

Women's Work: Vocation in Exodus 2:1–10

Jennifer M. Gash

Exodus 2:1–10, often referred to as Moses's birth narrative, initially caught my attention because of the number of women in the 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 also 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 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.

The 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 Exod 2:1–10 immediately follows the story of the midwives who save the Hebrew babies against Pharaoh's orders. The midwives introduce the theme of women acting disobediently. They allow the Hebrew babies to live, attributing their helplessness to follow the royal command to 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, Exod 1 previews what the narrative of Exod 1–2 will be: “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. Women have a key role in this.

Moses's Mother (vv. 1–3, 8–9)

Though she is unnamed in this passage, readers later learn that Moses's mother is named Jochebed (Exod 6:20). Like the midwives, Jochebed does what mothers are expected to do: She ensures the survival of her baby. After she births a healthy baby that she is supposed to kill, she hides him for as long as possible before concocting a plan to preserve his life. This is a subversive action on her part, but one which emerges through her efforts to fulfill her vocation as mother. Lynn Japinga describes her as “clever, courageous, and quick-thinking,” all of which are crucial to Moses's survival.³ These, in Eastern cultures, are perceived as “masculine” traits. There is no indication that her husband is part of this plan. Jochebed is the one who “puts” Moses in the basket and then “places” it in the reeds. In contrast to Pharaoh's command to “throw” male Hebrew babies in the Nile, these actions imply gentle, non-violent life-saving action. These are subversive acts.⁴ We do not know how long the basket is in the river after she places it there, further emphasizing the magnitude of the risk she takes to protect her child.⁵

Elements of the story that follows are atypical, including the conditions of Jochebed's wet nursing. She is part of the enslaved class and from a different ethnic group than the adoptive mother, yet Pharaoh's daughter offers to pay her for her services.⁶ Additionally, though not explicit, the text implies Jochebed is allowed to take Moses home.⁷ Wet nursing contracts ranged from six months to three years; however, it is believed that children were not weaned until three years of age, which means that Jochebed likely has that much time with Moses.⁸ Because his mother raises him, Moses is “nurtured in a Hebrew way,” which contributes to his ability to lead his people later.⁹ We infer that Moses retains lessons from his mother that stay with him throughout his life.

It is not clear why Jochebed releases Moses back to Pharaoh's daughter after the terms of agreement are complete.¹⁰ She may fear punishment, but I suggest that she wants what is best for her son. She knows he will be safe in the palace. However, Gale Yee notes that the bond “was not always severed when the nurse handed over the child,” so it is possible that Moses continues in relationship with his birth mother after he moves to the palace.¹¹ This would allow Jochebed to continue to instill Israelite values in Moses, despite him being steeped in Egyptian culture.

Thus, God's plan for the people of Israel is effected through the routine and unremarkable responsibilities of a woman—birthing, nursing, and nurturing.¹²

Moses's Sister (vv. 4, 7–8)

Moses's sister is first mentioned by name as “Miriam the prophet” in Exod 15:20. She plays a critical role in how the plot unfolds.¹³ The text does not explicitly say that her mother instructs her to watch over her brother after they put him in the basket. It does say that she “stood at a distance.” It is important to Miriam to know what is going to happen to her baby brother (Exod 2:4). Miriam exhibits fewer traits that a modern reader may expect from a woman in the patriarchal ancient world, as her vocation in this story is not related to birthing, nursing, or nurturing. However, her shrewdness is instrumental to reuniting her family—a trait she shares with various other women in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁴

As an unmarried daughter, Miriam's primary role is serving the family, which she does through her cleverness. Miriam is not able to stage a coup to overthrow Pharaoh, but she is able to defy his rules. Japinga describes her as “smart,” for she orchestrates the plan for Jochebed to take care of Moses.¹⁵ She is also seen as “cunning” and “sly” in effectively tricking Pharaoh's daughter into going along with her plan.¹⁶ In the previous chapter, the midwives Shiphrah and Puah are praised and rewarded for engaging in trickery when it furthers a greater aim.¹⁷ Thus, there is no indication that Miriam's “trickster” role in this narrative is unethical. Rather, Mary Obiorah and Nkiruka

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Okafor describe Miriam as “audacious, empathic, and persuasive.”¹⁸ Miriam is bold to speak to Pharaoh’s daughter, despite their class and ethnic differences. Perhaps they connect over a shared concern for the well-being of a child, a value in both of their cultures.

Miriam’s empathy and service to her family aligns with the expectations placed on women in her time, but her bolder traits reflect that she—like various other women in the Hebrew Bible—has a personality which leads her to actions outside of those related to reproduction.

Pharaoh’s Daughter (vv. 5–10)

Pharaoh’s daughter intends to go to the river and bathe like on any other day, but on seeing a basket in the water, she sends her attendants to inspect its contents. We have no indication of whether she suspects there would be a Hebrew child in it, but she instantly realizes 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 be because he is in the Nile, because of his clothing, or just through the fact that he has been abandoned.¹⁹ She “takes pity on him,” the usual response to an abandoned baby crying. Anyone can have pity on a baby, but what Pharaoh’s daughter does next is extraordinary.

She is “moved by compassion” to save the baby she sees in the water.²⁰ This 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.”²¹ She treats him as a son from the moment she meets him. Obiorah and Okafor observe that the princess proves “her feminine quality of compassion” when she sees Moses.²²

Rescuing the infant and arranging for his care, Pharaoh’s daughter thwarts her father’s plan, which “contributes to his failure.”²³ Her vocational position of power allows her to perform this subtle act of defiance which has a larger impact than she anticipates. Though unnamed herself, she gives Moses his name. She translates his name as “I drew him out of the water.” The name is an active participle that can be rendered “one who draws out.” As such, the name “foreshadows his future” as the one who will lead the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage.²⁴ Pharaoh’s daughter, though belonging to the opposing people group, acts in the quintessentially feminine role of mother through showing compassion to Moses. In turn, there are far-reaching positive effects for the Israelites.

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

The Hebrew word for the women who accompany Pharaoh’s daughter (*na’aroth*) has been translated in various ways. It can mean “young

women” generally but also refers to “maidservants” or “attendants,” especially “those of royalty.”²⁵ “Attendants” fits the context.

These attendants do not speak in the text, but they act, for 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. They play an essential role in saving Moses’s life and by doing so inadvertently play an essential role in the eventual liberation of the Israelites from slavery. Obiorah and Okafor note that they could have endangered Moses.²⁶ Hoping to be rewarded, they could have informed Pharaoh of a Hebrew baby in the palace, but they say nothing. Though we cannot know why they do not speak out, it is perhaps because of their loyalty to their mistress or because of their womanly nurturing inclination. This makes them attendants of not only the royal family, but also of Moses, and—by extension—of God’s people.²⁷ Though their vocation carries limited power, Pharaoh’s daughter’s attendants—through an ordinary act of obedience to their mistress—become critical characters in both this narrative and in the larger story of the Israelites.

The Women in Moses’s Birth Narrative

Pharaoh completely underestimates the women in this story, not realizing this small group of women would thwart his plans. His order in Exod 1:22 is to “let every daughter live” and to kill all the sons born to the Israelites. He does not realize “just how dangerous daughters could be,” as his own daughter and the daughter of an enslaved Israelite couple work together in saving the child who would lead the Israelites out of Egypt.²⁸ He seems to forget that women “play a crucial role in the biological reproduction of a people,” meaning that the Israelites would continue to grow as a population if the daughters were allowed to live.²⁹ Unnamed mothers, daughters, and attendants—seemingly of no consequence—outsmart Pharaoh within their everyday vocational roles.

Akkadian mythology from the third millennium BC tells the story of a baby who is drawn out of the water and who later becomes a national hero: Sargon of Akkad. His mother also gives birth in secret and places her child in a basket in a river, not knowing what his fate would be.³⁰ Sargon also comes under “female protection” at the beginning of his life and is given a name related to water: Aqqi (from which “Akkad” derives) means the “drawer of water.”³¹ Whether or not the Moses story is intentionally parallel to that of Sargon is not what is important here. Rather, difference in detail is what matters. In Sargon’s story, a man—not women—goes to the river to drink and finds the baby in the water.³²

Both Moses and Sargon go on to become great leaders, but only Moses is helped by women to get there. God chooses to partner with women to raise up a future leader. This reflects the character of the God of the Israelites. He is a God who makes women indispensable to the story of Exodus by working through their routine and unremarkable vocations.

Overall, the work of these women can be summarized as “caring actions.”³³ These are the distinctives of their routine roles as women. But those roles subvert royal authority and undo the enslavement of Israel. While some of the traits displayed are traditionally masculine³⁴ and are critical to the plot, the task of saving the infant Moses could

not have been done by men. Men could not birth, could not nurse, and could not nurture in the way these women collectively did.

Women and Their Vocations

Today, many women have vocations that extend beyond giving birth, nursing, caring for children, and other unpaid labor encompassed by the term “women’s work.” However, it is important for women whose vocations lead them to lives full of diapers and feeding bottles to know that they, too, are serving God. Those who are inclined toward nurturing and mothering are no less vital to God’s kingdom than those who attend seminary and pursue ordination.

With the increasing number of women who work outside of the home and serve the church in formal capacities, it is worth the reminder that not every woman has the same vocation. Kenneth Ngwa compares the culture of ancient Israel to that of the Igbo people in southeastern Nigeria—both being cultures in which women “operate in the background.”³⁵ Like the women in this story, women in Igbo culture “powerfully propagate the good course of society.”³⁶ Though women can operate in the foreground as well, it is important not to lose sight of the “background” work that many women do.

Ngwa reminds readers that both of Moses’s mothers, biological and adoptive, saved his life, and “not knowing what he would be in the future, they prepared for the salvation of the whole nation.”³⁷ Women who raise their biological children, raise adopted children, and take care of other people’s children do not know who those children will become. They do not know what God’s specific purpose for them is, but they can instill values in those children that will equip them to further the kingdom of God.

Some women, like Pharaoh’s daughter, demonstrate compassion. Others, like Miriam, display courage. God asks us to be the women that we are, not to try to be men or to try to be other women. God has a place for women who see themselves in Pharaoh’s daughter, who have positions of influence. God has a place for women like Jochebed and Miriam who would risk anything for their families. God has a place for women who do not see themselves in this story but identify with women in leadership positions like Huldah or Deborah. God wants to partner with each woman to fulfill God’s mission, and the women in Exod 2:1–10 show that it can be done within our vocations and through our unique personalities.

Notes

1. Nyasha Junior, “Exodus,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed., ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Westminster John Knox, 2012) 56.
2. Gale A. Yee, “‘Take this Child and Suckle It for Me’: Wet Nurses and Resistance in Ancient Israel,” *BTB* 39/4 (2009) 185.
3. Lynn Japinga, *From Widows to Warriors: Women’s Stories from the Old Testament* (Westminster John Knox, 2020) 40.
4. William Propp, *Exodus 1–18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (Yale University Press, 2021) 154.
5. Japinga, *From Widows to Warriors*, 40.
6. Yee, “‘Take this Child and Suckle It for Me,’” 184–85.
7. Yee, “‘Take this Child and Suckle It for Me,’” 182.
8. Yee, “‘Take this Child and Suckle It for Me,’” 185; Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 152.

9. Sonia Kwok Wong, “The Birth, Early Life, and Commission of Moses: A Reading from Hong Kong,” in *Exodus and Deuteronomy*, ed. Athalya Brenner-Idan and Gale A. Yee (Fortress, 2012) 145.
10. Junior, “Exodus,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 59.
11. Yee, “‘Take this Child and Suckle It for Me,’” 185.
12. I do not imply these are the *only* responsibilities women in the ancient world had; rather, these are responsibilities that only women were able to have.
13. Junior, “Exodus,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 59.
14. Shrewdness is also exhibited by Lot’s daughters (Gen 19), Tamar (Gen 38), Shiprah and Puah (Exod 1), and Jael (Judg 4), to name a few.
15. Japinga, *From Widows to Warriors*, 43.
16. Mayer I. Gruber, “On Miriam and Jochebed,” in *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*, ed. Carol L. Meyers et al. (Eerdmans, 2001) 186; Yee, “‘Take this Child and Suckle It for Me,’” 181.
17. Exod. 1:21–22 says God “dealt well” with the midwives who deceived Pharaoh and “gave them families” as a result. In Judg 5:24, Deborah sings, “most blessed of women be Jael,” for she tricks Sisera to give the Israelites victory over the Canaanites.
18. Mary J. Obiorah and Nkiruka C. Okafor, “Moses’ Mother in Exodus 2:1–10 and Mothers in Personal Names among the IGBO People, South-East Nigeria,” *AcT* 40/1 (June 2020) 86.
19. Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 151.
20. Japinga, *From Widows to Warriors*, 40; J. Cheryl Exum, “Exodus 2:5–10—Daughter of Pharaoh,” in *Women in Scripture*, ed. Carol L. Meyers et al., 186.
21. Mal 3:17, referenced in Kenneth Ngwa, “Ethnicity, Adoption, and Exodus: A Socio-Rhetorical Reading of Exodus 2.1–10,” *JSOT* 38/2 (Dec 2013) 173.
22. Obiorah and Okafor, “Moses’ Mother,” 86.
23. Melissa A. Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible: A Subversive Collaboration*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford University Press, 2012) 69.
24. Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 73.
25. Carol L. Meyers, “Exodus 2:5—Attendants of Daughter of Pharaoh,” in *Women in Scripture*, ed. Carol L. Meyers et al., 186.
26. Obiorah and Okafor, “Moses’ Mother,” 86.
27. Meyers, “Exodus 2:5—Attendants of Daughter of Pharaoh,” 186.
28. Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 76.
29. Yee, “‘Take this Child and Suckle It for Me,’” 187.
30. Junior, “Exodus,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 59.
31. Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 155.
32. Junior, “Exodus,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 59.
33. Mikael Larsson, “In Search of Children’s Agency: Reading Exodus from Sweden,” in *Exodus and Deuteronomy*, ed. Brenner-Idan and Yee, 83.
34. By masculine traits, I mean those *commonly* used to describe men in the Hebrew Bible, including courage, cleverness, and quick-thinking. As mentioned above, there are various examples of women behaving with these traits; these are not exclusive to men, nor do I imply they are God-ordained for men to exhibit rather than women.
35. Obiorah and Okafor, “Moses’ Mother,” 83.
36. Obiorah and Okafor, “Moses’ Mother,” 83.
37. Obiorah and Okafor, “Moses’ Mother,” 83.



Jennifer M. Gash is an MDiv student at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, and serves as the Connections Director at Waves Church of Christ in Malibu, California. She will soon begin her PhD in Old Testament at Baylor University where she plans to study women in Old Testament narrative and law as well as comparative Semitics.