

1.

THE BIRTH OF MOSES

We arrived at Cairo International Airport just after nightfall. Though weary from a day of flying, we were excited to finally set foot on Egyptian soil and to catch a glimpse, by night, of the Great Pyramid of Giza. It took an hour and fifteen minutes to drive from the airport, on the northeast side of Cairo, to Giza, a southern suburb of the city. Even at night the streets were congested with the swelling population of twenty million people who live in greater Cairo.

Upon checking into my hotel room, I opened the sliding door to my balcony, and stood for a moment, in awe, as I looked across at the pyramids by night. I was gazing upon the same pyramids that pharaohs, patriarchs, and emperors throughout history had stood before. It was a breathtaking sight.

The Pyramids and the Power of the Pharaohs

Some mistakenly assume that these pyramids were built by the Israelite slaves whom Moses would lead to freedom, but the pyramids were already ancient when Israel was born. They had been standing for at least a thousand years by the time Moses came on the scene.

So, if the Israelites were not involved in the building of these structures, why would we begin our journey—and this book—with the pyramids? One reason is simply that you should never visit Egypt without seeing the pyramids. More importantly, though, we begin with the pyramids because they help us understand the pharaohs and the role they played in Egyptian society. The larger-than-life, semidivine status of the pharaohs, captured in the building of the pyramids, helps us understand the villains or antagonists in Moses' story.

Sometime around 3000 B.C., when the kings or pharaohs first unified Upper and Lower Egypt, a city was built on the west bank of the Nile about thirteen miles south of modern Cairo. This city, located on the boundary of Upper and Lower Egypt, would serve as the new capital of the unified kingdom. We know the city as Memphis. Just north of this ancient capital, and stretching north for miles along the plateau that separates the desert from the Nile, the city's necropolis—its burial ground—was built.

It was there, around 2560 B.C., that a king named Khufu built an enormous burial chamber for himself, a monument to his greatness, in the shape of a pyramid. For almost four millennia this pyramid remained the tallest man-made structure on earth, at 481 feet. It is the only one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World still standing. The pyramid of Khufu, known as the Great Pyramid of

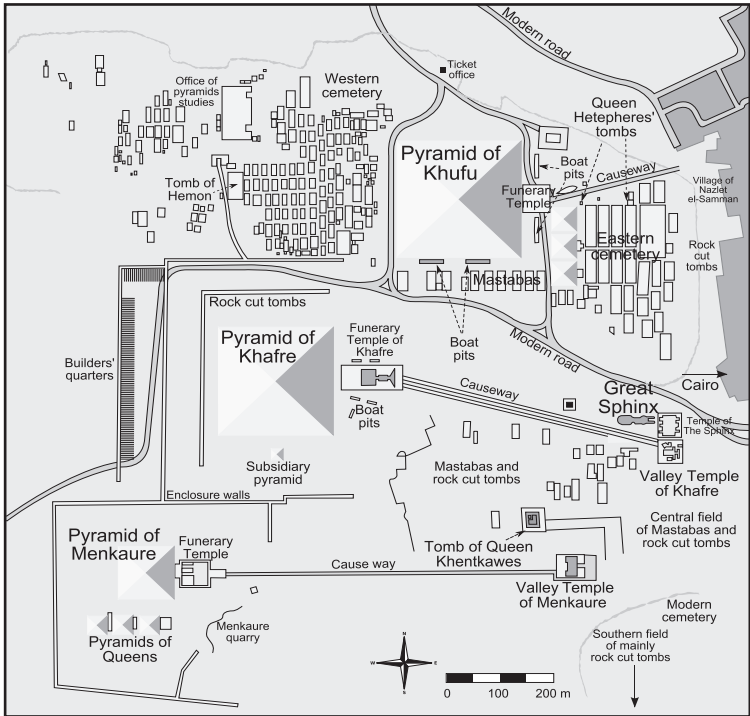


Pyramids of Giza, with the city of Giza in the background

Giza, along with the pyramid of his son Khafre and its adjacent sphinx and the pyramid of his grandson Menkaure, together make up the most prominent of the pyramids at Giza.

Over one hundred pyramids have been unearthed in the sands of Egypt, and likely others have yet to be found. It is thought that the pyramids of Giza were built by a workforce of as many as twenty thousand people, most of whom were farmers who worked to construct the pyramids during the seasons when the Nile flooded and they were unable to farm (though some who labored may have been slaves). These massive building projects were possible during periods of economic prosperity and peace. As economic prosperity decreased, so did the size of the pyramids.

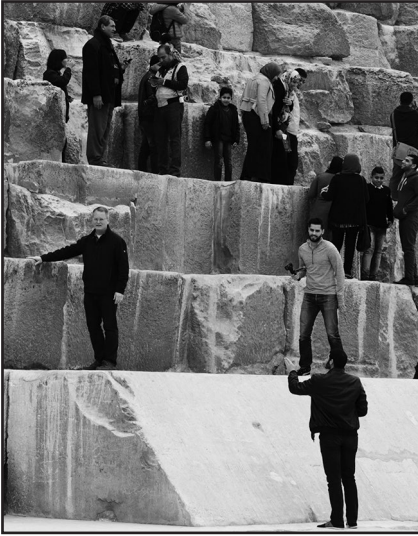
Some have described the pyramids as “resurrection machines” intended to ensure that the pharaohs or others buried in them



Map of the Giza pyramid complex

completed their journey to the afterlife.¹ Ultimately the pyramids served as an enduring testimony to the power and greatness of the pharaoh whose remains they held.

We traveled to the Giza pyramid complex the day after we arrived in Egypt. As I gazed up at the Great Pyramid, in awe of the massive stones that were so expertly fit together, I wondered how Abraham, Jacob, and even Moses felt as they stood before this very pyramid. We live in a time with magnificent buildings, many of which are taller than these structures, and yet the pyramids still amaze us. The



Standing on the stones of the Great Pyramid gives a sense of the pyramids' size and scale.

pyramids were meant to inspire awe and admiration for the pharaohs who built them. To those searching for Moses in Egypt, the pyramids stand as a silent witness to the power of the ancient pharaohs, and to the Egyptian belief in the pharaohs' semidivine nature that went back a thousand years before the birth of Moses but was still believed about the pharaohs in his day.

From Giza to Luxor

Memphis was the capital of Egypt in the period known by scholars as the Old Kingdom. For most of the New Kingdom, the time in which Moses was born, it wasn't Memphis but Thebes that served as the home of the royal family. Thebes was located about 300 miles south of Memphis, a distance that today takes about an hour by plane.

As noted in the introduction, we cannot be sure when Moses lived. The two most common dating schemes have Moses living from approximately 1526 to 1406 B.C. or from approximately 1350 to 1230 B.C. The latter dating, give or take a decade or two, is more common among mainline scholars, the former among more

conservative scholars, though you can find exceptions to this rule. For either of these likely dates of Moses' birth, the Egyptian capital was in Thebes.²

I had always assumed that Moses was born in the Nile River Delta—the biblical “Land of Goshen,” where the Israelites settled in the time of the patriarch Joseph. Moses' story in Exodus seems, at first glance, to suggest that all Hebrews or Israelites lived in the same general area, and the story seems centered there. Yet during neither of the proposed dates for Moses' birth was there likely a royal palace in the Delta region.³ However, it is likely that there were Israelite slaves located across Egypt, even if a majority continued to dwell in the Land of Goshen. Hence, it seems plausible or even likely that Moses was born near Thebes, was adopted there by one of the pharaoh's daughters, and lived there for much of his life to the age of forty.⁴

Our journey to walk in the footsteps of Moses took us from Giza, in the southern suburbs of Cairo, to Luxor, the modern name for the ancient city of Thebes. Luxor is a city of roughly five hundred thousand people on the eastern bank of the Nile River. The archaeological remains of the ancient capital of Thebes are intertwined with the modern city of Luxor, lying beneath the modern city in places and yet magnificently exposed in the temples of Luxor and Karnak, which bear witness to the grandeur of this ancient capital. And three miles to the west by northwest of the city, where the Nile River Valley meets the desert plateau, is the famous Valley of the Kings—the necropolis or burial ground of Egypt's kings who reigned from the sixteenth to the eleventh centuries before Christ.

We've been considering historical questions and archaeological sites up to this point, but let's shift our focus to Moses himself

and the meaning of his story. My hope is to have his story speak as Scripture—to recount the events of Moses’ life, yes, but to ask: What does the story teach us about God, about humanity, and about ourselves? At each point in our account of Moses’ life, we will see if we can find ourselves in the story. In this chapter we’ll focus on the stories surrounding Moses’ birth, as described in the first two chapters of Exodus.

The Terrible Power of Fear

Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them. Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.

(Exodus 1:6-8 NIV)

As seen in this Scripture, the backdrop for the story of Moses is the story of Joseph, the son of Israel, who was sold by his brothers into slavery and eventually became Pharaoh’s second-in-command over Egypt. The story is a masterpiece of ancient literature and is known by many who have never picked up a Bible because of the wonderful way Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber retold it in the hit Broadway musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*.

The biblical story actually fits well a period in Egypt’s history in which foreign people, known as Hyksos, settled in the Nile River Delta. These foreigners eventually gained control of Lower Egypt (the area from roughly Memphis north to the Mediterranean, including the massive Nile Delta) and ruled as pharaohs over the

land for roughly a hundred years. The Israelites, like the Hyksos, were Semitic people. Both came from the Near East, and both were shepherds and farmers. It would not be surprising for a Hyksos pharaoh to make a Hebrew such as Joseph his prime minister and to allow the Israelites to settle in the land of the Delta with many other Semitic people.

Sometime after Joseph lived, Pharaoh Ahmose I of Upper Egypt (the area from roughly Memphis south), who ruled from 1550 to 1525 B.C., led an Egyptian army to defeat the Hyksos and drive them from Egypt. Ahmose united Upper and Lower Egypt once again and began what historians call the New Kingdom period of Egyptian history. Ahmose I may have been the “new king to whom Joseph meant nothing” who “came to power in Egypt.” It would appear that the Israelites were not forced to leave Egypt with the Hyksos but allowed to remain. But the Egyptians had something else in mind for the Israelites.

[Pharaoh] said to his people, “The Israelite people are now larger in number and stronger than we are. Come on, let’s be smart and deal with them. Otherwise, they will only grow in number. And if war breaks out, they will join our enemies, fight against us, and then escape from the land.” As a result, the Egyptians put foremen of forced work gangs over the Israelites to harass them with hard work.

(Exodus 1:9-11)

Pharaoh feared that the Israelites would join Egypt’s enemies, the Hyksos or other enemies from the east, and fight against Egypt in case of war, and he responded by enslaving the Israelites. *Fear* is a key word to remember in this part of Moses’ story. It is behind the oppressive treatment of the Israelites at every turn.

Note what happens next:

But the more they were oppressed, the more they grew and spread, so much so that the Egyptians started to look at the Israelites with disgust and dread. So the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites. They made their lives miserable with hard labor, making mortar and bricks, doing field work, and by forcing them to do all kinds of other cruel work.

(Exodus 1:12-13)

Notice that Pharaoh was the most powerful ruler on earth, king of both Upper and Lower Egypt, and yet he and his people were anxious about a minority population of foreign shepherders in their midst. Their fear led them to despise the Israelites and to oppress them.

And this is precisely where I'd like us to consider how the story of Moses is more than just a story; it is Scripture that reveals truth about us as human beings. What does the oppression of the Israelites tell us about ourselves as a race or people?

Fear is a powerful emotion, and irrational fear can lead us to do irrational and sometimes horrible things. It doesn't take long to think of examples around the world in which fear of minority populations has led nations to oppress, dehumanize, and at times kill those viewed as strangers in their midst. The word we use for this fear is *xenophobia*. Taken from the Greek, it means "fear of strangers."

I think of the ideal of America captured in Emma Lazarus's famous lines, engraved on a bronze plaque inside the Statue of Liberty:

*Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.*

*Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*

Yet in our history there has always been a tension between living up to this lofty vision and our fear of the other. When the Irish came to America in large numbers in the mid-1800s because of a famine in their home country, fear gave birth to a new political group at first called the American Party and later the Know-Nothing Party. This group was certain the Irish were sent by the Pope to take over America, and they sought to ensure that Catholics would not hold office in America.

Later the Chinese came to America fleeing persecution in their own country. The United States happily received them, and at first even recruited them, as a source of cheap labor to build the railroads. But later, as the number of Chinese grew, they evoked fear and were spoken of as the “Yellow Peril.” As a result of that fear, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 that prohibited all Chinese from entering America for the next sixty years.

By the 1920s, Americans were concerned with the Russians and anyone else from eastern Europe, including “undesirables” from Greece, Italy, Spain, and Czechoslovakia, as well as Jews. This new wave of fear led to the Immigration Act of 1924, which severely limited immigration of these groups while favoring “white” immigrants from Great Britain, France, and Germany. In this wave and others, two types of leaders were prone to use fear to motivate people into action: politicians and preachers.

However, our limits on immigration pale in comparison to the Nazi atrocities committed against Jews (as well as Gypsies, homosexuals, and a host of other groups). The Nazis were masters at

instilling fear of the Jews and others into the hearts of the German people, a fear that led to unthinkable acts. Replaying the same siren song of fear in more recent times were the Khmer Rouge of Cambodia, the Hutu of Rwanda, various leaders in the Middle East, and too many more to name.

In Egypt, as fears grew about the increasing population of Hebrews, so too did the oppressive acts ordered by Pharaoh.

The king of Egypt spoke to two Hebrew midwives named Shiphrah and Puah: “When you are helping the Hebrew women give birth and you see the baby being born, if it’s a boy, kill him. But if it’s a girl, you can let her live.”

(Exodus 1:15-16)

The Hebrews had not rebelled. They had done no harm to the Egyptians. Yet fear led Pharaoh to decree this dreadful plan to kill newborn baby boys.

Christians will remember a similar story, one that points back to this account, found at the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel. King Herod the Great heard that a group of magi from Persia had read in the stars that a Hebrew child had been born who would become king of the Jews. In response, Herod, motivated by fear as Pharaoh had been, decreed the death of the Hebrew boys in Bethlehem.

If we’re looking for ourselves in the story of Moses’ birth, we’ve got to consider when and where we struggle with fear of the other and how our fears lead us to act in ways that are hardly humane.

Two Courageous Midwives

The writer of Exodus goes on to tell us something profound about the midwives who were commanded by Pharaoh to put the

infant boys to death at childbirth: “Now the two midwives respected God so they didn’t obey the Egyptian king’s order. Instead, they let the baby boys live” (Exodus 1:17). These women feared God more than they feared Pharaoh, and they refused to go along with his plan. Can you imagine the courage of these two women? This is one of the first recorded acts of civil disobedience in history. Because of their disobedience they saved the lives of countless children, perhaps even that of Moses.

I want you to notice that while the pharaoh in this story is not named, the midwives’ names are still known and celebrated 3,300 years later. Exodus tells us their names were Shiphrah and Puah.

How did these two midwives get away with disobeying Pharaoh? They lied to him! They told Pharaoh the Hebrew women were so strong that they had already given birth by the time the midwives had arrived. And God blessed them for their faith, courage, and willingness to do what was right, which in this case included being dishonest in order to protect the children. Here’s what the text says: “So God treated the midwives well, and the people kept on multiplying and became very strong. And because the midwives respected God, God gave them households of their own” (Exodus 1:20-21).

This points to an interesting moral question: Is it ever okay to lie? We know we’re not supposed to lie. And we know we’re not supposed to kill. There are moments in life when we are faced with two competing ethical or moral claims—in this case, the ethical command not to lie and the ethical command not to kill. And we have to decide which of the two takes precedence. In the case of the midwives, they decided that saving lives took precedence over telling the truth, and it was the right call. It reminds me of the people who

hid Jews in their homes during the Nazi Holocaust. When asked if they were harboring Jews, the people lied and their courageous acts were recognized as righteous. The decision of the midwives doesn't give us license to lie, but it does remind us that there are situations in which our reverence and respect and awe of God might lead us to violate one ethical imperative if it means keeping an even more important one.

Civil disobedience is another example. The Scriptures call us to obey authorities. But if the authorities ask us to do what is immoral—whether those authorities are military or political leaders, our bosses at work, or our teachers at school—the right thing to do is to disobey those authorities. A friend of mine recently quit a six-figure job when his company asked him to do something he felt in his heart was wrong. I was really proud of the courage he showed.

Roman Catholic Bishop Edward Daly died in 2016 after a remarkable ministry in Northern Ireland, where he was famous for challenging both the British government and the Irish Republican Army to end violence. Known as the “fearless peacebuilder,” Daly stood up to both sides who felt violence was the only way to resolve the conflict, and he spoke out against the evils he saw around him. The bells of the cathedral in Derry rang out for an hour on news of his death.

In the story of Shiphrah and Puah, we find two remarkable women who remind us what courage looks like and who invite us to join them in resisting evil even if doing so comes at some personal cost. Here's the question I ask myself and would ask you: Are you willing to stand against the authorities if they call you to do something that is immoral or unjust?

A Determined Mother and a Compassionate Princess

When the midwives refused to kill the boys as they were born, Pharaoh gave an order to *all* Egyptians: “Throw every baby boy born to the Hebrews into the Nile River, but you can let all the girls live” (1:22). Can you imagine? He called the entire Egyptian populace to tear children from their mother’s arms and drown them in the Nile. And this is the context for the story of Moses’ birth.

Now a man from Levi’s household married a Levite woman. The woman became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She saw that the baby was healthy and beautiful, so she hid him for three months. When she couldn’t hide him any longer, she took a reed basket and sealed it up with black tar. She put the child in the basket and set the basket among the reeds at the riverbank. The baby’s older sister stood watch nearby to see what would happen to him.

(Exodus 2:1-4)

Moses’ mother was Jochebed, a courageous woman who was not going to let her child be put to death. She refused to let her son die without attempting to save him. She hid him for three months, then took a basket made of reeds and she put her child in it and placed him among the reeds on the banks of the Nile. She did so at a location where Pharaoh’s daughter was known to bathe, perhaps in hopes that the daughter would feel compassion for the child, disobey her father, and save the child.⁵

I want you to notice that this is the Bible’s first story of adoption. Jochebed gave her child up for adoption in order to save his life. It

was love that led her to give up the child; it was the only way she felt she could save him.

There are many people in the congregation I serve who have their own adoption stories, either having given up a child for adoption, having adopted, or themselves having been given up for adoption. One woman shared with me her story of giving up her child:

I gave up my firstborn for adoption thirty-seven years ago. I was twenty-three, alone and scared. While so very painful, mine is a beautiful story. I can say without hesitancy that even through the darkest days of my experience, being totally isolated from family and friends, I felt the hand of God cover me throughout my whole journey. I wanted to keep her, but I felt that she should not have to do “hard” because of me. She deserved better. I prayed daily that God would protect my daughter. . . . Sometimes, years later, I would wake up in the middle of the night and she would be on my heart. . . . Four years ago she found me. Her family is beautiful, and they raised her to be a strong woman of faith. She thanked me for giving her life. She has a beautiful family of her own. I am still sorry for any hurt that I caused by that decision years ago, but I am forever grateful to God for watching over her, and me.

Some of you, like Moses, were adopted. Some, like Moses’ mother Jochebed, gave your children up for adoption, not because you didn’t care but because you cared deeply for your child and sought to save them and give them a future with hope.



The Nile River at Luxor

And that leads us to consider Pharaoh's daughter. We don't know anything about her except that she saw the Hebrew child and, despite knowing what her father had decreed regarding Israelite boys, felt compassion and pity for the child and was moved to adopt him. How easy it would have been for her to have left the child there in the basket on the banks of the Nile, perhaps fearing her father or believing that surely *someone else* would save him. But instead her compassion led her to lift the child from the water, risk her father's wrath, and take him home, adopting him as her own child.

Of the four courageous women who saved the baby Moses, Pharaoh's daughter was the least likely.⁶ She was the daughter of a despot who was oppressing and killing Israelites. She worshiped the Egyptian gods and goddesses. Yet God used her, as Moses' adoptive parent, in one of the most important roles played by any mother in human history.

I wonder if God may be calling some of you reading these words to the ministry of adoption or offering foster care for a child in need of parents. This may be part of God's word to you from this story.

The Providence of God

The story of Moses' birth and how he was spared from death in Exodus helps us see how God typically works in our world. We often pray for God's miraculous intervention in the world. In the case of Moses, his mother undoubtedly prayed again and again for God to spare her son. But notice, God didn't send angels from heaven to spare him. God didn't miraculously step in to destroy Pharaoh or change his heart.

No, two midwives feared God and courageously practiced civil disobedience when they saved many Hebrew children, likely including Moses. A heroic mother saved Moses when she hatched a plan for Pharaoh's daughter to adopt him. A princess who listened to her heart rather than to her father's decrees took this child in and made him her own son.

Owing to the actions of these four heroic women, Moses survived and was raised in the pharaoh's household, where he would receive the finest education money could buy, and which ultimately would prepare him for God's mission—a mission to challenge a future pharaoh, to lead the children of Israel out of bondage, and to form a new nation.

There's one last thing I want you to notice as you read Exodus 2: 1-10, the story of Moses' birth, his deliverance from Pharaoh's deadly decree, and his adoption into Pharaoh's house: God is hardly mentioned in these verses, and yet it's clear that God was active

through these various women. I mention this because it illustrates the way God usually works in our world—through people. When we listen to our hearts, do what we know is right, and pay attention to the nudges and promptings and whispers of the Spirit, we find ourselves being used by God to accomplish his purposes. God uses ordinary people, in seemingly ordinary ways, to do extraordinary things.

Notice too that God works through disappointing and difficult circumstances. Moses' mother had to give up her baby to save him, but God was there working through this heartbreaking situation. Moses as a child was likely teased for being the one drawn out of the water, for having no father, for being adopted, but God was at work then as well, likely using such experiences to foster compassion in Moses' heart. God often works most profoundly in the disappointment and heartache of our lives.

To summarize, there's much we can learn from the story of Moses' early life: Don't give in to fear of the other, as Pharaoh did. When those in authority call you to do what you know is wrong, resist them, as Shiprah and Puah did. When you face heartbreaking circumstances, trust that God is still at work, as Moses' mother Jochebed did. And when you see those in need, let your heart be moved to compassion, as the Egyptian princess did. If you do these things, you may find yourself playing a pivotal role in God's saving story.

Walking Where Moses Walked: A Visit to Luxor

In each chapter I'll share with you a few of the things you would see if you were walking in the footsteps of Moses. I'm including



Hot air balloons at sunrise over the Valley of the Kings

photos of some of these locations, and in the video designed to accompany this book I will take you to these locations.

As with Cairo, we arrived in Luxor just after sunset. We checked into our hotel on the eastern bank of the Nile River. Across the Nile we could see the desert mountains and the plateau we knew to be the Valley of the Kings. I woke early the next morning and watched the sun rising upon the mountains with beautiful hues of pink and orange. Hot air balloons were lifting off, taking visiting tourists for a flight over the ancient necropolis. We were in Luxor two nights, and both mornings I couldn't resist getting up early to watch the sunrise. It was truly magnificent.

We began our first day in Luxor visiting Pharaoh Hatshepsut's mortuary temple, beautifully preserved and restored just south of the Valley of the Kings. Hatshepsut, a woman, ruled as the pharaoh for approximately twenty years, from 1478 to 1458 B.C. If an early date

is assumed for the Exodus, then she would have been the pharaoh ruling just prior to those events.

We then toured the Valley of the Kings. Beginning in the 1500s B.C., Egypt's kings began to build elaborate underground burial chambers. Each pharaoh would commission a tomb shortly after ascending the throne. The tombs, like the earlier pyramids, would have walls with careful instructions for the journey to the afterlife, the judgment, and the king's deification. Rooms in the burial chambers would be filled with items deemed necessary for a successful afterlife, including food, drink, furniture, and chariots.

Most of the sixty-three tombs and hundreds of chambers in the tombs had been sacked by grave robbers over the millennia, but in 1922, archaeologist Howard Carter and his team discovered a tomb that was largely intact: the tomb of King Tutankhamun, known to us as King Tut. This boy king ruled just nine years, from 1332 to 1323 B.C. If a late date is assumed for the Exodus, then Tutankhamun was the pharaoh when Moses was in his late teens and into his twenties. King Tutankhamun was nine years old when he began to rule and only eighteen when he died. Many of the treasures that were found in the tomb are now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. The dry conditions in the Valley of the Kings preserved most of the items in his grave amazingly well. You can see his chariots, several beds, thrones, jewelry, and so much more. The items from Tut's tomb allow us to see actual objects from the time of Moses' story.

While touring the Valley of the Kings, we visited three tombs, each with multiple burial chambers. It was astounding to see how well preserved the paintings and hieroglyphics on the walls were. The colors were still vibrant more than 3,300 years after the artisans first created those images on the walls.