THE FEMININE TOUCH

IN THE LEGEND OF MOSES

CHARLES DAVID ISBELL
Louisiana State University

Over twenty years ago, I began to engage in scholarly research that resulted in a series of technical publications involving the biblical Book of Exodus and the character of Moses.[1] Regardless of the specific subject on which I was focused, the dramatic role of several female characters in the early chapters of Exodus cried out for interpretation. It became ever clearer that literary periscopes within the early chapters of Exodus (chapters 1-4) exhibit emphases as widely divergent as wisdom, courage, *Hutzpah*, coolness under pressure and even individual assertiveness, all featuring females acting in some significant fashion to advance a story line that is crucial to the foundation epic of Judaism-**the** exodus. Ultimately it is clear that six individual women were assigned to play crucial and prominent roles in the Moses legend. Close examination of each of these six yields a surprising result: while Moses becomes the hero *par excellence* in the story, six women were absolutely necessary, critically and unalterably essential, to his success. Said another way, absent these six women in the story, there could be no Moses, and thus no exodus and no redemption.

Of course, there is simply no way to rewrite the early history of Israel and turn it into the kind of egalitarian society which our modern world now demands. But the stories of six special people who happened not to be males can help us to understand that our ancestors were perhaps more open than we have presumed. At least one author or editor was open to the idea that women too can play crucial roles in the development of the people whose unique relationship with the divine has shaped its destiny. To that courageous soul, whoever she was, we owe a debt of gratitude. She showed us six females who were tough and strong, six who were unafraid, six who shaped and changed their world, and ours too. She gave us "The Magnificent Six" of Exodus.

TWO JEWISH MIDWIVES

The first two female characters act as a team. As the story of the exodus opens, the children of Israel are perceived by a newly-crowned Pharaoh as a threat to the security of Egypt. Accordingly, a pharaonic (="divine" in Egyptian theology) plan is presented to deal with the problem, and it is a plan befitting a leader of great wisdom and insight. "Come," says the Pharaoh to his advisors, "let us deal wisely with [the children of Israel] (Exodus 1:10a). In response to his convocation, a three-step program was inaugurated. In step one, labor bosses were assigned to afflict the Israelites with killing

work (1:11). "But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied" (1:12). So much for the wisdom of step one. Obviously, a second and more drastic step would be necessary.

It is into this literary context that the first two female characters are introduced by the Exodus author/editor. Described as "Hebrew midwives,"[2] these two medical professionals,[3] committed both by training and by conscience to the saving of life, were commanded by the divine Pharaoh to commit mass murder (1:16). They were not asked to "look the other way," they would not be allowed to stand by passively and simply refuse to "get involved," they were directly ordered to "kill" baby boys. The narrator knew well that we and all other readers would grasp the tension thus induced. No matter how pious these women might be, there could obviously be no possible way to disobey and live to tell about it. After all, their orders had come from the most powerful (and the most intelligent!) MAN on the planet. So we have to forget for a moment that we already know the end of the story from Sunday School, and we must allow ourselves to be led in the direction that the narrator wanted to lead us. In this instance, we have to allow our hearts to plummet with fear, and allow the narrator to convince us that there is no way out.

But our narrator also wanted us to underestimate the heroines. So she brilliantly sketches for us how their fear of God (1:17) compels them to disregard the order of god (sic!), and how they openly and brazenly disobeyed an order their hearts could not condone. In the process, of course, they placed their own lives in jeopardy, for a day of reckoning could not be avoided forever. Still, when the order does come, its announcement is chilling: "The king of Egypt summoned the midwives" (1:18). Once again, as we watch two powerless women standing in the presence of ultimate power, we know, we are certain, that only disaster can ensue. But if the midwives are nervous, they do not show it. Asked why they had disobeyed, they answered with a concoction so bold that it almost defies credulity. "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women," they solemnly aver. "They are like animals, and give birth before a midwife can arrive on the scene" (1:19).[4]

Even as we are asking ourselves how such a preposterous excuse can possibly succeed, several points leap out at us from the biblical story. [1] While most modern translations of the Hebrew text simply have the midwives describe the Hebrew women as "lively" (KJV) or "hardy" (Jerusalem Bible) or "vigorous" (JPS, NASB, NIV), their intention is quite clear. They call them, their own sisters (?) *Hayyot*, "animals."[5]

[2] After our initial shock at such a terrible insult, we begin to realize that what these bold women have told the Pharaoh is exactly what he wants to hear, what he **needs** to believe. THEY don't think this way, but they know that HE does. And preying upon his arrogance and prejudice will be their method of subverting his "intelligent" program of murder.[6] As medical professionals, these women would have realized from the outset how stupid the "wise" plan of the Pharaoh had been. To wipe out a population, one doesn't kill the boys, one kills the girls. One "boy" can father children with multiple girls, even as Jacob had fathered a dozen sons with four different female partners. But our wise Pharaoh was too stupid to know even such a simple biological fact. Surely no girl could

stand in the way of such a man! No. "Let's kill all the boys, destroying our labor force in the process." Now we get it. The midwives used such a preposterous tale because they had recognized the stupidity of the Pharaoh all along. He wanted to believe terrible things about his "enemies," so they would nudge him along the predetermined path of his own prejudice.

Now of course, while such an idea makes sense from a purely biological perspective, it may not have been obvious to readers living in the social and religious context of the ancient Near East. "If one wants to destroy that culture, one has to kill the boys - not the girls ... because at maturity, they will be a physical threat to him and his kingdom. Once the Hebrew men are out of the way, the Egyptians can still take the Hebrew women as their wives."[7] Nevertheless, the story in its present form sets forth a sharp contrast between Unwise and truly crafty, cruel and compassionate, respect for God and self-deceit about being god - male and female!

[3] Still, we cannot but be amazed when we observe that the simple ploy of the midwives actually does outsmart the Pharaoh. They were correct. He really was so consumed with ideological prejudice that he could not see through their ridiculous subterfuge. Instead, responding to this outrageous and totally unsatisfactory explanation for the disobedience of his orders, the ultimate role reversal occurs, and it is the Pharaoh who stands dumb and powerless before the two midwives. The narrative does not even record his response to their statement, presumably because stupidity of such profundity cannot be verbalized.

Of course, our narrator realizes that two such women must be divinely rewarded, and indeed they are. They are given names, identities, existence, substance. They matter to us, and will continue to matter for all time to come. Even by so simple an act as the writing and reading of this article, their fame is spread just a bit wider abroad, and their names are memorialized yet again. Shifrah and Pu`ah, we laud you. "Beautiful One" (Shifrah), we know you. "Girl" (Pu`ah),[8] we will never forget you, for you too are forever a part of our foundational salvation story. Without both of you, deliverance could not have happened. "You go, girls."

Pharaoh? History does not even permit us to figure out which ruler you were. We know neither your name nor your identity, only the vacuous title that you held for a moment and the stupidity of the "wise" plan that you bungled so badly. You played just a small role, a bit part in a cosmic drama, a drama in which you were nothing but a foil for two courageous women. And that is how we shall always remember you. "Outsmarted by girls!" Could there be a more ignominious epitaph for a Pharaoh?

A TYPICAL JEWISH[9] MOM

Of course, the Pharaoh will not simply rescind his orders to murder. Kings could never afford to admit mistakes, for kings were never wrong. In fact, apparently this genius king never did figure out that he had been duped by two lowly midwives. So the literary progression to step three of the "wise" plan both reveals his utter wickedness and

prepares the stage for the next three female characters who truly make a difference in the story.

To appreciate the next female character in the narrative, it is necessary to allow the narrator to manipulate us a bit more. We must forget once again how well everything turned out in the end and pretend that we are hearing the story for the very first time. Two nice Jewish kids got married (Exodus 2:1). Nothing sinister here. In fact, Jewish weddings are always moments of great joy. What's the problem? "The wife conceived" (2:2). Well, that's great too, isn't it? But wait. We must not rush to the birth yet. What must the two newly weds have been thinking?[10] Long months of pregnancy stretch out ahead of them, fraught with all the usual difficulties. Surely there was morning sickness back then too. Surely too there were hormonal changes and physical changes and the incessant urge to urinate, to eat strange foods, to sleep, to clean, to weep - often all at the same time! But those difficulties fade to the background in the face of THE difficulty. IT. The decree. The royal/divine order of death still hangs there like the sword of Damacles, waiting, always waiting, to fall. Has any couple before or since ever prayed so earnestly for a child ***not*** to be a boy! Remember? "If it is a **girl**, let it live" (1:16). Thus to be true to the story, we must force ourselves to agonize along with the parents-in-waiting. Their agony lasted nine painful and fear-filled months. Surely ours can last a few moments before we read on. "Oh God, please! Please let it be a girl."

But God did not hear. "She bore a son." There it was, the most joyous word in ancient near eastern society violently twisted into every parent's worst nightmare. A son? "Oh God, No." But son it was. Where is the proud father?[11] From him, not a peep. Does he simply mean to sit idly by while his own son is murdered in the Nile River? We are not told. But perhaps our narrator does not tell us anything at all about the father, because there is another character at hand whose action demands our full attention. If Dad will not or cannot act, Mom both can and will. One glance tells this mother that her son was "good" (2:2), not merely beautiful - all babies are beautiful - but "good," *TOV*, the way all of God's creation had been "good" when the world had first been made.[12] This mother's creation too was "good," exactly like God's very best work, and she was determined to protect her own. So "she hid him for three months" (2:2).

But every mother knows she cannot protect her child forever, and this one knew it too. The decree was still there and would not go away. There was only one thing left to do. Since she could no longer hide a three month old lusty baby boy, she would be forced to comply with the Pharaoh's decree. So, comply she did. She would cast her own son into the River, exactly as she had been commanded to do! ... Well, she did make one slight alteration. Let's read that decree again. Doesn't say anything about a basket. So Mom, having newly joined God as a creator of "good," joins with the divine One as well by making an "ark" to preserve alive what she has created. In Genesis 6-8, God had ordered the construction of an "ark," a *tevah*, to serve as an instrument by which divinely created life could be preserved. In Exodus two, our Jewish Mom, so very much like God in her ability to give life, now builds her own *tevah* to protect her son.[13]

Can this possibly work? Surely the strongest and wisest man alive will see through this silly stratagem. But maybe not. We remember that this is the genius who

had bought the ridiculous excuse of the midwives. That explains it. Once again an ordinary woman outfoxes the spectacularly foolish man, who though foolish is still powerful. So maybe it wouldn't hurt to watch from the bank just to see what might happen. We tell ourselves that it doesn't matter, but we know that it does. We can scarcely bear the suspense, wondering when and by whom the little boy will be found. Mom has won the first two rounds, via three months of hiding and the clever idea of the ark. But the baby is only three months old. There will be a lot more excitement in his life before anyone can relax.

THE DAUGHTER OF THE PHARAOH

Our next character is immediately identified with the enemy, for she is the daughter of the very man who has issued the vile decree. The mother has cast her tiny son onto the Nile knowing that the princess never bathes at this hour. But here she comes in grand style, accompanied by maidens to do her slightest bidding. Are there body guards in the retinue as well? Of course. Armed and ready to kill? To be sure. This is the daughter of the strongest and wisest man alive. And "she saw the basket" (2:5). Anyone but her! "Oh God, where are You? How can You let her be the one to find the "good" one?" How can she see what no one else has seen!"

In this way our narrator attempts once again to convince us that all is lost. But now we are beginning to play along with her. She has led us to think all was hopeless before. We remember the helpless and befuddled midwives standing in the very presence of the divine one. And we have seen how a Jewish Mom could handle an emergency by locating the only technical loophole in the law. Could there be another surprise? Well, the one thing we have been fearing all along was the lung power of a healthy baby boy. Babies cry. Dogs howl at the moon. Spiders sting. The sun rises in the east. And babies cry. But always before, the specter of the baby crying had carried the penalty of death with it. Indeed, given the vile necessity for the hiding, for the baby to have cried at any time before this very moment might could have been for him to die. But now, precisely at the right moment, it is specifically by crying that the life of the little boy will be spared. What woman can resist a crying baby? Even a Jew baby. Even a baby of the wrong color. Anybody's baby. Men can kill babies, because men are, well, MEN, and using power to produce death is one of the things that men do. But women bond with babies when they cry. They pick them up. They hold them. They cuddle them. They nurture them. And even the daughter of the vilest man in the world was not exempt. "When she saw the child and the little boy was crying, she felt compassion for him" (2:6).

Let's review. Painless and certain death at the hands of emotionless medical professionals? No. Life comes where death was to be expected. A slave mother's fearful compliance with a royal decree resulting in a watery grave for a helpless infant? No. The watery grave, held at bay by the ark, gives life back to the child, and once again life is found where death was to be expected. Instant death at the hands of a hated Egyptian? No. The heart of a woman is touched by the sight of a crying child.

Still, how can there be life even now? This woman lives in the same house with the man who has no compassion. Surely this time our narrator has run out of ploys, for no conceivable story line can write us out of danger this time. We wait once again for our narrator. And gradually we are allowed to understand. This Egyptian Lady is surprisingly tough. She will use her power to preserve life. She will not destroy the "good" creation of another woman. She will defy the most powerful man in the world, and she will take the baby back to her own father's house. She will rear him under the nose of the man who would kill him. Now the baby can cry without dying, for one who knows already his true identity has determined to offer him life once more. Maybe God did hear.

THE JEWISH SISTER

Because our narrator briefly referred to a sister before introducing us to the daughter of the Pharaoh, we have skipped the opening lines of the sister in the drama. Now we must go back to understand her true significance. We knew, did we not, that no mother would leave her little boy out alone. Even when the Egyptian princess approached, the little boy had a protector who had stationed herself "at a distance to learn what would happen to him" (2:4). Much later in the story we will learn that the sister had a name (Miriam) and that she had been age five when her baby brother had come along. Also as the story advances, we will learn how truly remarkable this sister was. Prophet (Numbers 12:2-9), music composer (Exodus 15:20-21), top ranking religious official (Micah 6:4), she ranks in importance with Aaron and Moses himself. But early in the story we know none of these things. Here she is just a sister, just a five year old girl expected to watch baby brother. Surely no threat to the Pharaoh here.

But the story will not be told so simply. The midwives have passed off the stage. The fearless and clever mother has been forced into the background, waiting along with us to see the results of her scheme. The Egyptian princess has just entered and holds center stage, dominating our vision and fueling our fears. As the powerful woman peers into the tiny basket, everyone in the drama is frozen into inaction. Except a five year old sister. No one had told her what to do. No parent could now coach her from backstage. Yet with childlike innocence she marched directly to the powerful one with a proposal shocking enough to belong with the audacity of the midwives and the mother. "Shall I locate a Hebrew wet-nurse for you" (2:7)? Surely the wise Egyptian will see through this thinly-veiled suggestion. And yet ... She is the daughter of the wise yet foolish one. And the one who had seen the tiny ark does not see how she is being manipulated by a mere child. Or does she? Would she care? Powerful ones do not rear infants. They rescue them, but they do not care for them. For that, there is always money to pay someone else.[14]

Still in all, the women in the biblical narrative did what the men could not do, refused to do. They united across broad chasms of race and ethnicity and politics and class to preserve life. For life, the life of one tiny boy, these women set aside their

differences and joined hands in a common enterprise. One more time, where death was expected, the women brought forth life.

A MALE ONLY INTERLUDE

Now the story shifts focus once more. Details for which we long are denied to us.[15] But even in the absence of a specific female presence, the feminine touch continues to affect the story. Moses grows into young manhood, and we observe his first adult action. Exiting the palace of privilege, he encountered "their" burdens at close range. Since masters simply do not notice the burdens of slaves, or care if they do, such a statement seems so remarkable that it evokes the following *midrash*:

> R. Eleazar, son of R. Jose the Galilean, said: He saw great burdens put upon small people and light burdens upon big people, and a man's burden upon a woman and a woman's burden upon a man, and the burden which an old man could carry on a youth, and of a youth on an old man. So he left his suite [his staff of graded officers, the retinue of a prince] and rearranged their burdens, pretending all the time to be helping Pharaoh.[16]

In all candor, such a *midrash* does what we are refusing to allow ourselves to do, anticipating the end of the story before the narrator has had time to manipulate us a bit, before the tension has been resolved in the natural flow of the narration. It is not until Moses witnesses an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, and recognizes the latter as "one of his brothers" (2:11) that we know with certainty that something remarkable has happened. His "brothers!" Indeed this is a remarkable fact to notice, for who but a Jewish mother could have taught him this? A child who had come to manhood in the luxury and splendor of the palace saw two people arguing and identified with the underdog. This is real news.

The two other leading males in the story have left us depressed and disgusted. The father of the hero had been unable to lift a finger even in the face of absolute disaster. The king of the hero was a brutish and evil murderer. But not our hero. This male not only has compassion and empathy, he also has the courage to act on his beliefs. He strikes! But, there is a more sinister word in the story too. "He hid" the dead Egyptian "in the sand" (2:12). Of course we already know that hiding is at best a temporary solution to a problem. Perhaps a baby boy could be hidden for a short time. But a corpse? How long could it be before someone would discover the dead body, not in a proper grave well below the surface of the earth, but merely "in the sand?" Maybe this man is no wiser than the Pharaoh. Maybe we should not expect too much from him. And just as we suspected, the discovery was made in less than twenty-four hours, "the next day" (2:13). Our new "wise" hero is forced to flee for his own life, to a place far away from Egypt, removed from the "burdens" of "his brothers." What possible assistance can such a one offer to others? A man fleeing a murder rap will have no time for small matters like slavery.

It gets worse. Safely away from trouble, tucked away in a rural desert, our hero forgets who he is. Sure, Moses is still a defender of the little person, this time of some shepherdesses being harassed by the village bullies in Midian (2:17). But now, forgetting

"his brothers," he is "passing" as an Egyptian (2:19). Such an aristocrat so impresses the locals that the most important person around offers his own daughter in marriage (2:21). And there the matter seemed likely to stay, for "Moses was willing to stay with the man," marry the local beauty, and begin a family (2:22). Some hero!

Even when Moses experiences his great theophany (3:1-4:17), we are not inclined to repose great confidence in him. He is weak, he whines, he makes multiple excuses, falters, fears. Perhaps he is the best "man" for the job, but we still must doubt his prospects for success without a strong woman around.

THE JEWISH WIFE

A strong woman? Not a problem. During the return trip of Moses to Egypt to lead the great deliverance, we are told of an incident that shocks and amazes us. And strong woman number six is the major player in this drama. "At the lodging-place en route [from Midian back to Egypt], YHWH confronted him and attempted to kill him" (4:24). First the all-powerful god on earth (Pharaoh) had wanted to kill Moses, and now the all-powerful God of the heavens wants to kill him as well. Attempts to explain this enigmatic passage are legion.[17] But one fact is clear in the narrative: only the woman, only the Jewish[18] wife (Zipporah) acts. Everyone else, including the hero Moses, is paralyzed into inactivity. But not Zipporah. Seizing a sharp flint, she deftly circumcised their infant son, flinging the bloody foreskin at the feet of her husband (4:25),[19] thereby inducing God to leave him alone (4:26).

Did the male hero simply not know of the necessity of circumcision for every Jewish boy (Genesis 17:9-14)? Had he forgotten in the rush of preparing for the trip? Did he think he could become the savior of an entire nation even though he could not care for his own son? We do not know, and we are not told by the narrator. But we are told that the hero was preserved alive and healthy for the third time in his short life. Again his rescuer was a woman. And again, without her there could never have been a deliverance from Egypt, for there would not have been a Moses.

THAT FEMININE TOUCH

Across the centuries, these six heroic figures reach out to us, teaching us, prodding us, probing deep into our consciousness. And we have much to learn.

In our day, many synagogues deny to a woman the privilege of reading the Torah. Our biblical narrator has explained to us that 3,200 years ago a woman COMPOSED (!) part of the Torah (see Exodus 15:20-21). Would she find our restriction on **reading** the Torah unreasonable?

When we learned that Miriam composed a song that would become part of Judaism's sacred Scripture, we were also told that she and her female friends played timbrels and danced while they sang. How surprised would our narrator be to observe an all-male *simchat torah* chorus line?

In our day, the struggle for the right to serve as spiritual leaders - rabbis, cantors - has not been won for all women in all corners of Judaism. Our biblical narrator has told us that women long ago had power, real power, among our ancestors. Life itself depended upon them, of course, not just for babies to be born, but for the grit and the raw courage necessary to defy powerful forces that bid fair to destroy everyone. Would she think it odd that after three millennia we continue to doubt the ability of one-half of our number? Even in our late day, there still has never been a female chief rabbi or a female seminary President. Would the narrator who described Miriam as a prophetess equal to Aaron and Moses find this acceptable?

Am I the only person who wonders whether the person responsible for these feminine touches in Exodus might herself have been a woman? Could she be reaching out across the years, pleading with us to make our beloved Judaism the prime example of egalitarianism and opportunity for all Jews? Would she really expect us to reach across our own lines of race and class and age and gender just to preserve life, to create a community in which all slavery is banned both in law and in fact? I believe she would. I believe she does.

Shifrah, Pu`ah, Yokheved, Miriam, Princess, Zipporah. We read you. We honor you. We will hear you. And we will learn. You are our mothers, after all. And you are also our heroines. It is right that you should teach us.

Notes:

---

[1] 1978. "Initial 'Aleph-Yod Interchange and Selected Biblical Passages," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 37:3, 227-236. 1978. "The Divine Name *hyha* As a Symbol of Presence in Israelite Tradition," *Hebrew Annual Review* 101-118. 1982. "Exodus 1-2 in the Context of Exodus 1-14: Story Lines and Key Words," in *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature*, ed. Clines, Gunn, Hauser. Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Press 37-61. 1992-94. "Sermons From Exodus" (series eight articles), *The Preacher's Magazine*. 1999. "YHWH and the Gods of Egypt," *Journal of the Central Conference of American Rabbis*, Winter 67-80. Forthcoming. "The Liturgical Function of Exodus 33:16-34:26," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*. Forthcoming. *Theological Didactic Drama*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

[2] The phrase may mean either Egyptian midwives assigned to serve the Hebrew population or midwives who were themselves Hebrews. Jewish tradition has consistently viewed the two as faithful Hebrews, citing their faithfulness to God as the chief evidence. Linguistically, either identification is possible.

[3] Midwife was a serious medical profession in ancient times, when MD's scarcely existed. I cannot resist the temptation to reveal that I myself was delivered to my mother in 1944 by a midwife who happened to be my beloved grandmother (*'aleha ha-shalom*). There were no hospitals, and only one MD, in the small Louisiana parish where she and my parents resided at the time. I offer this paper in honor of her memory and her example to me of great courage and strength.

[4] This idea is anticipated as early as *Exodus Midrash Rabbah*.

[5] An idea already found in *Talmud Tractate Sota*, cited by the 12th century commentator Rashi.

[6] Of course, the dehumanization of human beings in this way is too well known to require review. To the white supremacist, Black women can be like animals for having so many babies (with their equally sub human male partners). And for more than 1,000 years, European Jews were often depicted as animals (or worse!) in an attempt to demonize and dehumanize them.

[7] The quotation is part of private correspondence from Susan Haber, an author and student of Judaism at York University. Susan graciously read an earlier draft of this essay and offered many other helpful comments and corrections which are hereby acknowledged with appreciation. Jennifer Moses also read an initial draft, and my thanks go to her for help on several matters of style.

[8] This is the probable meaning of the originally Phoenician names *Shp-ra* and *pgt*, from which Hebrew *shifrah* and *pu'ah* are derived. Both of these two names have been recovered by archaeologists in a list of Egyptian slaves. However, both names are "Northwest Semitic," the mother of Canaanite dialects such as "Hebrew". See W. F. Albright. 1954. "Northwest-Semitic Names in a List of Egyptian Slaves," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* LXXIV:222-33.

[9] The designation of the mother (and later the wife) of Moses as "Jewish" is obviously anachronistic. But just such an anachronism would have been understood whenever the story was read by the community that came to see "Moses" as a symbol of us all.

[10] *Exodus Midrash Rabbah* 1:13 has the man (later identified as *Amram*) divorce his wife (and advise all other Israelites to do the same) so they will not produce any children that might be slaughtered. When his daughter explained to him that his action was denying life to all Hebrew children (while that of the Pharaoh affected only males), his wife and he remarried. This explains how they can have two older children even though the story appears to chronicle a pregnancy for Moses shortly after their marriage. But it also underscores the wisdom of a five year old "girl."

[11] In Numbers 26:59 we learn that his name was Amram and his status as a Levite is underscored.

[12] See Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31.

[13] In all of Scripture, the unique word *tevah* occurs only in these two places!

[14] Susan Haber suggests that since the mother was a slave, the princess could simply have forced her to work in the palace. She also suggests that "if Pharaoh's daughter suspected that the wet nurse was the biological mother, ... [she might have] offered her wages in an act of compassion."

[15] Though of course Jewish tradition fills in most of the gaps with interesting stories about the education and early experiences of Moses (*Exodus Midrash Rabbah*).

[16] *Exodus Midrash Rabbah* 2:11.

[17] For a survey of the pertinent literature and a plausible explanation of Exodus 4:24-26, see Nahum M. Sarna. 1991: *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*. New York: The Jewish Publication Society.

[18] Of course, Zipporah was a Midianite, not a Jewish woman.

[19] Or at the genitals of their baby boy. The language can be interpreted either way.