

Pharaoh's Daughter / בת־פַּרְעֹה

Biblical Text

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She spied the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to fetch it. When she opened it, she saw that it was a child, a boy crying. She took pity on it and said, "This must be a Hebrew child." Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for you?" And Pharaoh's daughter answered, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will pay your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses, explaining, "I drew him out of the water."
Exodus 2:5-10



And his Judahite wife bore Yered father of Gedor, Heber father of Soco, and Yekuthiel father of Zanoah. These were the sons of בת־פַּרְעֹה / בת־יָהוָה / Bityah/Batya/*daughter of God*, daughter of Pharaoh, whom Mered married.
I Chronicles 4:18

Companion Text

Thermuthis was the king's daughter. She was now diverting herself by the banks of the river; and seeing a cradle borne along by the current, she sent some that could swim, and bid them bring the cradle to her. When those that were sent on this errand came to her with the cradle, and she saw the little child, she was greatly in love with it, on account of its largeness and beauty; for God had taken great care in the formation of Moses....

Thermuthis bid them bring her a woman that might nurse the baby, as he was refusing the breast of all who offered. Miriam was nearby when this happened, trying not to look like she appeared on purpose, and she said, "It is in vain that you, O queen, call for these women to nurse the child, who are in no way kin to it. If you would ask for one of the Hebrew women, maybe the baby will suckle at the breast of one of its own nation." Since she seemed to speak well, *Thermuthis* bid her procure such a woman. With such authority given her, Miriam came back and brought her mother, who was known to nobody there, and now the child gladly admitted the breast, and seemed to stick close to it. And so it was, that, at the queen's desire, the nursing of the child was entrusted to his mother.

Hereupon it was that *Thermuthis* gave the baby his name – Moses. The Egyptians call water by the name of *Mo*, and such as are saved out of it, by the name of *Uses*... And he was, by all admission, and according to God's prediction...the best of all the Hebrews, for Abraham was his ancestor of the seventh generation.....

Thermuthis therefore, perceiving Moses to be a remarkable child, adopted him for her son, having no child of her own. She brought Moses to her father, saying to him: "I have brought up a child who is of a divine form, and of a generous mind; whom I have received him from the bounty of the river. I thought it proper to adopt him my son, and the heir of your kingdom." As she said this, she put the infant into her father's hands. He took him, embraced him, and, on his daughter's account, and in a pleasant way, put his diadem upon his head. But Moses threw it down to the ground...which seemed to bring along with evil presage concerning the kingdom of Egypt.

Josephus, Antiquities Chapter 9:5-7

Questions:

1. According to each text, when read on its own, what do we come to know about Pharaoh's daughter? What is *not* mentioned?
2. How do the texts, when read in conversation with one another, fill in the blanks? What questions remain about Pharaoh's daughter: her personality, status, and motivation?

Classical Midrash

These are the pious and righteous women who converted: Asenat (*Joseph's wife*), Tziporah (*Moses' wife*), Shifra, Puah (*the Egyptian midwives*), Pharaoh's Daughter, Rachav (*a Canaanite prostitute/ heroine*), Ruth, and Yael, wife of Hever the Kenite. (*Yalkut Shimoni on Joshua 9:1*)

BATHE IN (לָבַח) THE NILE – *on, not in*. She had a view of the river, her room in the palace bordering on the embankment. No doubt, royal etiquette would not permit an Egyptian princess to actually bathe in the river. This is the reason why she did not command one of them to bring the basket to her as they were not with her at that time. The servant who was attending her at the time when she bathed herself... (*Sforno*)

Rabbi Simeon said: Now Bityah, the daughter of Pharaoh, was smitten sorely with leprosy and she was not able to bathe in hot water, and she came to bathe in the river, and she saw the crying child. She put forth her hand and took hold of him, and she was healed... (*Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 48:8*)

AND SHE OPENED IT AND SHE SAW HIM — whom did she see? אֶת הַיָּלֵד – the child. This is the literal sense of the suffix. A midrashic explanation is: she saw the Shechinah (Divine Feminine/indwelling presence of God) with him (אֶת vocalized as אֵת - Her) (*Rashi*)

[Pharaoh's daughter] came down to the river to cleanse herself from the impurity of her father's idols, as she was immersing herself as part of the conversion process....The verse continues: "And her maidens walked along by the riverside" ... Once her maidens saw that the daughter of Pharaoh was intending to save Moses, they said to her: Our mistress, the custom of the world is that when a king of flesh and blood decrees a decree, even if all the world does not fulfill it, at least his children and members of his household fulfill it, and yet, you are violating the decree of your father! After the maidens tried to convince her not to save Moses, the angel Gabriel came and beat them to the ground, and they died.

The verse concludes: "And she sent *amatah* to take it" (Ex. 2:5) Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Nehemya disagree as to the definition of the word "*amatah*." One says that it means her arm, and one says that it means her maidservant.

The Gemara asks: And according to the one who says that it means her maidservant, didn't you say earlier: Gabriel came and beat them to the ground and the maidservants died, so how could Pharaoh's daughter send her?

The Gemara answers: It must be that Gabriel left her one maidservant, as it is not proper that a princess should stand alone.

The Gemara asks: And according to the one who says that it means her hand, let the Torah write explicitly: Her hand [*yadah*]. Why use the more unusual term *amatah*?

The Gemara answers: This verse teaches us that her arm extended many cubits. As the Master said in another context: And similarly, you find with regard to the hand of Pharaoh's daughter that it extended, and similarly you find with regard to the teeth of evildoers, as it is written: "You have broken the teeth of the wicked!" (*Talmud, Sotah 12b*)

Seven entered Paradise in their lifetime: Serah, the daughter of Asher, Bityah the daughter of Pharaoh, Hiram, king of Tyre, Eved-melech the Ethiopian, Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, the grandson of Yehudah HaNassi, Yabez, and some add Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi....

Bityah the daughter of Pharaoh, as it is written, "and these are the sons of Bityah the daughter of Pharaoh whom Mered took. God said, 'I will call Moses by no other name than she called him', as it is stated, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said: "Moses, Moses!" ... It is written,] And she called his name Moses, and said: "because I drew him out of the water."

The Holy One, blessed be God, said, 'Because she caused salvation to come to Israel and brought them forth to life, I will prolong her life'. God [also] said, 'I have made a covenant with your ancestors, and they followed in the path of their ancestors. This woman, however, who has forsaken her royal status and attached herself to you, shall I not reward her?'

(*Kallah Rabati 3 -Tannaitic midrash*)

Contemporary Midrash

Finally, there is Pharaoh's daughter Batya, who defies her own father and plucks baby Moses out of the Nile. The Midrash reminds us that Batya knew exactly what she was doing: When Pharaoh's daughter's handmaidens saw that she intended to rescue Moses, they attempted to dissuade her, and persuade her to heed her father. They said to her: "Our mistress, it is the way of the world that when a king issues a decree, it is not heeded by the entire world, but his children and the members of his household do observe it, and you wish to transgress your father's decree?"

But transgress she did.

These women had a vision leading out of the darkness shrouding their world. They were women of action, prepared to defy authority to make their vision a reality bathed in the light of the day. Retelling the heroic stories of Yocheved, Shifra, Puah, Miriam and Batya reminds our daughters that with vision and the courage to act, they can carry forward the tradition those intrepid women launched. While there is much light in today's world, there remains in our universe disheartening darkness, inhumanity spawned by ignorance and hate.

The Passover story recalls to all of us—women and men—that with vision and action we can join hands with others of like mind, kindling lights along paths leading out of the terrifying darkness.

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg

And so Moses is born, and saved to be reborn, by the collaboration of this triad of daughters, who begin the redemption of Israel. The Bible records the name of Moses's mother, Yocheved, and his sister Miriam, and midrash adds the name Batya for the daughter of Pharaoh. But none of them is named in this story, for like the anonymous daughters of the book of Judges, they are archetypal. They are *daughters*, women, the very ones overlooked by both Pharaoh and the tradition that remembered the names of only the men who came to Egypt. Three subversive daughters have foiled the plans of men and shaped the destiny of the world.

Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Reading the Women of the Bible p. 28

The Missing Name

"These are the names..." (Shemot 1:1)

Among the rolls
of worthy names
hers remains untold:
the unknown daughter
of a mighty king,
who sees a child
of wretched slaves,
condemned to certain death.
She could, unheeded,
turn aside,
yet risks her father's wrath
to swim against the tide
and save him.
That child himself,
once grown,
can neither turn away,
nor overlook injustice
and he too
intercedes.

Elizabeth Topper (2016)



A fresco of the daughter of Pharaoh drawing Moses from the Nile, from the synagogue in Dura-Europos, Syria. The synagogue is one of the oldest examples of diaspora Jewish artwork, and while the paintings are preserved in the Museum of Damascus, the site was destroyed by ISIS. Source: Wikimedia Commons