

(Devotional #18) *Character Studies from Hebrews 11:1-40*
Heroes of the Faith: Moses and His Mysterious Parents – Part 1
(Exodus 2:1-10; Hebrews 11:23-26)

Now a man from the House of Levi married a daughter of Levi. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was beautiful, she hid him for three months – Exodus 2:1-2

By FAITH Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw he was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king's edict – Hebrews 11:23

Today we are going to focus a bit on names. Do you know the names of Moses' parents? Probably not! Most people do not know their names. I think it is odd – (*not that you may not know their names*) – but that their names are not mentioned early in the story of Moses and the basket of reeds recorded in Exodus Chapter Two – the story that sets everything else in the Book of Exodus in motion. The verses cited above simply say, “*A man from the House of Levi married a daughter of Levi.*” These are Moses' parents – and the son born to them is Moses – and all we are told about them is they are Levites.

Now the absence of their names is even more unusual if we consider how the books of the Pentateuch (*Genesis – Deuteronomy*) are named in the Hebrew Bible:

- (1) **THE BOOK OF GENESIS** in the Hebrew Bible bears the title, ‘**B^ERESHITH**’ – It is the first word of Genesis 1:1. This word, *b^ereshith*, means ‘**BEGINNINGS**,’ and it introduces us to *the ‘Book of Beginnings’* – And it tells us a lot about the content of the first book of the Hebrew Bible.
- (2) **THE BOOK OF EXODUS** in the Hebrew Bible is titled, ‘**SH^EMOT**’ – *Sh^emot* is the second word of Exodus 1:1. It means ‘**NAMES**,’ and *the ‘Book of Names’* tells us a lot about the content of this second book of the Hebrew Bible. In fact, the opening words of Exodus are, “*These are THE NAMES of the sons of Israel.*”

Now, if we are reading a book with the title, ‘**NAMES**,’ we would expect not only to encounter a lot of names, but we would be right to think the names we do encounter probably are important ... otherwise, why title the book ‘**NAMES**’ if names are not important?

Well, names are important, and **THE BOOK OF SH^EMOT** begins by giving the names of Jacob's eleven sons, who migrated from Canaan to Egypt (*remember, Joseph was already in Egypt*). And there are two other names mentioned in Chapter One, and both of them are women: *Shiphrah* and *Puah*¹. Now women are not named frequently in the Bible, so when we see a woman identified by name, we should take note of her. These two were midwives, who played an important role in saving the lives of many young boys condemned by the King of Egypt to be thrown to their deaths in the Nile River, and these two are honored in Scripture for eternity for their selfless service to the Lord.

But the parents of Moses are not named until Exodus 6:20² ... (*though the name Moses does appear in Exodus 2:10*). You know the story: the child is placed in a wicker basket and placed in the Nile River by his mother, only to be discovered by the daughter of Pharaoh³.

The Adoption and Naming of Moses

¹ See Exodus 1:15-21 for their story.

² Actually, Moses' father is mentioned in Exodus 6:18, but at that point, we do not know he is to be Moses' father.

³ See Exodus 2:3-10

Pharaoh's daughter officially adopts the baby. Part of the adoption process includes naming the child – **“And she called his name, Moses, because I drew him out of the water” – Exodus 2:10.**

This poses an interesting question: Are we to assume the Egyptian princess can speak Hebrew? She names him מֹשֶׁה (*Mosheh*) – which in Hebrew means, **‘THE ONE WHO DRAWS OUT,’** which the princess twists a bit to mean, **‘BECAUSE I DREW HIM OUT.’** It is interesting that the name, **‘Moses’** actually is an Egyptian loan word⁴. It is one of a few names that came into Hebrew from the Egyptian Language⁵. Pharaoh's daughter chose a name for the child that was based on an Egyptian word that also occurs in Hebrew, and thus was fitting ... for it relates both to his new Egyptian identity and to his Hebrew heritage.

So, let's review: (1) Early in Exodus we learn the names of the sons of Jacob, who migrated with their families, from Canaan to Egypt. (2) We know Moses had a sister⁶ and a brother⁷, but their names are not mentioned in the context of **‘OPERATION WICKER BASKET.’** (3) We learn the names of the two heroic mid-wives, who defied the orders of the king⁸, and (4) we are told the names of the cities⁹ the Israelites built after **“an unnamed king, who knew not Joseph”¹⁰** enslaved the Israelites. But among all these names, the parents of Moses remain anonymous. Why?

A clue to the anonymity of Moses' parents may be found in Exodus Six, for in verse 14, another list of names begins. This new list identifies the heads of Jewish households, beginning with Jacob's firstborn, Reuben. The sons of Levi, Moses' tribe, are listed, beginning in verse 16. Then in verse 18, we read: **“The sons of Kohath (were): Amram and Izhar and Hebron and Uzziel; and the length of Kohath's life was one hundred and thirty-three years.”** Amram is the son of Kohath — and he is the father of Moses. He is identified as such in verse 20: **“AMRAM married his father's sister, JOCHEBED, and she bore him Aaron and Moses.” FINALLY!**

So now we know the names of Moses' parents — but we also know something else about them ... something that (though not yet codified in the Mosaic Law as forbidden, nevertheless) might be somewhat of *‘a skeleton in the closet’* of Moses' family: **“AMRAM married his father's sister, JOCHEBED.”**

Leviticus 18:6-24 is a section of the Mosaic Law that deals with improper sexual relations. Verse 12 reads: **“you shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's sister,”** yet this is exactly what Amram did when he married the sister of Kohath. Two things are important with respect to his prohibition:

⁴ A 'loan word' is a word that belongs properly to one language but has been 'imported' into a second language. A modern example would be the French loan word, 'Champagne.' This word remains a French word, but it is used by English speakers 'as if it were an English word.'

⁵ In Egyptian, the word 'Moses' is **ms(w)**, meaning **‘BORN.’** It is pronounced as one syllable, **‘MOSE,’** as in the names of several Egyptian kings, among whom are (1) **THUTMOSE I, II, and III** – [‘born of the god Thoth’], (2) **AHMOSE** – [(the god) **AH is born**], and slightly less obviously in the name (3) **RAMESES** – [‘born of RA’].

⁶ She is referred to as ‘his sister’ in Exodus 2:4 & 7, and as ‘the girl’ in Exodus 2:8. It is not until Exodus 15:20-21 that we are told her name: ‘Miriam.’

⁷ Aaron, Moses' brother, is not mentioned by name until Exodus 4:14.

⁸ The Egyptian King and his daughter are not named in the text ... but this is not unusual since Scripture often does not identify unbelievers by name; however, see footnote #10 below.

⁹ The cities are Pithom and Rameses – (Rameses, at the time it was built, was named Avaris).

¹⁰ Exodus 1:8: This king was either SOBEKHOTEP III or NEFERHOTEP I; both were rulers during the 13th Dynasty, according to David Rohl's *‘New Chronology’* (vid., *Pharaohs and Kings: A Biblical Quest*, by David Rohl, Pgs. 276 & 351).

- (1) Early in the chapter, we are told, “*you shall not do what is done in the Land of Egypt*” – **Leviticus 18:3**. Amram was born, raised, and influenced by the conventions of Egypt. And as a result, Amram married the sister of his father, Kohath. In doing this, he was following a common, Egyptian practice.

Moses, in writing Leviticus, begins this section of prohibitions, one of which is unsavory with respect to his own father, by saying, ‘*Do not continue doing what you did in Egypt! Things have changed; we now have God’s Law regarding these matters, and as a result, we must follow God’s Law and not the traditions of the Egyptians*’ (paraphrased).

- (2) Notice also, at the time of Amram’s marriage to Jochebed, the Mosaic Law was not codified, for God had not yet revealed it to Moses. And according to a principle voiced by the Apostle Paul in the New Testament, “*where there is no Law, there is no transgression*” (**Romans 4:15**), Amram and Jochebed were not transgressors with respect to a law that did not exist.

Why mention this at all? Is the discussion thus far just a series of (hopefully) interesting facts, or is there a lesson for us? I believe there is a very important lesson – and that lesson is this: “*Our pasts do not determine our futures.*” The very nature of God’s forgiveness means we do not live enslaved by our failures. Because of the cross, God is able to put our pasts as far away from us as the east is from the west. Whatever may have happened *in ‘the before,’* we are freed from those things *in ‘the after.’* All things are new for us in Jesus Christ. Israel needed to hear this message ... *and they did ...* from the very hand of Moses himself.

The Practical Reason for the Anonymity of Moses’ Parents’ Names:

Moses authored Exodus and Leviticus AFTER the Law was given to him on Mount Sinai – and though his parents’ marriage would have been governed by the principle that ‘*no transgression has occurred when there is no Law*’ – it still bothered him – and I believe this is why the names of his parents were not mentioned earlier in the Book of Exodus.

But I want you to notice something about Amram and Jochebed. In Hebrews 11:23, *it is THEIR FAITH that is praised*, even though only Moses’ name is mentioned. ‘*BY FAITH ... THEY were not afraid of the king’s edict.*’ They shared a common faith with *Shiphrah and Puah*, and when they acted on that faith, God honored it and them.

The Nature of Amram’s and Jochebed’s Faith:

Despite Moses’ concern about the skeleton in the closet, the actions of Amram and Jochebed were grounded in a very practical faith. Think a moment about this: It is worth noting, in their day, the Nile River was infested with crocodiles! Yet they had faith the baby would not drown in the river or be killed by a beast. They believed the basket would not leak. They had faith the child would be found by someone who would protect him. They believed if he were rescued by an Egyptian, still in some way he would receive instruction concerning Yahweh – and as a result – he would grow to become a godly man. From a human perspective his parents had no way of knowing the outcomes of any of these things. They certainly did not know their son would be the deliverer God had chosen to liberate Israel from the bondage of Egypt. Yet they let him go willingly, entrusting him to God’s care.

Now We Turn to Moses:

By FAITH Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward – Hebrews 11:24-26

Jesus once asked, **“What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”** (Mark 8:32). By divine providence, Moses was adopted by the daughter of the most powerful man on earth, the King of Egypt. Moses was educated in the palace schools and steeped in the ways of Egypt. The world was his to claim. But as has been pointed out in the story, Moses was an Israelite by birth. Through a series of events that took him away from the palace and put him in a shepherd’s field in Midian, God gave Moses time to think ... and then He spoke to him from a burning bush on Mount Sinai, and Moses made a choice. He chose to sacrifice the riches and power of Egypt for ill-treatment at the hands of the Egyptians. He chose to identify with the slaves of Israel rather than enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season¹¹.

The author of Hebrews and the martyr, Stephen in Acts 7, interpreted Exodus 2:11 the same way: *‘Identifying himself with the down-trodden Israelites, was a de facto rejection of his royal status, and it established in principle that Moses could not identify both with the household of Pharaoh and with the people of God.’* **He had to make a choice – and so do we.**

To choose slavery over the material benefits of the palace – certainly by any human standards – was folly. But according to Hebrews, it was this choice – this great act of **FAITH** – that established for Moses an eternal place in the sacred history of Israel.

Moses made his choice based on *‘what he considered’*¹². Moses looked ahead and concluded that the eternal reward for bearing reproach with the Israelites far outweighed anything Egypt could offer. This reward, even though distant and unseen, was in such clear focus that the earthly treasures of Egypt lost their attraction. The promises made to the patriarchs were of more value to Moses than the pleasures and treasures of Egypt. In New Testament terms, ***‘the things that are seen are temporal, while the things that are not seen are eternal.’*** And which has the greater value – the temporal or the eternal?

High rank and political power are not evil – unless they are misused. Moses could have rationalized that he could help the Israelites more in the palace than in the mud pits of Goshen. But that was not his choice; rather, he focused on the promises made to Abraham, and he sacrificed the treasures of Egypt for the reward that awaits all believers. In an Old Testament sense, Moses made a choice based on something the Apostle Paul would write centuries later in a letter to the Corinthians¹³

At the time Moses made this choice, he could not foresee the results of his decision. All he could see were the taskmasters and the mud pits. But according to Hebrews, when Moses chose reproach at the hands of the Egyptians, he chose to identify with the reproach of the coming Messiah. The difficulties we will face in our lives never will come close to the reproach suffered by Christ, but we are identified with that reproach by faith, and it is by His reproach and suffering that we are healed¹⁴.

Next week we will see where the choice Moses made will lead him and his countrymen, the Israelites.

¹¹ Cf. Exodus 2:11 with Acts 7:25

¹² The verb ‘to consider’ in Hebrews 11:26 is the Greek term *ἡγήσασθαι* (*hegeomai*); it means ‘to think and then to weigh the consequences of a decision.’

¹³ See 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

¹⁴ See Isaiah 53:5