# Beyond Boundaries: Ethnicity, Gender, and Class in Exod 1:8–2:10*

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## Abstract

Exodus 2:1–10 has been thoroughly analyzed from a feminist perspective. This is appropriate because women play a significant role in the story. However, it is important to note that these female characters are not only defined by gender but also by ethnicity and social status. Combining analyses of ethnicity, gender, and class, this article demonstrates how the female figures in Exod 2:1–10 ignore, challenge, and subvert the polarizations established in Exod 1:8–22 by the Egyptian king. Exodus 2:1–10 can even be read as an example of cross-ethnic, cross-class, and cross-generational solidarity against a despotic regime that marginalizes and oppresses by using marks of differences. However, upon closer analysis it becomes evident that the female figures' interactions are also determined by an unequal power dynamic. The article demonstrates how examining differences in gender, ethnicity, and class provides a nuanced understanding of power relations within biblical texts.

## Keywords

power relations, oppression, social categories, female interaction, ethnicity, gender, class, Hebrew Bible, Exodus

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## Introduction

Exodus 2:1–10 is the final scene of a larger narrative unit in the opening chapters of the book of Exodus, namely Exod 1:8–2:10.[1] This unit describes the attempts of the new Egyptian king to halt the growth of the Israelites and how people react to his orders, and this context must be taken into account when analyzing the final scene. The article is divided into four sections and proceeds as follows: the first section provides preliminary hermeneutical and methodological remarks and explains the framework of the study. In the second section, the narrative context of Exod 2:1–10 is examined, and attention is given to how the figure of the new Egyptian king draws lines of difference concerning ethnicity, gender, and class. This section focuses on the new king's speeches in Exod 1:9–10, 1:15, and 1:22, as well as on the consequences of these speeches in Exod 1:11–14 and Exod 1:16–21. The third section examines the interactions of the female characters in Exod 2:1–10 and demonstrates how their actions challenge and subvert the dividing lines drawn by the new Egyptian king in Exod 1:8–22. Exodus 2:1–10 can be interpreted as an example of a cross-ethnic, cross-class, and cross-generational solidarity against a despotic regime that marginalizes and oppresses people by using marks of difference. At the same time, the female figures' interaction in Exod 2:1–10 is also characterized by an unequal power dynamic. While the female figures cooperate with each other, this cooperation is not one between equal partners. The last section summarizes the most important findings of the study.

## Preliminary Hermeneutical and Methodological Remarks

Exodus 2:1–10 has been extensively explored from a feminist perspective, and for good reason. Women play a prominent role in this story, yet they are not only marked by their gender but also by their ethnicity and social status. This study analyzes the differences in gender, ethnicity, and class to provide a nuanced understanding of power relations within biblical texts. The study thus employs a lens of intersectionality,[2] in order to examine the intersection of social categories

[1] On this delimitation, see J. Cheryl Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live': A Study of Exodus 1.8–2.10," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy* (ed. Athalya Brenner; The Feminist Companion to the Bible 6; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 37–61, at 42; Phyllis Trible, "Difference Among the Distaff: A Reading of Exodus 1.1–2.10," in *Making a Difference: Essays on the Bible and Judaism in Honor of Tamara Cohn Eskenazi* (ed. David J. A. Clines, Jacob L. Wright, and Kent Harold Richards; HBM 49; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012) 292–306, at 292. At the same time, Exod 2:1–10 is the opening of a new narrative thread dealing with Moses' identity in Exod (1:22)2:1–2:22, see Thomas E. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus* (Eerdmans Critical Commentary; Grands Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 62, 78–91. On the position of Exod 2:1–2:10 within the opening chapters in Exod 1:1–2:25, see Helmut Utzschneider and Wolfgang Oswald, *Exodus 1–15* (IEKAT; Stuttgart: Verlag Kohlhammer, 2013) 65; Siebert Hommes, "But if she be a Daughter … She May Live! 'Daughters' and 'Sons' in Exodus 1–2," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy* (ed. Athalya Brenner; The Feminist Companion to the Bible 6; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994) 62–74, at 64.

[2] The term "intersectionality" was first coined by the African-American legal scholar Kimberlé

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and their effects.[3] It is important to note that categories such as gender, ethnicity, and class are socially constructed and therefore subject to historical and social change. These categories vary across time, regions, and societies.[4] Biblical scholars commonly cite gender, class, ethnicity, age, and economic status as categories for defining social differences in Near Eastern societies. Some studies also consider sexual orientation, psychophysical status, marital status, motherhood (or fatherhood), and religion to be relevant categories.[5] However, it is important

Williams Crenshaw in 1989. See Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (1989), Article 8, 139–67. See also Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991) 1241–99. Intersectional analysis—first applied in the legal and social science disciplines—has since found its way into (feminist) biblical exegesis. Women of color were among the earliest interpreters to use the intersectional approach. See, e.g., the African-American biblical scholar Clarice Martin, "The Haustafeln (Household Codes) in Afro-American Biblical Interpretation: Free Slaves and Subordinate Women," in *Stony the Road We Trod: African-American Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Cain Hope Felder; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991), 206–31; the African-American scholar Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993) 4, 15–19; and the African-American scholar Mitzi Smith, "Roman Slavery in Antiquity," in *The African American Jubilee Bible* (New York: American Bible Society, 1999) 157–85. On intersectionality in biblical studies, see also Gale A. Yee, "Thinking Intersectionally: Gender, Race, Class, and the Etceteras of Our Discipline," *JBL* 139.1 (2020) 7–26; Nyasha Junior, *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: WJK, 2015); *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse* (ed. Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace; Semeia 85; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Introduction: Exploring the Intersections of Race, Gender, Status, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies," in *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies* (ed. Laura Nasrallah and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2009) 1–23; Carol Meyers, "Gender and the Heterarchy Alternative for Re-Modeling Ancient Israel," in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Susanne Scholz; New York: Oxford University Press, 2021) 443–59; Renate Jost, "Intersektionalität als Herausforderung für Feministische Theologie, Gender Studies und Religion: Einführende Überlegungen," in *Vielfalt und Differenz. Intersektionale Perspektiven auf Feminismus und Religion* (ed. Renate Jost and Sarah Jäger; Internationale Forschungen in Feministischer Theologie und Religion: Befreiende Perspektiven 6; Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2017) 7–17.

[3] However, intersectional studies not only aim at researching differences in gender, ethnicity, class, etc., as well as the power relations resulting from these differences, but also draw attention to discrimination that results from the intersection of social categories such as gender, ethnicity, and class. Some biblical books, texts or stories address multiple discrimination (cf., e.g., the figure of Hagar in the book of Genesis or the foreign women in the book of Ezra/Nehemiah). However, there are also biblical books that tell counter-stories (cf., for instance, the book of Ruth). As I will show in this study, the child's sister in Exod 2:1–10 is not discriminated against based on gender, class, and ethnicity. She acts to save her brother despite the power imbalance between her and Bat Pharaoh. Hence, this study does not meet certain criteria of intersectionality.

[4] See Ute E. Eisen, Christine Gerber, and Angela Standhartinger, "Doing Gender–Doing Religion: Zur Frage nach der Intersektionalität in den Bibelwissenschaften: Eine Einleitung," in *Doing Gender—Doing Religion: Fallstudien zur Intersektionalität im frühen Judentum, Christentum und Islam* (ed. Ute E. Eisen, Christine Gerber, and Angela Standhartinger; WUNT 302; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) 1–36, at 27–29.

[5] On these criteria or categories for the definition of social differences in Near Eastern societies,

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to note that some of these categories may have slightly different meanings than in modern theories. For instance, biblical scholars generally use the category class not in a Marxist sense[6] but primarily to distinguish between free and unfree people, such as slaves and masters. Defining these categories is thus an ongoing process that requires dialogue with the interpretation of biblical texts and the historical context in which they were written. How the categories of ethnicity, gender, and class are utilized in this study will become apparent in the course of the analysis of Exod 1:8–2:10 below.

The book of Exodus, including its opening chapters in Exod 1–2, underwent a long and complex formation process.[7] This study analyzes the final, extant version of the text.[8] It focuses on Exod 2:1–10 and its context for the purpose of exploring differences in gender, ethnicity, and class because these are the categories which dominate the plot. The study can serve as a hermeneutical or methodological model for analyzing similar texts.

## The King's Speeches and their Consequences in Exodus 1:8–22

The narrative unit Exod 1:(7)8–2:10 can be divided into three scenes based on the king's attempts to prevent Israel's growth. Each scene begins with a speech or command[9] in which the new king draws a line of distinction: In the first case, the distinction is based on ethnicity, as the king distinguishes between the people (עם) of Israel on the one hand, and Egyptians, on the other hand. In the second and third cases, a gender-based distinction is made, creating a line of differentiation between men and women, or between sons and daughters.[10]

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see Fischer, "Inklusion und Exklusion–Biblische Perspektiven," 11. On marital status, see Sara Bolze, *"Auch wenn ich schwach scheine, bin ich stark": Tamar in Gen 38 und die kanaanäische Frau in Mt 15,21–28 in intersektionaler Perspektive* (ed. Renate Jost, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Susannah Heschel; Internationale Forschungen in Feministischer Theologie und Religion: Befreiende Perspektiven 12; Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2024) 35. On motherhood, see Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 4, 15–19. On motherhood and fertility, see also Nele Spiering-Schomborg, "Manifestationen von Ungleichheit: Exegetische und bibeldidaktische Perspektiven zur Hagar-Erzählung im Horizont von Intersektionalität und Vielfalt," in *Einschließung und Ausgrenzung: Von Intersektionalität von Religion, Geschlecht und sozialem Status für religiöse Bildung* (ed. Thorsten Knauth and Maren A. Jochimsen; Münster, NY: Waxmann Verlag, 2017) 61–78, at 68–69.

[6] See Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, "Intersectional Studies," in *Oxford Encylopedia of the Bible and Gender Studies*, Vol. 1: ASI-MUJ (ed. Julia O'Brien; Oxford University Press: New York, 2014), www.oxfordreference.com.

[7] On theories of the textual genesis, see, for instance, Utzschneider and Oswald, *Exodus 1–15*, 67–92 or Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 57–61.

[8] On this approach, see, for instance, Carol Meyers, *Exodus* (NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 2–3.

[9] On this structure, see Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live,'" 42; Trible, "Difference among the Distaff," 292.

[10] Spiering-Schomberg, *Exodus 1*, 171, has drawn attention to these lines of difference in Exod 1:8–22. See also Renita Weems, "The Hebrew Women are not Like the Egyptian Women: The Ideology of Race, Gender and Sexual Reproduction in Exodus 1," in *Semeia* 59 (1992) 25–34, at 30: "Difference is inherent in the culture of the story [e.g. Exod 1:8–22]: differences between

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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Scene 1: | 1:(7)8–14 | The king speaks to his people (1:9–10) |
| Scene 2: | 1:15–21 | The king speaks to the midwives (1:15) |
| Scene 3: | 1:22–2:10 | The king commands all his people (1:22) |

In Exod 1:9–10, the king addresses "*his* people" (עמו), and does not include the children of Israel in this group. He is the first in the Bible to recognize Israel as a "people" (עם): "Look, the people of the children of Israel …"[11] Throughout his speech, he distinguishes between "us" and "them"[12] (or: "it" in the Hebrew text). The Hebrew word for "people" (עם) is used in the Bible as a kinship term, referring to a larger community of descent.[13] According to the book of Exodus, the people of Israel are descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob (i.e., Israel) (cf. Exod 1:1–7). In this study, the term "ethnicity" refers to the concept behind the Hebrew term עם, which encompasses larger communities of descent.[14]

The distinction between Israel and Egypt is not inherently problematic. Even the Egyptian king who reigned during Joseph's time perceived the children of Israel as a distinct group that immigrated to Egypt (cf. Gen 47–48). Drawing boundaries defines identity and is not necessarily negative. However, the new Egyptian king uses this distinction to portray Israel as the dangerous "other" who poses a threat, thus justifying his actions.

Initially, in verse 9, the king simply records what the narrative voice in Exod 1:7 reports: the children of Israel have become numerous (רב) and strong (עצום). However, he then goes beyond that by claiming that they are "more than us" (ממנו; i.e., the Egyptians). In the perception of the new Egyptian king, Israel is not only the "other" that does not belong to the "we-identity" but also a competitor. The statement that Israel has become more powerful than Egypt may stir fear and motivate followers to act quickly and decisively. The emphatic particle, הנה ("behold" or "look"), at the beginning of the sentence contributes to this.

In verse 10, the king pushes the polarization even further by depicting a scenario of war in which the Israelites join forces with Egypt's enemies to fight against Egypt. This portrays Israel not only as a competitor but also as a military

Egyptians and Hebrews, differences between slaves and slave masters, differences between Egyptian women and Hebrew women, differences between male and female children, differences between women and men."

[11] All following translations of the Hebrew texts stems from the author of this article.

[12] Magdi S. Gendi, "Pharaoh as a Character in Exodus 1–2: An Egyptian Perspective," in *Exodus and Deuteronomy* (ed. Athalya Brenner and Gale Yee; Texts@Contexts; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2012) 55–66, at 57; Meyers, *Exodus*, 34; Georg Fischer and Dominik Markl, *Das Buch Exodus* (NSKAT 2; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2009) 30. This distinction between "us" and "them" can be determined by the Hebrew grammatical forms.

[13] See Meyers, *Exodus*, 34 and Kristin Weingart, "Volk (AT)," in *WiBiLex* (2016) 1.1.1, www.bibelwissenschaft.de/stichwort/34299/.

[14] It is important to note that the genealogies of descent depicted in the Bible are literary constructions. See, for instance, Robert R. Wilson, "The Old Testament Genealogies in Recent Research," in *JBL* 94 (1975) 169–89, at 171.

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adversary.[15] Irmtraud Fischer notes that being foreign is viewed negatively in hierarchically ordered societies, resulting in disadvantages and exclusion.[16] In the situation presented in Exod 1:11–14, being foreign not only leads to exclusion but also to tangible social and physical oppression.

The speech aims to motivate action with the phrase, "Come on, let us deal shrewdly with them …" (Exod 1:10), and it is effective. In Exod 1:11, the Egyptians, not just the king, establish a system, in which the Israelites perform labor service to build state construction projects under the supervision of taskmasters (מסים). Therefore, Exod 1:11 is about the dependence of a collective that has to perform state-organized labor.[17] Accordingly, the Israelites may not be considered unfree with respect to personal law.[18] It was a common practice in Near Eastern societies for certain groups to provide labor service to the ruling class.[19] From Egypt's perspective, one could argue that the Israelites who received land from Pharaoh (cf. Gen 45:18–20; 47:5–12) have an obligation to perform service in exchange for the land.[20] However, it is clear that Pharaoh's main intention for compelling the Israelites to perform labor is not economic. According to the biblical story, the labor obligation was rather intended to humiliate (cf. ענה, which is used twice in Exod 1:11–12), decimate, or weaken Israel (cf. Exod 1:8, 12).[21] This being the case, the Israelite labor can be described as forced.[22] In this study, the category of class is used to differentiate between forced laborers and taskmasters.

[15] The last remark of the king in v. 10 is treacherous because the king also prophesies that Israel could leave the country (ועלה מן הארץ); see Benno Jacob, *Das Buch Exodus* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1997) 9. If the Israelites are as powerful and dangerous as the king claims, he should be relieved if they leave voluntarily. The speech is contradictory. On the one hand, the king plays with the Egyptian people's fear of being inferior. On the other hand, his last words reveal the desire of being dominant and supreme. See Gendi, "Pharaoh," 58; Albertz, *Exodus 1–18*, 47.

[16] See Fischer, "Inklusion," 11; Spiering-Schomberg, *Exodus 1*, 160.

[17] See Meyers, *Exodus*, 34–36; Wolfgang Oswald, "Auszug aus der Vasallität–Exodus-Erzählung (Ex 1–14*) und das antike Völkerrecht," in *ThZ* 3.67 (2011) 263–88, at 269–76.

[18] See Karl-Wilhelm Welwei, "Sklaverei und Zwangsarbeit im Alten Orient und in der griechischen und hellenistischen Welt," in *Zwangsarbeit als Kriegsressource in Europa und Asien* (ed. Kerstin von Lingen and Klaus Gestwa; Krieg in der Geschichte 77; Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 2014) 73–91, at 73; Antonio Loprieno, "Slavery and Servitude," in *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology* 1/1 (2012), www.escholarship.org/uc/item/8mx2073f.

[19] Utzschneider and Oswald, *Exodus 1–15*, 69–70.

[20] Christoph Dohmen, *Exodus 1–18* (HThKAT; Freiburg im Breisgau: Verlag Herder, 2015) 102–3.

[21] See Albertz, *Exodus 1–18* (ZBAT 2.1; Zürich: TVZ, 2012) 46–48. Dohmen, *Exodus 1–18*, 102, however, disagrees.

[22] The wording in Exod 1:11–12 (ענה [twice], מסים, סבלות) suggests most likely "forced labor"; see Jost and Peetz, *Exodus*, forthcoming. The NRSV even translates סבלות (heavy burden) in Exod 1:11 with "forced labor." J. Alberto Soggin, "Compulsory Labor under David and Solomon," in *Studies in the Period of David and Solomon and Other Essays* (ed. Tomoo Ishida; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1982) 259–67, at 260–61, argues that the Hebrew term מסים from Akkadian *massu* indicates "statutory labor." According to Soggin, the term סבלות specified the labor of the Israelites in Exod 1:11 as "forced labor."

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The king's speech successfully provokes action but ultimately fails to achieve his goal of stopping Israel's growth. In fact, the more the Israelites are oppressed, the more they multiply and spread (cf. Exod 1:12). As a result, the measures are tightened in verses 13 and 14. Verses 13 and 14 use the Hebrew words פרך (compulsion) and מרר (embittering) to express the increase of oppression: the Israelites are made to serve under duress (פרך), and their lives are embittered (מרר) through hard (קשה) work (עבודה) by the Egyptians.

In Exod 1:9–10, the king has created a division between Israel and Egypt[23] based on ethnicity, which results not only in the ethnic humiliation of Israel but also in its social and physical humiliation. In the second scene another line of difference is added, which is strongly androcentric.[24] In Exod 1:16, Pharaoh instructs two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill the sons of Hebrew women but to let their daughters live. The midwives are to make this selection immediately after the children's births. The attempt to halt the growth of Israel has become even more extreme and cruel. Pharaoh targets the most vulnerable and defenseless members of society, specifically newborns, in order to prevent Israel from growing. The story employs the motif of the "Slaughter of the Innocents" which is also present in Exodus 1–2 in connection with the "Birth of the Hero" pattern (cf. the adaptation in Matthew 2).[25] Prior to the birth of the savior, the king orders the senseless destruction of innocent life (cf. Exod 1:15–16 and 22), and the savior himself is one of the most vulnerable and endangered members of society (cf. Exod 2:1–10).

The text does not explicitly state the reason for the king's distinction between sons and daughters. Scholars have suggested that the decision to spare daughters and kill sons may be related to patrilineal descent and patrilocal marriage practices, which involve the integration of women into their husbands' families. In the Israelite society, a married woman's identity is tied to her husband.[26] If an Israelite woman is unable to find a man of her own people to procreate with, she may have children with an Egyptian man. However, the result would be the discontinuation of the Israelite lineage and the loss of Israel's identity. Another consequence of sparing female children is their continued exploitation as slaves or forced laborers.

The killing of male babies at birth may also be linked to the law of inheritance in ancient Israel. If an Israelite family had no male heirs, their property would pass to the families into which their female heirs had married.[27] According to Gen 45:18–20

[23] See Gendi, "Pharaoh as a Character," 57.

[24] Spiering-Schomberg, *Exodus 1*, 171.

[25] For a more detailed analysis of the motif of the "Slaughter of the Innocents" and the "Birth of the Hero" pattern, see Dozeman, *Exodus*, 86; Ulrich Luz, *Matthäus 1–7* (EKKNT; Zürich: Neukirchener Verlag, 2002). On the "Birth of the Hero" pattern, cf. also the legend of "the birth of Sargon the Great" (*Ancient Near Eastern Texts: Relating to the Old Testament* [ed. James B. Pritchard; 3rd ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969] 119).

[26] See Fischer, *Gottesstreiterinnen*, 160; Jost and Peetz, *Exodus*, forthcoming.

[27] See Maier, "Der Diskurs um interkulturelle Ehen in Jehud als antikes Beispiel von Intersektionalität," in *Doing Gender–Doing Religion*, 129–53, at 144–45.

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and 47:5–12, the Israelites received land from Pharaoh, who reigned during Joseph's time. The potential goal of the new Egyptian king in Exodus 1–2 may have been to reclaim this land for Egyptian families. Therefore, killing female babies at birth would not have been necessary. As there would be no male descendants of the Israelites, the adult female descendants would have to marry Egyptian men, resulting in the inheritance of the children of Israel falling to Egyptian families.[28]

In this article, I will also emphasize another aspect or interpretation. As Nele Spiering-Schomberg notes, in a patrilineal-oriented society, a people without males lose not only their identity but also their political or military power.[29] This idea is consistent with the king's speech, in which he stokes fears that there are too many potential Israelite soldiers to fight Egypt.[30] Women do not represent rivals or threats to national security in this mindset.[31] This is another reason why the killing of daughters seems unnecessary.

The fact that Pharaoh draws a line of distinction between men and women and focuses solely on the sons ultimately turns out to be his biggest failure, because the women become dangerous and resistant, and they are the ones who ensure the survival of the Hebrew people. As noted by Phyllis Trible, it probably would have been more effective for Pharaoh to have the daughters killed.[32]

The midwives do not obey the king's command and instead let both male and female children live. This act of disobedience is the first defiance to Pharaoh in the book of Exodus. In Exod 1:12 the Israelites resist by multiplying despite physical oppression. Because the midwives defy a state order, their resistance is political, challenging the authority of the state.[33] Nahum Sarna argues that the actions of the midwives in Exodus 1 represent "history's first recorded case of civil disobedience in defense of a moral cause."[34]

When justifying to the king why they did not kill, the midwives argue that the Hebrew women are different from the Egyptian women. They claim that the Hebrew

[28] On this Interpretation, see also Christoph Dohmen, *Exodus 1–18*, 102–3.

[29] Spiering-Schomborg, *Exodus 1*, 171.

[30] Ellmenreich, "Widerstand," 40. Although there are numerous female gods of war in antiquity (such as the goddess Anat, cf. *Corpus des tablettes en cunéiformes alphabétiques découvertes à Ras Shamra-Ugarit de 1929 à 1939* [ed. Andrée Herdner; Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1963] 1, 3, 35–40), war is apparently a male affair in daily life. In the surviving Assyrian reliefs, only men are depicted as military soldiers (cf., e.g., the Lachish relief in *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament* [ed. James B. Pritchard; 4th ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992] 371). However, the Bible also knows female warriors—women in leading military positions (cf., e.g., the judge Deborah in Judg 4).

[31] See Spiering-Schomberg, *Exodus 1*, 171.

[32] See Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," *JAAR* 41 (1973) 30–48, at 34 and the reference to Trible in Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live,'" 37.

[33] For more on the role of the midwives and their power, see Jost and Peetz, *Exodus*, forthcoming.

[34] Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 25. See also Judy Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible: How Biblical Stories Mine and Undermine Each Other* (Philadelphia: JPS Society 2009) 31–62.

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women are more vital or animalistic (חיות)[35] than their Egyptian counterparts and have therefore already given birth when the midwives arrive. On the one hand, the account shows that the midwives resist drawing a line of gender difference aimed at killing the Hebrew sons at birth. On the other hand, the midwives apparently take up Pharaoh's ideology of ethnic differences as presented in Exod 1:9–10, to the point that they argue with differences in the physical fitness of the two groups of women.[36] It is evident from the narrative that the midwives' argument is an excuse. They deceive Pharaoh to avoid a life-threatening situation by adopting his ideology, thus outwitting Pharaoh. If Pharaoh truly believes and promotes the idea that Israelites are different from Egyptians, he will also believe that Hebrew women are different from Egyptian women. The midwives' strategy is successful because Pharaoh has nothing to counter their arguments. Pharaoh's intent to use the midwives for his evil plan finally fails due to his ideological convictions.[37] The midwives can risk lying to Pharaoh because he is unable to verify the accuracy of their testimony. Birthing is the domain of the midwives, and as such, it is an area of life that is removed from the influence of the most powerful man in the country.

There is much debate in scholarship as to whether the midwives were Hebrew or Egyptian.[38] The Hebrew consonant allows for both the translation "Hebrew midwives" and "midwives of the Hebrew women." The Septuagint understood העברית (Hebrew) as a genitive (ταῖς μαίαις τῶν Εβραίων, "the midwives of the Hebrews"). Both the Hebrew consonantal text and the Septuagint are ambiguous about which ethnic group the midwives belong to. The later Masoretes vocalized the Hebrew text in such a way that הָעִבְרִיֹּת (Hebrew) should be understood as an apposition to לַמְיַלְּדֹת (midwives). Thus, the Masoretes assign the midwives to the

[35] The Hebrew expression חיות (*hayot*), is highly ambiguous and ambivalent. The word חיות (*hayot*), which occurs in the Bible only here, is often translated as "vital." Understood this way, the term most likely implies in the context of Exod 1:19 that Hebrew women are not as delicate as Egyptian women. They are vigorous and give birth so quickly that any midwife arrives too late. This ultimately means that Israel is strong, whereas Egypt is weak. This characterization devalues the Egyptian women as compared to the Hebrew women; see Fischer, *Gottesstreiterinnen*, 161. However, at the same time, the term חיות also alludes to *hayyot* (animals); see Albertz, *Exodus 1–18*, 51. If read this way, the statement can also be understood as indicating that the Hebrew women are (like) animals and therefore give birth so quickly that they do not need a midwife (unlike the cultured Egyptians), resulting in a strongly pejorative perspective on the Hebrew women.

[36] Unlike the king in Exod 1:9–10, the midwives argue with the body. The physical and biological appearance of Hebrew women (they are much more vital or animal-like) is different from that of Egyptian women. Hence the midwives employ bodyisms to favor or disfavor certain groups.

[37] Nele Spiering-Schomborg, *Exodus 1*, 177. Nevertheless, Renita Weems, "Hebrew Women," 32–33, rightly notes that neither the characters within the story nor the narrator challenge the stereotypes assumed in Exod 1:8–22. Instead, the story inverts these stereotypes to serve its own ideological interests. Weems therefore emphasizes that the story cannot be understood as a liberation story without due caution. On Weems, see also Juliana M. Claassens, "Resisting Dehumanization: Acts of Relational Care in Exodus 1–2 as Image of God's Liberating Presence," in *Scriptura* 105 (2010) 572–80, at 572–73 n. 1.

[38] On this issue, see, for instance, Jost and Peetz, *Exodus*, forthcoming or Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 73–74.

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Hebrew women. The observation that the midwives in Exodus 1 have Semitic names, Shiphrah and Puah, supports this interpretation. In favor of the interpretation that the midwives are Egyptian, it might be reasonable to argue that it seems more promising to use Egyptian rather than Hebrew midwives to kill Hebrew babies. It would also fit better into the structure of the text since all of Pharaoh's other speeches are addressed only to his Egyptian compatriots.[39] However, since there are good arguments for either readings or interpretations, the question of which ethnic group the midwives belong to ultimately has to remain open.

If the midwives were indeed Egyptian, their refusal to carry out Pharaoh's plan would be even more remarkable[40] because that would mean that the two Egyptian midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, would have overcome ethnic and class boundaries and ignored the distinction between Israel and Egypt, as well as the discrimination associated with it, which Pharaoh sought to enforce.[41]

The third speech of the new king in Exod 1:22 leads into the third scene, in which Pharaoh no longer plans a secret genocide but instead calls for a public one.[42] This time the king does not merely speak, but he orders, and his command is to all "his people" (עמו). Also, the term "killing" (מות) is no longer used, but instead Pharaoh orders his subjects to "throw (שלח) him [i.e., the son] into the Nile."[43] Again, Pharaoh distinguishes between sons and daughters, but this time he does not differentiate between Hebrew and Egyptian sons—at least not in the Hebrew text version.[44] In the following story, Exod 2:1–10, however, it becomes clear that Pharaoh's command affects only Hebrew boys.

[39] Thomas Römer, "Moses und die Frauen in Exodus 1–4," in *Wege der Freiheit zu Entstehung und Theologie des Exodusbuches* (ed. Reinhard Achenbach, Rut Ebach, and Jakob Wöhrle; Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und des Neuen Testaments 104; TVZ: Zürich, 2014) 73–86, at 76–77, who argues in favor of the interpretation as Egyptian midwives.

[40] See Albertz, *Exodus 1–18*, 49–50.

[41] See Spiering-Schomberg, *Exodus 1*, 179; Jaqueline E. Lapsley, *Whispering the Word: Hearing Women's Stories in the Old Testament* (Louisville, Kentucky; WJK, 2005) 72.

[42] Albertz, *Exodus 1–18*, 48.

[43] The measures become more extreme each time an attempt fails. First, Pharaoh tried to decimate Israel, more or less passively, by forced labor. Then, he planned a secret genocide. Now he is planning a public one, in which all Egyptians are to participate. The resistance likewise intensifies. In the first case, the rebellion consists of Israel resisting and multiplying despite hard work. In the second case, two midwives rebel by not carrying out Pharaoh's order. In the third case, Pharaoh's daughter explicitly acts contrary to her father's command.

[44] The translators of the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Septuagint, and the Targumim make it clear that it is about the sons of the Hebrews (LXX: ὃ ἐὰν τεχθῇ τοῖς Εβραίοις; PJT: כל ביר דכר דאיתיליד ליהודאי). However, according to Utzschneider and Oswald, *Exodus 1–15*, 81, this "inconsistency" of the Hebrew text might be a deliberate inconsistency, to represent Pharaoh as unlimited in the extent of his cruelty.

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## Female Agency in Exodus 2:1–10

The story in Exod 2:1–10 is about how women deal with the tightened command of the Egyptian king in Exod 1:22.[45] The text mentions a man (איש) from the house (בית; i.e., family) of Levi who takes *the*[46] daughter of Levi as his wife.[47] Although this man defies the king's murderous order by starting a family, he does not contribute to the child's rescue or participate in the concrete resistance against Pharaoh. It is worth noting that the man from the house of Levi plays a more significant role in the Septuagint version. The verb forms ראה (see), צפן (conceal) and יכל (could [hide]) in verses 2 and 3 are in the plural form (ἰδόντες; ἐσκέπασαν; ἠδύναντο): "When they saw that he [i.e., the male child] was handsome, they concealed him … when they were not able to hide him anymore …" (LXX), instead of "And she looked at him … she hid him. … When she was no longer able to hide him …" (MT). The plural forms in the Greek text obviously refer to the child's mother and father. In the Greek version, the father is more involved in his son's fate than in the Hebrew text. Nonetheless, both in the Septuagint and in the Hebrew text, the mother is the one to initiate the child's rescue.[48] In Exod 2:2–3, Bat Levi is described as being meticulous and attentive to important details, as she "forgets and misses nothing, not the right moment to expose the child, not the right equipment for its salvation, and not to choose the appropriate place for exposure."[49]

[45] Fischer, *Gottesstreiterinnen*, 162.

[46] It is noticeable that the woman is not introduced as being *a* daughter of Levi but decidedly as *the* daughter of Levi (the text uses accusative particle את). Possibly this is to set her apart as a profiled character from her husband. He is merely *a* man stemming from the house of Levi. That she is introduced as *the* daughter of Levi, at the same time, serves to juxtapose her in opposition to *the* daughter of Pharaoh, see also Siebert-Hommes, "'Daughters' and 'Sons'," 67–68.

[47] Verbatim, the text does not say that the man took a wife (אשה), but that he took Levi's daughter. Therefore, Konrad Schmid, *Erzväter und Exodus: Untersuchungen zur doppelten Begründung der Ursprünge Israels innerhalb der Geschichtsbücher des Alten Testaments* (WMANT 81; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1999) 153, argues that the birth in v. 2 is illegitimate. In this, he sees an analogy to "the birth legend of Sargon" (a story that probably served as a model for Exod 2:1–10), where Sargon introduces himself as an illegitimate child by saying that he does not know his father and that his mother gave birth to him secretly. The interpretation as an illegitimate birth could explain why the man does not play any role in the salvation of the baby boy in the following narrative; see Jost and Peetz, *Exodus*, forthcoming. However, in the Hebrew Bible, the Hebrew term לקח (take) with a simple object can refer to a legitimate relationship, such as marriage (cf., for instance, Gen 4:19; 11:29; 38:2; Deut 20:7; 22:13); see, for instance, Dozeman, *Exodus*, 80 and Utzschneider and Oswald, *Exodus 1–15*, 80. The father's inaction is probably best explained by the narrative intention to put women in the spotlight. In contrast to the men, the women resist not only indirectly by continuing to procreate, but also directly by either not carrying out Pharaoh's order (cf. the midwives in Exod 1:15–21) or even undermining his orders and turning them into the opposite (see the following interpretation).

[48] Utzschneider and Oswald, *Exodus 1–15*, 86 n. 48.

[49] Helmut Utzschneider, "Die LXX als Erzählerin: Beobachtung an der LXX-Fassung der Geburts- und Kindheitsgeschichte des Mose (Ex 2:1–10)," in *Die Septuaginta: Texte, Theologien, Einflüsse* (ed. Wolfgang Kraus and Martin Karrer; WUNT 252; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010) 462–77, at 469.

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However, the child's salvation that follows is only made possible by the (inter)actions of several women. Three female figures play prominent roles: Bat Levi ("Levi's daughter"), the child's sister, and Bat Pharaoh ("Pharaoh's daughter"). At first, all three characters act in succession: Bat Levi in verses 2–3, the sister in verse 4, Bat Pharaoh in verses 5–6. Then, they interact: the sister with Bat Pharaoh in verses 7–8, the sister with Bat Levi in verse 8, Bat Pharaoh with Bat Levi in verses 9–10.

All three are introduced in their relation to their male relatives (cf. Exod 2:1, 4, 5) as daughters (בת) or sisters (אחות). Therefore, the text reflects the conventions of a patrilineal structured society in which women's identity is determined by their fathers, brothers, or sons.[50] However, throughout the entire story they act independently of their male relatives. In Exod 2:1–10, the plot is primarily driven by women, while men play a secondary role.[51]

Two out of the three female protagonists in the story are Hebrew (cf. Exod 2:6, 7), as indicated by their lineage from the house (i.e., family or tribe) of Levi (cf. Exod 2:1). This places them within a specific subgroup of the people of Israel (cf. Exod 1:1–9). The third protagonist is introduced as Bat *Pharaoh*, indicating her Egyptian ethnicity. The three women not only differ in ethnicity but also in class and social status, with both categories being highly intertwined. According to Exod 1:11, Bat Levi and the sister's child belong to an ethnic group that is oppressed by forced labor. In verses 6 and 7, the term עברים or עבריות (Hebrews) is used instead of "Israelites," which may suggest a lower social status. The term primarily has an ethnic meaning as it refers to "Israelites" (cf. Gen 40:15 and 43:32). However, Rainer Albertz and Helmut Utzschneider argue that when the term contrasts the

[50] On the patriarchal structure of the societies in ancient Israel, cf., for instance, Fischer, "Inklusion und Exklusion," 14.

[51] Some feminist scholars find the stories in Exod 2:1–10 and Exod 1:8–22 troubling, since all female figures are introduced from an androcentric mindset or patriarchal point of view, namely as daughters and sisters of men, or are defined by typical female professions. Also, their actions revolve around male characters, and Exod 2:1–10 is even framed by male proper names, namely "Levi" and "Moses." Moreover, the crying little boy stands in the center of the text (cf. Exod 2:5). On the feminist critique of Exod 1–2, see, for instance, J. Cheryl Exum, "Second Thoughts about Secondary Characters: Women in Exodus 1.8–2.10," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy* (ed. Athalya Brenner; A Feminist Companion to the Bible 6; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 75–87; Esther Fuchs, "A Jewish-Feminist Reading of Exodus 1–2," in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scripture* (ed. Alice Ogden Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky; Symposium Series 8; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2000) 307–26; and Susanne Scholz, "Exodus: Was Befreiung aus seiner Sicht bedeutet …," in *Kompendium feministischer Bibelauslegung* (ed. Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1998) 26–39. It should be taken into account, however, that it is women who determine the entire plot of the story in Exod 2:1–10. Although the female figures in Exod 1:8–2:10 are introduced as daughters and sisters of men or defined by typical female professions, it is striking that they act independently of their male relatives. The women in Exod 1:8–2:10 may be primarily concerned about male offspring. However, the female characters are not told by men what to do. Instead, they are presented as self-confident characters who do not limit themselves to the private sphere (see the interpretation on the action of the midwives above and on Pharaoh's daughter below). The actions of the women are highly political.

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Israelites with the Egyptians, it carries a social connotation, as it also refers to Israel's status as foreign, subordinated, oppressed, and marginalized.[52]

Bat Pharaoh is not only Egyptian but also a member of the royal family. The text indicates that maidens are subordinate to her (נערותיה and אמתה), reflecting her power. As an Egyptian princess, she holds one of the highest statuses a woman can have in society,[53] while Levi's daughter and the child's sister are at the very edge of society.

Determining the age of the women is a more difficult task. In the case of Bat Levi, it is evident that she is of childbearing age[54] as she gives birth to a son, and her motherhood is explicitly mentioned in verse eight (אם הילד).[55] Only the sister is explicitly referred to as עלמה (cf. Exod 2:8). This Hebrew term is generally assumed to refer to a young unmarried[56] woman of childbearing age (cf., e.g., Gen 24:43). This interpretation agrees with the LXX, which translates עלמה in Exod 2:8 as νεᾶνις (young woman).[57] While the age of Bat Levi can only be determined approximately, it is difficult to estimate the age of Pharaoh's daughter. At first glance, her exclusive[58] designation as "Bat Pharaoh" ("daughter of Pharaoh") could indicate her age or her marital status, because biblical texts typically introduce unmarried girls and women, such as Bat Pharaoh in Exodus 2, by their father's

[52] See Utzschneider and Oswald, *Exodus 1–15*, 79–80; Albertz, *Exodus 1–18*, 51.

[53] On the status and power of princesses in ancient societies, see, e.g., Renate Jost, "Königin (AT)," in *Wibilex* (2012) 2.3.5, bibelwissenschaft.de/stichwort/23736/. Ilse Müllner and Carsten Jochum-Brotfeld, "Königtum," in *Sozialgeschichtliches Wörterbuch zur Bibel* (ed. Frank Crüsemann et al.; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2009) 301–6, at 302. On the lives of royal daughters, see Willem Römer, *Frauenbriefe über Religion, Politik und Privatleben in Mari. Untersuchungen zu G. Dossin, Archives Royales de Mari X* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1971).

[54] Since the woman is presented as Levi's daughter, her approximate age can be calculated using the relative numbers of years given in the Bible. See, for instance, Jacob, *Exodus*, 20. However, the presentation of the woman as Levi's daughter in Exod 2:1–10 is rather a narrative device to highlight her as an authoritative figure and says little about her actual age in the narrative. See also n. 46.

[55] Researchers tend to assume that Bat Levi is also the mother of the child's sister; see, for instance, Fischer, *Gottesstreiterinnen*, 163. If that was the case, the sister would have to be much younger than Bat Levi (and thus approximately at least twelve years younger or so). However, the relationship between Bat Levi and the sister is not expressively stated in the text. At least theoretically, it is possible that the sister and the child have the same father but not the same mother (cf. Gen 20:12), i.e., that they are half-siblings.

[56] On the issue of determining the sister's age, see Jenifer Lewis, "Girl Power Gone Right in Exodus 1–2: Miriam as Model for Contemporary Youth," in *Journal of Youth and Theology* 18 (2019) 3–18, nn. 12 and 35.

[57] Another translation is proposed by Karen Engelken, *Frauen im Alten Israel: Eine begriffsgeschichtliche und sozialrechtliche Studie zur Stellung der Frau im Alten Testament* (BWANT 7; Stuttgart: Verlag Kohlhammer,1990) 44–45, who translates עלמה with "Hofdame" (court lady). According to Engelken, the sister belongs to the staff of Bat Pharaoh and is the "court lady" of Bat Pharaoh.

[58] Pharaoh's daughter is only referred to as בת־ (daughter of). The term בת־פרעה (Pharaoh's daughter) occurs in total four times (cf. 2:5, 7, 9, 10), unlike, the term בת־לוי (Levi's daughter), which is used only once at the very beginning. Hence, throughout the text, Bat Pharaoh is only defined by the relation to her father.

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name or title (cf., e.g., Gen 24:15; 29:6, 16; Exod 2:21; Esth 2:7).[59] It might therefore, on the one hand, be reasonable to assume that Bat Pharaoh is unmarried and may be of a similar age to the sister. On the other hand, Solomon's wife is also called "Bat Pharaoh" (cf. 1 Kgs 3:1; 7:8; 2 Chr 8:11; 1 Kgs 9:16, 24; 1 Chr 4:18), which means that the term might not indicate marital status but rather function as a political and cultural statement.[60]

Therefore, the sister fulfills several criteria that Irmtraud Fischer identifies as having a negative impact on social status in hierarchical societies:[61] she is young, female, and a member of an oppressed ethnic group. Against this background, her key role in the Hebrew-Egyptian interaction is even more remarkable. Some scholars claim that her role is merely to help Levi's daughter,[62] but she in fact plays a crucial role in connecting the actions of the other two female characters (cf. Exod 2:4, 6–7) and thus acts as a mediator between Bat Pharaoh and Bat Levi. Also, the text does not imply that Bat Levi instructs her to do anything; instead, she acts independently. Additionally, the longest speech, based on the number of words, is attributed to her, while Bat Levi remains silent.[63] Initially, the sister stands at a distance and observes as Pharaoh's daughter discovers the child (cf. Exod 2:4). The Hebrew verb יצב in *Hitpael*, instead of the verb עמד in *Qal*, indicates an intense standing, with the sister standing firmly, demonstrating decisive and committed action. Therefore, the sister is more than an uninvolved bystander. She watches with tension, ready to intervene if necessary. Despite their differences in ethnicity, class, and arguably also age, the sister is the first who initiates a cross-ethnic and cross-class interaction by daring to address Bat Pharaoh in Exod 2:7: "Shall I go (האלך) and call for you (לך) a nursing woman from the Hebrew women that she may nurse the child for you (לך)." In light of the hierarchical structure of society at that time, the sister's unsolicited and unbidden initiative is remarkably courageous. In the book of Esther, for example, Esther fears for her life because she appears before the king without being asked (cf. Esth 4:10–17; 5:1–5). However, unlike Bat Pharaoh later on, the sister proposes instead of commanding. Formally, the decision thus remains with Bat Pharaoh. The sister carefully signals her acceptance of the higher position of Bat Pharaoh. Linguistically, this is reflected in the interrogative particle ה־ (i.e., Shall I …). The phrasing of the question is clever because it implies that Bat Pharaoh has already accepted the child as her own: "Shall I go and call for you (לך) a nursing woman … that she may nurse the child for you (לך)." It is possible that it is the sister's question that gives Bat Pharaoh the idea of accepting the child as her own in the first place. In any case, the sister's

[59] See Elke Seifert, *Tochter und Vater im Alten Testament: Eine ideologiekritische Untersuchung zur Verfügungsgewalt von Vätern über ihre Töchter* (Neukirchner theologische Dissertationen und Habilitationen 9; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlag, 1997) 48.

[60] See Seifert, *Tochter und Vater*, 48 n. 3.

[61] On the criteria which have disadvantageous or preferential effects, see Fischer, "Inklusion," 11.

[62] See, for instance, Utzschneider, "Erzählerin," 469.

[63] The sister's speech is just one word longer than the longest speech of Pharaoh's daughter.

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intervention aims to ensure the child's rescue. One could even go so far as to argue that Bat Pharaoh is somewhat deceived or even manipulated in her decision. At least the sister, although she has the lowest status of all protagonists, can influence the course of events since Bat Pharaoh does exactly what she proposes.

The intervention of the sister not only ensures that Bat Pharaoh accepts the child as her own but also results in the reunion of the baby child with its birth mother, at least for the breastfeeding period (cf. Exod 2:9–10). Without the sister, there would have been no interaction between Bat Levi and Bat Pharaoh. Simultaneously, the sister also initiates cross-generational interaction by calling the child's mother. Although Bat Levi holds a higher position in the family hierarchy, it is the sister who drives the action.

Although the sister has the longest single speech (cf. Exod 2:7) compared to the other characters, Bat Pharaoh speaks first and most frequently—a total of four times (cf. Exod 2:6, 8, 9, 10). Scholars have been quick to point out that her character is at the center of the narrative.[64] Indeed, the finding of the child in verses 5–6, is entirely determined by her actions. Nevertheless, Bat Pharaoh does not act alone. First, an unnamed number of maidens accompany her. The Hebrew term נערות (maidens) essentially means "young women." It is the same Hebrew term used in Exod 2:6 for the baby boy (נער, "young boy"). The term does not mean necessarily "servants," but the maidens are referred to as "her maidens" (i.e., as maidens of Pharaoh's daughter). They are, in fact, the first female characters in Exodus 2 who are not introduced through their relation to a man but to a woman. They are tasked with walking along the banks of the Nile while Bat Pharaoh bathes (cf. Exod 2:5). From a narratological perspective, the maidens are secondary characters since they do not actively influence the course of events. Nevertheless, these figures are essential to the story. They patrol, most likely, to protect the bathing princess from the gaze of men (cf. Dan 13:15–27). Thus, similar to the midwives' workplace, the text presents a feminine space that is withdrawn from the realm of male influence. The maidens also witness the discovery of the princess. If Bat Pharaoh spoke the words, "A child from the Hebrews it is," aloud, her maidens' presence would mean that there would have been a public audience for her statement (at least in the female sphere in which she is ruling). This emphasizes the political significance of Bat Pharaoh's actions. Additionally, one of her attendants is directly involved in saving the child. She is set apart from the other female companions by being referred to as אמה. The Hebrew term אמה means servant or slave and thus indicates that her social status is lower than that of the other female companions. The female servant is sent by the princess, who notices the box in the reeds. Although the princess is the grammatical subject of all actions in verses 5 and 6—she sees, sends, takes, spares (or feels pity), and speaks[65]—the context implies that the female

[64] See, for instance, Utzschneider and Oswald, *Exodus 1–15*, 85.

[65] The Septuagint version relates the Hebrew verb לקח (to take) to the handmaid of Pharaoh's daughter by an infinitive construction (ἀποστείλασα τὴν ἄβραν ἀνείλατο αὐτήν). Hence, in the

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servant is responsible for drawing the child from the water so that the princess can take the child easily. In Exod 2:10, the servant acts on behalf of the princess. Bat Pharaoh depends on the help of her subordinate and relies on the loyalty of all her attendants. If her companions had informed the Egyptian king, who is of course far above her in the hierarchy,[66] that his daughter had saved a Hebrew child, the rescue operation would have failed. Thus, more than just the three women who are directly involved can be credited with Moses' rescue. Rather, it is the collaboration of several women who differ in their social status that achieves this goal. What remains unclear in the text is the ethnicity of the young women and the female servant. The context seems to suggest that they are most likely not Hebrew. If they were in fact Egyptian, then this would imply that women from the Egyptian lower class were also involved in saving the Hebrew child.

In verse 6, Bat Pharaoh reacts spontaneously and emotionally upon discovering the weeping Hebrew baby boy (נער). She expresses pity for the child and quickly realizes the situation, exclaiming: "It is a child of the Hebrews!" Unlike the Egyptians in Exod 1:12, Bat Pharaoh does not display disgust (קוץ) towards the Hebrew child, despite her father's branding of the Hebrews or Israelites as outsiders and dangerous. Instead, she responds with empathy. The Hebrew word חמל, however, not only means "to feel compassion," but also has the connotation of "to spare," as can be seen, for instance, in 1 Sam 15:9 where the verb חמל is used in exactly this meaning. In this passage, it is said that king Saul and the people spare (ויחמול) Agag, the king of Amalek, after Israel's military victory against Amalek; i.e., Saul lets Agag live and does not kill him. The Hebrew word חמל, meaning "to spare," is also used in 2 Sam 21:7, when king David chooses not to kill Mephibosheth, the son of Saul's son Jonathan, but shows him mercy.[67]

Interpreted in this manner, Bat Pharaoh's response is not solely one of compassion but also a political maneuver, as Helmut Utzschneider astutely observes.[68] If one reads the verb חמל in its ambiguity, Bat Pharaoh is portrayed more as a ruler than as a woman with maternal instincts and thus emerges as a counterpart to her father. She not only defies his orders but also acts in direct opposition to him, as can be seen when she pulls the baby boy out of the water (or

Septuagint version, the handmaid, at least formally, is more active than in the Hebrew text.

[66] Erika Feucht, "Frauen," in *Der Mensch des Alten Ägyptens* (ed. Sergio Donadoni; Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1992) 361–94, at 393, for instance, describes the status of female royal family members in ancient Egyptian societies as follows: "In all social classes, women were largely dependent on the men in their families. … Even members of the royal family rarely attained leading positions. Although the women of the ruling class had a high status compared to the ordinary people, both socially and religiously, they hardly exercised power. The few women who did occupy positions of power owed it to their social embeddedness as the wife, mother, or daughter of a man of high rank, and in many cases, they exercised power in the interests of the man. … There were exceptions at that time, as there were and are at any time in societies dominated by men."

[67] Lapsley, *Whispering*, 77, emphasize the fact that in Ezek 16:5 God pities (חמל) Israel, the orphan child.

[68] Utzschneider, "Erzählerin," 471.

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the female servant for her; cf. Exod 2:5) instead of throwing him into it, as she emphatically confesses in verse 10: "Yes … for out of the water I pulled him." The narrative in Exod 1:22–2:10 is framed by the antonyms "throw" (שלך) and "pull out" (משה), which also emphasize the act of rebellion against the father. Scholars have shown that Pharaoh is portrayed as an anti-figure to God in the book of Exodus, because he is a threat not only to the promise of multiplication made to the ancestors of Israel, but also to the fulfillment of the blessing of multiplication for all people. Conversely, as shown, Bat Pharaoh is depicted as an antagonist to her father.[69] She is therefore a figure who contributes to the fulfillment of God's blessing.

The two daughters, Bat Pharaoh and Bat Levi, finally work hand in hand (cf. Exod 2:9–10). Bat Levi responds to the Egyptian king's orders (cf. Exod 1:22) by placing the child in a box and putting it in the Nile (cf. Exod 2:2–3). Bat Pharaoh, or rather her female servant acting on her behalf, retrieves the child from the river (cf. Exod 2:6, 10). Then both cooperate or interact with each other (cf. Exod 2:9–10), and Bat Pharaoh gives the child to Bat Levi to nurse. Finally, Bat Levi gives the child back. In the last scene in Exod 1:15–22, it remains open whether the midwives are Hebrew or Egyptian. Exodus 2:1–10 describes a unique interaction between Hebrew and Egyptian characters, initiated by the sister who is the first to cross cultural boundaries by addressing the Egyptian princess.

A closer look into the Hebrew text reveals the extent to which the female interaction is equally characterized by an imbalanced power dynamic. The most visible indication for this type of unbalanced power dynamic is the fact that Pharaoh's daughter commands others. She addresses both the child's sister and Levi's daughter with imperatives, thus telling the sister to "go" (לכי; cf. Exod 2:8) and Levi's daughter to "take away this child" (הילכי את הילד הזה) and to "breastfeed it [i.e., the child] for me" (הינקהו לי; cf. Exod 2:9). Her communication with the sister and mother is concise, regally detached, and decisive. The sister dares to address Bat Pharaoh. However, the sister asks questions and suggests rather than commands. Bat Pharaoh does as the sister suggests, but she has the power to decide

[69] Some scholars view Pharaoh's daughter more negatively. See Gale A. Yee, "'Take This Child and Suckle It for Me': Wet Nurses and Resistance in Ancient Israel," in *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 39 (2009) 180–89, at 187. James Ackerman, "The Literary Context of the Moses Birth Story (Exodus 1–2)," in *Literary Interpretation of Biblical Narratives* (ed. Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974) 74–119, at 93, even argues that the "foolish Egyptian princess stands in contrast to the wise Hebrew midwives." Indeed, the power relationship between the princess and the other main female characters is partly as unequal as that between Pharaoh and the midwives. The crucial point of the story, however, is that the princess defies her father. Like all female characters, she resists Pharaoh's deadly command. The linguistic hints in the narrative support the characterization of the princess as a counter-figure to her father. Utzschneider, "Erzählerin," 471–75, even argues that the Septuagint version reinforces the notion of Pharaoh's daughter as her father's antagonist. According to him, the more prolific profile of Pharaoh's daughter in the Greek translation is probably due to the fact that the Septuagint stems from Egypt. The translators seem to be particularly interested in highlighting the resistance of the Egyptian princess in the biblical narrative in order to enhance the image of Egypt in the Exodus narrative a little bit. In doing so, however, they tie in with what is already laid out in the Hebrew text, argues Utzschneider.

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otherwise. It is striking that Bat Levi does not speak one single word throughout the entire text. As with Bat Pharaoh, her presence is ensured by the use of a series of active verbs,[70] but she is the only main character who remains silent. In verses 8, 9, and 10, Bat Levi only lets herself be summoned by the sister and carries out the tasks assigned to her by Bat Pharaoh. Her thoughts or feelings are not mentioned at all.[71]

The employment of Bat Levi as a wet nurse for Bat Pharaoh highlights the social disparity and power imbalance between the two figures. Historical sources from Mesopotamian and Greco-Roman societies indicate that wet nurses were typically recruited from lower social classes,[72] and only wealthy families, particularly those of royal status, could afford to hire them.[73] It is noteworthy that Bat Pharaoh compensates the Hebrew woman for her services as a wet nurse, treating her as a free woman rather than an unpaid forced laborer.[74]

In summary, in order to save the child's life, the sister and Bat Levi have no other choice but to cooperate with Bat Pharaoh. As a result, they are in a much weaker position than Bat Pharaoh, who has the power to decide the child's fate. Although the sister has some influence, Bat Pharaoh is the one who sets the terms for the Hebrew-Egyptian cooperation.

The supremacy of Bat Pharaoh is evident in how she is related to the baby boy. At the very end of the story, the text states "he [i.e., the little boy] was son to *her* [i.e., Bat Pharaoh]" (ויהי לה לבן). That the child belongs to Bat Pharaoh is indicated by the Hebrew preposition ל־. For the first and only time, a male character is identified in relation to a female protagonist rather than the other way around.[75] Unlike Bat Levi, Bat Pharaoh is *not* referred to as the "mother of the child" (אם הילד; Exod 2:8). Instead, the child is son for *her* (לה), and the princess is therefore also the one who names the child (Exod 2:10). The female figures in Exodus 2 are not identified by proper names, which may suggest their insignificance (*nomen est omen*). However, the questions of who has the authority to name is more important for the issue of power than the question of who bears a proper name. Bat Pharaoh ultimately names the baby boy and gives him the name Moses (cf. Exod 2:10). The naming of the Hebrew child by an Egyptian princess may suggest a practice among the ancient Near Eastern kings or rulers who demonstrated their power by renaming their subjugated vassal kings (cf. 2 Kgs 23:34; 24:17; cf. also Gen 41:45, Dan 1:7, and Gen 2:19–10). The act of giving a name or renaming is a display of power over

[70] See on this Trible, "Difference among the Distaff," 301–2.

[71] However, her feelings for the child are expressed in v. 2, where it said that she saw that he (the baby boy) was good.

[72] See Jost and Peetz, *Exodus*, forthcoming.

[73] For Mesopotamia, see Eleonore Reuter, "Amme," in *WiBiLex* (2010) 3.2, bibelwissenschaft.de/stichwort/13217/. For Greco-Roman sources, see Gale A. Yee, "Wet Nurses," 182–83.

[74] By paying Bat Levi, she also expresses her acceptance of the child as her own. See Jost and Peetz, *Exodus*, forthcoming.

[75] Exodus 2:2 only mentions that Bat Levi gave birth to a son.

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the named or renamed. Thus, while the text introduces Bat Pharaoh as an unnamed character she is in fact a powerful figure, as evidenced, among other things, by her role as a name-giver.

## Conclusion

The new Egyptian king distinguishes between Israel and Egypt and portrays Israel as a threat to national security. This exclusion of the "dangerous stranger" has political, social, economic, and even physical consequences for Israel, as they are forced into labor and severely oppressed. Pharaoh distinguishes not only between Egypt and Israel but also, twice, between men and women, which aligns with his hegemonic worldview. In this worldview, male soldiers count as a threat to national security, whereas women do not.

The actions of the two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, as well as Bat Levi, the child's sister, and Bat Pharaoh, challenge Pharaoh's concept of masculinity and femininity. In Exodus 1–2, only women are portrayed as dangerous to Pharaoh, while men remain in the background.The actions of the three women in Exod 2:1–10 further subvert the polarizations drawn by Pharaoh in relation to ethnicity and class. Bat Levi, the sister, Bat Pharaoh, and her female attendants demonstrate female solidarity, challenging the king's worldview in terms of gender and ethnicity.

Exodus 2:1–10 can be interpreted as an example of cross-ethnic, cross-class, and cross-generational solidarity against a despotic regime that marginalizes and oppresses by using marks of differences. However, the analysis of gender, ethnicity, and class reveals that the interaction between the female figures is also determined by an unequal power relationship. Even though the female figures cross social boundaries, they do not abolish them. The sister shows respect for the higher status of Bat Pharaoh by approaching her carefully. Bat Pharaoh commands and is the official decision maker, while Bat Levi carries out her orders. Although Bat Levi and the sister initiate or influence the course of events, they depend on Bat Pharaoh's goodwill and must cooperate if they want the child to be safe. Therefore, the female interaction is not a collaboration between equal partners.

However, it is noteworthy that the female characters thwart Pharaoh's murderous plan by rejecting the discriminatory consequences of his division between Israel and Egypt, and between males and females. The sister plays a crucial role in initiating cross-ethnic, cross-class, and cross-generational interaction, while Bat Pharaoh serves as a counterpoint to the Egyptian king. Although Bat Pharaoh is neither a man nor an Israelite, she is indeed the greatest rival to her father.

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