

Midlife Moses in Midian
Exodus 2:11–22
October 19, 2025

A few years back I decided to read Walter Isaacson's biography of Steve Jobs. That wasn't because I was into technology, Apple, or even thought a lot about Jobs. But because, at that point, some of his innovation had dramatically affected our world. And a lot of people told me that the Isaacson bio was the best source on him.

It's been *years* since I read it. But I remember, *distinctly*, three things about that book. First, the guy was a genius. He did a *lot* more than Apple. The second thing I remember is that no matter which company he was leading, or which endeavor he was pursuing, Jobs was *not* someone you'd want to work for. And that's to put it mildly. "Genius" has been known to have a few side-effects.

Which brings me to the third thing I distinctly remember. Though Jobs gave his biographer all kinds of access, Jobs didn't try to shape the final message. In fact, Isaacson writes in the introduction that Jobs told him, "It's your book. I won't even read it." He also told him, "I don't have any skeletons in my closet that can't be allowed out." Steve's wife even encouraged the author to be honest about her husband's failings.

Now, I guess the author could've lied about all that. But, if Jobs did shape or edit that bio, he did a terrible job. The introduction states, without apology, that Jobs "was not a model boss or human being, tidily packaged for emulation . . . he could drive those around him to fury and despair. His tale is both instructive and cautionary."¹

Now, why start here? Because that is far from typical. It's *much* more common in our day to find a bio or a documentary financially fronted by a production company with a particular narrative in mind. For example, I've *not* seen this, but apparently Hulu has a documentary on the Lakers called *The True Story of the LA Lakers* that also happens to be produced by the owner of the team, who's also the daughter of the former owner. She's paying for the film that tells the *true* story.

The big word for this is hagiography, a word that means, "writing about the holy." In *our* day, it's to tell someone's story while conveniently omitting certain details to make the subject look a certain way.

And before we think this *only* happens in California, we might consider the tale people are weaving about themselves on our feed. Nothing's really all that new, of course. In the Ancient Near East, stories portrayed the heroes of those stories in an unrealistically good light.²

Exodus 2 does the opposite. At its essence, it spotlights a glaring flaw in a man. It's the first of a few we see in this book. Our passage today ends with him having failed miserably. And by the way, *all* this is recorded in a book that he himself wrote.

1. Moses went out to his brethren (vv. 11–12)

Verse 11: Now it came about in those days, when Moses had grown up.

Verse 10 used the *same* word to say that baby Moses grew. In *that* verse his growth occurred over however many years it took for him to be weaned. But *this* time, growing up wasn't that abbreviated. According to Acts 7:23, **when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel.**

The narrative has advanced *significantly*, time-wise. We might ask, "Why does he skip so many years?" But another question, and maybe a *better* one, is this: "Why does Moses stop here at

¹ Walter Isaacson, *Steve Jobs*, xviii–xxi.

² Douglas Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC, 95.

all?” Last week he was a baby. At the beginning of chapter 3, he’ll be in front of a burning bush at the age of 80. So, out of *all* those years, he pauses the tape and tells us about something that happened when he was forty. Why?

As you consider that, you might wonder if there’s anything else we know about the first forty years of Moses’s life. Acts 7 does include one sentence about his growing up years: **Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds** (Acts 7:22).

This isn’t YouTube, so we’re not going down a rabbit-hole on the construction of the pyramids. But, by all accounts, at this point in history the Egyptians were an impressive people. Their pyramids already towered over the desert, their temples gleamed with gold, their armies were feared, and their scribes could calculate, record, and administer a complex empire. Egypt wasn’t backwoods; it was one of the superpowers of the ancient world.

And as he grew up, Moses received the finest education that empire offered. Stephen describes him as **a man of power in words and deeds**. That helps us understand a few circumstances in the book ahead. But even more central to our purposes today, we mention those influences during his first 40 years because it’s absolutely certain Moses grew up surrounded by those who looked down their noses at the Hebrews.

Yet, verse 11 says this: **Now it came about in those days, when Moses had grown up, that he went out to his brethren**. Later in verse 11 it’ll describe a Hebrew as **one of his brethren**. What we read earlier in Acts 7:23 corroborates the plain reading of those verses, that is, by *this* point in his life Moses sees himself as an Israelite.³ He knew that the slaves his “grandfather” oppressed were his brethren, his people.⁴

So, before we talk about Moses’s failure, it might be worth talking about what the Lord was doing in his life at this point. I do think Hebrews 11 is speaking broadly, of the culmination of Moses’s life; but here we’re *already* seeing the first glimpses of the decision Moses will make: **by faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin** (Heb. 11:24).

That’s a summary of Moses’s life in toto, but we’re *starting* to see hints of it here. He goes **out to his brethren**. And when he does, verse 11 says he **looked on their hard labors**. “Hard labors” is the same language⁵ used back in chapter 1:11, where we read: **so they appointed taskmasters over them to afflict them with hard labor**. Chapter 1 goes on to say it was hard labor in mortar and bricks (1:13). Over and over and over again, they’re packing wet clay and straw into molds that form the bricks. Then they carry those bricks out into the sun to dry. Once they’re dry, they carry them into the kiln to be baked. The Hebrews lived in a haze of clay, dust, and sweat, surrounded by furnaces and heat. Hour after hour, day after day, under the oppressive whip of the Egyptians.⁶

Moses went out. He went out **to his brethren**. And he **looked on their hard labors**. And he didn’t merely *see*, he saw with deep affection.⁷

By the way, *this* week Moses looks on. *Next* week God sees the sons of Israel (Ex. 2:25).⁸

³ Stuart, 95; Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, AOTC, 66.

⁴ Jeffery Leonard, *The Preacher’s Hebrew Companion to Exodus 1:1–15:21*, 69.

⁵ Stuart, 95.

⁶ As you might expect, I had some help from our local experts on this. See also Ross Blackburn, *The God who Makes Himself Known*, NSBT, 33.

⁷ Phil Ryken, *Exodus*, PTW, 61.

⁸ Alec Motyer, *Exodus*, BST, 27.

But *as* Moses **looked on**, verse 11 continues to describe what he sees: **he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brethren**. Again, according to Moses, it was not *just* a Hebrew being beaten, but one of his fellow Hebrews. At this point, he's identified with them.

So, we're seeing good things that the Lord will use. And yet, at this point, Moses pursues a good end with flawed means. Verse 12: **So he looked this way and that**. There's an element of premeditation here.⁹ He seems to be making sure there are no witnesses.¹⁰ That's implied in the next clause of verse 12 as well: **and when he saw that there was no one around**. What he's about to do he hoped would remain secret. Verse 14 will agree.

He looks this way and that, and seeing no one around, verse 12 continues: **he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand**.

So, here's Moses: compassionate toward his fellow Hebrews. But not merely compassionate, also powerful. In one sense, he delivers *one* of them—sort of.

The next narrative, from the *next* day, gives us more to help us interpret this whole scene.

When Moses went out to his brethren, . . .

2. Moses went out to his *fighting* brethren (vv. 13–14)

Verse 13: **He went out the next day, and behold, two Hebrews were fighting with each other**. It's fight club in Egypt. *Yesterday*, an Egyptian beat a Hebrew that Moses then struck down himself. *Today*, it's two Hebrews duking it out. Of course, today's ruckus isn't *all* that surprising when you consider the conditions. These slaves are hot, tired, hungry, and their frustration would almost certainly be quick to boil over, even toward one another.

It's worth pointing out that—in this text—not *only* are we seeing a flaw in Moses—the soon to be deliverer—we're *also* seeing the character of those the Lord aims to deliver. In Deuteronomy the Lord will make clear that He chose Israel, and delivered them, *not* because they were impressive, *nor* because they were righteous. His choice *of* them is due to His love *for* them (Deut. 7:7). He delivers them, *not* because they're flawless (Deut. 9:6), but because He's faithful to His promise (Deut. 7:9).

Moses goes out to his brethren—the people of God—and finds them fighting with one another. Moses says to the chief aggressor,¹¹ **to the offender, “Why are you striking your companion?”** Just yesterday, Moses had “delivered” a Hebrew from their enemy—the Egyptians. He's finding it hard to understand why his brethren would turn on one another. So he asks, “why”?

The man answered, or maybe *didn't* answer, in verse 14: **But he said, “Who made you a prince or a judge over us?”** That response is probably not all that different from yours when a random person you didn't know corrected you one time (in the distant past, I'm sure). In that moment, maybe you thought, “Who do you think you are?”

The Hebrew asks, **“Who made you a prince or a judge over us?”** We ought to be careful here. Because maybe we immediately think the answer is, “God did.” But that's to get ahead of the narrative. We're not in Exodus 3 just yet. There's no burning bush at this point. That's decades from now. The answer to the man's question “Who made you judge over us?” is actually, at this point, “No one did.”¹²

⁹ Stuart, 65.

¹⁰ Alexander, 67.

¹¹ One seems to be more “in the wrong” than the other. See Leonard, 74.

¹² Ryken, 66.

Moses is doing what he thinks is right, of course, but he's *not* doing it under God's authority, *nor* is he doing it God's way.¹³ I'll try not to quote Alec Motyer every week, but he's spot on when he writes, "In the work of God mere human effort, however well-intentioned, committed or influential, results in failure."¹⁴

Moses assumed the Hebrews would follow his lead. They did *not*. And this episode also serves as some serious foreshadowing as well. Because even later when Moses leads rightly, they will often choose *not* to follow.¹⁵ In one sense they will repeatedly ask, "Who made you judge over us?"

And in what *had* to shock Moses, the fighting Hebrew continues with his questioning in verse 14: **Are you intending to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?**

He'd looked this way and that. No one saw. He'd buried the guy in the sand. And yet this guy knows. Verse 14 tells us that Moses wasn't *merely* shocked: **Then Moses was afraid and said, "Surely the matter has become known."** Of course it did. Any Egyptian taskmaster being murdered would've sounded the alarm all over Goshen. The Israelite community would've been abuzz with rumor. And eventually someone would've talked, maybe even the guy Moses saved.

Moses was afraid. And he was afraid because of what verse 15 goes on to detail: **When Pharaoh heard of this matter, he tried to kill Moses.**

Moses went out to his people, and as he did, he sympathized with them. In fact, though misguided to some degree, or at least 40 years early, he thought he might deliver them. But in just two days, it's all unraveled. The people he wanted to protect rejected him. Pharaoh, the father of his adopted mother, now sought to kill him. So, the would-be deliverer now becomes, in some sense, a fugitive. Verse 15 goes on: **When Pharaoh heard of the matter, he tried to kill Moses. But Moses fled from the presence of Pharaoh and settled in the land of Midian.**

3. Moses went out *from* his brethren (vv. 15–22)

You ought to look at a map and note the direction of Moses's journey. Where he settles—Midian—is in northwestern Arabia, in what we call Saudi Arabia today¹⁶—on the other side of the Red Sea. I tend to think there's something there, in a mediator also being the forerunner, making the journey *first* before he leads God's people. But I won't press it.

He goes past the Red Sea and stops in Midian. Verse 15 tells us that he then, **sat down by a well**. Of course, he stopped and sat down by some water. He's in Saudi Arabia.

Wednesday night Kevin Millard did a wonderful job telling us how he met his wife. I love that story. It's a story we want to know. And it's not "out of bounds" that in the book of Exodus Moses might tell us something about how he met *his* wife, especially if it furthers a point he intends to make. Verse 16: **Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters; and they came to draw water and filled the troughs to water their father's flock.**

There's not a ton to say about that. Moses, on the run, sitting at a well, sees these daughters come to get water. Verse 17: **Then the shepherds came and drove them away.** There's not a ton to say about that. The shepherds didn't wait their turn. They bully these daughters. And Moses sees it.

As we consider this scene, we might consider what we already know about Moses. Though we've not spent weeks and weeks with him, we *already* know that he's compassionate. And though he did it wrongly, he's *already* shown himself to be quick to act against those using their power

¹³ Stuart, 96.

¹⁴ Motyer, 27.

¹⁵ Stuart, 97.

¹⁶ Stuart, 98

wrongly—even when the odds are stacked against him.¹⁷ Verse 17 says shepherds, in the plural. Moses is in the singular.

Verse 17 goes on: **Then the shepherds came and drove them away, but Moses stood up and helped them and watered their flock.** “Helped them” might be slightly too soft. The ESV translates it “saved them.” The CSB, in a similar vein, writes that he “came to their rescue.” In fact, there are a string of salvation terms in this passage.¹⁸ Keep in mind what Stephen said about Moses in Acts 7: **he was a man of power in words and deeds** (Acts 7:22). By himself, Moses runs the shepherds off. And then he, in humility, helps them water their flocks.

Verse 18 continues the tale: **When they came to Reuel¹⁹ their father, he said, “Why have you come back so soon today?”** Some would say there’s a hint of accusation in this question.²⁰ Maybe they finished earlier than normal? Maybe this wasn’t the first time these shepherds disrupted their task at the well and it typically took longer to get the water.

Verse 19 seems to indicate as much: **So they said, “An Egyptian²¹ delivered us from the hand of the shepherds, and what is more, he even drew the water for us and watered the flock.** These seven sisters returned home much earlier than normal because someone ran off the bullies. And then, **what is more**, he **even** helped them draw the water.

The “what is more” and the “even” indicate how rare this would’ve been. The sisters couldn’t believe it. Nor could Mr. Reuel. Verse 20: **He said to his daughters, “Where is he then? Why is it that you have left the man behind? Invite him to have something to eat.** Wouldn’t any decent dad grill a burger for the man that protected his seven daughters?

This father was willing to do *more* than that, of course. Verse 21: **Moses was willing to dwell with the man, and he gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses. Then she gave birth to a son, and he named him Gershom, for he said, “I have been a sojourner in a foreign land.”**

Moses has a firstborn son. One day Moses will put blood on his doorpost so that his son might live.

This is the second week in a row that a baby has been born. And it’s the second week in a row that the baby has been given a name that’s significance is also explained. Last week, baby Moses was named what he was because his mother **drew him out of the water** (2:10). He’s given a name that speaks to rescue.

But this week 40-year-old Moses names his own baby. And he gives him a name that speaks, not of rescue, but to alienation. The name Ger-shom is the slamming together of two words that mean, “alien there.”²² In this moment, and in his firstborn’s naming, midlife Moses is reflecting on his first forty years, looking *back* on his time in Egypt. And it’s clear to him that as a Hebrew, he never *fully* belonged to the world of the Egyptians—certainly not to the royal court. And he’s realizing also that once he went to his brethren, his own, they did not receive him either.²³ Here was a man shaped by two cultures, and alienated from both.²⁴

He didn’t belong to the place he’d always known, nor to his people. And even though now he’s in a home, and has a family, he’s still on the run.

¹⁷ Stuart, 99.

¹⁸ Leonard, 82.

¹⁹ For you careful readers, maybe you remember Moses’s father-in-law being named Jethro. Most scholars I read believe this is the same guy. See Alexander, 68. Doug Stuart makes the argument that this verse lists his surname, 99. So, meet Jethro Reuel.

²⁰ Leonard, 82.

²¹ How’d they know he was Egyptian? Hairstyle? Dress? Did he . . . walk like an Egyptian?

²² Ger-som, Stuart, 101.

²³ John 1:10

²⁴ Alexander, 70.

Moses's strength had not been sufficient. His good intentions were not *close* to enough. Though he'd considered himself a deliverer, this passage tells a story of failure.²⁵

Conclusion

And this passage is *far* from hagiography, omitting certain details to make the subject look a certain way. So, we might ask again, out of *all* his years on earth, why does Moses stop and tell us about the events that unfolded when he was forty. Why include *this*?

As much as anyone, Moses knows the theme of this book he's writing. And it's not the *Moses* who makes Himself known. It's the God who does. Even in the details of his own story, he shows us his flaws so that, as we hear those details, we might look to Another.

One too rejected by His own. And yet One who set His face toward Jerusalem, where He'd be rejected, and struck down so that we might be delivered.

²⁵ Motyer, 23.