

## Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 257

Exodus 2:1-10

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### Episode Summary

Exodus 2:1-10 is the familiar story of the birth of Moses in Egypt. Lurking behind the familiar story is a point of controversy and misunderstanding: its presumed relationship to ancient stories of the “abandoned child,” most specifically the legend of Sargon the Great’s birth. This episode asks the question of whether the biblical writer stole the Sargon story for Exodus 2:1-10, and how a potential relationship between the two might be processed well.

### Transcript

**TS:** Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 257: Exodus 2:1-10. I’m the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he’s the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike, Super Bowl weekend! How are you?

**MH:** Yeah. I’m disappointed. I wanted New Orleans and Kansas City, and so look what I got. I got the two other teams. You know?

**TS:** Oh, I know. I know.

**MH:** I’ll probably watch a little of it, just to say I did it, and then think about the fact that we’ve got, what, 20 days or so (or less, if more pitchers and catchers have to report) [laughs] until spring training...

**TS:** Oh my gosh. I just checked out...

**MH:** It’s like the dead zone because I don’t like hockey and I don’t like basketball, so I’m just in limbo.

**TS:** We have March Madness coming up. Oh, I love March Madness.

**MH:** I used to watch it, but I don’t know, it just dropped off the radar.

**TS:** I love it. I love it. Well, do you have any predictions for the Super Bowl?

**MH:** I think if the Rams' defensive line can control the line of scrimmage, the Rams will win. That's about as far as I can go. It all depends on that. If Brady has time, he's going to just be Brady. If he doesn't, then it'll be a different story.

**TS:** I'll ride him and Belichick to the end. So there you go.

**MH:** [laughs] Belichick's entertaining. He's like this mad genius. So it'll be interesting. So I'll watch at least a little of it. I don't know if I'll watch the whole thing, but I'm still disappointed. I'm still getting over... I wanted a Super Bowl that was going to be 50-45—something crazy like that.

**TS:** We may get it. It just depends on the Rams' defense. Well, for those people who don't watch American football or the Super Bowl (I don't know why you would not want to do that), but fortunately, you have Exodus 2 coming your way right now.

**MH:** There you go. This might, in fact, be more entertaining, especially if the team you want to win doesn't win. I've gotten more than a few emails about the Exodus series. It's just like, "Man, it's so detailed, and it's cool stuff, and I have to go listen to it two or three times." Well, good! I kind of tried to warn you ahead of time. We're going to be hitting the quagmires. We're going to get deep into the weeds (into the papyrus). You can't really avoid it in this book, and today is more of the same with Exodus 2:1-10.

But before we begin, one of the emails I got prompted me to... I thought it would be a good idea to spend five minutes here commenting on some previous content. I got an email from Chris who's an archeologist and a specialist in historical geography of the Bible at Bar Ilan University in Israel. He's referencing Jim Hoffmeier from Wheaton, who's an Egyptologist, and of course has the very useful book *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition*, which I have referenced in the earlier episodes a bit. Chris says, basically (I'm not going to go through the whole email):

I have heard Hoffmeier talk about the "textual updating" idea of [Chuck] Aling [MH: Those who have listened to the first two episodes on chapter 1, you know what we're talking about here.] - and he counters that it is problematic for Avaris to have been updated to Ramses when Ramses was only a major Egyptian town until the 20th dynasty... a late updating during the presumed editorial activity for the Pentateuch (exile or shortly thereafter) [would be centuries after the 20<sup>th</sup> dynasty, and] would not mean anything to later Israelites who would not be aware of a city named Ramses (cf. Psalm 78 - updated to Zoan). [MH: This is a later name of the same place, or at least the same region that we're talking about here.] In other words, if Aling's editorial activity view is coherent, a scribe would have updated the name from Avaris to Zoan, not Raamses.

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That, of course, is coherent as it's stated, but there are two possible responses to it (just so that you get the idea that Chris is raising here). If it's true that the place (the two store cities in Exodus 1:11, Pithom and Raamses)... We talked during our chronology episode that the early-daters get around this by proposing that Raamses as a name is an editorial updating when the Pentateuch was edited and updated. There are other examples of this: Bethel, Luz is a good example. Very transparent in Scripture. So they postulate this kind of thing happened. And so Raamses in Exodus 1:11 does not force a late date for the exodus—something in the 1200s. Of course, the early date is the one that takes 1 Kings 6:1 literally, and that's the mid 1400s B.C. So the fact that Raamses is in there and his time period is in the 1200s B.C., that doesn't force us to say the exodus was dated to that time. Raamses could have just wound up in the text because of this editorial updating, during the exile or shortly thereafter, the 500s B.C. (we'll call it). And Chris' point is that, "Well, that wouldn't make sense, because if they were updating the text then, they would have used Zoan instead of Raamses. There are a couple of possible responses to this:

1. Redford's article that we talked about when we discussed Exodus 1:11 notes on page 402 that you could still have an editor in the 500s B.C. still inserting or using Raamses deliberately to give the story an archaic flavor. To some listeners, that would just seem like fictionalizing something or playing a little too fast and loose with the editorial idea—that the writer knows that the city's called Zoan now, but we're going to call it Raamses to get back to the original antiquity of the exodus event and preserve that then. That might sound like fictionalizing. The problem with looking at it that way (this possibility) is books like Job. Job has a mix (all scholars who study Job know this) of late Hebrew features and a few earlier Hebrew features. But the book itself is set in a patriarchal setting. So you could have a writer writing late (500s B.C.) and putting things into the story to give it an archaic flavor.

Of course, the problem with that is that people would say, "Well, Job can get away with that because it's wisdom literature. Exodus is historical, and so we feel less comfortable there." I understand that, but go back to our very first episode when we jumped into the book of Exodus. We asked questions like, "How much precision do we need to be precise or to call something history?" Ancient writers *do* this sort of thing. And even though we wouldn't do it the way we write history now, they did do this sort of thing. So the fact that they do it doesn't rule out historicity. In Job's case, there really could have been a person named Job who suffered and so on and so forth, and then his reason for suffering gets theological dimensions because of how the book begins—theologizing his suffering. So it doesn't rule out Job's historicity. And that's just the way the book is crafted. In other words, the ancient person wouldn't have read that and concluded just out of the gate, "Well, there was never really somebody named Job and we know that this is just an allegory." A lot of people would have thought there was a person named Job and that they're getting a behind-the-scenes look into the spiritual world about why this guy is suffering when he's righteous. So the fact

that this can happen doesn't rule out historicity. So that's the first approach—that the writers could still have used Raamses to give it an archaic flavor.

2. This is the longer one. We referenced Redford's article on Exodus 1:11. Listeners should know by this point that Redford doesn't buy Hoffmeier's argument that since Raamses was only a major town until the 20th dynasty, the editorial updating must have been at the time of Ramesses or shortly thereafter (12th-11th century B.C.). Redford doesn't buy it because he questions whether the name itself refers to the *town* specifically, as opposed to merely associating the store cities with Ramesses the person. And Redford marshals evidence for the imprecision of equating the name with the actual city or residence. He actually says in a different article (Redford in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*):

This is important since Zo'an became the official pharaonic residence, replacing the old Ramesside capital, Pi-Ramesses.

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He's going to go on in what he writes to distinguish the place regionally and the person Raamses from the actual residence (the town and the residence within the town). So Redford doesn't view all these things as a whole. He divides up the parts and then he asks the question, "Is the name really about the city, the place?" And Hoffmeier would say, "It *is* about the city, and it was only the royal residence there until the 20<sup>th</sup> dynasty. So Redford, out of the gate, approaches it from a different trajectory. Redford asks, in his article on Exodus 1:11:

Is [the name Raamses in Exod 1:11] to be equated with Ramesses II's new capital [the specific site]?

He doesn't think so, as we noted in the earlier episode. He goes on:

Is it not strange that if the two Egyptian toponyms [place names] were borrowed c. 1200 B.C. by the Hebrews, the element *pr* [in *Pr R'-ms-sw* (that's the Egyptian spelling for that one) and *Pr Atum* for Pithom] should be retained in the transcription of *Pr-'ltn* but suppressed in that of *Pr R'-ms-sw*?

You don't get Pith Raamses, you just get Raamses. Any of that first syllable is gone. So Redford thinks that's just strange. Why keep it with one and not the other? This is what prompts him to argue that the Hebrew spelling (without that "pr" element) actually is the result of getting the place name (or the name of the person) from Greek material, which is very late. So this is the logic that Redford uses.

Something I didn't get into in the episode we did on chronology... Redford continues that this idea of very late updating agrees with other things. Specifically it agrees with...

...the fact that from the Saite period well on into Roman times there was a flourishing city called Pithom in the north-eastern delta, while there is no evidence that, prior to the Saites [which are very late], a city with that name [Pithom] existed [ever in Egypt].

That creates a problem, because when you read Exodus 1:11, we're talking about the store cities of Pithom and Raamses. So Redford's going to say, "Look. Just the fact that historically, we don't get a city known as Pithom until very late..." That bolsters his argument about what to do with Raamses—very late editorial kind of activity. So Redford is going to object to this, and we really get down to the question of, "How do we get Pithom as a store city? And how can we reconcile that with all that we've said about Raamses?"

So I don't want to get too deep in the weeds here. But for Chris (this is geeking out here a little bit), you probably wish that Hoffmeier had dealt with some of the contentions of Redford. He deals with some, but he leaves some out. Hoffmeier does cite the work of a couple of other scholars who object to Redford's idea that Raamses did not refer to the capital itself. That's true. With respect to both the name Raamses, Hoffmeier objects (rightly, in my mind, as something we're going to talk about today; we'll get into this)... Hoffmeier objects to Redford's argument that *R' ms sw* is different than Raamses, because of the spelling. And there are really two elements to Redford's argument there. One is that the "S" letter is different in Egyptian and Hebrew, and also there's a whole other syllable that's missing. Ra-am-ses, as opposed to *R' ms sw*. There's that "ah" syllable that's missing. The "S" syllable talk isn't really that important, so I agree with Hoffmeier that that's not much of an argument. But the missing syllable Hoffmeier never addresses, and that's important to what Redford is saying. Redford just approaches this from a different perspective.

And you could say, "Where does this leave us?" As always, it leaves us with not being able to prove either date by means of Exodus 1:11. That's just the way it is. You can go back and forth with all these detailed arguments, but to be fair, the late date isn't undone by the editorial updating issue. It just... You can argue till you're blue in the face about minutia like letters and syllables in names and whether the "S" sound in Egyptian... Egyptian has more than one "S" sound, and Hebrew has two ("sibilants" in linguistic talk). Egyptian actually has several. It actually has more than two. Hebrew has two. With the fact that they're inconsistently used when a place name goes from one language to the other and from that other language back to Egyptian... What do we do with that stuff? But that's the level of argumentation you get on this verse (Exodus 1:11) within the bigger debate of the date of the exodus. It's so granular. It's so detailed. We're going to move on to what we're covering today, but this is why... I hope this mind-numbing stuff illustrates something: that you should be suspicious when you read something on the internet or something that's not peer-reviewed material claiming to solve the date of the exodus or claiming to locate a specific biblical

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site with this particular thing over here. And “Oh, this is so obvious! All we have to do is visit there! All we have to do is look at this! All we have to do is think this thought, and the problem’s solved.” No, it isn’t. These debates are centuries old for many reasons. It gets very granular—very detailed—in terms of linguistic evidence and archeological evidence. Arguments hinge (they move one way or the other) based on minutia. And if you’re reading something that has not considered the minutia and interacted with peer-reviewed material that *does* interact with the minutia, feel free to dismiss it. It is just not up to snuff. If you’re going to be serious about research, you must interact with the minutia. Otherwise, you’re going to overlook something and make fallacious arguments. So let’s just take the granular level of the detail here as a learning tool about how biblical studies is done and that we should not just... All commentary about a subject is not equal. It just isn’t. People with a high degree of expertise have considered all the things that need to be considered over and over and over again. And they have interacted with other people just like them. So when you get researchers and writers who don’t do any of that work and aren’t even really aware of that work, don’t just adopt what they say. Realize that there are reasons why these debates have persisted. It’s not easy. It just isn’t.

So today we’re in Exodus 2:1-10. I’m going to read the passage. We’re going to get into a big item and then a smaller item in the episode today. But we want to start off by reading the actual passage, and we’re going to go through the first 10 verses. There’s a lot to consider here. It’s Exodus. There are just so many things going on here. There are some things that might appear a bit obvious: “Hey, I want to drill down on that. I’m curious about this thing that I can see clearly.” And then there are other things that are lurking in the background that you may or may not be aware of that are really crucial to the way academics (scholars) think about Exodus 2:1-10. So in the ESV, we read this:

**Now a man from the house of Levi went and took as his wife a Levite woman.<sup>2</sup> The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him three months. <sup>3</sup>When she could hide him no longer, she took for him a basket made of bulrushes and daubed it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child in it and placed it among the reeds by the river bank. <sup>4</sup>And his sister stood at a distance to know what would be done to him. <sup>5</sup>Now the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her young women walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her servant woman, and she took it. <sup>6</sup>When she opened it, she saw the child, and behold, the baby was crying. She took pity on him and said, “This is one of the Hebrews’ children.” <sup>7</sup>Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?” <sup>8</sup>And Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Go.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother. <sup>9</sup>And Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child away**

**and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed him. <sup>10</sup>When the child grew older, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, “Because,” she said, “I drew him out of the water.”**

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This is a very familiar story. I think the basic elements of this are frankly pretty obvious. So we're not terribly concerned about retelling the story and doing a sermon (some kind of sermonic material). What I want to drill down on are two things. One is obvious; the other is not. We're going to do the non-obvious first, because it's the longest, and it's the most challenging. And then at the end... The second, easier one is, “What about the name ‘Moses’?” How does that work with Egyptian...? Does it make sense? That's something that always comes up when you read books about Exodus or the Old Testament or Israel in Egypt. You get that sort of discussion.

Depending on what kind of books you're reading, if you have studied Exodus on your own, you may or may not hit the first topic we're going to consider (the big one). And that is, there's a genre (a literary) issue here. Specifically, there are two aspects to this. When I say a literary or a genre issue, there are a lot of other stories (a lot of them) that feature an abandoned child or an abandoned hero who, in some instances, is in circumstances that are very similar to what you read in Exodus 2. And then this abandoned child grows up and does great things. Now there are a lot of these stories. I'm going to reference yet another article by Redford. Redford is an Egyptologist, so he's taken an interest in Egyptian stuff in the book of Exodus. That's why we're referring to his material more than once.

But there's one specific story that has the closest parallels to Exodus 2:1-10. And I'm going to give you the title of that story now (we'll get into it as we proceed here), and that is the Sargon birth legend. If you're doing your research on the internet, you're going to read things like that the writer of Exodus copied the Sargon birth legend to create the story of Moses in Exodus 2. I think that's drastically overstated, but that's what you get on the internet. But we need to get into the subject. I think you'll see why pretty quickly.

So I'm going to be referencing... When I say Redford's article on “the exposed child” or “the abandoned child,” the article I'm referring to is by Donald Redford. It's entitled “The Literary Motif of the Exposed Child (cf. Ex. ii 1-10)” *Numen*, volume 14, number 3. It was written in 1967, pages 209-228. Now what Redford does in this is he marshals all of the similar stories that in some way feature a child (a baby) that is abandoned or put under threat (basically disposed of in some way) and collects those and makes some comparative comments in relationship to Exodus as part of the article. The entire article doesn't focus on

the comparison. What he does is to group the stories into three categories. His three themes (or thematic categories) are:

1. You have stories where the child is exposed through shame at some circumstance of birth. Maybe the child is illegitimate. Maybe the child has a deformity. Maybe the child is a “hybrid”—in other words, the offspring of a god coming down and copulating with a woman or raping a woman. There are some Greek stories like that. So that’s the first theme (thematic element) of his three. Redford provides 14 examples, two of which have a box or container being put into water (the baby or child is put into this container and put into the water) as an element. The stories in this category... This isn’t actually where Redford puts the Moses story, because the other features of the stories in this category are honestly pretty bizarre. You’ve got the infant being suckled by bear or a wolf or a cow to keep it alive. You have other really truly bizarre sorts of elements. But two of the 14 have this box or container in water. That was the method of disposal of the child. And I hope that you’re catching that I’m saying “disposal,” because that is going to be a point of disconnect with the Exodus story. The mother of Moses in the Exodus 2 story isn’t trying to dispose of him. There’s no shame here. This is part of why Redford does not include the Exodus story in this first category. But you’ll see on the internet some of these examples that are plucked out. One of them is the Sargon birth legend. Sargon is an illegitimate child. So that’s a big disconnect with what’s going on in the book of Exodus, just out of the gate. So much so that Redford (who is not an evangelical Christian; he has no Christian or inspiration ax to grind) just doesn’t see the similarity here with the Sargon birth legend. But that’s the go-to analogy on the internet and in other popular resources for the origin of the Moses story. But here we have a good example of Redford saying, “Eh, not really.” There’s too much that’s different here.
2. The second category is that someone in power wants the child dead. Redford provides 13 examples here, three of which have this container or the water threat. Now this one applies to Exodus 2 because the baby Moses is under threat. His life is at stake here because of the killing off of the male children that we’ve talked about before. So this category fits. And you have three examples where you have the container and the water.
3. But Redford opts for category 3. This is, in his view, the best analogy, or at least the right category for Exodus 2. And that is that there is a general massacre going on that endangers the child. Redford gives us five examples of the abandoned child motif that include those elements. This really speaks to him as being the closest circumstance to the Moses story, so this is where he’ll actually list the Moses story in his article. Interestingly enough, he also puts the Jesus story in this one. Remember when Jesus

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was taken to Egypt to flee Herod? Herod wants all the boys two and under to die. So Redford puts the Jesus story in the same category.

That gives us a total of 32 stories with at least some similarity. And you have a half dozen that have this container and water thing going on, which is a big part of the Exodus 2 story. Of the 32, we should also mention that fewer than half of them involve mere human children. That means that more than half of these stories concern a child fathered illegitimately by a divine being or a rape. And the Moses story clearly does not fit that.

So right away, that raises a question mark over the idea, “Did the biblical writer know a bunch of these stories and then want to pattern his story deliberately after them?” Well, a lot of them, if he was doing that, why not have an angel coming and saying, “Hey, you’re going to have a kid. His name is going to be Moses. And this and that’s going to happen.” Kind of like the Jesus story. Why don’t we have some sort of divine appearance or input or something going on? Like with Samson. Samson isn’t part of this discussion here, but the Angel of the Lord shows up and announces to Samson’s mother that she’s going to have a child. Something like that. We don’t get that in Exodus 2. So it’s a significant disconnect. There’s no reason to conclude Moses is anything else but a normal human baby. So over half the examples have a significant disconnection with what’s going on in Exodus 2.

Now Redford is obviously well aware of this. We know where he puts it. He puts it into the third category. He knows that other scholars have tried to argue that Exodus 2 is an adaptation of this or that specific story. Since he’s an Egyptologist, he spends a lot of time in this article discussing the birth of Horus and devotes a good bit of attention to (as an Egyptologist) why the birth of Horus *does not* really provide a good literary analogy with the Exodus 2 story. And he’s also going to reject the Sargon story, but we’ll get to that in a moment. Redford goes through the birth story of Horus and he rejects the alleged Egyptian antecedents to the Moses story as source-parallels. Specifically, he notes the parallels to the birth of Horus. There is a craft (a little boat) of papyrus (made of reeds). The child is hidden in a marsh. There is a villain bent on the death of the child. He notes those elements are there, but he points out that those elements of the Horus birth story come from a very late set of texts—very late versions from the Greco-Roman period.

So Redford argues that the writers of the Horus myth were very likely very familiar with the *Moses* story. It could have been fertilized the other way around. Redford is pretty transparent about that, with the chronology of the text. So for those listening, I wanted to mention that, because there is a lot of internet stuff like Zeitgeist... Zeitgeist is typically trying to say that Jesus is Horus. You’re going to run into this, as well, with the Moses story. “Ah, that’s just taken from the Horus story and Moses is archetypal for Jesus, so that’s why Jesus gets to be a rehash of Horus.” It breaks down. You even have Egyptologists who say, “Well, if

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we're honest here, the material is really late so it doesn't make a whole lot of sense," as it pertains to our subject here in Exodus 2.

Where we want to camp, though, is really the Sargon birth story. So I'm going to read you a summary of the elements here from Redford's article, specifically this article of Redford is the one about the abandoned child motif. On page 214, in Redford's first category, he lists the Sargon story. It goes like this. This is just a little paragraph. He says:

Sargon is born in secret into a family which has apparently been at home in upland country. His birth place, however, is a city on the Euphrates, where his mother puts him in a reed ark and casts it upon the river. Found by a jar of water, Sargon is brought up as his son. Although no reason is given for the secrecy of the birth, it is clear that it was interdicted by someone. Sargon was probably not the object of a jealous king's search, but simply the bastard offspring of a woman whose station in life condemned her to childlessness.

Then he has a footnote where he discusses that. For our purposes here, there's this thing out there in Akkadian literature (Akkadian and Assyrian and Mesopotamian literature) called the Sargon Birth Legend. And it has these elements. Little baby Sargon was put into a reed box or ark (a little boat made of reeds), cast into the river, found by somebody coming down to draw water, and then Sargon grows up to be this great king (Sargon the Great). And this (at least when the person Sargon the Great lived) is centuries before the Israelites were in Egypt (centuries before Moses). The question is, though, "How old are the texts?" We're going to get into that. The person that we know from Mesopotamian history is one thing, but then what's written about that person is quite another. When you run into these texts (not just Mesopotamian texts, but Egyptian and biblical texts), you have to ask yourself, "Is the writing contemporaneous with the person that we're reading about?" We talked about Job a few minutes ago. Job is set in the patriarchal era, but by virtue of the language used throughout the book, it's written much later. We have these sorts of situations where the biblical content is written centuries after the fact of what's being described. That's normal. It's ubiquitous in antiquity. There's nothing unusual about that. So just a heads up that when we talk about Sargon the person living at a specific time well before Moses, that's different than talking about the literary text (or texts) from which we get the Sargon birth story. They're not contemporaneous in terms of time.

Now the elements are kind of obvious. And this has become a big topic of discussion in popular biblical studies. I use the internet for an example, where you get some good stuff and you get some really ridiculous stuff, too. There's a dissertation on this subject that is fairly old (done in 1976) and it's by a guy named Brian Lewis. It's called *The Legend of Sargon: A Study of the Akkadian Text and the Tale of the Hero who was Exposed at Birth*. The dissertation was

done at NYU (New York University) in 1976. And this is the most detailed study of the Sargon birth legend. It goes through every aspect of this. On pages 182 to 184, Lewis writes a few things that I think are really worth pointing out (worth quoting) that gets us into this. So the question before us is: Okay, the Exodus 2 story is very similar to a bunch of these abandoned child stories, but a lot of them can be winnowed out by one or more factors. The one that everybody seems to zero in on is this one about Sargon because the elements are close. We have texts to this effect. Redford is weeding out the Horus story because the textual material is so late. It's basically so late that it's irrelevant. So what we're really left with as the primary point of attention is this Sargon story. So that's why we're going to spend some time on it. So we're going to go through some thoughts that Lewis in his dissertation shared, and just think ourselves about, "What we do we do with this?" So Lewis writes:

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In considering the problem of determining the date of composition of the Sargon Legend [MH: when it was written], one is faced with a long period during which the genre to which the text belongs was alive, and little, if any, obvious, internal criteria with which to fix a date...

So right away, Lewis is admitting... Again, this is the most detailed study of the Sargon legend in the Akkadian—in the original texts—that we have. He's like, "Basically, we can't fix a date." [laughs] He continues and says:

It may in fact be impossible to establish with any certainty the origins of the Sargon Legend based on the available evidence. The text lacks any obvious grammatical, lexicographical, or philological feature which would allow a precise dating. Unfortunately, aside from its possible mention in two inventories of texts from Kujunjik [MH: which is a location in Mesopotamia], there are no known references to the Sargon Legend in cuneiform literature... The copies whose fragments we possess are relatively late. Three fragments belonging to the Kujunjik collection are written in Neo-Assyrian script, and a fourth fragment written in Neo-Babylonian is probably even later.

Now let me stop there. Neo-Assyrian is going to be 900, 800, and 700 B.C. If Sargon goes back to the 24<sup>th</sup> or 23<sup>rd</sup> centuries B.C., you're dealing with well over 1,000... A thousand and a half years later is what the text dates to. So the person Sargon the Great... You can fix a date based on cuneiform literature—Sumerian, Mesopotamian literature, old Babylonian stuff, old Akkadian stuff. We know when this guy lived. But this legend that's written about him is 1,500 years (at least) later, in terms of the texts we have. And if you're looking at Assyrian dates, this is actually going to be after even critical scholar datings for the E material. Exodus is considered E (from JEDP, the theory about the Pentateuch). So if you believe in Mosaic authorship, there's no question. It's either 1400 B.C. or 1200 B.C., centuries earlier than the Sargon Birth Legend. If you go with JEDP, it's still a century or two earlier than the Sargon stuff—than the Assyrian

period. So right away, we have a chronological problem for trying to say that the writer of Exodus 2 used the Sargon birth legend. If you're going with the text we actually have, that is an impossible argument to be that specific. It's an argument that just can't be made on the basis of data, which means if you're going to make that argument, you're making it up. You're just going with it without data. That's just the way it is. Back to Lewis:

The question is are these late copies of a text which had originated at a much earlier period...

So he says, "What we have is late, but the question is, 'Are they copies of a much older text that we no longer have?'" That's an open question.

...or, perhaps, the remnants of a late composition which may have been only loosely based on earlier sources? . . . Now we have seen that the use of the royal epithet šarru dannu "strong king" (in line 1) is an anachronism in a text attributed to Sargon of Agade, for the first occurrence is to be found in the eighth regnal year of Amar-Sin (2039) of the Third Dynasty of Ur and thus follows by 240 years the end of Sargon's rule. Therefore, the ascription of the title to Sargon in this work proves that the Legend was written after 2039 and establishes [at least that much]... The presence of copies in the library of Assurbanipal...

...whose dates are 668-627 B.C. This provides the latest point. So you have an earliest point (*terminus post quem*) and then the latest point (*terminus ante quem*) of the mid-seventh century. But all the tablets we actually have are in that Assyrian period (the 800s, 700s, 600s B.C.). And what that last comment was about is, even some titles (in this case, this one phrase)... The phrase shows up in these earlier texts, but Lewis is saying that Assyriologists think that it's a deliberate anachronism—that some later writer just used it to give it the appearance of age, just like we were talking about earlier with Raamses. Writers do this in the ancient world. They pluck out phrases and titles and descriptive elements from texts that they know of (because they're scribes) that are much older, and they'll stick them in later texts (the ones they're actually writing). It could be 1500 or 2000 years later, and they'll use these older words and lines just to give it the flavor of antiquity. But in this case, there's only one of them.

There are some other things that Lewis goes through, and the Assyriological community (those who are experts in cuneiform literature) recognize all of these as being anachronistic. They don't help. [laughs] They don't move the tablet back, because if it's discovered in a particular library or a particular pile of cuneiform tablets that clearly date to the Assyrian period... And the cuneiform script itself changes over time. Even though cuneiform looks like chicken scratch, the chicken scratch of one era looks different than the chicken scratch of another. And people who are into cuneiform understand that. They can see it. They have typologies for all this kind of stuff. *The texts are late*, is the point. And the

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question of, “Are they copies of something that was earlier?” We don’t know. You can make that argument. So what Lewis does in his dissertation from this point (page 184) on is he imagines a scenario for an early origin of the story (texts we don’t have). He imagines how this might have worked—how you could make the argument. And then he is fair in his dissertation, and he imagines how you would understand how things would have worked in a late period. Now there are two points that are worth pointing out, as well, before we leave Lewis’ dissertation here. He says on page 187 that in the Sargon legend text (as far as it is preserved, there is nothing of a lexical, grammatical, or orthographical (the way the characters are written) nature that need be early. There just aren’t. There’s nothing in there that makes the argument that the story is early. So you are actually on very defensible ground to say that the Sargon birth legend is late, and for the sake of our discussion, later than the Moses story. You can make a really good argument for that and Lewis lays out how to do it in his dissertation.

On page 188, he says that there are three idiomatic expressions which occur in the legend of Sargon (and this is important), that are attested *only* at the end of the second millennium (which would be like 1000 B.C.) or in the Neo-Assyrian period (which is this late period where the tablets that we have actually come from). He says that this provides the strongest evidence available that the Sargon legend was composed in its present form at a much later date than previously thought. He’s not writing this... I hate to be a little silly here, but because of the kind of stuff you run into on the internet, I’m going to say it this way. This guy is not writing a dissertation at a Christian school or a seminary just to reflexively defend the Bible on some point that he doesn’t like. This is NYU. It’s a dissertation. He’s an Assyriologist. Okay? Let that sink in. He’s being honest. He’s doing what good scholars should do, regardless of what his own personal predilections are. These are the data. This is a conclusion that is very defensible (very late for the story). But you won’t hear any of that on the internet. What you’re going to be shown on the internet is the Sargon birth story, and then you’re going to be shown the Moses story, and somebody’s going to say, “See, the Bible stole more material from Mesopotamia.” Really? If you run into somebody claiming that (maybe the Ancient Origins website—they love to do stuff like this), you have just found a person A) with an ax to grind, and B) who isn’t a scholar. It’s just that simple. This is why I say primary texts are what you should focus on—the data that actually exist and peer-reviewed scholarship where people specialize in this stuff. They go through the material. In the overwhelming number of cases (regardless of if they’re a Christian or a Jew, or not a Christian, or an atheist), especially in dissertations, they really make an effort, far and away... Not everybody, but far and away they make an effort to be honest. And we have a good example here in Lewis’ dissertation.

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There’s something else the internet won’t tell you, and that is the problem of dissimilarities between the two stories (the Sargon legend and the Moses story in Exodus 2). I’ll offer one more little bit from Lewis’ dissertation here. He writes on page 384 (so this is toward the end):

For a long time scholars had accepted the premise that the birth legends of Sargon and Moses were unusually similar in form and content. However, in recent years [MH: the '60s and '70s], work by M. Cogan, M. Greenberg, and others has challenged this assumption by stressing the different motivations for the abandonment, by asserting a closer parallel between the Moses story and an Egyptian myth concerning Horus...

Of course Redford essentially debunks that with the late material, but I quote that to say that other scholars (besides Lewis and Redford) have not thought of the Sargon birth story as a really good parallel. Now Redford doesn't like it either. He doesn't like the Horus story; he doesn't like the Sargon story. But some other scholars have looked at the Sargon story and go, "There's just too much different about it for it to have been a model. There's just too much different." And the textual situation is that it's very late anyway. So it isn't just one guy. It isn't just Redford. There are other people who have noticed this and they've tried out the Egyptian story. But like I say, Redford doesn't like that either because the material is just so late. "How in the world could this work?"

So let's go into some differences here. Here's the short list. There are five. We'll just give you a short list of five, and Lewis summarizes these. The Hebrew story (Exodus 2), in relation specifically to the Sargon story, has some significant disconnections.

1. The concept of genocide as the motivating factor underlying the need to abandon the child. That is *not* in the Sargon story. Certainly, it's in the Exodus story. Moses is exposed to save his life from a threat to all Hebrew male infants. That's just not part of the Sargon story.
2. The hero (the child) is hidden for three months in the Exodus story until it is no longer possible to conceal him. You don't get that in the Sargon story.
3. The role of the sister (in the Exodus story) who watches over the hero (the child) from a distance as the representative of the mother. You don't get that with Sargon.
4. The use of Pharaoh's daughter to rescue and adopt the infant hero. You don't have a royal daughter with Sargon.
5. The hiring of the natural mother to nurse her own child.

Here are five core elements to the Exodus 2 story that do not appear in the Sargon story. All you have is the means to float the baby. Look, if you lived in the Egyptian delta (and we know that they lived there because you have the whole Pithom and Raamses thing—Avaris, the land of Goshen—back in Genesis. We

know where the Hebrews were, and it's the delta region. So there's lots of water there, and there are lots of marshes there. If you were going to hide a child from Pharaoh's men, where would you put him? It's at least a possibility that you would think, "Well, I can't stash the kid at home, because it's not like we have Ikea furniture here, where we can put him somewhere and no one will ever find him." You're limited in your options. If you're going to put him outside, hide him in the marsh. And you can't just throw the kid in. You have to build something. You have to create something that will float. This is just a normal thing. If you consider this a possibility, you would just do these things. And that's the only real similarity between the Exodus story and the Sargon story. All this other stuff is different—and significantly different because these aren't just throwaway elements in the story. These elements are crucial to the story because the story gives us this providential irony (that's a big theme in the Exodus 2 story) about how the little baby's sister goes out to watch and sees little baby Moses taken out of the water, and she's right on the spot. It's calculated. It's planned. It's ironic. And she speaks to the Egyptian woman, "Hey, should we go get a nurse to nurse the child?" "Sure, great idea." And so the little girl (his sister) runs and gets his mom. These details are important to telling and showing us how God providentially inverted and subverted what's going on in Egypt. He uses Pharaoh's household—the administration from which the command to kill the male children came—to save the deliverer. These are very obvious things that are crucial to the story. They are not throwaway elements. And none of them are in the Sargon story. Now I'm going to go to Carpenter's commentary on Exodus. He has a few things to say about this as well. And then we'll transition into our second question. That will be the conclusion of our episode here. Carpenter writes about the comparison here:

This is not a case of the exposure or rejection of an unwanted infant [MH: that just runs through the other abandoned child stories frequently], but the purposeful and tender dedication of an infant to the sovereignty of God... The writer-editor may have employed the genre form of the Sargon Legend [MH: structurally, some of the elements here], but he has emptied it of its mythological overtones and filled it with Israelite history and theology. He has effectively changed its content and structure to fit his purposes, creating a historical narrative even antithetical to the Sargon Legend to fit his purposes. It is evident that major essential differences exist between these two ancient narratives. Also, Hoffmeier is probably correct to challenge this supposed borrowing from Mesopotamian literature, since the whole section (2:1–10) is permeated with Egyptian elements.

Now he quotes or footnotes Hoffmeier here, pages 138 to 140. Hoffmeier lists six specific textual expressions that are Egyptian and not Mesopotamian in origin. If you're just borrowing a Mesopotamian story, why would you do that? If you're writing, either in an Egyptian context or the events that you're writing about took

place in an Egyptian context, then this makes sense to have these Egyptian elements in it. If you're just doing something much later ("Hey, I need a good story and I'm going to steal and adopt it."), you wouldn't just throw Egyptian words, phrases, or idioms in there. You wouldn't do that. You wouldn't do that. It doesn't make a whole lot of sense. So Hoffmeier says, "We have to look at the Egyptian elements in here to really make sense of it because the Sargon story by itself would have been perfectly serviceable if that's what's happening."

Now all of this suggests that the biblical writer (if we take all this as a whole) was not dependent on the Horus myth, certainly. Redford points out that that material was so late. And it also suggests that he was not dependent on the Sargon story, either. The key word there is "dependent." In both cases, the Moses story may predate the presumed source (either the Sargon source and certainly the Horus stuff)... It's conceivable that the Moses story predates both of those. And if you're looking at it that way, then you have to approach the whole subject a little bit differently. We can ask, "What if the biblical writer or a later editor knew about the Sargon story?" Let's just play "what if" here. I would say that that doesn't rule out the coherence of Exodus 2 being an actual event. In fact, it's a perfect way (it's really a good way) to frame the birth of the one who delivered Yahweh's people out of chaos. Because ultimately, Moses is going to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and through the Sea of Reeds (the Red Sea). Water is the chaos symbol. Linking it conceptually in some way to Mesopotamian material is actually a really good idea, especially if it's associated with Babylon.

Now van der Mieroop, who's an author of the *History of the Ancient Near East* says on page 63:

The last centuries of the third millennium were characterized by successive periods of centralization of power under two city-dynasties: one from Akkad in northern Babylonia in the 24th and 23rd centuries (BC), the other from Ur in the far south in the 21st century.

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Now Akkad is where Sargon the Great ruled. That's where he's from. That's where he ruled. So he is associated with Babylon by virtue of the location of this city. It's in north Babylonia. Think about it this way (and we're just playing "what if" here): there would have been a telling irony and a theological polemic if the writer used the legend of Sargon of Akkad's birth story to tell the story of the rise of Yahweh's deliverer—really his savior figure—for rescuing his people from chaos. Those people, of course, had originated from Abraham—himself from Ur. And this works whether Ur is in southern Babylonia or northwest Mesopotamia. It's still Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia is the referent point for a lot of the chaos stuff we see in Genesis 1-11. The irony and messaging is the same: Yahweh is greater than his chaos rivals. In other words, the similarity of the birth stories would draw attention to a literate Israelite or Jew to Yahweh's defeat of chaos. In other words, if you link the birth of the deliverer in Exodus 2 to something



Mesopotamian (even though there are all these Egyptian elements)... If you link it in some way... If people are reading that and, “Yeah, this story is set in Egypt, but this kind of sounds like that Mesopotamian dude”... If that’s what’s happening in somebody’s head, then the writer gets to compare and contrast what Yahweh is doing to save his people out of chaos, and it takes your mind back to when the chaos began and where it began—where it’s rooted: Babylon, Mesopotamia.

Genesis 1-11 (I’ve said it many times in the podcast) is just cluttered with Mesopotamian material for a reason. This is where... It’s the anti-Eden. There is so much content in Genesis 1-11 that responds to (that inverts, that subverts) Mesopotamian stuff and tells the story of the Deuteronomy 32 worldview. Babel (Genesis 11) is the big one. But you also have Genesis 6 with the Apkallu; you have stuff in Genesis 1-3 that takes us back to Mesopotamia. Genesis 1-11 is designed to pit God’s desire for Eden against the anti-Eden (the forces of chaos—all of the forces that disrupt what God wants on earth) and the metaphor for doing that is consistently Babylon, Babylonia—this part of the world. And Sargon the Great comes from that part of the world. That’s where he lived and ruled.

So if you intentionally do enough of a comparative work in the way you tell the story of Moses’ birth to make people think of that place instead of just Egypt, you have accomplished something significant. You have made the reader see that Yahweh is at work subverting and defeating the forces of chaos that are very, very ancient (more ancient than Egypt). So this is just a little thought experiment; it’s just a “what if.” There’s no way literarily to prove this—any sort of dependence or cross-fertilization—because the material as we have it is late. But what if? To me, it’s fascinating that a writer could be so clever. And by the way, none of that rules out the historicity of the event. It’s just literary strategy for theologizing the event (Moses’ birth). Theologizing an event and the historicity of the event are not mutually exclusive. They’re not.

Remember the story of how I got my job at Logos? All those events happened. Now the way I tell the story is, I’m making God a character (a behind-the-scenes actor) in the events that unfold. I’m not telling you that under inspiration. I have no divine guidance to tell you that. That was just my perception. But my perception (my theologizing of what happened, my making it a mythic narrative) doesn’t mean that the events didn’t happen. They did. It’s just the retelling of the story to make a theological point—to make my listeners think theologically important thoughts. And this is precisely what I’m suggesting—that if the writer of Exodus (or an editor, or whatever) had knowledge of the Sargon story, it would be really clever to use some of that in how the story is told, even in a deeply Egyptian context. Because your literate reader’s mind is going to go back to where chaos began—to why we have the people of God, and God selecting Abram out of the region we know as Babylonia (whether it was the north or the south, it doesn’t matter). God selects a person out after he has divorced the

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nations, severed the relationship between him and them. He plucks this guy out of his polytheistic context (and we learn he was raised in a polytheistic context in Babylonia from Genesis 11), he makes a covenant with him and his wife to raise up a new human family. He's not giving up on the original Edenic plan. He's going to use this guy and his offspring through this woman who can't have children. So she's perfect. It's a supernatural event. He's going to use her and him to create a human family, and through them he makes a covenant that will draw all of these other nations back home. In other words, it will cure chaos. This is really, really clever. But we're just playing "what if" here. But it does not rule out the historicity. It's a literary strategy.

There are other examples of this. It's not a coincidence that Egypt, in other parts of the Old Testament, is actually identified with Babylon in other ways. Egypt is actually identified with Babylon in the Old Testament as a chaos agent. For example, Pharaoh is cast as Leviathan in Ezekiel 29:3 and 32:2. It's Ezekiel! He's writing from a Babylonian context. He's talking about Pharaoh of Egypt, but he's using Leviathan (the wonderfully elastic chaos symbol). The Babylonian context is very evident. It seems reasonable that, given the non-bizarre circumstances of the Moses story and the proximity of the Hebrews living in the delta to marshy areas, that we have a real story of a real event of a desperate mother who risks the life of her child on a gamble that he'd be discovered by someone—a woman of importance. I call it a gamble, but it's a faith-based gamble. She's trusting God. There's nothing uncomely about his birth. He's not undesirable. He's not some divine hybrid. It just seems a reasonable act of desperation by a woman. It's reasonable, at least in its details. She doesn't just set the kid afloat anywhere and toss him in. She has to build a little craft. What would you do? You'd do the same thing. Egyptians do have Hebrew servants, so it's not unusual that a little slave girl would be allowed to show up and have a conversation. We talked about that when we talked about the Israelite bondage. All the elements are there. There is no evidence, as well, that the infant Moses was circumcised, and so the child would have blended in to an Egyptian context. We don't read that Moses ever got circumcised. Later, we're going to hit some of that where we discuss that. But here, no. It seems reasonable that a really good strategy for linking Babylon and Egypt as chaos agents who will be defeated by Yahweh raising up a human deliverer... It would be really reasonable to play off the Sargon story and blend in Egyptian material of the actual historical context. You kill two birds with one stone. And you're not fabricating events; you're theologizing. It's extraordinarily clever, is how I look at this. It's really, really clever.

Now the last item (we'll transition here)... There's just one thing I want to say really briefly about Moses' name. I'll put Lewis' dissertation in the protected folder, in case people are interested in this. I'll put this article, as well, in the protected folder, even though this one is going to be dense. You'd more or less have to have some Hebrew or Semitic or some language study to really get this. But in regard to Moses' name, there's an article (a really good one) by J. Gwyn

Griffiths. It's titled "The Egyptian derivation of the name Moses." It's in the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* (JNES) 12:4 (Oct 1953). It's about eight pages long. It's a very thorough treatment of how scholars have tried to link Moshe in Hebrew (*mem-shin-hey*) with something in Egyptian—and do it coherently—because there are things that don't align in the possibilities. Moses... We get this little comment at the end, "She named him Moses 'because,' she said, 'I drew him out of the water.'" It requires a little bit of thought. And in this article, Griffiths goes through all the options and essentially (I'm cutting to the chase here because it's full of Egyptian and transliteration and Hebrew and stuff) she argues really well (she's just drawing on other research and then answering a few questions that are outliers) that what we have here is that Moses is "*ms*" in Egyptian and it's not a verb ("to draw out"). She believes (and she has really good reason for arguing this and she has really good examples) that that term just means "child." So when we go back to Exodus 2:10, what we see happening here is the woman (Pharaoh's daughter) takes the child out of water and she says... I'll just read it.

**<sup>10</sup>When the child grew older, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter and she became his son. And she named him Moses, because she said, "I drew him out of the water."**

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So the Egyptian is saying, "I'm going to call him "*ms*," which means "child" in Egypt. I'm going to call the child "child." And *ms* in Egyptian was actually used as a proper name. Griffiths' article gives really good examples of this. It's not unusual, it's not odd, it's not unknown. It was also a proper name that would get appended to a deity name, like *Ra ms*, what we would think of as Ramses. *Ra ms* would be "son of Ra" or "Ra is born." Griffiths points out that these names were usually commemorating the birthday of a deity, that kind of thing. But in this case, if there was an original Egyptian theophoric element (a deity name that Pharaoh's daughter stuck on to this), the biblical writer takes it off, and we're just left with Moshe (*ms* in Egyptian). It just means child. So she names the child "child." She calls him "child"—Moses, we'll just say, "because I drew him out of the water."

Now a lot of your commentaries will try to link an Egyptian term for drawing out with the name Moses. I think that's a mistake. I think the point is that Pharaoh's daughter calls him "child," and when she says "because I drew him from the water," it means, "because I saved him and kept him." In other words, the drawing out of the child is not an etymological clue to the Egyptian term behind the name Moses. It refers to the event. I'm going to call this child "*ms*" because I saved him. He's mine. It's a much neater solution. There are places you can go to read about the other ones: Griffiths' article, Hoffmeier's book (pages 140-142 goes through this). Hoffmeier tries to be diplomatic to Kenneth Kitchen. He had a real affection for Kitchen, as did a lot of other people. And having met him once, I can see why. But Kitchen wants to have the woman who says, "I drew him up out

of the water,” to be Moses’ biological mom, but Moses’ biological mom didn’t draw him out of the water. It was Pharaoh’s daughter. So I think we can lay that option aside, even though Hoffmeier tries to be nice about that in what he writes. But he’s well aware of Griffiths’ article and interacts with it, and I think that’s the simplest, neatest solution. *Ms* is a very normal Egyptian term. If you’re really into philology and Semitic linguistic stuff, get Griffiths’ article for what happened to the “*h*” in Moshe and how the “*s*” in “*ms*” and the “*she*” in “Moshe” align. There’s linguistic coherence to that. If you want to read that stuff, you can. But I wanted to just append a little bit on this because people are curious, “Does this work in Egyptian language?” It does. And it makes sense in context.

So that was a lot to digest. Most of our episode this time focused on the abandoned child motif, but it’s really important, because people are going to use the story here. Like I said, what you’re going to get on the internet is, “Yeah, let’s go read Exodus 2. Got that down? Got it in your head now? Well, look at the Sargon birth story.” And then they’re going to say the writer of Exodus 2 (the biblical writer) is stealing material. It’s so utterly simplistic and really fundamentally uninformed that you should know about it. So I wanted to make that the centerpiece of this episode.

**TS:** Alright, Mike. Another jam-packed episode. And we’re only halfway through chapter 2. So whoo!

**MH:** It’s just more nuts and bolts. You run into stuff everywhere.

**TS:** Absolutely. Well, we’re going to take a break from Exodus next week, and we’re going to be interviewing the guys from the Bible Project: Tim Mackie and Jon Collins. So that’ll be a nice break from Exodus, and to hear from those guys.

**MH:** It’ll be fun, too.

**TS:** Alright, Mike, we’ll be looking forward to that. And then the week after that, we’re going to finish up chapter 2. And with that, I just want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.