

Faith on the Banks of the Nile

Forgotten Lives . . . Remembered Truths, Part 1

Exodus 2:1-10

If you had lived in Europe in the early 1800's, you would have been both impressed and terrified by the mighty sweep of the man who would nearly conquer the world.

His name was Napoleon. At the age of 10 his parents entered him in military school and he soon rose in prominence through the ranks.

When he was awarded the role of Brigadier General, he was only 28 years of age. His first campaign would take place where he would attempt to win control of Egypt.

Fast forward a decade or two and through military intrigue and masterful manipulation, Napoleon is elected to the throne of France and declares himself Emperor for Life.

Not long after, he led his army against Russian troops and defeating them in a battle that solidified his reputation as a military genius.

As the retreating Russian army fled across a frozen lake, Napoleon ordered his troops to pummel the frozen ice with artillery. His cruel plan succeeded, the ice broke and he effectively drowned the retreating soldiers, thus solidifying his reputation as a man to be feared.

Napoleon saw himself taking the place of Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great. And most of Europe assumed he had.

Napoleon was on everyone's mind and in everyone's conversation. Napoleon was what mattered most.

Frank Boreham, one of Australia's best known authors, wrote these interesting words 100 years after Napoleon's death. He wrote, If you were living in the year 1809, what mattered most were the battles of Napoleon. That year stood midway

between two great battles that seemed to shape the destiny of the world. They were the Battles of Trafalgar and Waterloo. One battle destroyed Napoleon's naval power and the other battle destroyed his remaining military power. In the year 1809, everyone was thinking of battles. That's what mattered. Nobody was thinking about babies.

But what was God planning for His world?

In 1809, William Gladstone was born, one of Great Britain's greatest Prime Ministers; Lord Alfred Tennyson was born that same year as was Oliver Wendell Holmes in Massachusetts and Frederick Chopin in Warsaw and Felix Mendelsohn in Hamburg; and that same year, 1809, to poor pioneers living in the wilderness of Hardin, Kentucky, the first baby boy was born into the Lincoln family, and they named him Abraham.

Boreham concludes, "Viewing [1809] in the truer perspective of [history] which the years enable us to command, we may well ask ourselves if the battles mattered more than the babies [who were born that same year]."¹

If you traveled back to Egypt where Napoleon took his first military command – and then turned the clock back several thousand years – the person who mattered most was another warrior . . . an arrogant, cruel and newly crowned Pharaoh was commanding his vast empire.

For nearly 350 years, his empire had enjoyed the benefits of free labor – a race of people subjugated into cruel slavery he had inherited from his forefathers.

Ask anybody in that world and they would tell you who mattered most – who was the most powerful – and who didn't seem to matter at all.

I'll tell you what certainly wouldn't have mattered at all . . . the fact that in a slave hut near the banks of the Nile River, a Jewish woman by the name of Jochebed gave birth to a little boy.

What difference would that make?

In this series of sermon I've entitled *Forgotten Lives . . . Remembered Truths*, I want to look first at a woman overshadowed by the events of her world and overpowered by the circumstances in her life that left her completely helpless – yet dependent on God by faith . . . and that would change everything.

Turn to the *Book of Exodus*. It's basically the biography of her famous son, Moses. And everybody will know about Moses.

The truth of the matter is, Moses would have never been introduced, or known, let alone kept alive if it had not been for the courage and faith of a slave couple named Amram and, as you'll see the focus of scripture on his mother, Jochebed.

By the time you get to the end of *chapter 1*, Pharaoh is terrified of the growing potential among his slaves. They are literally multiplying faster than the Egyptians. And so chapter 1 ends with this cruel edict – notice *verse 22*. ***Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying, "Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live."***

Now before we dive in, there's a larger context to understand. This is one of Satan's earliest attempts to prevent the coming birth of the Messiah by destroying the Hebrew race from whom the Messiah has been promised.

Pharaoh is just one more Hitler, used by Satan to try and obliterate the Messianic prophecies; not only of the coming Messiah – but of a nation that will be alive and reconstituted when the Messiah returns to set up His kingdom on earth (Romans 11).

Satan doesn't know the future any more than we do, other than what the Bible has revealed about the future, but he happens to be a careful student of prophecy.

And there's a near term prophecy that he really wants to shut down. Back in *Genesis 15:13-14*, Abraham was given a prophecy from God that the Hebrew people would be enslaved for four generations . . . around 400 years – but then they would be released and led out of slavery. In other words, the nation won't be destroyed.

Satan has his calculator out and knows that in the next few years, more than likely a baby boy is going

to be born in that 4th generation of enslaved Israelites who will grow up to lead the people out of bondage.

Moses is the fourth generation . . . most of these babies being born in Egypt represent the fourth generation . . . 350 years have gone by . . . and Satan's alarm clock is ringing!

So you need to understand that behind the paranoia and cruelty and greed of Pharaoh is the Prince of Darkness, manipulating, suggesting, impressing, leading this emperor and his counselors to make a decree that destroys every male child born in Egypt and wipes out the nation.

With that in mind, let's pick up the narrative at *chapter 2 and verse 1*. ***Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a daughter of Levi (they belonged to the same tribe). 2. And the woman conceived and bore a son.***

Now stop there for a moment. Like so much of narrative in the Bible, the main point is the main point and some of the other points don't show up until later so you can more quickly get to the main point.

Obviously the main point is that Moses has just been born and so we jump immediately into that delivery room.

However, you discover in chapter 6, that Moses wasn't the first born child of Amram and Jochebed. Evidently, prior to this edict from Pharaoh, they've had another son named Aaron – and he's running around the hut as a three year old; and there's the oldest child – a 7 year old sister named Miriam.

Listen, I'd love to pull over right here and explore the implications that the leading characters of the coming Exodus from Egypt happen to be three children from the same family, born to those same slaves, probably in that same slave hut, near the banks of the Nile River.

I'll at least say that from what we see later on in the life of these three kids, they were taught well in the oral traditions of the Hebrew nation – in fact, it will be Moses who will write them down, inspired and led by the Holy Spirit later in life.

These three kids saw and learned from the persevering faith of their parents – and listen, none of them will ever forget they are not Egyptians; they are Hebrews – even if it condemns them to slavery.

All of them will give their lives – even risk their lives – in order to follow after their true and living Creator God.

I wish we had a little more insight into the life of this slave family several thousand years ago.

Now back to verse 2. And the woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was beautiful – literally well-formed or handsome) – she hid him.

Now look, what mother doesn't think her newborn son is handsome.

What mother in the delivery room sees her son and says, 'Oh my goodness . . . he can't be mine.'

No hardly. "Isn't he handsome?!" Then she brings him to church and shows him to you – "Isn't he just the most handsome little boy?" And you look down and gulp.

Then she brings him up to me – and I say what I learned from J. Vernon McGee where'd look down into the bassinette and say, "Well my, that *is* a baby."

Well, to the family of Moses, when Jochebed delivered him, it wasn't a matter of show and tell – it was a time of utter dismay.

You have this edict that all male babies are to be thrown into the Nile. While Satan had a short-term and long-term conspiracy in mind, Pharaoh has a more short term goal – he just wants to slow down the population explosion lest the Hebrew's from an army one day and overthrow the Egyptian empire. So he delivers an edict, which, by the way, is incredibly, politically clever. You see, babies were floated out to the Nile god as offerings all the time. The crocodiles, considered by the Egyptians to be the servants of the Nile god, would often gladly receive them on his behalf.

The Nile god was considered the source of everything good and plenteous and the highest honor an Egyptian could offer him would be to give him a newborn baby.

More than likely Pharaoh had cleverly issued this decree saying something like "You know, it's about time these Hebrew people stopped ignoring our gracious god who's benefiting them too and started giving gifts to him as well."

And everybody in the empire would have cheered, "It's about time".

When this baby boy is born to these slave parents, what should have prompted a time of celebration now turns into a time of desperation.

What exactly does this phrase mean where we're told that Moses was beautiful or lovely?

In Stephen's sermon in Acts chapter 7 you can loosely paraphrase his description that at his birth, Moses was no ordinary child. In fact, Stephen adds

this interesting phrase – at his birth, Moses was ***lovely in the sight of God (Acts 7:20).***ⁱⁱ

In other words, Jochebed wasn't risking her life and her family's because her baby boy had a cute dimple and was just so handsome . . . it was because of their faith in the coming deliverer, according to the prophecy of God through Abraham, along with some sort of revelation that we are not given here, that Moses was somehow marked out for unique service unto God.

Josephus, the first century Jewish historian writes that a dream announced to Amram that Moses would become the deliverer.ⁱⁱⁱ

We can't be sure because we're simply not told. But what we do know is that these Hebrew slaves had been keeping their eye on the calendar as well . . . anyone of these slave huts might echo with the newborn cries of the boy who would become the deliverer. Their alarm clocks are ringing too!

God somehow revealed to them – and particularly to Jochebed, since Amram doesn't seem to be there – he was more than likely working and away – she received some sort of sign that this child has a special destiny unto God. When Amram came home she no doubt revealed the news to him of their baby's unique place before God.

And so they conspired to hide him.

The problem with that is there isn't a basement in this hut. There isn't an attic either – or a back bedroom. And these Hebrew slaves were all so crammed together in their living quarters that nothing was a secret, certainly not the crying of a newborn baby. They couldn't possibly hide that fact!

The phrase – ***she hid him***, repeated in ***Hebrews 11:23*** – uses a verb that simply means they ***concealed*** him. The verb is also used in a secretive context for keeping something hidden from others. You can translate it – to cover – to conceal.^{iv}

What's really happening here? They are keeping the truth about their baby's sexual identity covered up.

Yes, they obviously have a newborn – you can't keep that a secret; but notice, they're not throwing it into the Nile River so it must be a girl.

And isn't she beautiful.

By the way, when you see a newborn, you don't know if it's a baby girl or a baby boy, so you take you cues from what? Their clothing; they're brought to church in their little pink outfit . . . or that little

blue outfit . . . which makes all the baby boys in our nursery Carolina fans. Is that tragic or what?

Never mind.

But as that baby grows – it isn't long before you don't need the outfit to tell.

You can tell.

Evidently for three months, Jochebed lived every moment of every day with the tension of being found out. For 90 days as she nursed him, and guarded him, and kept him, she made sure no one was around when he was bathed or when he was changed.

We're not told, but they would have circumcised him according to the law at 8 days of age – without any witnesses – and then prayed fervently he would heal without any complications.

Jochebed would have guarded her conversations with the other women nearby; she would have made sure to keep their secret safe – to keep their baby's life safe.

And what about other family members around – there were plenty. They could not be told.

I can tell you that as grandparents, Marsha and I have had so much fun at those reveal parties or special moments when we were told if our grandchild would be a boy or a girl.

Seth and Megan are expecting a boy – I was wrong and just knew it would be a girl. They're having a boy. They haven't decided on a name yet. I've suggested Stephen . . . not really.

Caroline and Benjamin had a son – Nicholas – it's hard to believe he's a year and half old.

I can remember the day he was born.

Look at him . . . Look at him. He's got his daddy's chin . . . he's got his mother's eyes . . . he sorta looks like his grandfather . . . yea, that's it . . . he's bald.

Imagine Amram and Jochebed after their baby is introduced.

Everybody's saying – look at her . . . isn't she beautiful . . . she has her mother's nose . . . she has her daddy's complexion.

But Jochebed is unusually quiet . . . nervous . . . biting her tongue . . . more aloof than normal . . .

Over time, did anyone notice how she changed the subject when it focused on her baby; they had to keep the secret and keep up appearances . . . I don't know what the customs would have been among the slaves in Egypt, but had it been today, the new parents would have dressed him in something pink.

But add to that the real horror, if you can imagine it, how they would have grieved with others families they knew who'd had their newborn sons ripped from their arms and thrown into the Nile.

Perhaps neighbors have become suspicious . . . who knows, little Aaron or Miriam might have blurted it out on the playground or to a cousin . . . **verse 3** informs us that Jochebed knows that she **can't conceal his identity any longer.**

For whatever reason, after three months or difficult, painful, terrifying, exhausting concealment, they have no choice.

But listen; don't think for a moment that they haven't come up with a plan.

Let me show you – **verse 3. But when she could hide him no longer, she got him a wicker basket – that is, a basket made out of interwoven papyrus stalks – and covered it with tar and pitch.**

Tar would have kept the vessel waterproof; **pitch** was a substance made from a plant their world had discovered repelled the crocodile.

Now notice, **3b. Then she put the child into it, and set it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. And his sister stood at a distance to find out what would happen to him. And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the Nile, with her maidens walking alongside the Nile; and she saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid, and she brought it to her.**

If there's a phrase to underscore, it's that phrase – **she . . . set it among the reeds.**

Jochebed didn't push the basket out into the current and say, "Well, I've done all I can do . . . I'll just have faith that the current will whisk him away into some safe place."

Not hardly. What you have here is a well thought out plan. She's been thinking this over for months . . . and while she leaves the ultimate results to her Sovereign Creator God, she devised the very best plan she could.^v

She knew that at a certain time, in a certain place, the princess would come to bathe. And she set that little basket at that very location.^{vi}

For centuries, this particular daughter of Pharaoh, unnamed here in this text, has been known and passed along one Jewish generation after another with several different names. Two of the most prominent are the names Thermusa or Bithia.^{vii}

What you need to understand is that Bithia isn't coming to the Nile with a washcloth and a bar of ivory soap because it was Saturday night.

This wasn't a bath like you and I think of a bath. The only people that bathed in the Nile River to try and clean up were the slaves.^{viii}

She lived in the palace. She lived in incredible opulence and advancement unknown to most of her people.

We now know through excavations that ancient Egyptians had engineered indoor plumbing systems and lavatories which actually flushed and drained through underground piping systems.

The princess would have had her own marble encased, custom made bathroom with everything she needed to take care of herself and in total privacy.

So why is she coming down to the muddy banks of the Nile and risking disease and even a crocodile or two to take a bath?

This wasn't that kind of bath.

This was a ritualistic, religiously motivated, ceremonial bathing.

The Egyptians believed the waters of the Nile were spiritually empowering.

They believed it had sacred power to heal and give life.

To this day, religious beliefs abound in relation to water. I have personally watched people bathing in the polluted, filthy waters of the Ganges River – believing it had spiritual power.

Centuries earlier, the Egyptians believed that if treated with proper respect and honor, the god of the Nile River would even be able to produce fertility and life.^{ix}

From what we can piece together, she is either a single adult woman or a married woman without children, which is more likely.

She will appear later in the Old Testament as the mother of several children – but she has none at this moment.

More than likely she is following the Egyptian superstitions that bring her down to the Nile – as was her custom – to this same location – hoping . . . longing . . . wishing for a child of her own.

Verse 5 tells us that her *attendants walked alongside the river bank* – no doubt they are protecting her privacy while at the same time watching out for wildlife.

And don't think for a moment that Jochebed doesn't know this. She set the basket among the reeds – at that very spot where Bithia, the barren princess of Pharaoh will arrive with longing in her heart for a baby of her own.

She may have been hoping that on that day, more than ever, "Maybe the Nile god will be good to me and answer my prayer."

Notice verse 5b. *And she saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid, and she brought it to her. 6. When she opened it, she saw the child, and behold, the boy was crying.*

Evidently, this basket had a lid on it. And as she opens the lid – behold – that is, look, the boy was crying.

I don't think this was that kind of piercing 2:00 am crying that makes you wish you had a wicker basket and a river nearby . . . just kidding . . . kinda . . .

This was that infant whimper . . . with tears playing at the corners of his eyes . . . that sad, pitiful cry that makes you feel so sorry for it.

Listen, of all the things Jochebed could plan for, she couldn't script this. Miriam was waiting nearby with carefully rehearsed lines; the basket was crafted and placed at just the right spot; Moses was wearing his cutest outfit ever . . . but beyond that, God had to do what only God could do.

After all, this narrative isn't about how clever Jochebed was – this was God at work, using the faithfulness and courage of His followers and then using it all to His appointed purpose.

What you have here, at this moment as the lid is lifted and the baby is crying – perhaps blinded by the sunlight and somewhat fearful with its surroundings – and watch what only God could create.

Notice, ***And she had pity on him and said, "This is one of the Hebrews' children."***

Where'd that come from? Those two thoughts don't belong in the same sentence. This is one of the Hebrews' children – and she had pity on him?! You've got to be kidding!

This is treasonous.

Oh, this is a God-determined, God-inspired, God-formulated, God-provoking connection between a baby's fearful tears and a woman's longing heart. And at this moment, it produced pity!

In reality, she is probably the only person on the planet capable of influencing the Pharaoh, her father, to make an exception to his edict.

Even still, this is God at work, through the faith and courage of His children.

Again, the first century historian Josephus interrupts the text at this point and writes that what happened next was the princess took the baby to

several of her attendants – her maidens. These are nice words for Jewish slaves – to see if one of them could nurse the baby or knows of someone who can.^x

But she strikes out.

It's at that point that Miriam steps forward and delivers her line – **verse 7. Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call a nurse – literally a wet nurse – that is, a nursing mother – that she may nurse the child for you?"**

Again, don't read this and think for a moment that this 8 year old girl has somehow ingeniously come up with a plan that will allow her mother to nurse her baby.

These lines were planned and well-rehearsed.

Imagine your 8 year old daughter on the stage in a school play. She has the critical lines that tie together the entire production.

You would be holding your breath . . . actually you would be mouthing the lines with her . . . because you have them memorized too . . . because you've practiced them over and over again.

"Miriam, wait until the princess desires to keep your baby brother; and then wait a few more moments and if you hear the princess asking her maids for a wet nurse – wait a moment and then, what's your line again?"

Miriam would have responded, "Shall I go and call a nurse for you from the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for you?"

"That's it, Miriam . . . now say it again once more."

Prepared . . . but even still, only God can produce His perfect will and plan.

The lessons to learn from Jochebed are to indeed prepare . . . faith doesn't sit on its hands. The believer is to plan . . . to be courageous . . . to disobey unrighteous law and obey God's law . . . to do the right thing . . . then to allow God the final word.

Do you think for a moment that the princess didn't see through Miriam's sudden appearance . . . and scripted lines?

Of course . . . she knew too, no doubt.

But God had moved in her heart and she determined, for no justifiable, sane, reasonable, intention – she will adopt this baby and raise him as her own son . . . and in the meantime, she will give him back to his mother to nurse and raise until he's old enough to enter the Egyptian court and begin his training as an adopted grandson of Pharaoh.

Before we finish, let me show you something that gets lost in the narrative.

Jewish traditions have kept the story of this remarkable princess alive and passed along, honoring her for her remarkable compassion and courage. Her given name, many believe was Thermusa, but later changed to Bithia. Bithia means, "daughter of Jehovah."

Something of God's magnificent grace occurred in her life. I wish I had all the details and could fill in all the blanks, but this woman evidently considered it more important to be the daughter of Jehovah, than the daughter of Pharaoh.

That's the same kind of thing her adopted son Moses will say as he chooses to follow God rather than embrace the riches of Egypt (**Hebrews 11:26**).

Even though he was trained, according to Stephen's sermon in **Acts 7:22 – in all the learning of the Egyptians** – which would have included engineering, mathematics, astronomy – so skillful in astronomy that they developed and amazingly accurate calendar – their engineers built complex structures that still defy our imagination.

But he never forgot . . . he *never* forgot that he belonged to Jehovah. And she evidently, no doubt influenced by Moses and his family, chose to belong to God as well.

In the Chronicles – the first Book at chapter 4 records the lineage of the Hebrews coming out of Egypt at the Exodus, as Moses led them out – and we read this stunning verse; **I Chronicles 4:17. And the sons of Ezra were Jether, Mered, Epher, and Jalon. And these are the sons of Bithia the daughter of Pharaoh, whom Mered took) . . . Shammai and Ishbah.**

Let me just read that again . . . **These are the sons of Bithia the daughter of Pharaoh, whom Mered (a Jewish man) took to be his wife . . . their names are Shammai and Ishbah.**

That's not all. We're given not only the names of the sons – which is traditional genealogical practice. But in this case, we are given the name of her firstborn, which just so happened to be a baby girl.

And **verse 17 tells** us that she named her daughter Miriam.

Miriam.

It was Miriam's scripted lines that introduced this princess of Egypt to a faithful mother and father . . . and a little boy who would grow up and never forget who he was.

And all of this divinely orchestrated by God to checkmate once again Satan's murderous plans to exterminate the Jewish nation; not only divinely orchestrated by God to liberate a nation according to His promise to do so in the fourth generation, but – to liberate and redeem a most unlikely woman . . . a woman who had gone down to the Nile River, time after time, hoping for an answer . . . for meaning . . . and purpose . . . and God in His grace, introduced her not only to a baby, but a redeemer . . . and the Living Lord of all Creation.

She ultimately found a purpose for living – in following the God of the Hebrews . . . and she eventually found herself among a newly liberated nation . . . in the family of a new husband . . . and children of her own . . . and most importantly, a new and lasting relationship with the true and living Jehovah.

Evidently she chose to leave the namesake of Moses alone when she bore her sons, but she still

decided to name her firstborn child after that little girl who's well-rehearsed line would eventually change her life forever.

By the way, don't ever underestimate the power in someone's life of one little sentence. Even if it's only one line. Even if you stumble over it . . . never underestimate how God can use your testimony of truth in the life of someone else.

Don't ever underestimate what God has in store for His children either . . . we have no idea what God is up to.

And don't ever underestimate the grace of God to change superstitious, religious, ritualistic, pagan, despairing, hopeless creatures, into forgiven, redeemed, new creations – added to His people and who will sing of His glory and grace forever.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/4/2015 by Stephen Davey.

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- i John Phillips, Introducing People of the Bible: Volume 4 (Loizeaux, 1999), p. 65
ii The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament, editors, John Walvoord & Roy Zuck (Victor Books, 1985), p. 109
iii Theodore H. Epp, Moses: Volume 1 (Back to the Bible, 1975), p. 17
iv Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Volume III, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 958
v Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, Moses (Thomas Nelson, 1999), p. 24
vi Ibid
vii The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 2 ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Regency, 1999), p. 310
viii C.F. Keil & F. Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament: Volume 1 (Eerdmans, 1991), p.429
ix Ibid
x Swindoll, p. 26