

Jochebed – A Godly Mother

A Jewish proverb reads “God could not be everywhere, and therefore He made mothers.” It is good that we have one day a year where we put a special focus on honouring and valuing mothers – because motherhood is a remarkably important job.

Today I want to talk about a woman in the Bible who was one of the greatest mothers of all history. Her impact on the lives of her children shook and shaped the world of her day with a force that ripples even down as far as the world of our day. That’s the power of a godly mother. She can change the world.

This woman is listed among the heroes and heroines of faith in Hebrews 11. She produced 3 children who all were great leaders of God. She saved one of her children from death.

Anyone know who this woman is?

I’m not surprised you don’t know her. Hardly anyone has even heard of her. Her name only appears twice in the Bible. Jochebed.

Exodus 6:20 “Amram married his father’s sister Jochebed, who bore him Aaron and Moses. Amram lived 137 years.”

Verse 18 shows Amram’s father was Kohath.

Verse 16 shows Kohath’s father was Levi.

Amram married Kohath’s sister, so Jochebed was one of Levi’s daughters. To marry an aunt or nephew isn’t acceptable now, but such inter-family marriages were common in those days. They were limited after the establishment of the Mosaic Law.

Numbers 26:59 “the name of Amram’s wife was Jochebed, a descendant of Levi, who was born to the Levites in Egypt. To Amram she bore Aaron, Moses and their sister Miriam.”

The name Jochebed means “Jehovah is her glory.” She seems to be the first person in the Bible to have a name compounded from Jehovah (or Jah), though there had been others with names compounded from El (or Elohim). This shows the name Jehovah was known before Moses, which is a surprise to the Commentators. (Unless Moses gave this name to her later because of her godly character?)

She gave birth to Aaron, Miriam and Moses.

- ◆ Aaron was Israel’s first High Priest, the beginning of the Aaronic Priesthood. Moses’ primary aide and spokesman, the one who established the sacrificial system – a very important character in the history of Israel.
- ◆ Miriam was a prophetess and a gifted poetess and musician.
- ◆ Moses was one of the greatest national and spiritual leaders the world has known, leading Israel out of slavery in Egypt, speaking with God face to face, obtaining the 10 Commandments and Old Covenant laws from God, a very great hero of Israel, yet also known as the “most humble person on earth” (Numbers 12:3).

God chose 3 of Jochebed's children to lead Israel out of slavery. Surely that in itself is a testimony to her character as a godly woman.

Here's something about Jochebed from a Jewish source I got off the Internet.

"Jochebed, the mother of Moses and Aaron and Miriam, surely was one of the greatest Jewish women that ever lived. Was there ever a mother who had three more famous children? She became the greatest mother in Israel. Jochebed was the daughter of Levi, Jacob's son. She was born at the very moment when Jacob and his entire household, Levi and his wife among them, had just entered the gates of Egypt. That was in the year 2238 after Creation. Jochebed was the youngest member of the seventy souls that made up Jacob's household.

The great Sage, Rabbi Judah Hanassi (who gathered and arranged the Oral Law into the Six Volumes of the Mishnah), when speaking of Jochebed, said: "There was a Jewish woman who was the mother of 600,000 children." He explained that he meant Jochebed, who gave birth to Moses, who was worth as much as all the people of Israel that came out of Egypt.

Jochebed lived to see her daughter Miriam lead all the Jewish women in praise of God after the crossing of the Red Sea, and her two sons Moses and Aaron receive the crowns of Royalty and Priesthood. What great Nachas (joy) she enjoyed from all her children! May all Jewish mothers be like her."

We read of the story of Jochebed in Exodus 2:1-10:

¹ "Now a man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman, ² and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months. ³ But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. ⁴ His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.

⁵ Then Pharaoh's daughter went down to the Nile to bathe, and her attendants were walking along the riverbank. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her female slave to get it. ⁶ She opened it and saw the baby. He was crying, and she felt sorry for him. "This is one of the Hebrew babies," she said.

⁷ Then his sister asked Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?"

⁸ "Yes, go," she answered. So the girl went and got the baby's mother. ⁹ Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you." So the woman took the baby and nursed him. ¹⁰ When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, "I drew him out of the water."

Verses 1-2 In Chapter 1:22 Pharaoh had commanded that all the Hebrew babies be killed. Jochebed showed courage to defy Pharaoh's order, because she valued the life of the baby more than her own life. She also showed faith in God by her actions – this is where she is mentioned in Hebrews 11:

Hebrews 11:23 "By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict."

They weren't just proud parents, but they must have sensed that he was special to God, or in any case they believed God would help them, so they hid him for 3 months, risking their lives if he was found. They could've given up in despair and blamed God for forsaking them, and simply thrown the baby out, but they were resourceful and did what they could to help themselves.

Acts 7:20 “At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for by his family.” This indicates there was something special about the baby Moses.

Back to Exodus 2:2. How do you hide a squealing and squawking baby for 3 months? It can't have been easy. Especially in houses which were not very private – basically one room with open windows, no glass, as we understand.

Verse 3 She was a creative woman, as well as being courageous and committed to God. The Hebrew word for “basket” here is also used for Noah's “ark” (in Genesis 6:14) – a Hebrew word of Egyptian origin only used these 2 times in the Bible (the first 5 books were all written by Moses.) She had kept the letter of the law (Chapter 1:22) – she had thrown her son into the river – but in a basket! She gave up her son, and trusted God to look after him.

Verses 4-7 Miriam acted very smartly. What a brilliant idea! Jochebed was able to nurse and nurture her own son, and got paid for it! Undoubtedly she taught him God's ways, and the history and customs of Israel.

In fact we know that she did, because of Hebrews 11:24 – “By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter.”

Hebrews 11:25-26 ²⁵ “He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶ He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.”

He was also taught in the ways of the Egyptians, and could have been an Egyptian Prince, but he chose mistreatment and disgrace with the people of God rather than the treasures of Egypt. A great example of faith.

When Moses grew up to be an adult, Exodus 2:11-13, we see he identified with Israel more than Egypt, and he wanted to do what was right – although he took the law into his own hands because of his zeal for fairness. It was probably Jochebed's influence that developed his character. She was committed and faithful to God, and no doubt she taught Moses this, as well as Miriam and Aaron.

Back to Exodus 2:10 – eventually Jochebed had to give up her son again. She gave up her son to save her nation, although she didn't realise that's what she was doing.

A bit like Mary, who had to give up her son Jesus to do God's work, not really knowing at first what was happening – end eventually she gave Him up to an early death.

Jochebed gave up her son for physical Israel. God the Father gave up His Son for the sake of spiritual Israel – so that spiritual Israel could be formed, and bought out of slavery to sin.

Acts 7:20-24 also talks about this: “At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for by his family. ²¹ When he was placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. ²² Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action. ²³ “When Moses was 40 years old, he decided to visit his own people, the Israelites. ²⁴ He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defence and avenged him by killing the Egyptian.”

Exodus 2:11 says this happened when he has “grown up” – so therefore it is not until you are 40 that you are grown up! Those of us in our 50's and 60's don't need to feel so old: we have only just grown up!

Exodus 2:10 “Moses” was a common Egyptian name, especially in royalty: there were Kings called Thutmose and Ahmose.

Jochebed is a great example of womanhood and motherhood. A great example of faithfulness and dependence on God. She gave up her son once, putting him in a basket – that must have been traumatic.

But then she had to give him up again. She had to bring her precious child, her little miracle, and give him to the Pharaoh’s daughter. How it must have torn her heart, to have her son returned to her but then to have to give him up again, most likely forever. Yes, he was spared from death, but only to become a pagan Egyptian, living the life of a prince far from her home and arms, working in and serving a nation and king which hated and oppressed her people.

She must have wondered why God allowed this to happen. Why did He let her go through all the pain of sacrificing her son, letting him go?

We often wonder why God puts us through things in our lives – why we have to go through pain and suffering. We want to know why things are allowed to happen, and how it is all going to work out.

But like Jochebed, we have to let go. We sometimes have to let go of our hopes and dreams and ideas and “rights.” We must leave them in God’s hands and trust Him to work the details out. He does indeed have a plan, and He can work things out in amazing ways, far beyond what we can imagine or dream of.

Our place is simply to follow Him and depend on Him, even when it sounds crazy, it doesn’t seem to be working out right.

Jochebed’s name says it all: “Jehovah is her glory.” Proverbs 31:29-31 could be talking of her. 4,000 years later, we still celebrate the legacy of her faith.

Remember the example of Jochebed, who was willing to let go of her hopes and dreams and trust in God to work out the details, to make sure everything turned out for good. And He sure did!

If we trust in God and follow Him, just as Jochebed did, He will do the rest.