

Ex. 1:15

The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, 16 saying, “When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live.” 17 The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live. 18 So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?” 19 The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth.” 20 And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly. 21 And because the midwives feared God, He established households for them. 22 Then Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, “Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.”

Ex. 2:1

A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. 2 The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him for three months. 3 When she could hide him no longer, she got a wicker basket for him and caulked it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. 4 And his sister stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him.

Ex. 2:5

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She spied the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to fetch it. 6 When she opened it, she saw that it was a child, a boy crying. She took pity on it and said, “This must be a Hebrew child.” 7 Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for you?” 8 And Pharaoh’s daughter answered, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother. 9 And Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will pay your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed it. 10 When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses, explaining, “I drew him out of the water.”

ANET: Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. with Supplement, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969) — “The Legend of Sargon,” 119

COS: The Context of Scripture, eds. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger (Leiden: Brill, 1997-2002) — “The Birth Legend of Sargon of Akkad,” 1.133

Kenton L. Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature*, 279-280

***The Sargon Birth Legend.*** This title is something of a misnomer, based as it is on the story of Sargon’s birth, which takes up only the text’s first ten lines. The title stuck, however, for reasons that will be obvious. According to the tale, Sargon was born to an EN-priestess who was apparently prohibited from bearing children.

She successfully concealed his birth and then abandoned him in a watertight basket at the river's edge. Aqqi, a water-drawing agriculturalist, found and raised Sargon. As an adult, Sargon took up the family trade, but he soon drew the attention of the goddess Ištar, who interceded to make him the king of Akkade. The text then follows with a list of Sargon's greatest accomplishments and concludes by pronouncing a blessing upon future kings, that they too might enjoy a long reign and success. A natural question arises: to what end would such a text have been written? Although composed in the poetic style of earlier epics, the Akkadian dialects of the Birth Legend exemplars are Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian. These dialects were in use over a millennium after Sargon of Akkad lived. The Birth Legend is therefore now generally regarded as a composition of the Neo-Assyrian king Sargon II (709–705 B.C.E.), who composed the text in honor of his namesake and, in doing so, placed a blessing for himself in the elder Sargon's mouth (Lewis). Thus, the text was probably composed to extol the virtues of Sargon II and to legitimate his reign.

Scholars commonly believe that the similarities between this story and the birth of Moses in Exodus are best explained by the biblical author's use of the Sargon tradition. The artificial attachment of the concealment theme to the Moses tradition is suggested by the sudden and unexplained disappearance of the infant-killing motif after Moses was found at the river's edge. Rabbinic tradition attempted to account for this strange feature: "Moses was cast into the Nile to make the [Egyptian] astrologers think that Israel's savior had already been thrown into the Nile, so that from that day on they would call off the search for him. Indeed from that day on, the decree was annulled, for they divined that Israel's savior had already been attacked by water" (see Greenberg). Although the rabbinic solution might strike us as artificial, the rabbis recognized the problem. The infant-killing motif and the resulting concealment do not cohere with the Moses story so nicely as they do in the case of the Sargon Birth Legend. This suggests that the Hebrew writer took up the motif from the Sargon legend, where it fit very satisfactorily, and applied it to Moses in order to portray Israel's lawgiver as a similar hero. Why was this done? It has been suggested that the biblical presentations of Moses were reshaped from time to time in order to counter political and theological challenges from Assyria, Babylon, and Persia (Otto). In the case of the exposure motif, this may reflect an attempt to contrast the heroic Moses with the enslaving presence of the Neo-Assyrian king Sargon II (721–705 B.C.E.). We may, then, conclude that not only the social dynamics in ancient Israel but also the external political forces faced by ancient Israel have shaped the Moses tradition.

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