

Moses: earth's meekest man

2. Drawn out

John Mitchell

Moses, adopted into the court of Pharaoh as an infant, grows up with a glittering future ahead of him, only to forsake it all in fleeing from Egypt when his premature attempt to rescue his countrymen from their bondage fails.

JOCHEBED, WIFE OF Amram the Levite, managed to conceal her “very fine” baby boy for three months, but the time was fast approaching when something else would have to be done—apart, that is, from throwing him in the river. He was growing fast, as was his lung power and voice, especially when feed-time came near. Someone was sure to hear him before long. And then? Perhaps it was the fate that Pharaoh had decreed for male children that prompted Jochebed to think of the river and of the possibility of depositing her babe there, and obeying the decree after a fashion, yet without his coming to any harm. She would make a little boat, or “ark”,¹ for him and float him upon the waters!

Drawn out of the waters

Accordingly she took a basket-shaped vessel, made from papyrus reeds, complete with hood to keep the harmful effect of the sun’s rays off the child, coated it with tar and pitch, and prepared for the launch. Her husband Amram’s part in the scheme is not stated, although the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us that both he and Jochebed had faith in God in concealing the child and were “not afraid of the king’s commandment” (11:23). But who better than Amram to have gone to the reed beds to collect the three-cornered papyrus stalks with which to make the ‘ark’ in the first place, so that no one would be any the wiser?

1. *Tebah*, the Hebrew word translated “ark” in Exodus 2:3,5, means primarily a boat or vessel, and is used in Scripture on only two occasions, first in relation to the Ark that Noah built, and secondly of the small vessel in which Jochebed floated her babe. By the grace of God, deliverance from death was to be the outcome in both.



Tony Benson

The “ark of bulrushes” into which the infant Moses was put is thought to refer to a basket made of papyrus, once common in Egypt. The picture shows papyrus (a species of sedge) growing in the Huleh marshes in northern Israel.

As for the rest of the family, little Aaron, who was only three years old, could have taken no part, but his older sister, whose age is not given but who must have been at least nine or ten years of age, was certainly privy to it and became a co-operator in the plan to save her baby brother. And one can imagine the interest she showed when the time came to make a small mattress to cushion him in the boat, and to dress him as attractively as possible for the part he too had to play. For this was to be no mere dumping on the waters to allow him to float away willy-nilly on the current. An enticement was afoot (and no mean one at that) towards the very loftiest in the land.

Amram and Jochebed must have lived within easy walking distance of a secluded spot on the banks of the river where Pharaoh's daughter was accustomed to bathe. So Jochebed and Miriam rose early one morning, probably before dawn for the sake of secrecy, and made their way to the bathing place bearing their precious burden. And on the approach to it, where there were some reeds, they placed their little decoy in the water. Then Jochebed sited Miriam a short distance away so that the girl could see what would happen, and she herself left the scene, but went not too far away, one may be certain. And sure enough, at the appointed time, the princess came along the bank accompanied by her retinue, and she spotted the vessel among the reeds and told her waiting woman to fetch it out of the water. She opened it and, right on cue, the baby began to cry!

Was there ever so appealing a sight and sound to touch a woman's heart as this? The daughter of Pharaoh immediately felt sorry for the child, and said, "This is one of the Hebrew babies".* Then, as she stood there becoming more and more attracted to the child, and contemplating what might be done with him, his sister came along, as if by chance, and said, "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?". Well, why not? One fewer among the Hebrew boys drowned in the river wouldn't make much difference, would it? "Yes, go", said the princess to the girl, who immediately disappeared to fetch the baby's mother. When Jochebed arrived as a nursing mother, the daughter of Pharaoh said, "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you".

And so Jochebed, woman of faith in the God of her fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, triumphed over Pharaoh in three ways: first, she preserved the life of her beloved babe; second, she insinuated him, under the very nose of the king, into

the royal household to be trained and educated there for his life's work; and third, she was actually to be paid for fulfilling her heart's desire! And, of course, it was all God's handiwork and the outworking of His will and purpose with the child. The babe could not leave his mother right away, for he was not yet weaned; it was a process that took much longer according to the custom of those days, in fact as long as three years, during which Jochebed must have imprinted on his infant mind that, whatever might betide him later, he was a Hebrew.

In process of time, in accordance with the wishes of the princess, Jochebed took her child to the palace and handed him over to be her adopted son. Then the completeness of the transaction was shown by the fact that it was the princess herself who gave him the name by which all posterity has known him: Moses, which means 'drawn out', because she drew him out of the water. What his father and mother had called him up to the time when he became part of the royal household we do not know, but Moses' new name supports the idea that his emergence from the ark in the bull-rushes was a type of baptism² and of the giving of a "new name" in the sight of God.

From prince to fugitive

Once in the family royal, the boy was not only nourished as the princess's son but also received the liberal education expected to fit him for high office. Stephen, in his martyrdom speech before the Jewish council, said that he became "learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds" (Acts 7:22). According to Josephus, Jewish tradition credited him with great achievements, including successful generalship in a campaign against the Ethiopians,³ but most commentators, though equally without authority, confine his education to such of the sciences and arts as were current in Egypt at that time. Whatever the details were, we can be certain that

* This and other quotations from Exodus 2 are from the NIV.

2. If, as was possibly the case, Jochebed, as part of her stealthy approach to putting the ark on the water, had chosen early morning because there would then be a mist on the river, the type of baptism would have been complete, and the occasion would have paralleled that when the children of Israel were themselves "baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1 Cor. 10:2).

3. *Antiquities of the Jews*, ii, x. 1.

all Moses learned was but a preparation for that time when his real vocation would be fulfilled in leading the Hebrews out of the insufferable hardship and bondage that this same royal household had placed upon them.

Concurrent with life at the top for forty years with all its attractions, Moses knew in his heart that he had a choice to make, a choice that ran parallel to that which the Lord Jesus faced when, in forty days, he also was tempted with all that the kingdoms of this world could offer. There is even a suggestion in the legends quoted by Josephus that Moses was next in line for the Pharaohship when the decisive moment came, and he chose "to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ [NIV, disgrace for the sake of Christ] greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward" (Heb. 11:25,26). Undoubtedly the choice, when it had to be made, though momentous, was not rash but the product of a faith that had been building up for many years.

The only trouble was that Moses both mistimed it and miscalculated it because of a presumption he had regarding his destiny and his approach to it. Either openly or in his heart he had already refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter when, on a lone foray into the area where the Egyptians were maltreating their Hebrew slaves, he came upon one of the taskmasters beating one of his own people. His ire rose up with murderous passion, but not without caution. Glancing this way and that, and seeing no one about, he used his superior strength, for he was evidently a very powerful man, to kill the taskmaster, and then hid his body in the sand before returning to his royal abode.

Somehow or other he was minded next day also to visit his own people; but this time, instead of an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew, he saw two of his own race fighting together, and he asked the one in the wrong, "Why are you hitting your fellow Hebrew?". The reply he received was the greatest body-blow he himself had ever sustained: "The man said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian?' Then Moses was afraid and thought, 'What I did must have become known'".

How Moses' deed of the previous day had leaked out is not recorded. It may have been that the man he had rescued noised it abroad, conscious of the greatness of his deliverer. Or

there could have been other witnesses whom Moses had not noticed at the time. However it became known, the news must have spread like wildfire among the downtrodden people of Israel, and raised hopes in some that were to be dashed as soon as they were born, for the time of their deliverance was still far away. In others the reaction was negative, born of distrust that someone who had been brought up at the royal court, even though he was a Hebrew, could possibly be their deliverer. And it is Stephen again who enlightens us as to Moses' state of mind when he had ventured to kill the Egyptian taskmaster in the first place: "for he supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them: but they understood not" (Acts 7:25).

Thus Moses is seen to have made two cardinal errors in thinking and acting as he did. First, he anticipated the timing of God and acted without His authority; and secondly, in his rage he used the arm of the flesh. He had relied on what in modern parlance has sometimes been called 'muscular Christianity', which is not Christianity, but brother to the collective use of force in what are dubbed 'just wars' but are not sanctioned by God. Moses had acted out of pride and not out of meekness, and he had to understand that, before he could assume the role he knew God intended for him, he must first learn obedience through the things he would suffer.

The result of his foray made him afraid when he thought of its consequences. "What I did must have become known", he said. And already the report of it had reached the court, with the inevitable outcome that Pharaoh would try to kill him as a renegade and a traitor. There was no other course open to Moses now except to flee the country and go beyond the boundaries of Egyptian power to where the remit of Pharaoh did not run. So Moses fled to Midian on the edge of the desert of Arabia, and there, like his father Jacob before him, and the Lord Jesus after him, he sat down by a well.

Thus Moses the prince ended the first third of his life: forty years spent in the highest political, social and privileged circles this world had to offer. Now he entered upon a new and totally different phase that was just as important, just as demanding in the forming of his character, so that he might become Moses, the humble servant of God.

[\(To be continued\)](#)