

Exodus, Chapter 2, Verses 16-25

16. וּלְכֹהֵן מִדְיָן שִׁבְעַת בָּנוֹת וַתְּבִאנָהּ וַתְּדַלְּנָהּ וַתִּמְלְאנָהּ אֶת-הַרְהָטִים לְהַשְׁקוֹת צֹאן אָבִיהֶן:
 17. וַיְבֹאוּ הָרְעִים וַיִּגְרְשׁוּם וַיִּקָּם מֹשֶׁה וַיּוֹשַׁעַן וַיִּשְׁקֵן אֶת-צֹאנָם:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock; but shepherds came and drove them off. Moses rose to their defense, and he watered their flock.	Now the priest of Midyan had seven daughters; they came, they drew [water] and they filled the troughs, to give-drink to their father's sheep. Shepherds came and drove them away. But Moshe rose up, he delivered them and gave-drink to their sheep.	And a priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came and drew water and filled the troughs to water their father's flock, and the shepherds came and drove them away. And Moses got up and saved them and watered their flock.	And the priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came and drew water and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. And the shepherds came and drove them off, and Moses rose and saved them and watered their flock.

Verse 16

Fox

priest of Midyan: This title has spawned extensive theorizing about the origins of Mosaic religion (sometimes called the “Kenite Hypothesis” after the Kenites, a tribe of smiths connected to Moshe’s father-in-law and spoken of favorably at a number of points in the Bible). It has been suggested that Moshe learned the rudiments of his religious or legal system from this source. We do not have enough evidence to make a positive judgment on this theory; biographically, it does make sense for Moshe to marry into a holy family of some sort.

Seven daughters: The requisite “magic” number, as in a good folk tale.

Alter

Seven daughters .. came and drew water. By this point, the ancient audience would have sufficient signals to recognize the narrative convention of the betrothal type-scene (compare Abraham’s servant and Rebekah, Gen. 24, and Jacob and Rachel, Gen. 29): the future bridegroom, or his surrogate, encounters a nubile young woman, or women, at a well in a foreign land; water is drawn; the woman hurries to bring home news of the stranger’s arrival; he is invited to a meal; the betrothal is agreed on. In keeping with the folktale stylization of the Moses story, the usual young woman is multiplied by the formulaic number seven.

Verse 17

Alter

The shepherds came and drove them off. Only in this version of the betrothal scene is there an actual struggle between hostile sides at the well. Moses’s intervention to “save” (*hoshi’a*) the girls accords perfectly with his future role as commander of the Israelite forces in the wilderness and the liberator, *moshi’a*, of his people.

18. וַתְּבֹאנָה אֶל־רְעוּאֵל אָבִיהֶן וַיֹּאמֶר מִדּוּעַ מְהֵרָתָן בָּא הַיּוֹם:

19. וַתֹּאמְרֵן אִישׁ מִצְרִי הִצִּילָנוּ מִיַּד הָרֹעִים וְגַם־דָּלָה דָּלָה לָנוּ וַיִּשְׁקֵן אֶת־הַצֹּאן:

20. וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־בְּנֹתָיו וְאִיוֹ לָמָּה זֶה עֲזַבְתֶּן אֶת־הָאִישׁ קְרָאֵן לוֹ וַיֹּאכֵל לֶחֶם:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
When they returned to their father Reuel, he said, “How is it that you have come back so soon today?” They answered, “An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds; he even drew water for us and watered the flock.” He said to his daughters,	They came [home] to Re’uel their father, and he said: For-what-reason have you come [home] so quickly today? They said: An Egyptian man rescued us from the hand of the shepherds, and also he drew,	And they came to Reuel, their father, and he said, "Why were you so quick to come today?" And they said, "An Egyptian man rescued us from the shepherds' hand, and he drew water for us and watered the flock, too." And he said to his daughters, "And	And they came to Reuel their father, and he said, “Why have you hurried back today?” And they said, “An Egyptian man rescued us from the hands of the shepherds, and, what’s more, he even drew water for us and watered the flock.” And he said

<p>“Where is he then? Why did you leave the man? Ask him in to break bread.”</p>	<p>yes, drew for us and watered the sheep! He said to his daughters: So-where-is-he? For-what-reason, have you left the man behind? Call him, that he may eat bread!</p>	<p>where is he? Why is this that you've left the man? Call him, and let him eat bread.”</p>	<p>to his daughters, “And where is he? Why did you leave the man? Call him that he may eat bread.”</p>
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Verse 18

Alter

Why have you hurried back today? With great narrative economy, the expected betrothal-scene verb, “to hurry,” *miher*, occurs not in the narrator’s report but in Reuel’s expression of surprise to his daughters.

Verse 19

Fox

An Egyptian man: Moshe would have been recognizable as such from his manner of dress and lack of facial hair. In addition, he is not yet fully an Israelite, spiritually speaking.

Verse 20

Fox

So-where-is-he: This is one word in the Hebrew (*ve-ayyo*). The whole verse stands in ironic contrast to Moshe’s earlier treatment (v. 14) at the hand of “his brothers” (Childs). There, he was rejected; here, his host cannot welcome him quickly enough.

For-what-reason: Similarly this is one Hebrew word (*lamma*).

bread: As often in both the Bible and other cultures, “bread” is here synonymous with “food.”

Alter

He even drew water for us and watered the flock. Their report highlights the act of drawing water, the Hebrew stressing the verb by stating it in the infinitive before the conjugated form — *daloh dalah* (in this translation, “even drew”). The verb is different from *mashah*, the term

associated with Moses's name, because it is the proper verb for drawing water, whereas *mashah* is used for drawing something out of water. In any case, this version of the scene at the well underscores the story of a hero whose infancy and future career are intimately associated with water.

Call him that he may eat bread. “Call” here has its social sense of “invite,” and “bread” is the common biblical synecdoche for “food.” Reuel's eagerness to show hospitality indicates that he is a civilized person, and in the logic of the type-scene, the feast offered the stranger will lead to betrothal.

21. וַיֹּאֶל מֹשֶׁה לְשֵׁבֶת אֶת־הָאִישׁ וַיִּתֵּן אֶת־צַפְרָה בְּתוֹ לְמִשָּׁה:
 22. וַתֵּלֶד בֵּן וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ גֵרְשֹׁם כִּי אָמַר גֵּר הָיִיתִי בְּאֶרֶץ נְכַרְיָה:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
Moses consented to stay with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah as wife. She bore a son whom he named Gershom, for he said, “I have been a stranger in a foreign land.”	Moshe agreed to settle down with the man, and he gave Tzippora his daughter to Moshe. She gave birth to a son, and he called his name: Gershom/Sojourner There, for he said: A sojourner have I become in a foreign land.	And Moses was content to live with the man. And he gave Zipporah, his daughter, to Moses, and she gave birth to a son, and he called his name Gershom, “because,” he said, “I was an alien in a foreign land.”	And Moses agreed to dwell with the man, and he gave Zipporah his daughter to Moses. And she bore a son, and he called his name Gershom, for he said, “A sojourner have I been in a foreign land.”

Verse 22

Fox

Gershom/Sojourner There: Related to the Hebrew *ger*, “sojourner” or resident alien. The name more accurately reflects the sound of the verb *garesh*, “drive out” (so Abravanel), which plays its role in the Exodus stories (and in Moshe's recent experience in the narrative). As my student Nancy Ginsberg once pointed out, this naming of sons to express the feelings about exile has already occurred in a more personally positive context—with Yosef (see Gen. 41:50–52).

A sojourner ... in a foreign land: The King James Version phrase, “a stranger in a strange land,” is stunning, but the Hebrew uses two different roots (*gur* and *nakhor*).

Alter

Gershom .. a sojourner have I been. In keeping with biblical practice, the naming-speech reflects folk etymology, breaking the name into *ger*, “sojourner,” and *sham*, “there,” though the verbal root of the name *g-r-sh* would appear to refer to banishment.

23. וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָרַבִּים הָהֵם וַיָּמָת מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וַיֵּאָנְחוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן־הָעֲבֹדָה וַיִּזְעְקוּ וַתַּעַל שׁוֹעֲתָם אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים מִן־הָעֲבֹדָה:

24. וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת־נַאֲקָתָם וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת־בְּרִיתוֹ אֶת־אֲבְרָהָם אֶת־יִצְחָק וְאֶת־יַעֲקֹב:

25. וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֵּדַע אֱלֹהִים:

<p>A long time after that, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God. God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.</p>	<p>It was, many years later, that the king of Egypt died. But the Children of Israel groaned from the servitude, and they cried out; and their plea-for-help went up to God, from the servitude. God hearkened to their moaning; God called-to-mind his covenant [with] Avraham Yitzhak and Yaakov. God saw the Children of Israel; God knew.</p>	<p>And it was after those many days, and the king of Egypt died. And the children of Israel groaned from the work, and they cried out, and their wail went up to God from the work. And God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God saw the children of Israel. And God knew!</p>	<p>And it happened when a long time had passed that the king of Egypt died, and the Israelites groaned from the bondage and cried out, and their plea from the bondage when up to God. And God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God saw the Israelites, and God knew.</p>
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Verse 23

Fox

the king of Egypt died./ The Children of Israel groaned: The change in regime does not prove beneficial to the suffering slaves, but makes it possible for Moshe to return to Egypt, thus impelling the narrative along and reestablishing the link between Moshe and his people.

Cried out: The same verb (Heb. *tza'ok*) is used to describe the “hue and cry” of Sodom and Gomorra (Gen. 18:20; see also the note to 22:22, below).

Alter

Bondage. The Hebrew *'avadah* is the same term rendered as “work” in chapter 1.

Verse 23-24

Friedman

2:23-24. groan, cry, wail, moan. Four different words are used in the Hebrew to describe their crying. This conveys that their agony is intense, continuous, and pervasive.

Verse 24

Alter

Moaning. The work *na'aqah* is a phonetic cousin (through metathesis) to the word for groaning, *'anahiah*, reflected in the previous verse, an effect the translation tries to simulate through rhyme.

Verses 24-25

Alter

Until this point, God has not been evident in the story. Now He is the subject of a string of significant verbs — hear, remember (which in the Hebrew has the strong force of “take to heart”) see, and know. The last of these terms marks the end of the narrative segment with a certain mystifying note — sufficiently mystifying that the ancient Greek translators sought to “correct” it because it has no object. “God knew,” but what did He know? Presumably, the suffering of the Israelites, the cruel oppression of history in which they are now implicated, the obligations of the covenant with the patriarchs, and the plan He must undertake to liberate the enslaved people. And so the objectless verb prepares us for the divine address from the burning bush and the beginning of Moses’s mission.