichi*, as *hei lichi*, “he is yours.” But this is incorrect; we find no such expression anywhere in the Bible. Compare it to “nurse it,” which is grammatically similar.

**10 Made him her son.** That is, adopted him, as Naomi does to Obed in Ruth 4. **Moses** is the Hebrew translation of his Egyptian name, which was Monius. [J] The Talmud (B. Meg. 13a) reads 1 Chron. 4:18 to say that Moses had six other names, and Leviticus Rabbah adds three more. Which is surprising, since names are contingent on accidental factors and not part of the essence of what they name, as I will explain shortly in connection with “When they ask me, ‘What is His name?’” (3:16). How could 1 Chron. 4:18 say “These were the sons of Bithiah daughter of Pharaoh” if all the names referred to a single person? When a

**NJPS** beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. <sup>12</sup>He turned this way and that and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. <sup>13</sup>When he went out the next day, he found two Hebrews fighting; so he said to the offender, “Why do you strike your fellow?” <sup>14</sup>He retorted, “Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” Moses was frightened, and thought: Then the matter is known! <sup>15</sup>When Pharaoh learned of the matter, he sought to kill Moses; but Moses fled from Pharaoh. He arrived in the land of Midian, and sat down beside a well.

**RASHI** their labors, empathized with them, and grieved for them. **An Egyptian.** He was one of the taskmasters appointed to oversee the Israelite foremen, and he would get them up for work at cockcrow. **Beating a Hebrew.** Whipping him cruelly. It was the husband of Shelomith daughter of Dibri. The taskmaster wanted her. At night he had roused the husband for work and gotten him out of the house, then returned and had sex with the man’s wife, who thought it was her husband. When the man came home, he realized what had happened. When the Egyptian saw that the man had found out, he beat him cruelly all day long.

**12 He turned this way and that.** That is, Moses “turned this way” and saw what the taskmaster had done to the man at home, and “turned that way” and saw what he had done to him in the field. But contextually it means that he looked around. **Seeing no one about.** Read with OJPS, “When he saw that there was no man” among the potential descendants of the Egyptian who would convert to Judaism.

**13 Two Hebrews.** Dathan and Abiram, the same two who would later leave some of the manna over until morning (16:20). **Fighting.** That is, arguing. **Why do you strike your fellow?** Literally, “why will you strike your fellow?” Though he had not struck him yet, Moses knew that the one who raised his fist against the other was the offender. **Your fellow** in wickedness.

**14 Who made you chief and ruler over us?** Literally, “Who made you a *man* to be chief and ruler over us?” Who made you a man? You are still just a boy! **Do you mean to kill me?** Literally, “Do you say to kill me?” From this we learn that he killed the Egyptian by speech—by pronouncing the Tetragrammaton. **Moses was frightened.** The contextual meaning is straightforward. Midrashically, having found that there were some among the Israelites wicked enough to reveal what he had done, he was frightened that they would no longer deserve redemption. **Then the matter is known!** Again, this is straightforward contextually. Midrashically, it means: Now the matter I was puzzled about—what was the sin of the Israelites that they, of all the 70 nations, should be subjected to such harsh toil?—“is known” to me. For I see that they deserve it.

**15 Pharaoh learned of the matter.** Because Dathan and Abiram told him. **He sought to kill Moses.** He handed him over to the executioner, but the sword had no

**NAHMANIDES 14 Do you mean to kill me?** Literally, “Do you say to kill me?” Rashi says that Moses killed the Egyptian by means of the Tetragrammaton; this is a rabbinic midrash. If that were how it happened, I wonder who told the offending Hebrew that Moses had killed the Egyptian? Perhaps Moses put his hand on him and cursed him in the name of the Lord, and this explains “he struck” (v. 12). Or perhaps when the Egyptian fell dead before him, Moses feared that they would accuse him, so he buried him in the sand. But the Hebrew saw him doing it and knew that Moses had caused the death, or perhaps, having seen only the burial, he thought Moses had physically slain him. NJPS follows Ibn Ezra’s suggestion here. But there is no need for this explanation. What the offender said was this: “Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you say ‘Why do you strike your fellow?’ (v. 13) because you wish to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?”

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS 12 He struck down the Egyptian.** Who had earned death according to the Noahide commandments by committing adultery with the Hebrew’s wife; see Rashi’s comment (Hizkuni). **The sand.** Which was there for use in the construction (Hizkuni).

**14 Chief and ruler.** To kill me without due process of law (Bekhor Shor).

**OJPS** Hebrew, one of his brethren. <sup>12</sup>And he looked this way and that way, and when he saw that there was no man, he smote the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand. <sup>13</sup>And he went out the second day, and, behold, two men of the Hebrews were striving together; and he said to him that did the wrong: “Wherefore smitest thou thy fellow?” <sup>14</sup>And he said: “Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us? thinkest thou to kill me, as thou didst kill the Egyptian?” And Moses feared, and said: “Surely the thing is known.” <sup>15</sup>Now when Pharaoh heard this thing, he sought to slay Moses. But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh, and dwelt in the land of Midian; and he sat down by a well.

מִכָּה אִישׁ-עֲבָרִי מֵאַחֲיוֹ: <sup>12</sup> וַיִּפֶן כֹּה וְכֹךְ וַיֵּרָא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ וַיִּף אֶת-הַמִּצְרִי וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ בַחֹל: <sup>13</sup> וַיֵּצֵא בַיּוֹם הַשֵּׁנִי וְהַיְהוּה שְׁנֵי-אֲנָשִׁים עֹבְרִים נֹצִים וַיֹּאמֶר לְרִשָׁע לָמָּה תִכֶּה רֵעֶךָ: <sup>14</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר מִי שָׂמֶךָ לְאִישׁ שֶׁר וְשִׁפְטָ עָלֵינוּ הַלְהַרְגְנִי אַתָּה אָמַר כַּאֲשֶׁר הִרְגָת אֶת-הַמִּצְרִי וַיֵּרָא מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אָכֵן נוֹדַע הַדָּבָר: <sup>15</sup> וַיִּשְׁמַע פְּרַעֲה אֶת-הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וַיִּבְקֹשׁ לַהֲרֹג אֶת-מֹשֶׁה וַיִּבְרַח מֹשֶׁה מִפְּנֵי פְרַעֲה וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּאֶרֶץ-מִדְיָן וַיֵּשֶׁב עַל-הַבְּאֵר:

**ABARBANEL’S QUESTIONS** ♦ Since Moses killed the Egyptian in front of the man who was being beaten (vv. 11–12), why was he so surprised (v. 14) to find out that “the matter was known”?

**RASHBAM 14 Do you mean to kill me** because I am beating my coworker **as you killed the Egyptian** because he was beating a Hebrew? **Then the matter is known!** Better, “so,” in such a way, the matter is known—not as I thought when I hid him in the sand, that it would not be known, but it is so—it is known.

**15 He arrived in the land of Midian, and sat down beside a well.** The translation is misleading; the same verb is used in both instances. The text tells us in general terms that he “settled” in Midian, and then elaborates: he “settled” down by a well when he first rested, like a man who stops to take a breather.

**IBN EZRA 12** Those who say that **he struck down the Egyptian** by means of the Tetragrammaton are incorrect, as I shall explain. He struck him with a stone or with a spear.

**13 The offender.** The one of the two who was doing violence to the other.

**14 Do you mean to kill me?** Literally, “Are you saying to kill me?”; but (as NJPS recognizes) “say” often has the meaning of “think” or “intend,” as in the expression “I said in my heart” (Eccles. 2:1). **Then.** Indeed. But some say it means “if so.” [M]

**15 Beside a well.** Literally, “beside *the* well”—the famous well. Or it could be that it was the only well there. Since Midian was within the Egyptian sphere of influence, Moses was forced to become a shepherd, avoiding urban areas where he might be recognized. Only when God told him that those he had been fleeing were dead did he feel safe.

[M] In the long commentary, Ibn Ezra switches to this opinion.

**NJPS** <sup>16</sup>Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock; <sup>17</sup>but shepherds came and drove them off. Moses rose to their defense, and he watered their flock. <sup>18</sup>When they returned to their father Reuel, he said, "How is it that you have come back so soon today?"

<sup>19</sup>They answered, "An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds; he even drew water for us and watered the flock." <sup>20</sup>He said to his daughters, "Where is he then? Why did you leave the man? Ask him in to break

**RASHI** power over him, as we know from Moses' saying in 18:4, "He delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh." **Sat down beside a well.** He had learned from the example of Jacob that this was a good way to meet one's mate.

**16 The priest of Midian.** That is, their chief. But he had abandoned idolatry, and they had excommunicated him. **The troughs.** These were made directly in the ground.

**17 Drove them off.** They could never have done this to the daughters of such an important man if he had not been excommunicated.

**18 Reuel.** Some think Reuel was Jethro's father, and "father" here means "ancestor"; see my comment to 4:18.

**20 Why did you leave the man?** He recognized him for a descendant of Jacob, because the water in the well rose up to meet him. **[G] To break bread.** "Cast your bread upon the waters" (Eccles. 11:1)—perhaps he will marry one of you! And see my comment to "Nothing save the bread that he ate" (Gen. 39:6).

**[G]** He could not have watered the flock so quickly otherwise. At Gen. 47:10 Rashi explains that Jacob gave Pharaoh the blessing that forever after the waters of the Nile would rise up to meet him. When the water in the well rose up to meet Moses, Reuel knew that he must be from the family that could grant this power over water.

**NAHMANIDES** **16 The priest of Midian had seven daughters.** The text does not mention his name, but it is clear from the phrase that describes him that he was the most honored of that priesthood—and that it was Jethro. For after Moses becomes his son-in-law the text writes, "Moses went back to his father-in-law Jether ... and Jethro said to Moses, 'Go in peace'" (4:18). They are two versions of the same name. Similarly we find Elijah sometimes spelled in the Hebrew text "Elijahu" and Jeremiah "Jeremiahu." But after Jethro converted to Judaism he was called Hobab, as we know from Judg. 4:11, "Hobab, father-in-law of Moses." For it is the way of converts to call themselves by a different name when they become Jews. **[H]** His father's name was Reuel, as we know from Num. 10:29, where he is called "Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite." When it says in our own text "When they returned to their father Reuel" (v. 18), it really means their grandfather. Similarly Jacob in Gen. 32:10 says, "God of my father Abraham," though Abraham was really his grandfather. There are many such occurrences in the Bible. In this particular case, the daughters are described as returning to their grandfather because their father was detained at the temple with his priestly duties. But when it says "Moses consented to stay with the man" (v. 21), "the man" might refer to Jethro, since it was he who gave him Zipporah, his daughter. **They came ... and filled the troughs.** Because the shepherds would come every day and fill the troughs and water their sheep first, and afterward these women would water theirs. On this particular day it happened that the women got there first. They filled the troughs thinking they could water their sheep before the shepherds got there. But the shepherds arrived and drove them away so that they could water their sheep first, as they did every day. But Moses was angry at such violence and helped the women. For since they had filled the troughs, the water was theirs. He "even drew water" for them (v. 19), for the water in the troughs was not enough for their sheep.

**19 An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds** who drive us away from the troughs every day, though we are there first.

**[H]** Nahmanides may also be thinking of the reverse phenomenon, the Spanish Jews who converted to Christianity and changed their names, like Pablo Christiani, his opponent in a famous disputation.

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS** **17 Moses rose to their defense.** But this time, since neither of the parties was Israelite, he did not try to punish or reprove the offenders (Sforno). This story is juxtaposed to those of vv. 11-14 (even though it took place long afterward) to demonstrate that Moses was just, honest, and bighearted—the very qualities that prepare one for true prophecy (Abarbanel).

**19 An Egyptian.** They could tell by his clothing and his language (Bekhor Shor). Possibly, or perhaps they had asked him (Gersonides).

**OJPS** <sup>16</sup>Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters; and they came and drew water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. <sup>17</sup>And the shepherds came and drove them away; but Moses stood up and helped them, and watered their flock.

16 וּלְכֹהֵן מִדְיָן שֶׁבַע בָּנוֹת וַתִּבְאֵנָה וַתִּדְלְקֵנָה וַתִּמְלְאֵנָה אֶת-הַרְהָטִים לְהַשְׁקוֹת צֹאן אֲבִיהֶן: 17 וַיָּבֹאוּ הָרֹעִים וַיִּגְרְשׁוּם וַיִּקָּם מֹשֶׁה וַיּוֹשֶׁעַן וַיִּשְׁק אֶת-צֹאנָם: 18 וַתִּבְאֵנָה אֶל-רְעוּאֵל אֲבִיהֶן וַיֹּאמֶר מִדְיָן מִדְּבַר בָּא הַיּוֹם: 19 וַתֹּאמְרֵן אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם הֵצִילֵנוּ מִיַּד הָרֹעִים וְגַם-דָּלָה דָּלָה לָנוּ וַיִּשְׁק אֶת-הַצֹּאן: 20 וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-בְּנֹתָיו וְאִיזוֹ לָמָּה זֶה עֹבְרָתֵן אֶת-הָאִישׁ קִרְיָאן לוֹ וַיֹּאכַל לֶחֶם:

<sup>18</sup>And when they came to Reuel their father, he said: "How is it that ye are come so soon today?" <sup>19</sup>And they said: "An Egyptian delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds, and moreover he drew water for us, and watered the flock." <sup>20</sup>And he said unto his daughters: "And where is he? Why is it that ye have left the man? call

**RASHBAM** **18 Their father Reuel.** Their father's father. In which case their father's name was Jethro, the same person as "Hobab son of Reuel" who is mentioned in Num. 10:29. But if Reuel was really their father, the same person as Jethro, then Hobab was Jethro's son. But Judg. 4:11, "Hobab, father-in-law of Moses," proves that Hobab is Jethro. For everywhere else that it mentions "father-in-law of Moses" it mentions Jethro.

**IBN EZRA** **16 The priest of Midian.** This is Jethro, not Reuel (see v. 18). "Priest" in Biblical Hebrew can refer to one who serves any god, false or true. But Jethro was indeed a priest of the true God, as I shall explain in my comment to 19:6.

**18 Their father Reuel.** He was really their grandfather. For their father was Hobab (also known as Jethro). This is shown by the reference in Judg. 4:11 to "Hobab, father-in-law of Moses," and in Num. 10:29 to Hobab as "son of Reuel the Midianite." **[N]**

**19 Drew water for us.** Since v. 16 says that they themselves drew water, this is either the girls' way of saying that Moses "watered their flock" (v. 17), or an indication that the water they themselves drew was not enough, and Moses indeed had to draw more for them.

**20 His daughters.** Just as one's grandfather may be called "father" (as when Jacob says, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac," Gen. 32:10), granddaughters may be called "daughters." **Ask him in.** The text does not go on to say that they *did* ask him in, because this is obvious in any case.

**[N]** This comment is from the long commentary; for Ibn Ezra's view in the short commentary, see his comment to 3:1.

**NJPS** bread.” <sup>21</sup>Moses consented to stay with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah as wife. <sup>22</sup>She bore a son whom he named Gershom, for he said, “I have been a stranger in a foreign land.”

<sup>23</sup>A long time after that, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to

**RASHI** 21 **Moses consented.** The Targum indicates that this is the correct translation. Midrashically, it is to be interpreted not from יאל, but from אלה, “swear”—he swore to him that he would not budge from Midian without his consent.

**23 The king of Egypt died.** He did not literally die; the Israelites would have rejoiced, not groaned, at his death. He was struck with leprosy, which is a kind of living death, and would slaughter Israelite children and bathe in their blood.

**NAHMANIDES** 23 **A long time after that.** Literally, “during those many days.”

One would expect it to say “after those many days.” Our Sages explain that the text calls them “many,” because it was a painful time that seemed interminable. In any case, the period in which **the king of Egypt died** and the Israelites cried out to God was actually quite short. We might rather explain “those many days” to refer to the whole period of slavery and oppression, which was long indeed. For the exile went on for a long time, and it was this that made the Israelites cry out. But in my opinion, the “many days” are the period in which Moses was on the run from Pharaoh. For in reality it was in his youth that he fled. He “went out to his kinsfolk” as soon as he was grown up, killed the Egyptian that very day, and fled the next day when it was reported. He must have been about 12 years old, as our Sages point out; he certainly could not have reached 20. And when he stood before Pharaoh, he was 80. So he must have been on the run for more than 60 years. It seems likely that he did not reach Midian and marry Zipporah until near the end of this period, for at this point in the story only one of their two children had been born. But nothing that needed telling occurred until this point. One who is on the run from the authorities does not linger in any one city, but flees in disguise “from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another” (Ps. 105:13). [I] At the end of this time, he came to Midian and stayed there (v. 15). One would have expected that verse to say “he arrived in the land of Midian,” as in the NJPS translation, but it really says “he settled in the land of Midian,” hinting that he had not settled in a city until he came to Midian at last and did so. As the text is written, it looks as if the whole sequence of events took place one after the other, within a single year, so this expression about “many days” serves to remind us that this is a brief description of quite a long period of time. Had it said “after many days,” that would have meant “many days after Moses settled in Midian,” which is not what the text wished to convey. **The king of Egypt died. The Israelites were groaning.** According to Rashi, he became leprous and would slaughter Jewish children and bathe in their blood. This is a midrash. The straightforward sense of the text is that all who are enslaved to an evil master look forward hopefully to the day of his death, but in this case they saw that the new king was more wicked than the first and, saying “Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone; we are doomed” (Ezek. 37:11), they “groaned with the groans of one struck down” (Ezek. 30:24).

[I] After his victory in the disputation with Christiani, Nahmanides himself was forced to flee his homeland.

could groan after the death of such a murderous king is an indication that the new king was even worse. I shall explain the implications of this verse further at 4:19.

[O] *The Book of Zerubbabel* is a description of the End of Days, probably written in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century, just before the advent of Islam. Eldad the Danite was a Jewish traveler of the late 9<sup>th</sup> century who claimed that his own tribe of Dan, together with those of Naphtali, Gad, and Asher, lived in an independent Jewish kingdom in Ethiopia, protected behind the legendary Sambatyon, an impassable river.

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS** 23 **A long time.** A difficult time always seems long, a happy one short (Hizkuni). **The Israelites were groaning.** Since the evil decrees did not end with the death of the Pharaoh who had issued them, they foresaw no end to their suffering (Bekhor Shor).

**OJPS** him, that he may eat bread.” <sup>21</sup>And Moses was content to dwell with the man; and he gave Moses Zipporah his daughter. <sup>22</sup>And she bore a son, and he called his name Gershom; for he said: “I have been a stranger in a strange land.”

וַיִּוָּאֵל מֹשֶׁה לְשֵׁבֶת אֶת־הָאִישׁ וַיִּתֵּן  
אֶת־צִפּוֹרָה בְּתוּ לְמִשָּׁה׃<sup>22</sup> וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן  
וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ גֵרְשֹׁם כִּי אָמַר גַּר הָיִיתִי  
בְּאֶרֶץ נֹכְרִיָה׃ פ

וַיְהִי בִּימֵי הַרְבִּיבִים הָהֵם וַיָּמָת מֶלֶךְ  
מִצְרַיִם וַיִּאֲנָחוּ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן־הָעֲבֹדָה  
וַיִּזְעָקוּ וַתַּעַל שׁוֹעַתָם אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים מִן־

**ABARBANEL'S QUESTIONS** ♦ Why did Moses name his first son Gershom? According to the explanations of the names in Exod. 18:1–4, Eliezer (“God was my help”) should have been first, and only after God helped him could he escape to Midian and call himself “a stranger in a foreign land” (v. 22), which should have inspired the name of his *second* son. ♦ Why do the Israelites begin to groan about their bondage only after the death of the king of Egypt?

<sup>23</sup>And it came to pass in the course of those many days that the king of Egypt died; and the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of

**RASHBAM** 22 **In a foreign land.** For this is the meaning of Gershom—*ger sham*, “a stranger there” in a distant land.

**23 A long time after that.** After Moses had killed the Egyptian and Pharaoh king of Egypt sought to kill him, and he fled, a long time had passed, until now he was 80 years old when the Holy One spoke with him. And now **the king** who had been seeking to kill him **died**. The Israelites had been groaning all this time, and the Holy One saw their affliction. At this point, Moses was “tending the flock” (3:1) and the Holy One appeared to him and commanded him to return to Egypt. Moses was afraid to do this until the Holy One informed him, “All the men who sought to kill you are dead” (4:19). It was Pharaoh who died. That is why our text says, **The king of Egypt died**—to set the stage for God’s remark in 4:19. Similarly Ham is called father of Canaan in Gen. 9:18 to set the stage for the curse of Canaan at the end of that chapter.

**IBN EZRA** 21 **The man ... gave Moses his daughter Zipporah as wife.** The verse seems to imply that it was Reuel, their grandfather, who did this; but perhaps Jethro was not there.

**22 She bore him a son.** It was Zipporah who was Moses’ “Cushite” wife (Num. 12:1); do not believe the legend in *The Chronicles of Moses* that he was King of Cush (Ethiopia) for 40 years and had a queen there. In general, no work that was not written either by prophets or by sages relying on tradition is to be relied on, all the more so when it contains matters that defy reason. I am referring to such works as *The Book of Zerubbabel*, Eldad the Danite’s book, and the like. [O] **Whom he named.** Whom Moses named.

**23 The king of Egypt died.** It was now safe for Moses to return to Egypt. Moreover, the Israelites had now repented of the idol worship that (according to Ezek. 20:5–7) they had practiced in Egypt. **The Israelites were groaning.** The fact that the Israelites

**NJPS** God. <sup>24</sup>God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. <sup>25</sup>God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

**3** Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. <sup>2</sup>An angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed,

**RASHI** **25 God took notice of them.** He turned His attention to them and did not hide His eyes from them.

**3:1 Into the wilderness.** So as not to steal by grazing the flock in pastures owned by others. **The mountain of God.** Moses was able to say this later, when he wrote the Torah; he did not know it at the time.

**2 In a blazing fire.** Literally, “in the heart of the fire.” **Out of a bush.** And not out of some lofty tree, in accordance with God’s assurance, “I will be with him in distress” (Ps. 91:15). While My people are enslaved, I, too, am in cramped quarters.

**NAHMANIDES** **25 God looked upon the Israelites and God took notice of them.**

Rashi’s explanation is to be preferred to that of Ibn Ezra here. For at first God did hide His face from them, and they were “ready prey” (Deut. 31:17). Now God “looked upon them,” which is to say that He no longer hid His face from them, but knew their pain and all that was being done to them and all that they needed. The text goes to great lengths to mention all the reasons why God should redeem them (see also 3:7), for despite the fact that the time decreed for their Egyptian slavery had expired, they were idolaters and unworthy of redemption, as is explained in Ezek. 20:5–10. But because of their crying out to Him, He mercifully accepted their prayer. But the True meaning of the text contains a great secret, one of the deep mysteries of the Torah: that their affliction rose up to the Light of His Countenance and He brought them near to Knowledge, as in “Oh, make them known in these years! Though angry, may You remember compassion” (Hab. 3:2). That is why the text goes on about this even after having said in v. 24 that God heard them and remembered His covenant. This verse is explained in *Sefer ha-Bahir*; [J] you can understand it from there.

**3:2 An angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire.** Ibn Ezra’s explanation (at vv. 4 and 7) that “God” refers to the angel is incorrect. For Moses, the great

[J] *Sefer ha-Bahir*, generally referred to by Nahmanides as *The Midrash of R. Nehunya b. ha-Kanah*, is a mystical work that appeared in southern France ca. 1200. It had a great influence in Spanish kabbalistic circles.

that *God saw* the slave labor that the Egyptians made them perform in public, and *God knew* their oppression of them in secret.

**3:1 His father-in-law Jethro.** In my opinion, Jethro is Zipporah’s brother; see my comment to Num. 10:29. [P] **Horeb.** Mount Sinai; see Deuteronomy, where this is the standard name for Sinai. It is also found in Mal. 3:22. Etymologically, Horeb refers to the extreme dryness (*horeb*) of the location (for it is far from the Nile and so hot that no rain falls), and Sinai to the bush (*sneh*). **The mountain of God.** Moses knew this only later, when he wrote down the Torah.

**2 In a blazing fire.** Rather, “in the heart of the fire.” Following the standard interpretation, NJPS translates as if a  $\pi$  has dropped out of the word, and *labbah* is simply *lahabah* (“flame”). But this cannot be. For  $\pi$  is never a vowel letter except at the end of a word, and it

[P] In the long commentary, Ibn Ezra expresses a different view; see his comment to 2:18.

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS** **25 God took notice of them.** That is, God’s providence cleaved to them, to get them out of Egypt before the scheduled time of redemption, because of His covenant with the Patriarchs. For divine providence continues after the good man into subsequent generations as long as his offspring preserve it (Gersonides).

**3:1 His father-in-law Jethro the priest of Midian.** When one is reduced in circumstances, it is better to be beholden to a great man than to a small one, and to a relative rather than to a stranger (Abarbanel). **Into the wilderness.** Rather, “beyond the wilderness,” for in the wilderness there is no forage (Bekhor Shor). **Came to Horeb.** By himself, to be alone for purposes of prayer and reflection (Sforno). **The mountain of God.** So called because it was a place predisposed to have the divine emanation attach itself to Moses there. Alternatively, Moses might already have received prophecy there; or it may simply have meant “a God-almighty big mountain” (Gersonides).

**2 An angel.** Maimonides (*Guide* 2:6,41) says that Moses did not see an angel in the fire; the angel appeared to him as fire. But there are a number of arguments against this. For one, “God [i.e., the angel] called to him out of the bush” (v. 5). Are we supposed to think that

**OJPS** the bondage. <sup>24</sup>And God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. <sup>25</sup>And God saw the children of Israel, and God took cognizance of them.

הַעֲבֹדָה: <sup>24</sup>וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת־נַאֲקֹתָם וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת־בְּרִיתוֹ אֶת־אֲבְרָהָם אֶת־יִצְחָק וְאֶת־יַעֲקֹב: <sup>25</sup>וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּדַע אֱלֹהִים: ס

רביעי  
ג וּמֹשֶׁה הָיָה רֹעֵה אֶת־צֹאן יִתְרוֹ חֹתָנוּ כִּהְיוּ מִדְיָן וַיְנַהֵג אֶת־הַצֹּאן אַחַר הַמִּדְבָּר וַיָּבֹא אֶל־הַר הָאֱלֹהִים הַרְבֵּה: <sup>2</sup>וַיֵּרָא מֵלֶאֱנָף יְהוָה אֵלָיו בְּלִבַת־אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנֵּה

**ABARBANEL'S QUESTIONS** ♦ Since God heard the Israelites’ moaning, what further need is there to say afterward (v. 25) that “God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them”? ♦ Since this was Moses’ first prophetic experience, when “an angel of the LORD” appeared to him (v. 2), why was he surprised at the bush not burning up, rather than at this more marvelous sight?

**3** Now Moses was keeping the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the farthest end of the wilderness, and came to the mountain of God, unto Horeb. <sup>2</sup>And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he

**RASHBAM** **24 God remembered His covenant.** He remembered that He had promised the three Patriarchs that he would give them the land of Canaan. Now the end of the 400-year period that he had mentioned to Abraham in Gen. 15:13 was drawing near.

**3:2 The bush was not consumed.** Even at the very point where the flame came forth from the bush there was not a trace of burning. [E]

[E] Against the opinions of those who think “not consumed” means that the bush was not burnt up, Rashbam explains that it was not the slightest bit burnt.

**IBN EZRA** **24 God remembered.** That is, He remembered that the preordained period of Israelite slavery (Gen. 15:13) was about to come to an end.

**25 God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.** More literally, “God saw ... and God knew.” According to the philosophers, there are two kinds of knowledge: knowledge of what is existent, and knowledge of what exists only potentially. According to this view, *God saw* what had already been done to the Israelites, and *God knew* what was going to happen to them in the future. But the most plausible explanation of this verse is that the text is speaking about God in human terms. Similarly, 3:7 says, “I have heard their cry ... I know their pains.” But some interpret our verse to mean

**NJPS** and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. <sup>3</sup>Moses said, “I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn’t the bush burn up?” <sup>4</sup>When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: “Moses! Moses!” He answered, “Here I am.” <sup>5</sup>And He said, “Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is

**RASHI** **3 Turn aside.** This does not mean just to turn, but to go in the new direction.

**NAHMANIDES** prophet, would not hide his face from an angel. Our Sages said in Genesis Rabbah that this angel was Michael. [K] “Wherever anyone would see R. Jose the Tall, they would say, ‘R. Judah the Prince must be here!’ Similarly, every place where Michael appears, the Divine Presence is there also.” What this means is that when Michael first appeared to Moses the Divine Presence was there, but he did

not see it because he was unprepared for prophecy. When he did prepare himself, and turned aside to see, a vision of the Shekhinah was revealed to him, and God called to him from the midst of the bush. But the True interpretation is that this angel was the Redeemer Angel of whom God said, “My Name is in him” (23:21). It is this angel of whom v. 4 says, “God called to him out of the bush,” for that aspect of God that is engaged in the management of the lower world is called “angel.” Compare similarly Deut. 26:8, “The LORD freed us from Egypt,” with Num. 20:16, “He sent an angel who freed us from Egypt.” You will understand more about this farther on in my commentary, with the help of God. **A bush all aflame.** OJPS is closer to the Hebrew: This verse says that the bush burned, and in v. 3 Moses asks why it did *not* burn! But, as NJPS correctly has it, the same word means “aflame” here and “burning up” in v. 3. Onkelos explains it this way as well. But perhaps the word in v. 3 is not “burn,” but the homonym that means “sweep away, remove” (as in Deut. 17:7 and many other verses in Deuteronomy). For Biblical Hebrew frequently uses homonyms together for stylistic reasons (e.g., “burros” and “boroughs” in Judg. 10:4).

**5 Do not come closer.** Moses had not yet reached the highest level of prophecy. For at Mount Sinai he did indeed approach the cloud where God was (20:21). It is the same with the hiding of God’s face (33:20)—he had not yet attained what is said of him in Num. 12:8, “he beholds the likeness of the LORD.” **For the place on which you stand is holy ground.** Even though he was still distant from the bush, He warned him about the place

[K] In the texts as we have them, only what follows is in Genesis Rabbah; the identification as Michael appears in Exodus Rabbah 2:5.

which confirm that the reference is to a bush, something that could burn up. For the word translated “burn” really means to destroy or sweep away, as in 1 Kings 14:10. With regard to God “speaking from the bush,” I will hint at the implications of this later in the chapter.

**3 I must turn aside.** It means not merely “to turn,” but to leave one’s place and go in that direction. **This marvelous sight.** This is the first “sign” written in the Torah that God performed through His prophet Moses, the sign to which v. 12 refers. According to Japheth b. Ali, the fire represents Pharaoh and the bush that will not be consumed represents Israel.

**4 When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him.** Here, too, Moses could only write this later. “LORD” and “God” here both refer to a lesser divine being, the “angel” of v. 2; I shall explain this further in my comment to 23:21, “My Name is in him.” Or perhaps it means that when the Lord saw that Moses had turned aside, He commanded the divine being, the angel, to call to Moses. This would explain why two different terms are used. The Hebrew word translated “God” may refer to any holy being without a material body; here, as I say, it refers to an angel.

**5 Do not come closer.** Stay where you are; do not approach the burning bush.

[Q] As when we say “he opened the door.”

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS** the fire said to him, “I am the God of your father” (v. 6)?! “This marvelous sight” (v. 3) was the angel; the burning bush was secondary (Abarbanel). **In a blazing fire.** To accustom him to this, so he would not be alarmed at the fire and lightning when the Torah was given at Sinai (Hizkuni). **The bush was not consumed.** So, too, Israel would not be consumed despite Egyptian oppression (Hizkuni).

**4 The LORD saw ... God called.** “LORD” refers to the First Cause; “God” to the angel (Abarbanel).

**5 Remove your sandals.** Since the shoe treads everywhere, including unclean places, it is not proper to bring it into a sacred place (Bekhor Shor). God meant: Abandon your material perspective; there is no natural explanation for the survival of the bush, any more than there will be for Israel’s redemption, which it represents. Both are miraculous and providential (Abarbanel). **From your feet.** For the

**OJPS** looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. <sup>3</sup>And Moses said: “I will turn aside now, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.” <sup>4</sup>And when the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said: “Moses, Moses.” And he said: “Here am I.” <sup>5</sup>And He said: “Draw not nigh hither; put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is

**RASHBAM** **4 The LORD saw.** The angel from v. 2; the text refers to him here by the name of the Holy One.

**IBN EZRA** cannot simply “drop out” of the middle of a word. What I think is that it is a form of the word “heart.” There is a comparable form, *libbah*, in Ezek. 16:30.

**Out of a bush.** Most of the commentators say that the bush was a thornbush. Literally, it says “the bush,” simply meaning “the bush that was there,” [Q] or because Moses, when he wrote the Torah, was referring to his own experience. But Deut. 33:16, in the blessing of Joseph, calls God “Him that dwells in the bush,” suggesting to some that this was “the” bush that God dwelt in. But what point would there be in mentioning this in connection with Joseph? Moreover, “dwell” means to live somewhere permanently, whereas God merely appeared in the bush for a few moments. So Saadia says that the word has two different meanings: “thornbush” here and “heaven” in Deut. 33:16. Others say that it means “heaven” even here. But the correct meaning is a kind of dry bush, as in Arabic. The name Sinai derives from this word as well. Those who think it means “heaven” understand **all aflame** as in “the mountain was ablaze with flames” (Deut. 4:11, 5:20, 9:15)—not that the heavens were literally burning, but that flames appeared there. But they have ignored **the bush was not consumed** and “why doesn’t the bush burn up?” (v. 3),

וַיִּרְא וְהִנֵּה הַסֹּהַר בֹּעֵר בְּאֵשׁ וְהַסֹּהַר אֵינּוֹן אָפֶל: <sup>3</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶסְרֶה-נָּא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת-הַמִּרְאֵה הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה מִדּוּעַ לֹא-יִבְעַר הַסֹּהַר: <sup>4</sup> וַיִּרְא יְהוָה בֵּי סֹר לְרֵאוֹת וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֱלֹהִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסֹּהַר וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי: <sup>5</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-תִּקְרַב הָלֶם שֶׁל-נַעֲלֶיךָ מֵעַל רַגְלֶיךָ כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹמֵד עָלָיו אֲדֹמָת-קֹדֶשׁ הוּא:

**ABARBANEL'S QUESTIONS** ♦ If Moses was standing on “holy ground” (v. 5), why did God wait until he turned to look before telling him to remove his sandals? ♦ Why did Moses not bow down to the angel as did Abraham, Joshua, and Manoah and his wife in similar situations? ♦ Why are we not told that Moses followed the instructions to take off his shoes?