

Parashah 13

Sh'mot

שמות "Names"

Exodus 1:1 – 6:1

Torah Together



A significant length of time has passed since the events recorded at the end of **Genesis**. This portion introduces us to Moses, with whom we'll spend the rest of our time in the *Torah*. Sometimes it's helpful to remember that Moses wrote the book of **Genesis**. He recorded stories that had been passed down by word of mouth for hundreds of years.

1. The Oppression of the Israelites - 1:1-22

a) About how many years do you think passed between the events at the end of **Genesis** and the beginning of **Exodus**? Why do you suppose the Israelites stayed in Egypt so long? How did they fare?

b) Of what was the new Pharaoh "who did not know about Joseph" afraid? Do you think his fears were well-founded? What did the Egyptians do? What was the effect on the Hebrews? How did this effect the Egyptians?

c) As the Hebrews continued to thrive and grow, what was Pharaoh's next tactic to subdue them? How did the midwives respond to Pharaoh's command? How did God view their behavior? Can we draw any general conclusion from their behavior?

The Hebrew name for the book of **Exodus** (*Sh'mot* which means 'names') is taken from the first line of the *Torah* portion, "These are the names . . ." The name of each *Torah* portion is obtained in this manner.

Scripture Link:
Genesis 15:13–16 may shed some light on the length of time the Israelites spent in Egypt.

From Visitors to Slaves
As we begin the book of **Exodus**, the Israelites were still living in Egypt, although their living situation had changed dramatically since the time of Joseph.

Scripture Link:
Do you think **Genesis 12:3** might apply to the mid-wives and the Egyptians?

Scripture Link:

Can you find any parallels between the Pharaoh's actions and the story told in **Matthew 2:13-18**?

Moses and Water

In the Egyptian language, Moses' name was "*Monios*" which means "to draw out of the water." It would seem appropriate for Pharaoh's daughter to choose this name.

There is a tradition (not scripturally based) that the Pharaoh was aware of a prophecy that predicted that the savior of the Hebrews would be undone by water. This may have been his reason for choosing to have the male Hebrew babies thrown into the Nile River. It might also be noted that Moses was indeed undone by water in the incident at Kadesh. (See **Numbers 20:1-13**)

d) What was Pharaoh's "final solution" to the problem of the Hebrews? Does this remind you of any similar circumstances in Biblical history? What parallels can you draw from these situations?

2. The birth and upbringing of Moses - 2:1-10

a) From what tribe were Moses' mother and father? Do you think it was possible to keep the birth of Moses a secret for three months without God's help?

b) What aspects of the episode of Moses in the basket show that his mother's actions were not impulsive? What unexpected blessing did she receive from God?

c) Do you think Pharaoh's daughter had any doubt that the baby Moses was a Hebrew? What is the significance of Moses' name? Who named him?

d) **Hebrews 11:24-26** and **Acts 7:20-22** shed additional light on Moses' upbringing. Do you think he always knew he was Hebrew and not Egyptian? What does this say about his character?

3. Moses flees to Midian - 2:10-25

a) Why do you suppose Moses was watching “his own people at their hard labor”? Was his attack on the Egyptian slave master justified? Did Moses know it was wrong? Describe the incident that occurred the next day that caused Moses to flee Egypt.

b) What do you know about Midian? About how far did Moses travel? Who were the Midianites and what do you suppose “a priest of Midian” was?

c) Describe the incident at the well where Moses met his future wife, Zipporah.

d) This passage describes the birth of Moses’ first son. What is the significance of his name?

4. Moses and the Burning Bush - 3:1-22

a) Here Moses’ father-in-law is identified as Jethro, not Reuel. Are they the same person? Given that Moses was living in Midian, where do you think Mt. Horeb might be located?

b) Can you find any significance in the fact that God appeared to Moses in a burning bush? What is the first thing God instructs Moses to do? Why is this significant?

Scripture Link:

In **Acts 7:23-29**, the new believer, Stephen, is retelling this story. Does Stephen’s version of the story give you any additional insight?

Scripture Link:

Genesis chapter **25** tells of Abraham’s life after the death of Sarah and of his descendants. Note particularly the names of the sons he had later in life.

Mt. Horeb or Mt. Sinai?

Just as there is some controversy over the exact location of this mountain, there is also some confusion over its name. Here, Moses clearly calls it Mt. Horeb and identifies it as the “mountain of God.” Later it is called Mt. Sinai, a name which may have been taken from the region in which people believed it was located.

c) How does Moses react when God identifies Himself? Why do you think he did this?

Moses Reluctance

Based on his initial responses to God's words, it would appear that Moses was not very enthusiastic about undertaking the mission that God had for him. Analyze Moses' objections to God's plan. How many times did Moses object? How do you think God viewed this exchange with Moses? At this stage in his life, Moses certainly seems reluctant. How do you think you might have felt if you were in Moses' place?

d) In verses 7 - 10, God very clearly tells Moses what He intends to do and why. What is Moses' response? Is this the response of a man of great faith and a willing servant? What does God say to reassure Moses?

e) What is Moses next objection in verse 13? How does God respond to this objection?

“And God said to Moses, ‘I AM THAT I AM.’ And He said, So you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ And God said to Moses again, You shall say this to the sons of Israel, the LORD the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is My name forever, and this is My title from generation to generation. ”

Exodus 3:14-15

f) In verses 16 - 22, God goes into much greater detail in his instructions to Moses. Summarize what God tells Moses here.

Was it appropriate for Moses to ask God his name?

The Egyptian culture in which the Israelites lived involved the worship of many different gods, all with different names. Pharaoh himself was even considered to be a god. The Hebrews, on the other hand, worshiped only one god, and at least up to this point, their god didn't even have a name. How could the one and only god of a nation of slaves, and that an unnamed god, compare with the many apparently powerful gods of Egypt? So it makes sense that Moses would want to know the name of the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In the Hebrew text of the *Torah*, the name that God gives himself (translated here as "the LORD") is יהוה . In Hebrew, which is read from right to left, these are the four Hebrew letters yod, hey, vav, hey. This is called the "tetragrammaton," a Greek word meaning "four letters." The Hebrew phrase translated as "I AM THAT I AM" (or sometimes as "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE") can be derived from the Hebrew characters in the tetragrammaton. These four Hebrew characters are usually transliterated in English as YHWH because the Hebrew י (yod) makes a "Y" sound, the Hebrew ה (hey) makes an "H" sound and the Hebrew ו (vav) makes a "W" or "V" sound in English.

Aside from reading from right to left, another interesting characteristic of the Hebrew language is that a word's vowel sounds are written as a series of dots and dashes above and below the characters. Once a person is fairly familiar with the language, the words can be recognized without the vowel sounds and so they are often omitted. Such has been the case with the tetragrammaton and today no one really knows what the original vowel sounds were.

In an effort to keep from violating the third commandment ("You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain."), *Torah* and Bible translators chose to just not pronounce God's name at all. If reading, when they came across the tetragrammaton, instead of pronouncing God's holy name, they would substitute the Hebrew word *Adonai*, which means "lord," a term of respect as it is in English. The upshot of all this is that today, no one knows for sure how to pronounce God's name. However, if it were possible to pronounce God's name in English, it might sound like "Yahweh" which is what many people use.

Today, in most English Bibles, if you see the words "the LORD," where "lord" is written in all capital letters, then it has been translated from the tetragrammaton. If you're not uncomfortable pronouncing what might be the actual name of God, you can substitute Yahweh for this and be correct. The effect of doing this can be quite striking. For example, in the story of the Exodus, when Moses is having his ten confrontations with Pharaoh, if you substitute "Yahweh" for "the LORD" when reading, it has the effect of giving the God of the Israelites a name (which is appropriate). This tends to emphasize the fact that our God, the God of the Israelites, was engaging the gods of Egypt in battle, which is exactly what was happening. There are many other places where using the actual name of God can add to your understanding of the Bible.

What about Jehovah?

If you take the vowel sounds from the Hebrew word for "lord," *Adonai*, (ah-oh-ah) and use them with the consonants from the tetragrammaton, (Y-H-W-H) you get something like "Yahovah." Then if you translate that into English, exchanging the "Y" for a "J", you get "Jehovah." This is actually where the word came from that some English Bibles use for the name of God.

5. Signs for Moses - 4:1-17

a) What is Moses' next objection in chapter 4, verse 1? How does God respond to this objection? What three signs were given to Moses and what was their purpose?

b) What is Moses' next objection in verse 10? What is God's response? Do you sense God becoming a little impatient?

c) What is Moses' final objection in verse 13? How does God respond? What attributes of God are revealed in His verbal exchange with Moses?

Moses and the Circumcision of his Son

This passage (**Exodus 4:24-26**) is one of the most cryptic in the *Torah*. Commentators have had difficulties with it for centuries. Perhaps the most reasonable explanation is that there was a disagreement between Moses and his wife, Zipporah, over the rite of circumcision. Not being raised as a Hebrew, she may have found the rite barbaric and objected to it being carried out on their infant sons. God, however, required it and held Moses accountable to see that it was done. Do you think this may explain the events described in this passage? We will see that after this event, apparently Zipporah and the children returned to Midian and Moses went on to Egypt alone.

6. Moses returns to Egypt - 4:18-31

a) Verse 18 relates Moses' conversation with Jethro. Can you imagine how such a conversation might have gone? Note that Moses seems determined to obey God.

b) On Moses' trip back to Egypt with his wife and sons, God tells Moses what He intends to do to Pharaoh. What do you find interesting about this exchange?

c) Verses 24 - 26 relate a confusing story about the circumcision of Moses' son. What do you think this story is about? Why do you think Moses hadn't circumcised his son?

d) Moses and Aaron's first meeting with the elders of the Israelites seemed to go well. How did they respond to the news that Moses had come to relieve their oppression?

7. Bricks without Straw - 5:1 - 6:1

a) In their first meeting with Pharaoh, what did Moses and Aaron request of him? What did Pharaoh say to them in response? What did he do to show his displeasure?

b) How did Pharaoh's edict affect the Israelites? As they fell short of their required quota of bricks, who was punished and how?

c) What did the Israelite foremen do to try to correct the situation that caused them to fail to meet their quotas? Were they successful? Did they learn the reason for Pharaoh's new edict?

d) Just after learning the cause of their problems, the Israelite foremen happen to meet Moses and Aaron. What did they say to Moses and Aaron?

e) Appropriately, Moses went to God with his problems. What was God's response?

Moses Early "Success"

This exchange between God and Moses (**Exodus 5:22-23**) is very emotional. Because we know the "rest of the story," we can see that Moses was just beginning the work that God had for him. From Moses' perspective, however, God wasn't meeting His part of the bargain. Moses had gone to Pharaoh and given him God's message, but God had "not rescued His people at all!" It would be interesting to know how Moses felt about this exchange about 40 years later.

Digging deeper

1. This is our first encounter with Moses, with whom we will spend the remainder of the Torah. Spend a few minutes analyzing the personality traits exhibited by Moses in these first few chapters of Exodus. List them and keep the list to compare with later events in his life which we will study.

2. Put yourself in the shoes of the “Israelite foremen appointed by Pharaoh’s slave drivers” in Exodus 5:14. Try to imagine how it would have felt to be responsible for continuing to meet their quota of bricks with fewer resources than before. What expectations do you think they had for their meeting with Pharaoh?

For each *Torah* portion (*Parashah*), the ancient Hebrew scribes defined a corresponding reading from the prophets, called the *Haftarah* (conclusion). These passages are tied to the *Torah* portion by a key idea or theme. Also, after the New Testament (*Brit Hadashah*) was formalized, Bible scholars chose from it passages that also complement the *Torah* portion. These often provide additional insight into the *Torah* portion and can lead to a better understanding of the unity and consistency of God’s word.

For further study, see

Haftarah : Isaiah 27:6–28:13; 29:22-23 or Jeremiah 1:1 – 2:3
Brit Hadashah : Matthew 22:23-33, 41-46; Mark 12:18-27, 35-37;
Luke 20:27-44 Acts 3:12-15, 5:27-32; 7:17-36; 22:12-16; 24:14-16;
Hebrews 11:23-26