

God's Mission Supersedes Women's Vocations: Exodus 2:1–10

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Introduction

Exodus 2:1–10 initially caught my attention because of the number of women that are in this story. I wondered about the practice of wet nursing in the ancient Near East, and what this arrangement may have entailed for the baby's nameless mother. I wondered about the baby's sister, who remains unnamed in this passage. Did she realize that speaking to Pharaoh's daughter was subversive due to their class and ethnic differences? Was this action worthwhile enough to risk the consequences? I wondered about Pharaoh's daughter, too. How did she know that the baby was a Hebrew? What compelled her to help him? I wondered about her servants, those who silently drew the baby out of the water but whose mistress takes credit for this action. But most of all, I wondered what it means that God chose to partner with these women in accomplishing God's mission—women whose vocations entailed nurturing and serving, yet were vital to the story of Israel. While there is no way to draw conclusions about the inner lives of these women, this passage and other contemporaneous sources provide possible answers regarding the practice of wet nursing and the dynamics between the various women in this story.

In this paper, I will analyze the narrative context of Exodus 2:1–10 before looking at the common theme of God's intervention in the stories of Moses' mother and sister, as well as Pharaoh's daughter, her attendants, and her father. I will then compare Moses' story to that of Sargon of Akkad, specifically in reference to the women in each story. Lastly, I will offer suggestions for what this passage may mean for women in the North American evangelical church today. Through my analysis of this passage, I have determined that God partnered with these women within their vocations and contexts in order to accomplish God's purposes. Thus, God's mission supersedes women's vocations, and God desires to partner with all women

today—not in order make them men or like other women, but to come alongside each woman as she is and because of who she uniquely is.

Narrative Context of Exodus 2:1–10

The first eighteen chapters of Exodus detail the “enslavement and subsequent escape” of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery.¹ Exodus 2:1–10 immediately follows the story of the midwives who save the Hebrew babies against Pharaoh’s orders in Exodus 1. The midwives introduce the theme of womanly disobedience through allowing the Hebrew babies to live and lying about the vigorousness of the Hebrew women in delivery. Their role to bring life into the world is quintessentially female; yet, in doing what midwives are meant to do, they are disobeying Pharaoh. Thus, Exodus 1 previews what will be the theme of Exodus 1–2: “resistance literature.”² As will become clear, this is not resistance literature for its own sake but for the sake of fulfilling God’s purposes for the people of Israel through Moses.

Moses’ Mother (v. 1–3, 8–9)

Though she is unnamed in this passage, readers later learn that Moses’ mother is named Jochebed in Exodus 6:20. Jochebed does what mothers are expected to do: ensures the survival of her baby. The methods that she employs may deviate from the feminine norm of passivity in her society, but they come from her motherly instinct to protect her child. After she birthed a healthy baby that she was supposed to kill, she hid him as long as possible before concocting a plan to further preserve his life. This was “highly solicitous” for her to do, which is not a typically feminine trait in her context.³ However, her solicitous behavior emerged through her

¹ Nyasha Junior, “Exodus,” in Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed., twentieth anniversary ed, (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 56.

² Gale Yee, “‘Take This Child and Suckle It for Me’: Wet Nurses and Resistance in Ancient Israel,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 39, no. 4 (2009), 185.

³ Mary J. Obiorah, “Moses’ Mother in Exodus 2:1-10 and Mothers in Personal Names among the Igbo People, South-East Nigeria,” *Acta Theologica* 40, no. 1 (2020), 86.

efforts to fulfill her vocation as mother. Lynn Japinga describes her as “clever, courageous, and quick-thinking,” all of which are crucial to Moses’ survival.⁴ Those, too, are more “masculine” traits, but they are God-given characteristics that serve her in her context. There is no indication that her husband was part of this plan, as this story centers on the women that partner with God to fulfill God’s plan. In v. 3, she “put” Moses in the basket and then “placed” it in the reeds. Both of these actions imply both gentleness and subversion, as Pharaoh previously commanded the midwives to “throw” male Hebrew babies in the Nile.⁵ We do not know how long the basket was in the river after she placed it there, further emphasizing the magnitude of the risk that she took to protect her child.⁶

Many elements of this story are atypical, including the conditions of the Jochebed’s wet nursing. She was part of the enslaved class and from a different ethnic group than the adopted mother, yet Pharaoh’s daughter offered to pay her for her services.⁷ Additionally, men were typically the ones to choose the wet nurse in the ancient Near East; yet, Jochebed was chosen by a female.⁸ Though not explicit, the text implies that Jochebed was allowed to take Moses to their home.⁹ Wet nursing contracts ranged from six months to three years; however, children were typically not weaned until three years of age, which means that Jochebed likely had that much time with Moses.¹⁰ She doesn’t know how much she will be paid when she accepts the agreement, but the payment is not what matters; what matters is that she will be allowed to

⁴ Lynn Japinga, *From Widows to Warriors: Women’s Stories from the Old Testament* (Louisville, United States: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2020), 40.

⁵ Exodus 1:22, Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 154.

⁶ Japinga, *From Widows to Warriors*, 40.

⁷ Yee, ““Take This Child and Suckle It for Me,”” 184-5.

⁸ Ibid, 188.

⁹ Ibid, 182.

¹⁰ Ibid, 185; Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 152.

mother her child.¹¹ Because his mother had the chance to raise him, Moses is able to be “nurtured in a Hebrew way,” which equips him to later lead his people.¹² Though he was young, Moses no doubt retained lessons from his mother that stayed with him throughout his life.

It is not clear why Jochebed released Moses back to Pharaoh’s daughter after the terms of agreement were complete.¹³ She may have feared punishment, but I suggest that she was loyal to her word because she wanted what was best for her son. She knew he would be safe in the palace, even though she would rather have her son with her. However, Gale Yee notes that the bond “was not always severed when the nurse handed over the child,” so it is possible that Moses maintained a relationship with his birth mother after he went to the palace.¹⁴ This would allow Jochebed to continue to instill Israelites values in Moses, despite him being stepped in Egyptian culture. In my reading, these factors further demonstrate the ways in which God was intervening in this story through the ordinary actions of women—birthing, nursing, and nurturing—to accomplish God’s plan.

Moses’ Sister (v. 4, 7–8)

Moses’ sister, ostensibly his sister Miriam who is identified by name in Numbers 26:59 and 1 Chronicles 6:3, plays a critical role in this passage.¹⁵ The text does not explicitly say if her mother encouraged her to watch over her brother after they put him in the basket. It does say that she “stood at a distance,” because it was important to Miriam to know what was going to happen to him (Exodus 2:4). Miriam exhibits fewer traditionally feminine traits than the other characters, as her vocation in this story is not related to birthing, nursing, or nurturing. However, her

¹¹ Obiorah, “Moses’ Mother in Exodus 2:10,” 88.

¹² Sonia Kwok Wong, “The Birth, Early Life, and Commission of Moses: A Reading from Hong Kong in Brenner and Yee, Exodus in Deuteronomy, 145.

¹³ Nyasha Junior, “Exodus,” *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 59.

¹⁴ Yee, “‘Take This Child and Suckle It for Me,’” 185.

¹⁵ Nyasha Junior, “Exodus,” *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 59.

shrewdness is instrumental to reuniting her family. As an unmarried daughter, Miriam's primary role was serving the family, which she does through her cleverness. Miriam was not able to stage a coup to overthrow Pharaoh, but she was able to defy his rules in a way that blessed her family and her people. Japinga describes her as "smart," which she certainly is as she orchestrates the plan for Jochebed to take care of Moses.¹⁶ She is also seen as "cunning" and "sly" for her role in this ruse, in which she effectively tricks Pharaoh's daughter into going with her plan.¹⁷ Mary Obiorah's depiction of Miriam incorporates her various personality traits that she utilizes in partnering with God to save Moses: she is "audacious, empathic, and persuasive."¹⁸ Miriam is bold to speak to Pharaoh's daughter, both because of their class difference but also because of their ethnic difference. Perhaps they connect over a shared concern for the well-being of a child, which was a typical feminine value in their cultures. Miriam's empathy and service to her family aligns with expectations for women, but her bolder traits reflect that she was able to defy personality expectations while still maintaining her vocation.

Pharaoh's Daughter (v. 5–10)

Pharaoh's daughter intended to go and bathe like any other day, but God had other plans. After seeing a basket in the water, she sent her attendants to see what it was. We have no indication of whether or not she suspected that there would be a Hebrew child in it, but she seems to instantly realize this once she opens the basket. William Propp suggests various reasons that Pharaoh's daughter would have known he was a Hebrew child. It could have been because

¹⁶ Japinga, *From Widows to Warriors*, 43.

¹⁷ Mayer I. Gruber, "On Miriam and Jochebed," in Carol L. Meyers et al., *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 186; Yee, "'Take This Child and Suckle It for Me,'" 181.

¹⁸ Obiorah, "Moses' Mother in Exodus 2:10," 86.

he was at the Nile, because of his clothing, or just through “plain sense,” as he was abandoned.¹⁹ Verse 6 tells us that she “took pity on him,” which is the appropriate response to seeing an abandoned baby cry. Anyone can have pity on a baby, but what Pharaoh’s daughter does next is what reveals her true character.

The predominant word used to describe Pharaoh’s daughter throughout commentaries on this passage is “compassionate.” This is how Japinga describes her, and Cheryl Exum also sees Pharaoh’s daughter as “moved by compassion” to save the baby she sees in the water.²⁰ Obiorah also sees her as compassionate, noticing that the princess “proved her feminine quality of compassion” when she saw Moses.²¹ Kenneth Ngwa suggests that Pharaoh’s daughter has a moment of “cultural vulnerability” when she releases Moses back to his ethnic subgroup to be cared for.²² I believe that her impulse towards compassion, which was cultivated in women in her ancient Near Eastern context, is what drove this action. The Hebrew phrase used to describe the princess’s motivation to care for Moses is “used elsewhere” in scripture to “describe the protective affections of a parent for their child in the midst of destruction.”²³ She treated him as a son from the moment she met him, wanting what was best for Moses—even if that meant breaking the rules and allowing him to go back to his own ethnic group for a time.

She showed more kindness in this situation than was required of her, but in doing so she helped fulfill God’s plan. Pharaoh’s daughter thwarts her father’s plan, which “contributes to his failure,” as soon as she speaks to Miriam, but this is so that God’s plan will be fulfilled.²⁴ Her

¹⁹ Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 151

²⁰ Japinga, *From Widows to Warriors*, 40; J. Cheryl Exum, “Exodus 2:5-10—Daughter of Pharaoh” in Carol L. Meyers et al., *Women in Scripture*, 186.

²¹ Obiorah, “Moses’ Mother in Exodus 2:10,” 86.

²² Kenneth Ngwa, “Ethnicity, Adoption, and Exodus: A Socio-Rhetorical Reading of Exodus 2.1–10,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 38, no. 2 (2013), 171.

²³ Malachi 3:17, referenced in Ngwa, “Ethnicity, Adoption, and Exodus,” 173.

²⁴ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 69.

vocational position of power is what allowed her to perform this subtle act of defiance, which had a larger impact than she may have anticipated. Though unnamed herself, she gives Moses his name. She translates his name as “I drew him out of the water,” but the active participle in v. 10 actually means “one who draws out,” which “foreshadows his future” as the one who will lead the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage.²⁵

Pharaoh’s Daughter’s Attendants (v. 5)

The Hebrew word for the women that walk with Pharaoh’s daughter when she goes to bathe has been translated in various ways. It can mean “young women” more generally, but also refers to “maidservants” or “attendants,” especially “those of royalty” in the Hebrew Bible.²⁶ The NRSV chooses the word “attendants,” and that seems to fit the context of this story. The attendants do not speak in this story, but they are the ones who draw Moses out of the water. Though Pharaoh’s daughter takes credit for this action in her naming of Moses, readers know that the attendants actually did so. Therefore, they played an essential role in saving Moses’ life, therefore also playing an essential role in liberating the Israelites. Obiorah notes that they could have said something to endanger Moses, but they kept quiet.²⁷ Perhaps they could have told Pharaoh that there was a Hebrew baby in the palace in order to receive some sort of reward, but they said nothing. Though we cannot know why they did not speak out, it was perhaps because of their loyalty to their mistress or their nurturing inclination, encouraged for women in their

²⁵ Melissa A. Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible: A Subversive Collaboration*, 1st ed., 1 online resource (285 pages) vols., Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), 73.

²⁶ Carol Myers, “Exodus 2:5–Attendants of Daughter of Pharaoh” in Carol L. Meyers et al., *Women in Scripture*, 186.

²⁷ Obiorah, “Moses’ Mother in Exodus 2:10,” 86.

society, to care for children. This makes them attendants of not only the royal family, but also of Moses, God, and—by extension—God’s people.²⁸

Pharaoh

Pharaoh completely underestimated the women in this story, not realizing that this small group of women would thwart his plans. His order in Exodus 1:22 was to “let every daughter live” and to kill all the sons born to the Israelites. He did not realize “just how dangerous daughters could be,” as his own daughter and the daughter of an unassuming Israelite couple worked together in saving the child that would lead the Israelites out of Egypt.²⁹ He seems to forget that women “play a crucial role in the biological reproduction of a people,” meaning that the Israelites would still continue to grow as a population if the daughters were allowed to live.³⁰ Unnamed mothers, daughters, and attendants, seemingly unassuming, outsmarted Pharaoh within their vocational roles, demonstrating compassion and bravery to accomplish God’s plan.

Comparison to Sargon of Akkad

Akkadian mythology also tells a story of a baby who is drawn out of the water and later becomes a national hero: Sargon of Akkad. His mother also gave birth in secret and placed her child in a basket, not knowing what his fate would be.³¹ Sargon also came under “female protection” at the beginning of his life and was given a name related to water.³² Whether or not this story inspired the Moses story, was inspired by the Moses story, or came about independently is not what is important here. Rather, the next part of the story is what matters in the exegesis of Exodus 2:1–10. In Sargon of Akkad’s story, a man goes and finds him in the

²⁸ Carol Myers, “Exodus 2:5—Attendants of Daughter of Pharaoh” in Carol L. Meyers et al., *Women in Scripture*, 186.

²⁹ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 76.

³⁰ Yee, ““Take This Child and Suckle It for Me,”” 187.

³¹ Nyasha Junior, “Exodus,” *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 59

³² Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 155.

water when he goes to drink.³³ Both Moses and Sargon become great leaders, but only one of them relied on the help of women to get there. God chooses to partner with women in Exodus 2 to save Moses' life and raise him up to be a future leader. This reflects the character of the God of the Israelites, a God who made women indispensable to the story of Exodus and who longs to partner with women in their specific vocations today.

Conclusions

Overall, the work of these women can be summarized as “caring actions.”³⁴ Most of their character traits were those of ancient Near Eastern women, but those traits in and of themselves were subversive in their particular context of Israelite enslavement in Egypt. God did not want them to become men, but rather used these women within their vocations to fulfill the purpose of protecting Moses' life. This could not have been done by men in the ancient Near East; men who could not birth, could not nurse, and could not nurture in the way this group of women did. Though God is not mentioned in this story, God seems to be “invisibly at work, turning seeming setbacks into triumphs.”³⁵

Today, North American evangelical women can have vocations beyond giving birth, nursing, and caring for children. However, it is important for women whose vocations lead them to lives full of diapers and bottles to know that they, too, are serving God. Those who are inclined towards nurturing and mothering are no less vital to God's kingdom than those who attend seminary and pursue ordination. Additionally, it is possible to be interested in both working and raising children. With the increasing number of women who work outside of the home and serve the church in formal capacities, I think it is worth reminding women that not

³³ Nyasha Junior, “Exodus,” *Women's Bible Commentary*, 59.

³⁴ Mikael Larsson, “In Search of Children's Agency: Reading Exodus from Sweden” in Athalya Brenner-Idan and Gale A. Yee, *Exodus and Deuteronomy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 83.

³⁵ Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 160.

everyone has the same vocation. Ngwa compares the culture of ancient Israel to that of the Igbo people in Southeastern Nigeria, both cultures in which women “operate in the background.”³⁶ Like the women in this story, women in Igbo culture “powerfully propagate the good course of society.”³⁷ Though North American women can operate in the foreground as well, it is important to not lose sight of the “background” work that many women do.

Ngwa reminds readers that both of Moses’ mothers, his biological mother and his adoptive mother, saved Moses’ life, and “not knowing what he would be in the future, they prepared for the salvation of the whole nation.”³⁸ Women who raise their biological children, raise adoptive children, and take care of other people’s children each day have no idea who those children will become. They do not know what God’s purpose is for them, but they instill values in those children that will equip them to further the kingdom of God.³⁹

Women may act differently from one another, some being more compassionate like Pharaoh’s daughter and others being more bold like Miriam. God asks us to be the women that we are, not to try to be men or to try to be other women. Though this may sound like a complementarian perspective, I believe that it communicates the egalitarian stance on the uniqueness of each individual and their role in God’s kingdom, regardless of gender. We do not have to accept the context of the Bible “as the status quo for today,” but this does not mean that God does not partner with women whose vocations are characterized by nurturing and serving today.⁴⁰ God has a place for women who see themselves in Pharaoh’s daughter, who have

³⁶ Obiorah, “Moses’ Mother in Exodus 2:10,” 83.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Karen Strand Winslow, “The Purpose, Principles, and Goals of Egalitarian Biblical Interpretation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Susanne Scholx (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 530.

positions of influence and can perform small acts to serve God in their contexts. God has a place for women like Jochebed and Miriam who would do anything for their families and display boldness every day. God has a place for women who do not see themselves anywhere in this story, identifying more with women in direct leadership positions like Huldah or Deborah. God wants to partner with each and every woman to fulfill God's mission, and the women in Exodus 2:1-10 reflect that it can be done within our vocations and utilizing our unique personality traits.

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