SHE NAMED HIM MOSES . . . (BUT WHO WAS "SHE"?)

DAVID J. ZUCKER

Exodus 2:1-10 relates the narrative of the parentage of Moses, his birth and early days, and concludes with his being named. The text in vs. 10 reads: *When the child grew up she* [*Yokheved*] *brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses* [*Moshe*], *explaining, "I drew him out of the water."*

Who actually named Moses? The verse does not say directly, using only the pronoun *she* to describe the woman who named him. Most assume that it is Pharaoh's daughter who names Moses, as she is the figure in the verse mentioned right before the naming, she *made him her son* and she drew him out of the water.

This would indicate that the name Moses is actually Egyptian, not Hebrew. Nahum M. Sarna notes that Moses' "Hebrew name is of Egyptian origin. Its basic verbal stem *msy* means 'to be born,' and the noun *ms* means 'a child, son.'" He offers examples such as Ahmose, Ramose, and Thotmose. Sarna goes on to explain that the "Narrator puts a Hebrew origin for the name into the mouth of the Egyptian princess; unbeknownst to her, it foreshadows the boy's destiny. By means of a word play the Egyptian Mose is connected with the Hebrew m-sh-h, 'to draw up/out of water.' The princess explains the name as though the form is *mashui*, 'the one drawn out,' a passive participle, whereas it is actually an active participle, 'he who draws out,' and becomes an oblique reference to the future crossing of the Sea of Reeds."[1]

The play on words with the name Moses/Moshe is reflected in the words of Isaiah, *Then they remembered the ancient days, who pulled [this] people out* [mosheh] *[of the water]: Where is the one who brought them up from the Sea?* (Isa. 63:11). Medieval commentators such as Rashi, Rashbam, ibn Ezra and Sforno all offered their understanding of the word Moshe. Yet only a few

David J. Zucker, PhD, before retiring, served as Rabbi/Chaplain and Director of Chaplaincy Care at Shalom Park in Aurora, Colorado. He led North West Surrey Synagogue, Weybridge, Surrey, UK as their interim rabbi 2014-2017. His recent publications include The Bible's Prophets: An Introduction for Christians and Jews (*Wipf and Stock: 2013*); The Bible's Writings: An Introduction for Christians and Jews (*Wipf and Stock: 2013*); *and [with Moshe Reiss, z"l]* The Matriarchs of Genesis: Seven Women, Five Views (*Wipf and Stock: 2015) See:* www.DavidJZucker.org.

commentators have addressed the related question, who actually names Moses, Moses.

Some ancient sources explicitly have the princess naming Moses. Artapanus (c. 125 BCE), writes in Greek, but has a Jewish perspective. Only three fragments exist of his treatise, titled either *Judaica* or *Concerning the Jews.* In Fragment 3, he refers to a king of the Egyptians who "dealt meanly with the Jews." He has "a daughter Merris … But since she was barren she took as her own a child of one of the Jews and named him Moses" (Fragment 3 – from *Eusebius, Praep. ev* 9:27, 2-3).[2]

Similarly, Philo and Josephus both have the princess naming Moses. Philo writes, "Since he [Moses] had been taken up from the water, the princess gave him a name derived from this and called him Moses, for Mou is the Egyptian word for water" (*On the Life of Moses,* 1.17).[3] Josephus states, "Thermuthis [the name that Josephus gives to the Pharaoh's daughter] imposed this name 'Mouses' upon him, from what had happened when he was put into the river, for the Egyptians call the 'water' by the name of 'Mo' and such as are 'saved out of it,' by the name of 'Uses;' so putting these two words together, they imposed the name upon him" (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Chap. 9).

Another ancient text, *Pseudo-Philo*, or the *Book of Biblical Antiquities* (c. 70-150 CE), has Pharaoh's daughter nursing the child as well as naming him. "Pharaoh's daughter … took him and nursed him. And he became her own son and she called him by the name Moses. But his mother called him Melchiel" (9.15-16).[4]

In the rabbinic midrashim as well it is accepted that the princess, named Bithya, named Moses. This is explicit in *Exodus Rabbah* 1.26. *Leviticus Rabbah* 1.3 explains that God tells Moses, "Of the many names by which you are known, I shall call you just by that name which Bithya, Pharaoh's daughter, called you, 'She called him Moses,' (Exod. 2:10) even so, *YHWH called to Moses* (Lev. 1:1)." Having an outsider name Moses, the premier prophet of the ages strikes a discordant note. The rabbis therefore feel compelled to bring the Egyptian princess into the house of Judaism as a convert before naming him (see *Exodus Rabbah* 1.23 beginning; BT *Sotah* 12b).

Most traditional commentators accept the simple reading of the verse that the princess named Moses. The complication that the name seems to have a Hebrew derivation is dealt with by some commentators. Abraham ibn Ezra suggests that it is a Hebrew translation of the Egyptian word Monius or perhaps the princess learned some Hebrew or asked someone. In the modern period, Shadal (Shmuel David Luzzatto, 19th c. Italy) explained that the name Moses is a kind of Hebraization of the Egyptian word, it is a similar sound. Therefore, it is the princess who gives the child his name, which then is transliterated into Moshe/Moses. (Comments on Exod. 2:10).

Two traditional commentators, however, take a different stance. They are Hizkuni (Hezekiah ben Manoah, 13th c. France) and Don Isaac Abarbanel (15th c. Spain/Italy). Hizkuni postulates that either, as the rabbis suggest the princess converted to Judaism, or Yokheved named Moses. Abarbanel posits that Yokheved named Moses and then explained to the princess that his name is based on the fact that "you drew him from the water."

To identify the person who actually names Moses, it is instructive to see that there is an established pattern for mothers naming their own children. Throughout Genesis, and then in other parts of the Bible as well, mothers designate the name of their own birth-children, or their planned, acknowledged, and legally binding surrogate-womb children. For example, Eve names Seth (Gen. 4:25), and Leah names Reuben and also Gad (Gen. 29:32; 30:11).

That locution of mothers naming their children often follows a similar linguistic pattern. The formulaic words are "She named him" *va'tikr'a et shmo*.[5] This will be true for Lot's daughters (Gen. 19:37, 38), and several of the Matriarchs (Gen. 29:32-35; 30:18-21, 24). Leah and Rachel name their own children and surrogate-children (cf. Rachel naming Dan, Gen. 30:6). Notably with Eve naming Seth, Lot's daughters, the Matriarchs, and Samson's mother (Judg. 13:24) the word used for "naming" or "calling" comes from that selfsame root, *q-r-' – quf resh'alef* that is found in Exodus 2:10, as will also be the case of Hannah naming Samuel (I Sam. 1:20).

When considering the narrative in Exodus 2, the matter is more complex. In verse seven the sister goes and locates an anonymous Hebrew nurse. In the next verse, it transpires that this is none other than the child's birth mother, although she remains anonymized.[6] When the child grew up, she brought him

to Pharaoh's daughter, who made him her son. She named (*va-tiqr'a*) him Moses, explaining, *I drew him out of the water* (Exod. 2:7-10). In verse ten a female names the boy, linking that name to a Hebrew root. Was the speaker the birth mother, meaning metaphorically that she *drew him out of the water* by saving his life from drowning by placing him *among the reeds by the bank of the Nile* (Exodus 2:3). The last section of verse 10 gives an opportunity for the person doing the naming to provide an explanation of the meaning or etymology of that particular given name. In the examples cited above, the mother both names the child and then links this name to a reason: Eve/Seth; both of Lot's daughters/Moab, Ben-Ammi; Leah/Reuben and Gad; Rachel/Dan; and Hannah/Samuel.[7]

That it would be Yokheved who names her son Moses would fit into this overall biblical pattern of mothers-naming-child, followed by an attempt at an etymological explanation, even if there are grammatical difficulties with the word Moses as Sarna elucidated early in this article. The phrase used adheres to a frequent pattern of naming, and it is followed by the formulaic reasoning for this name. Having a Hebrew woman name the greatest of Israel's prophets, in fact his own mother, likewise is a compelling argument in favor of Yokheved naming Moses. Therefore there are serious reasons to consider the argument that it is the birth mother who gives the name to her child.

Yet, the consensus of biblical scholarship suggests that it is the anonymous princess who names Moses. As noted at the beginning of this article, just prior to the naming the narrative explains that the princess made Moses her son, and this lends weight to her naming Moses. It would be highly ironic that an Egyptian, and all the more so the Pharaoh's daughter, is the person that gives the Jewish savior his name. Still, this would align with the previous story of Egyptian midwives saving Jewish babies (Shifra, Puah, Ex. 1:15-20). It is probable that the narrator at least wished to have this naming follow the established pattern ("She named him" / *va'tikr'a et shmo*), even if there were competing arguments as to whom actually named Moses.

NOTES

1. Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Commentary – Exodus*. (Philadelphia: JPS, 1991), 11. For similar explanations see Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, OTL, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 19; William H. Propp. *Exodus* AB. (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 153; Thomas B. Dozeman, *Exodus – Eerdmans' Critical Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 81-82. A different point of view is offered by Benno Jacob. (*The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus*. (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1992), 34. Jacob writes, "the explanation is not intended to be etymological. It is a phonetic explanation meant to remind of a particular event … Parents have never been interested in etymology." He continues, "the princess named the child privately with his mother as the only apparent witness … we may reasonably assume that [the princess] knew some Hebrew."

2. Eric S. Gruen trans. "Artapanus" in *Outside the Bible: Ancient Writings Related to Scripture* (eds. Louis H. Feldman, James L. Kugel, Lawrence H. Schiffman; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society [Lincoln: University of Nebraska], 2013), 679.

3. "Philo derives Moses' name from an Egyptian rather than a Hebrew word as in Exod. 2:10 … assuming that it is far more likely for an Egyptian princess to call her son by an Egyptian name." Maren R. Niehoff, trans., "On the Life of Moses," in *Outside the Bible: Ancient Writings Related to Scripture* (eds. Louis H. Feldman, James L. Kugel, Lawrence H. Schiffman; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society [Lincoln: University of Nebraska], 2013), 968.

4. *Pseudo-Philo* "is an example of a genre known as rewritten Bible. The author reviews the biblical narrative … adding, subtracting, embellishing, and revising," Howard Jacobson trans., *Pseudo-Philo, Book of Biblical Antiquities,* [*Liber antiquitatum biblicarum* or L.A.B.] in *Outside the Bible: Ancient Writings Related to Scripture* (eds. Louis H. Feldman, James L. Kugel, Lawrence H. Schiffman; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society [Lincoln: University of Nebraska], 2013), 470. It is interesting that *Jubilees* (c. 200 BCE), another example of re-written scripture adds many details such as the name of the Egyptian princess, Tharmuth, but contains no mention of who gives Moses his name (*Jubilees* 47.5-9).

5. The formula is fairly consistent, although in some cases the sign of the direct object, *et* sometimes is missing. Further, in one instance, a different form of the selfsame verb *q-r-'* is used. In the case of Leah naming Dinah, the appropriate feminine noun is used, see Genesis 30:21.

6. Seeing anonymity as a conscious device, see Mark W. Gross, "Significant Anonymity in Exodus 2," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 2, (2010), 115-119.

7. Manoah's wife/Samson does not feature a direct statement explaining his name, but Samson in Hebrew is *Shimshon*, a word related to the Semitic word for sun (*shemesh*). As Tammi J. Schneider explains, in the Samson narrative, there "are a number of plays on words with sun and night, lightness and darkness … fire plays an important role also, and Samson's name introduces those themes initially." Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges*. Brit Olam. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 202.