

# Three Defiant Heroes

Hespeler, 26 June 2022 © Scott McAndless

[Exodus 2:1-10](#), Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20, Galatians 5:1, 13-25, Luke 9:51-62

**W**hen powerful people decide that holding onto their power and wealth is more important than things like justice and the rights of others, evil things can happen. And the big question then becomes what people can do to resist. What can they do when they have no power or voice? That is not a new question. It is one that comes up again and again throughout the history of the world.

It is true, of course, that we do not have to deal with anything quite as evil today as an order to toss an entire generation of a particular ethnic group into a river in infancy. But just because the evil of our world hasn't risen to the level of active genocide doesn't mean that we will never have to deal with the question. I mean, if we wait until that point is reached, we may be too late.

## Biblical Heroes

So, I do think it would be helpful to look at some biblical heroes who dealt with that very challenge and who won. And when it comes to that, I can hardly think of better examples than three extraordinary women in the Book of Exodus.

I know that we have often come to think that the Bible, produced as it was in a very patriarchal society, has a habit of dismissing women and suggesting that they really have nothing that they can contribute. But this story, I believe, is a perfect demonstration of just how wrong that assumption is.

## Pharaoh's Problem

**P**haraoh, the king of Egypt, had a problem, a big problem. But it wasn't necessarily an unusual problem. In fact, it was a problem as old as civilization itself. Ever since the beginning, you see, civilization has had a big built-in problem. Civilization, the building and inhabiting of cities, was something that was only possible because of the development of agriculture to such a level that societies were able to produce a surplus. Season after season, more food and goods were produced than the workers themselves needed to survive.

Civilization was this incredible invention that allowed a small elite to take control of that surplus and keep it for themselves. Yes, they also provided something in return for taking it – they provided security and they took care of matters of administration. Above all they provided a religion that gave meaning to the endless toil of the great mass of people. Surely the people should be grateful for that.

## On His Own

But the people weren't as grateful as they should be. Sometimes they were restive and rebellious. And that was the root of the problem because Pharaoh was aware of one inescapable fact. There were more of them than there were people



on his side – a lot more. In fact, it was almost as if it was Pharaoh alone against all of them.

Yes, he had priests and retainers and troops. He had a whole class of nobles underneath him, but none of them benefitted from the system more than he did. He really was the 1%, except it was more like the 0.001 per cent. And as soon as all of the rest figured out that simple fact and found a way to work together, he was done for.

## The Hebrew Problem

So, this was a problem that Pharaoh had been constantly aware of, but one particular aspect of it had been troubling him of late. There was a group of people who had been put to work constructing the vast complexes where Pharaoh stored his ever-growing wealth. They were nothing but slaves, but they had begun to form a cohesive identity.

They were called Hebrews and the thing that united them, above all, was the worship of some wild desert god who was beyond the control of the Egyptian religion that was dominated by Pharaoh. Everyday that they grew in strength and in numbers. If they only realized the strength that they had because of their unity of purpose and identity, they had the potential of bringing down the entire system. Pharaoh had to do something about them.

## A Failed Plan

He had already attempted to slow the growth by asserting government control over which women could and could not have children. He did this by ordering the Egyptian midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill all of the male Hebrew children at birth. But somehow, Pharaoh was still trying to figure out how, the midwives had betrayed him and allowed the boys to live. But they had clearly double crossed him, and so it appeared he was going to have to come up with a much more open approach to this problem.

## Jochebed

**W**hen Jochebed, the wife of Amram, heard about Pharaoh's decree, she was horrified. Pharaoh's plan that all of the male children born to the Hebrews should be cast into the Nile River, was not only cruel, it was a clear attempt to wipe out the very identity of a people. The Nile River was not just a waterway for the Egyptians, after all, it was a god. With its annual flooding, the Nile River brought life to every single person who lived along its course.

But it seemed as if Pharaoh couldn't stand the idea that the Nile shed its blessings upon all the people regardless of their station in society. It watered the fields of the peasants as well as the gardens of the rich. And that was simply unacceptable. And so, Pharaoh was determined to transform the life-giving Nile into a ravenous instrument of death. That would teach the people, all of them, that they must look to no one but the king himself to sustain them.

## Her Plan

In the face of such unmitigated evil, Jochebed came up with a plan. The decree had gone out when she was only a few months pregnant. She knew, somehow she knew, that it was going to be a boy. And so, she laid her plans. By the time she was beginning to show, she withdrew from all social life. No one must know that a child was on the way. And then, once her boy was born, she managed to keep him hidden as long as she could.

But, by the time he was three months old, she knew that she could not keep him hidden any longer. That was when she made a fateful decision. She would do as Pharaoh had decreed. But it would be a malicious compliance. Oh, she would throw him into the Nile alright. But she would also do a couple of other things.

## Into the River in a Basket

First, she would place the boy in a basket that she wove out of papyrus (a gift of the Nile itself) and plastered with bitumen and pitch. This would turn the river from the ravenous beast that Pharaoh had declared it to be into a cradling womb for the rebirth of her son.

Second, she would do this in faith – with the trust that there was a God (even if she did not yet know what that God’s name was) who was more powerful than the Nile or even than the divine Pharaoh. Even more importantly, she did it with the faith that such a God cared about her people who had no other protector in the land of Egypt.

## The Princess

**W**hen the princess caught sight of the basket bobbing in the river, she knew that her day was about to change completely. She knew very well what people thought of her. She was nothing more than a princess – an adornment to the household of Pharaoh. She was just there to be beautiful and to be quiet. She was supposed to spend her days wallowing in luxury and taking endless baths in the Nile.

But she was more than just a pretty face. Pharaoh would have been shocked to hear it, but she actually had a brain, and she understood the very real threat that Pharaoh was trying to counter with his latest decree. But she had real problems with what he was doing.

## A Hebrew Baby

When the basket was brought to shore and the princess looked inside, she knew without a doubt that it had to be a Hebrew boy. She understood how desperate Hebrew mothers had grown. What other possible explanation could there be?

But, realizing that, the princess knew she had a choice. On one level, she knew that she was supposed to side with her own people and her own class. The Hebrews were outsiders, and they were a potential threat to the stability of the system. But the princess also knew that she was a woman. And as a woman, she was an outsider to power in her own country. That made her feel as if she might have more in common with the poor woman who, in desperation, had thrown her young son into the Nile. But she simply did not know what she ought to do.

## Miriam

**M**iriam might have been nothing more than a little girl, but that didn’t mean that she didn’t know what was going on. She knew what people in the community had been talking about, about the terrible thing that had been demanded by the pharaoh. And for months now she had been a witness to the anguish of her mother.

Miriam had done her part, of course, to keep the birth of her little brother from being noticed. She had often taken care of the child when Jochebed and Amram couldn’t be around. She understood how

important it was to make sure that nobody outside of the house could hear the noise that he made. Of course, that had only been getting harder and harder as time went by.

## Her Part

And so, when Miriam had seen her mother leave the house carrying the child and silently weeping, it wasn't that hard for her to guess what was happening. She followed and she observed from a distance as her mother laid the child into the small basket and pushed him out into the current. Once she had done this, Jochebed collapsed in despair. She had done what she could do and had to leave the rest in the hands of her people's God.

But somehow Miriam knew that she still had a part to play. She kept her eyes on the basket as it moved at a steady pace through the reeds that lined the shores, moved towards the place where the royal party often came down to bathe during the day.

## Her Courage

And so, she saw the princess arrive. She saw the excitement and consternation as the basket was discovered. And even from the distance, she could see the confusion and indecision on the face of the princess as she contemplated the child.

And that was when Miriam, that poor slave child, that person with the least possible power and influence in this entire story, did the bravest thing she would ever do. She ran forward, past the guards who protected the princess, and then cried out to her in broken Egyptian. "I go and I get you nurse? I get Hebrew woman to nurse baby for you?"

You see, sometimes when people are struggling with a choice – sometimes when they know what is the right thing to do but are seized by indecision because they have never dared to be bold before, all they need is a little push. All they need is one small action that they can take towards doing the right thing because, if they can take that one step, the next will be easier and the next after that as well. Soon they have set themselves on a path towards doing the right thing, the thing they truly want to do. Miriam had provided the princess with that. All she needed to do was nod her head yes and Miriam was off like a shot to find her mother and present her as a wet nurse to the princess.

## When Evil Plans are Laid

**W**hen powerful people do horrible things in order to maintain their power and position, the powerless often feel as if there is nothing that they can do. And it may be true, especially if we stand alone as individuals, that there is very little that we can do. When the weak stand alone, the powerful only need to pick them off one by one.

But the story in the Book of Exodus tells of three women who were quite powerless. Two of them were slaves, one of them was not even an adult and one was nothing more than an ornament for the powerful pharaoh. They did not conspire together, but they acted. They acted in faith, and they acted in solidarity. Though they might have had every reason not to find that solidarity. The princess in particular had no reason to find kinship with a Hebrew slave. But, simply by choosing solidarity and faith, they each played a key role that put pieces in place to disrupt all of Pharaoh's evil plans. Now, if only we could find such courage. If only we could embrace such solidarity.