

## **The Baby in the Basket!**

At Glasgow University, our history lecturer began his lecture with these words, “Why do we study history?” Because history helps us to understand how events in the past have shaped the world we live in today, and how they continue to influence our present. History is our teacher and guide.

The book of Exodus, the second book in the Bible, is arguably the most important book, as it presents the defining features of Israel's identity—memories of a past, marked by hardship and escape, a binding covenant with God, who chooses Israel, and the establishment of the life of the community and the guidelines for sustaining it.

Exodus and much of the Old Testament was written in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, many years after the Exodus. It was written in Babylon. The Israelites had been removed from Israel and they were then under foreign rule again – just like their forefathers in Egypt.

So in Babylon, they looked to their past to see how God delivered their forefathers in Egypt. This powerful story of the Exodus would speak into their present and give them hope, that the God of Israel would do for them what he did for their forefathers centuries before, and from this they would discover a pathway forward.

So, as they looked at accounts of the ancient story, what did they learn?

They saw how the weak and powerless of this world overcame the strong and mighty. It's a David and Goliath story. This time it was a baby in a basket. God chooses the weak things of this world to confound the wise.

They saw the terrible suffering of the Hebrew people who were ruthlessly treated by their slave drivers.

They saw the providential care of God who provides their escape and is with them in it.

So, as they compiled their history in Babylon, and gathered their different stories, they made them into their present story, and by doing so, they tried to make sense of all their suffering and where God was in it all.

## **But what about us?**

We too ask the same questions as Israel asked.

Jesus, on the road to Jerusalem for the last time, asks the disciple Peter the question, "Who do people say I am?"

A question that the Jewish nation has asked itself since the beginning of its history.

Who are we? How did we get to where we are? Where are we going?

It's a question for us also as we journey in life, who am I? What's my purpose? Where did I come from? Where am I going?

I listened to a stranger recently and he opened up to me, and said I have spent my life chasing money. He defined himself to me in that one sentence, his god has been money.

I felt he was asking the deep question, who am I? As he begins to face his advanced years and as he reflects and realises that he has little to show for all his chasing in life.

It's been blowing in the wind.

Who Am I? is a poem written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Bonhoeffer was known for his staunch resistance to the Nazi dictatorship, including vocal opposition to Adolf Hitler's euthanasia program and genocidal persecution of the Jews. He was arrested in April 1943 by the Gestapo and imprisoned at Tegel Prison for one-and-a-half years. Later, he was transferred to Flossenbürg concentration camp.

The German pastor Bonhoeffer was accused of being associated with the 20 July plot to assassinate Hitler and was tried along with other accused plotters, including former members of the Abwehr (the German Military Intelligence Office). He was hanged on 9 April 1945 during the collapse of the Nazi regime.

In prison he wrestled with these questions, who am I? and he wrote...

*Who am I? They often tell me  
I stepped from my cell's confinement  
Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,*

*Like a Squire from his country house.*

*Who am I? They often tell me  
I used to speak to my warders  
Freely and friendly and clearly,  
As though it were mine to command.*

*Who am I? They also tell me  
I bore the days of misfortune  
Equably, smilingly, proudly,  
like one accustomed to win.*

*Am I then really that which other men tell of?  
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?  
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,  
Struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,  
Yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,  
Thirsting for words of kindness, for neighbourliness,  
Tossing in expectations of great events,  
Powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,  
Weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,  
Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all.*

*Who am I? This or the Other?  
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?  
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,  
And before myself a contemptible woebegone weakling?  
Or is something within me still like a beaten army  
Fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?*

*Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.  
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!*

### **So, what did the Israelites learn about themselves?**

The story starts with the suffering of God's people. They were not immune to pain and hardship. They were ruthlessly controlled by slave drivers. Their lives were misery. The days were dark.

But there is a light shining in the darkness.

Ranged against the might of Pharaoh and his slave masters were a series of seemingly insignificant women.

First of all, there were the two midwives, Shiprah and Puah, whose names have gone down in Scripture because of their heroic faith. They saved the Hebrew boys who were condemned to die at birth because of an order by Pharaoh.

Then there was the resolute Jochebed, Moses' mother, who loved her baby, the third of her children. She seems to also have recognised something special about him, which made it even more unbearable to think of throwing him into the river, or allowing anybody else to do it. So, at what terrifying risk to herself we are not told, she hid the little one and, when necessity drove, obeyed the letter but not the spirit of Pharaoh's edict – she put her baby boy into the Nile.

She was to discover that there was, on her side, a powerful over all power of the enemy.

Then there was Miriam, Moses' sister, that resourceful girl! Imagine noticing so acutely how Pharaoh's daughter's face changed when she looked at the baby, and realising so intuitively that behind the royal countenance there was a compassionate heart and then to have the audacity to bring the baby's mother into the equation as his nurse.

What a turnaround!

Far from this Hebrew baby being killed by the will of the royal house, his rescuer emerged from the royal house, and his own mother was actually paid to bring him up as the Prince of Egypt.

Finally, there was Pharaoh's daughter herself who was more than a minor miracle. Out of the core of the genocidal royal family came this precious person, a tender-hearted princess. Her father could, apparently without pity, consign sons to the Nile and daughters to slavery, but his own daughter had not inherited his personality. She had a maternal heart, eyes easily moved to tears, feeling for the feelings of others, and Moses, as we shall discover, grew up to be like his adoptive mother, a tender-hearted compassionate man.

So as the Jews read their history when in Babylon, they could see from their past that God had brought significant people into their life journey; people

with a good heart and conscience such as the midwives, people with compassion and wisdom such as Moses' mum; people like Miriam, Moses' sister, intuitive and quick thinking, people like the Princess, gracious and merciful.

But most of all, they would have seen through all these actions, a God who cares for them.

Pharaoh had set his sights on destroying the people of God, wiping them off the face of the earth, and he turned his army, his government and people against them. But far from being crushed by all this, we read that the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread. This was so much against what should have happened, that we can only account for it by saying that there must have been some other factor at work that ensured that the people were not at the mercy of circumstances.

Here we can see evidence of a secret and ceaseless care whereby the Israelites were not only preserved in life but against all the opposition that was heaped upon them, they went on increasing, flourishing and expanding. When the midwives refused to kill the babies, God was there watching and working with them. In the midst of their darkness is this indication that God was in it with his people, caring for them and blessing them through the actions of these brave and faithful women. All through the days of darkness, there is a gleam of light, but behind that gleam of light, stood the God of secret and ceaseless care.

Pharaoh left the God of the Hebrews out of his reckoning; that was his big mistake, and it can be ours too. Today we see three qualities of faith that will enable and help us through our dark times.

It encourages us to have a **trustful faith** and rest in the knowledge that underpinning everything that happens to us there is a secret, undeclared providence always at work, always providing, always purposeful, always on the side of the people of God. Paul wrote to the church in Rome, If God is for us, who can be against us.

Secondly, this story encourages us to have an **expectant faith**. Angels often come in very ordinary guises, they turn up as human beings! God's agents, in God's place, at God's time. Like the midwives to whom Pharaoh turned to support his programme of ethnic cleansing, only to find that they were

women of principle, and they were prepared to stand up, and be counted for doing the right thing, even though they were of different faith and race.

Who will God send to rescue us? Who are the angels in your lives that will deliver you and give you hope. Have an expectant faith for God is already at work in your life.

Thirdly, have a **patient faith**. We want things to happen tomorrow. We are often impatient looking for immediate results. It takes a long time to grow an oak tree. It takes patience to wait for God. What we learn from the Scriptures, is that God works out his purposes, but He's never in a hurry. It's in the waiting that lessons are to be learned.

We started with the question, *who am I?* We finish with this same question, for this story is not just about the Israelites, this is our story also. Through Jesus Christ, we are ingrafted into this ancient family of faith. We are related to these great people of faith; Jesus came into this world to suffer and die for us, that we might experience and know the love and grace of Almighty God. That we might know who we truly are and know his forgiveness and his purpose for our life.

We all struggle with our identity? Who am I, in the words of Bonhoeffer, "Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!" In the words of St Augustine, "My heart is restless until it rests in thee", in the words of Jesus, "I and my Father are One" John 10v30

When we ask that probing question, who am I, there is no greater place to begin than to know, I am a child of God.

The psalmist wrote, Psalm 139...

<sup>1</sup> You have searched me, Lord,  
and you know me.

<sup>2</sup> You know when I sit and when I rise;  
you perceive my thoughts from afar.

<sup>3</sup> You discern my going out and my lying down;  
you are familiar with all my ways.

<sup>4</sup> Before a word is on my tongue  
you, Lord, know it completely.

<sup>5</sup> You hem me in behind and before,  
and you lay your hand upon me.

<sup>6</sup> Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,  
too lofty for me to attain.

<sup>7</sup> Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?

<sup>8</sup> If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

<sup>9</sup> If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the sea,

<sup>10</sup> even there your hand will guide me,  
your right hand will hold me fast.

<sup>11</sup> If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me  
and the light become night around me,"

<sup>12</sup> even the darkness will not be dark to you;  
the night will shine like the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.

<sup>13</sup> For you created my inmost being;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

<sup>14</sup> I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful,  
I know that full well.

<sup>15</sup> My frame was not hidden from you  
when I was made in the secret place,  
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.

<sup>16</sup> Your eyes saw my unformed body;  
all the days ordained for me were written in your book  
before one of them came to be.

<sup>17</sup> How precious to me are your thoughts, God!  
How vast is the sum of them!

<sup>18</sup> Were I to count them,  
they would outnumber the grains of sand—  
when I awake, I am still with you.

<sup>23</sup> Search me, God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my anxious thoughts.

<sup>24</sup> See if there is any offensive way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.