

## THE PRINCE OF EGYPT

Genesis 1: 8 – 2: 23

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Joseph brought his family to Egypt and they settled in the province of Goshen on the east bank of the Nile River in that fertile valley where the Nile meets the Mediterranean Sea. And the children of Israel made their home in Goshen and prospered there for many generations, indeed, for about 700 - 1000 years.

So what do you call a group of people who live in Egypt for a thousand years? Egyptians, right? And that's exactly what they were.

The Israelites were Hebrews, but after a thousand years, they were also Egyptians. They were an ethnic minority within the Egyptian empire but they were Egyptians. They were a robust, fertile, hardworking and industrious ethnic minority and they multiplied and they prospered in one of the most fertile and productive parts of Egypt – one of the few areas that wasn't covered with sand.

So successful and prosperous and prolific were they that the Ethnic *majority* in Egypt found themselves a little bit worried. They began to imagine all kinds of things -- Hebrews thing -- to be afraid of. What if they decide to take over? What if we go to war and the Hebrews decide to fight for the other side? What if they decide to change things -- the government, the traditions, the culture, the religion -- to benefit them and leave us out? What if... What if... What if...

### THE HEBREW MINORITY

You probably recognize that a scenario such as this is not limited to the pages of ancient history. It is one that has been repeated over and over in nearly every human culture and society when an ethnic minority becomes prosperous and successful or even just, well, large.

It is in the nature of human beings that we oppress and disenfranchise minorities not because they are minorities but because, as minorities, they are powerless. Sociological studies too numerous to list here have, time after time, demonstrated, and history has confirmed, the truth of the old axiom that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." When we have power over other people our inclination is not just to use but to abuse that power and then to find or create some way to justify the abuse. It takes a conscious act of will and character to wield power beneficently and benignly. Sadly, few humans are blessed with that iron will and upright character.

Author Suzanne Pharr has identified this process of human oppression as it has been historically carried out:

First, the group in power (typically a majority, but sometimes a minority) will identify and define a "norm" that includes themselves almost exclusively. Those outside the norm will be identified as odd, weird, abnormal, deviant and inferior.

Secondly, those in power will institutionalize their power to favor those within their defined "norm." Opportunities, jobs, education, resources such as housing and even food, access to the power structures, and contact with others in power will be limited to those who fall within the "norm." Those outside the norm will have to get by with what, if anything, is left over.

Thirdly, the power wielders will create a mythology, that is, a series of images and stories that supports their created norm and their institutionalized power structure. It will, typically, involve some imagined threat that is allegedly posed by the powerless upon the powerful – anything from simply changing the status quo to violent revolution. This mythology will usually arise out of stereotypes, legends, and anecdotes but rarely include any measurable, testable, or empirical data. It will be used as justification for the oppressive treatment of the powerless who are usually, but not always, a minority.

Fourthly, those in power will isolate the powerless from the powerful and engage in tokenism in an attempt to prove that isolation is, in fact, not taking place.

Finally, the power group will enforce their norm and all that it entails with the threat or application of violence.<sup>1</sup>

Whether we are talking about the treatment of Jews, Gypsies, gays and persons with disabilities in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, the treatment of African Americans in the pre-civil rights American South, the treatment of women throughout the United States prior to universal suffrage, or the treatment of Aborigines in Australia, this pattern holds true in nearly every case.

And it held true in Egypt concerning the treatment of the Hebrew minority, there, three thousand years ago.

The Hebrews were an ethnic minority and, by that definition alone, subject to the probability of oppression by the majority. They were different, outside the norm, and separated from the norm by their insistence on monotheism. They didn't worship just one God among many. That might have been excusable. No, they insisted that there was only one God. How absurd...and strange.

The Egyptians followed the historic pattern in dealing with the Hebrew minority:

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<sup>1</sup> *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* by Suzanne Pharr. Berkley, CA: Chardon Press, 1997.  
(<http://suzannepharr.org/2008/01/30/download-homophobia-a-weapon-of-sexism/>)

The identified them as outside the norm. They isolated the Hebrews outside the power structure. They created a mythology of fear that speculated about a violent revolution of Hebrews against the Egyptian majority. As we will see in a moment, they engaged in tokenism. And they enforced their defined norm with the application of violence. Watch...

### **OPPRESSION AND MURDER**

The Hebrews were already somewhat isolated, geographically, in that they had been pretty much given the entire province of Goshen to do with as they liked. There they were free to worship and live according to their own customs and traditions, all of which were outside the Egyptian norm but hardly a threat as long as they were a weak, poor minority.

Tradition tells us that, while living in Goshen, the Hebrews became the architects and builders of the nation. And, because Goshen was such a fertile area, they were also pretty much self-sufficient for food and clothing.

As the size of the Hebrew population grew, some in the Egyptian community came to fear them and they responded with oppression as we have outlined above.

They were already easily outside the Egyptian norm – racially, religiously, and ethnically.

A mythology was easy to create simply by playing the “What If” game and letting it run wild.

Since the Egyptian culture was a monarchy supported by the aristocracy it was not difficult to isolate the Hebrews away from and outside the power structure.

Now came the violent enforcement of the norm and it happened in two ways.

First, the Egyptian aristocracy enslaved the Hebrews.

This is not hard for an aristocracy to do. They control the jobs and they control the pay which is meted out for the jobs. If they all band together to control labor and wages all they have to do is lower the wages and increase the labor until they have created a slave or indentured class of workers.

What choice do the workers have? The aristocracy of the entire country are in this together. It's not like the laborers can go somewhere else and get a job. They simply have to work for whatever is offered or starve – or worse yet, watch their families starve.

(Interestingly, about five hundred years later, King Uzziah will face the same problem with the treatment of workers by the Hebrew aristocracy in Judah, in about 750 BCE)

The result of this aristocratic corruption and oppression is the destruction of the middle class and the creation of a culture wherein the only classes are the very wealthy and the very poor who work for them.

These oppressive working conditions were not sufficient to ease the discomfort of the wealthy and powerful in Egypt, however. The population of the Hebrews was just too large for them to tolerate.

It was Pharaoh, himself, who came up with a solution to this problem and a ruthless solution it was.

The story teller has Pharaoh giving instructions to the Hebrew midwives, of which there were only two, but that is unlikely. Probably, he spoke to these two with the expectation that they would pass the word along to the other midwives. “When you aid the Hebrew women in giving birth,” he told them. “While the woman is still weak from her labor, you determine if the child is male or female. If it is female, fine. If it is male, kill it.”

We shudder at the brutality of this command but, remember, the Pharaoh was considered by Egyptians to be the son of Rah, the sun god, himself divine and immortal. His word was not questioned. His very whim was a command. His every notion was law.

So, naturally, the Hebrew midwives ignored him.

After some time it was reported to him that there didn't seem to be a drop in the male population among the Hebrew children that were running around the streets of Goshen so he called the midwives back in and asked them what was going on.

They had a reply ready: The Hebrew women are robust and strong, not like the weak and frail Egyptian women. When they have babies they just have them wherever they are and go right back to work. We midwives can't get there in time to kill the male children while the women are weak from their labor and delivery. The fact is: they never get weak from labor and delivery. This was, of course, a bald faced lie but an excusable one, given the circumstances.

We are told that God rewarded the midwives for their cleverness and their loyalty by giving them families of their own, adding to the growing Hebrew population and the vexation of the Egyptian aristocracy.

Exasperated, Pharaoh tells everyone in the closing verses of the first chapter of Exodus that they are not to wait for the midwives to do as they are told. If they hear of a Hebrew giving birth to a male child they are to see to it that that child is thrown into the Nile River.

### **THE BIRTH OF MOSES**

Just about that time a certain Levite couple had a son and, when they saw that it was a boy, they hid him for three months.

When she could no longer hide him, his mother made a basket and sealed it with bitumen and pitch (two naturally occurring forms of tar) and set it, not in the river as we usually picture it, but among the reeds on the bank of the river, leaving his sister to watch what happened to him and report back to her.

That day Pharaoh's daughter came down to the river to bathe while her servants walked along the river bank. She saw the basket and had it brought to her and saw the baby inside, crying. She recognized, probably from his skin color and the fact that he was circumcised, that he was a Hebrew child but she took pity on him.

The child's sister witnessed all this and made her way through the servants. "Would you like for me to find a wet nurse for the child?" she asked. This would be a woman who had recently given birth and would be able to nurse the child. Pharaoh's daughter agreed that this would be a good idea and the child's sister quickly ran and got his mother and brought her.

Pharaoh's daughter, none the wiser, hired the child's own mother to nurse and care for him and she did so until he was "grown up," which could mean anything from twelve to thirty years of age. Probably his own mother raised him until he reached puberty at about the age of twelve – the age of consent in ancient times.

Pharaoh's daughter, who had probably been checking on him from time to time, took him into her own care at that point and gave him an Egyptian name: Moses, which meant "from the water." In Hebrew: Moshe. (MOSH-ay)

So Moses spent his adolescence in the palace, the adopted son of the crown princess, aware of his Hebrew heritage but a child of privilege.

He was the *token* Hebrew that Pharaoh and his advisers could point to and say, "See, the Hebrews aren't oppressed. And, look. They're happy, here. Why one of them even lives right here in the palace, the adopted son of the princess. He's like family to us."

### **MOSES THE YOUNG MAN**

Some years later, when Moses was a young man, he went to spend some time among his own kinsmen, the Hebrews, and he was moved by their plight, their hard labor, and the oppression they suffered at the hands of their aristocratic Egyptian taskmasters.

One day he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew and, running to the Hebrew's defense, he fought with the Egyptian man and killed him. Panicked, he buried the body in a shallow grave, covered by the sand.

The next day he was back in Goshen when he saw two Hebrews fighting. He went to them and confronted the one who appeared to be in the wrong. "Why are you fighting, striking each other like this?" The unspoken question being, "Aren't you being hit enough by the Egyptians, you have to hit each other, as well?"

But the Hebrew fighters had no respect for Moses. "Who are you to tell us what is moral and immoral? What are you going to do, kill us like you did that Egyptian guy you buried in the sand?"

The jig was up. Game over. Someone, probably the man he saved, had squealed on him or the shifting sand had simply blown away and uncovered the body. It wouldn't be long before everyone knew what he had done and he was arrested for murder. And his assumption was correct. When Pharaoh discovered the murder, we are told, he tried Moses in absentia and ordered him to be executed.

Moses, however, had already taken off. He fled Egypt and didn't so much go to as end up in the land of Midian. Now where have we heard of the Midianites, before? That's right. Joseph's brothers sold him to Midianites. They were, you recall, nomadic herdsman who tended to dwell in the area of Arabia near the northeast shores of the Red Sea. But, to tell the truth, we don't really know where Midian was, if it really was a place. Most scholars seem to believe that Midian was wherever the Midianites happened to be at any given time.

They were, Arabs, descendants of Ishmael.

One day Moses was at a well or watering hole, probably trying to find work, when seven young ladies came there to water their herd of sheep and goats. Some other shepherds came along and were about to run the women off and cause them some other, unnamed troubles, but Moses intervened on the ladies' behalf and sent the bullies packing.

By way of thank you, the girls took him back home with them. (Daddy, look! Can we keep him?) And Jethro, their father, a pagan priest, invited Moses to stay with them.

Eventually, Moses fell in love with one of Jethro's daughters, Zipporah, and they were married and had a son, who Moses named Gershom, which means "stranger." He chose this name, he said, because he was a "stranger in a strange land."

Tradition tells us that he made his home with the Midianites and stayed with them for forty years, raising his own family and becoming a successful herdsman.

### **MEANWHILE, BACK IN EGYPT**

Meanwhile, back in Egypt, Pharaoh died but the oppression of the Hebrews did not let up. It had become institutionalized. After forty years it was simply, "the way it's always been." Hebrews are a slave race, not fit for anything else. Sub-human, really. Only good as beasts of burden, nothing more.

But "God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them." God was about to deliver them from suffering and injustice.

**AMEN**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Today we begin the story of Moses and the Exodus. It tells how they came to be a people oppressed. Can you think of other oppressed people who might identify with this story?
2. Re-read Suzanne Farr's six stages of oppression. Can you give examples of how real groups of oppressed people have been forced through these steps? Native American Indians? Gays? Ethnic minority immigrants? Catholics by Protestants or Protestants by Catholics? Blacks in South Africa? Christians in Saudi Arabia?
3. History and research shows that people don't really need a reason to oppress each other, but only an opportunity. What we think of as reasons are really just rationalizations. What are some of the rationalizations people have used in the past to justify their mistreatment of the powerless?
4. Much of this story, so far, is about Moses coming to terms with his own identity and ethnic/religious background. What is your religio-ethnic heritage? Was there ever a time when your people were oppressed?
5. The last paragraph of today's story tells us that God hears the cries of the oppressed. We get the feeling that God is going to do something about it. What? How has God acted to free the oppressed in other historical settings?
6. If God has a preferential option for those who suffer in oppression, how should God's people respond to oppression when we are confronted by it?