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Title: The Courage of Moses' Mothers

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Scripture: [Exodus 1:8-10, 15-22](#)

Text: [Exodus 2:1-10](#)

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Well, as you all know, it's Mother's Day. As far as we can tell there is nothing specific in scripture which suggests that today is a religious holiday. There are no commandments in Deuteronomy or Paul's writings that say, "Every year, once a year, on the second Sunday of the fifth month, you shall honor your mothers and grandmothers who are

among you." Mosaic Law *does* command us to honor our mothers and fathers, but I don't think our kind of Mother's Day honor is exactly what Moses had in mind.

I'm sure that Moses would be shocked to see what we consider an honor. A record of 25 billion dollars is expected to be spent this year in order to celebrate mothers. That includes cards, flowers, gifts, candy, and special outings. Moses could not imagine the golden calves that we have created in the name of our honoring mothers. But a significant portion of those gifts and cards today go not just to the mothers who gave us birth, but also to the many women who influenced our lives. The greeting card industry leads the way by acknowledging that many deserve special attention and gratitude, recognizing not just mothers but aunts, sisters, teachers, even friends of the family. Moses would appreciate this as he experienced it. When Moses asked the question that all children eventually ask, "Tell me about when I was born," he would have heard about five women and their influence on his birth and life. They are the courageous mothers of Moses. On Mother's Day, they inspire and challenge us to act with the same courage and love and remind us to recognize the many life-giving actions of women in our lives.

The first two mothers of Moses were Hebrew midwives, Shiprah and Puah. Their role precedes the birth of Moses but it is so important that if they had not acted courageously, Moses would not have survived to lead God's people to the Promised Land. Their life-giving act shows up shortly after this

beginning ominous verse. "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." (Exodus 1:8)

Scholars believe that the new king was Ramses II, a pharaoh who reigned from 1279-1213. He is often regarded as the greatest, most celebrated, and most powerful pharaoh of the New Kingdom. Oddly, his name means "keeper of harmony and balance" but scripture reveals something entirely different. He was incessantly paranoid about the Hebrew slave population: so much so that he's willing to guarantee the end of his cheap labor force in order to preserve his hold on power.¹

So, this new Pharaoh calls these two women in and says, "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." (Exodus 1:16) This was Pharaoh's plan to keep harmony and balance. But fortunately, Shiphrah and Puah, realize that Pharaoh is a few bricks shy of a pyramid. They not only defy the order; they came up with a clever excuse for why they did. They blamed their failure to do his murderous work on the "vigorous" constitution of the Hebrew women, who would give birth before the midwives could get there. Upon hearing this, Pharaoh became desperate. He issued another edict, commanding "...all his people, 'Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.'" (Exodus 1: 22)

There is no record whether or not that happened. Rather, the only the record we have is of the ethics and courageous leadership of Shiphrah and Puah. They are the only women in the Book of Exodus to act in an overtly political sphere. They understand that both the priority of the faith and the priority of the profession is to save lives. This was a higher priority than the dictates of any king or political system. By their actions, they valued the lives of slave babies at the risk of their own lives. Their life-giving courage action made it possible for Moses to survive after his birth. Shiphrah and Puah courageously decide to honor God instead of yielding to human power and xenophobic paranoia. Moses would learn to do the same. ²

Exodus continues the story of telling us what happened when Moses was born. It does so with two nameless women. One is Moses' biological mother, whom we know from other texts to be Jochebed and the other is Moses' sister, who is named Miriam. But in the story, we are simply told of their roles, not their names. But their roles are filled with life-giving courage. ³

First, there is the courage to conceive. Exodus describes it simply "Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son..." (Exodus 2:1-2a. Knowing what was going on, this wasn't simple at all. If any Egyptian who saw a Hebrew baby boy could

throw that child in the crocodile-filled Nile, to conceive and give birth required courage. Exodus implies here that this was their first child, but we know he wasn't. Moses has an older brother and sister, Aaron and Miriam, who shows up in this narrative, in just a few verses.

Jochebed and her husband, Amram, decide to have another child even though they know the dangers that lie ahead. During national tragedy and turmoil, people often choose not to have a child or expand their family. But somehow, Jochebed and her husband felt called to conceive and when they did, "...she bore a son; when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months." (Exodus 2:2)

Jochebed recognized that the boy was "a fine baby" which, on the surface, appears to be the kind of thing any mother would say. Every mother thinks their baby is beautiful, fine. But if you look at the Hebrew language, you will see that the word fine is *ki tov* (טוב כי). It is the very same word that God uses to describe creation each day in Genesis 1 as "good." God has created through Amram and Jochebed and "he is good." Jochebed somehow sees in the face of her baby God's claim on his life, sees that he was special to God, that he is good.

The Jewish historian Josephus, writing centuries later, tells of a Midrashic story that was passed down through the centuries about this. Amram, Moses father, was told by God in a dream that the baby was going to be Israel's liberator.⁴ His parents saw that something special was happening with this boy. So they hid him for three months. Can you imagine how hard that would be, how terrifyingly courageous?

We couldn't hide our son Andrew for three months. I remember exactly how long it took before we stopped hiding him, six weeks. When Andrew was born, we were dumb, naïve, parents who thought he'd never make a sound in public. And for the most part, he didn't. We'd take him to dinner, to movies and he'd seldom make a sound. And if he did, it was just a brief soft cry for a bottle or a change. But then, at six weeks, in the middle of watching *Driving Miss Daisy*, Andrew decided to make his presence known in the world, much to the displeasure and vocal unhappiness of a sold-out theater. We couldn't hide him any longer.

Think of the fear and the courage it took to face it. I'm sure when Jochebed heard Egyptian soldiers coming down their street, she thought the worse was about to happen. I'm sure she panicked every time he cried in the night, asked for a bottle, or needed a diaper. It was her role as a mother to protect him. Jochebed must have prayed for an answer, for God to give her a plan. And, suddenly one day it came to her. She remembered the story of

Noah. She remembered how Noah built an Ark and covered it with pitch, inside and out. She remembered how Noah and his family went into the Ark and they were saved. She must have thought to herself, "If God did it once, God can do it again." ⁵So with the courage of Noah building an Ark "...she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river." (Exodus 2:3) Again, she had the courage and holy imagination to believe that God would save again with an Ark. Putting him that papyrus basket, she believed she was placing him in God's care. God gave Moses a mother who had the courage to believe in him.

God also gave him a clever sister who was part of the plan. Exodus says, "His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him." (Exodus 2:4) Miriam went with her mother, watched her place her brother in the Nile. Then, she stayed and watched over her brother. We don't know if she was enlisted by Jochebed or if she followed at her own initiative. Either way, she was courageous and as we will see, life-giving. She saw Pharaoh's daughter come down to the water for her bath, saw her find the basket and the baby. Remember that her paranoid father had ordered all the Egyptians to throw the Hebrew baby boys into the river when they found them. She recognized the baby as Hebrew and had a decision to make. At that very moment, Miriam watching, waiting, sees this and bravely acts. Rushing in she "...said to Pharaoh's daughter, 'Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?' Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Yes.' So the girl went and called the child's mother." (Exodus 2:7-8) T

The Princess could have easily thrown the baby into the deep. It would also have been easy to surmise or even see the connection between Moses and Miriam, and deal with Miriam also as a lawbreaker. Instead, Miriam's courage inspires Pharaoh's daughter to say yes. This, in turn, enables Jochebed to get her boy back for a time, to nurse, to bond with to pour out her love on her fine son and prepare him for who God wanted him to be. How many years, we don't know. We simply know that "When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son." (Exodus 2:9)

Pharaoh's daughter is the last of the courageous mothers of Moses and the only one we don't have named for. The unnamed Princess walking along the Nile finds a baby. She realizes that he is one of the immigrants, racially and religiously despised by her father. She knows that her father has asked every Egyptian to throw these babies to their death. Yet, feeling her heart moved to pity, she dares to act and she adopts him. The princess is not Jewish, nor believes in Yahweh. Yet the divine nurturing spark is alive in her. It is not the princess' belief or lack of belief in God that is all important but

her empathetic and saving action. The stunning part of the story though, the part that alerts us here we have a princess worthy of that title, is this: "She named him Moses, 'because,' she said, 'I drew him out of the water.'" (Exodus 2:10) To name him Moses is to prophetically point to that which is to come. Isaiah uses the very same words that remind people Moses is the one who "...drew God's people out of the Red Sea" with outstretched arms and a shepherd's staff. Moses the liberator, named by his adoptive mother,

This is the story of the courageous mothers of the Hebrew nation, who acted as part of God's plan. Of the five courageous women, only one gives birth. Three were without children. One adopted. But all five were essential in nurturing and bringing forth life, the life of the great liberator of God's people.

This is the story of Moses in the bulrushes and five women of courage. Two remind us to stand up against discrimination and confront murderous practices. One challenges us to have the courage to trust in God's providence. One bravely believes in God's power to provide solutions. And the final one, dares us to be inclusive.

On Mother's Day, their actions inspire each of us to act the same. But they also remind us to recognize that the many gifts of our lives, that the nurture and care of our being has a wider influence than just one. Even as I wish each mother today the happiness of this day, I also honor the many women, mothers or not, who have shaped and nurtured life. Thank you all and may God bless.

¹¹ https://www.ancient.eu/Ramesses_II/

² The Moses Footprint, Homiletics. 8/24/2008.

³ Cardy, Glenn. The Mothers of the Hebrew Nation. May 8, 2016. Community of St. Luke. New Zealand.

⁴ Josephus, (Antiquities II, 212, 215-216).

⁵ Cardy.