VIEWING YOKHEVED (Jochebed)

Abstract
The book of Exodus specifically names Moses’ mother Yokheved (Jochebed) in chapter six, although her courageous acts are depicted earlier in chapter two. Yokheved is mentioned in the literature from the late Second Temple period. Likewise, there are several Midrashim that refer to her. It is primarily in the mid-19th, and then the 20th/21st centuries that Jewish writers highlight Yokheved as a valorous woman. This article considers how she is featured throughout the ages, and offers some context for those presentations.

Moses’ mother Yokheved (Jochebed) is mentioned by name in the Bible and also in the literature from the late Second Temple period and a bit beyond. A number of midrashic comments are made about her, although more is written about her daughter Miriam. Naturally, huge amounts of comments address the lives of her sons: her firstborn, Aaron, and then even more so, Moses. In the mid-19th, and then the 20th/21st centuries a number of Jewish writers consider her deeds and highlight Yokheved as a valorous woman. This article considers how she is viewed and understood (primarily in Jewish sources) throughout the ages, and offers some context for those presentations.

BIBLICAL REFERENCES
Yokheved, Moses’ mother is specifically referred to by her personal name twice in the Bible: in Exodus 6:20 and Numbers 26:59. References to her actions, although anonymized, are found in seven verses in Exodus 2. These brief references to Yokheved are found in the received Torah text. They may stem from different sources, but that is not a major focus of this article, which rather considers the Torah in its redacted form. The various biblical views of Yokheved need to be considered within the socio-historic context of the Bible itself. In biblical times, men and women were interdependent upon each other. Women had roles in economic life, as well as in educational, managerial, and religious life. Yet, despite the fact that in ancient Israel, daily life centered on the family household, women had less power and prominence than did men. Undoubtedly there are examples of powerful women in the Hebrew Bible. Deborah is both a judge and a prophet. Miriam, Huldah, Isaiah’s unnamed wife, and Noadiah, are all termed prophets (Exod 15:20; 2 Kgs 22:14/2 Chr 34:22; Isa 8:3; Neh 6:14); Esther is a Queen, and other queens, and some description of their roles are mentioned, including Jezebel in Kings, and Athalya in the
books of Kings and Chronicles. Nonetheless, generally compared to their male companions, women’s actions, never mind their authority/power are restrained. In the overall pattern of patriarchy of the biblical world, women are secondary figures.

The Torah, and the Bible as a whole, focuses on the deeds of men. Over ninety percent of named characters in the Bible are males. As Aviva Cayam notes, “God’s directives, miracles and promises are most often transmitted to men, while women’s lives form the backdrop for many biblical lessons.” Cayam refers to Yokheved as an example of a woman who found courage in the face of persecution.

There are a limited number of biblical references to women by-their-personal-name as mothers of specific children, for example Eve (Cain, Abel), the Matriarchs (Isaac, Esau, Jacob, Reuben, Simeon etc.), Hannah (Samuel), Bathsheba (Solomon) and several of the mothers of rulers in the book of Second Chronicles (cf. 2 Chr 13:2; 15:16; 22:2 etc.) On rare occasions, there are narratives about mothers with children (for example in the Elijah and Elisha narratives in Kings 1 and 2) but these women are not identified by their personal names. The Bible’s presentation of Yokheved therefore is unique in its paying close attention to certain details about her experiences.

**Exodus 2**

Yokheved as a figure first appears early in Exodus, but she is anonymized at this point as is the case with her husband. “A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman” (Exodus 2:1. Yokheved first will be identified by name in chapter 6).

Although at this point she is nameless, chapter two relates a great deal about Moses’ mother.

Verse [Vs] 1. The text makes clear that parentage of the future revered leader Moses is both paternally and maternally explicitly from one tribe; specifically that of the Levites. That his pro-
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genitors are not named serves to heighten tension; it creates a bit of mystery. By mentioning only one proper name in this section, that of Moses himself, and that not until verse 10, the narrative highlights the importance of his being above all else. Scholars debate whether this is an E or a J source, although there is general agreement that when Yokheved is finally named in chapter six, that this latter verse comes from the P source.3 Priests, for all priests are Levites, are keen to highlight a purity of lineage. This verse also establishes, or at least strongly infers, that Moses’ older siblings Aaron and Miriam are pureblood Levites. Technically, of course, that these unnamed Levites are the parents of the soon to be conceived Moses, does not in and of itself “prove” that the same couple already had two older children Aaron and Miriam. It is for this reason that rabbinic Midrash, as shall be discussed below, provided an explanation that in this instance these two specific people had been married, divorced, and then actually re-married.

Vs 2. In verse 2, the narrative describes the mother’s emotional reaction to seeing her son: she saw he was a fine baby (NRSV); beautiful (NJPS); a fine child (NEB, NIV) – ki tov hu. The Bible, a laconic work, is limited in its offering these kinds of evaluative descriptions, especially when it comes to dealing with female characters. There are exceptions: in Genesis the Torah had noted Sarah’s emotional reaction to what she perceived to be Hagar’s “slight” of her (Gen 16:5), and possibly Ishmael’s “slight” of Isaac (Gen 21:9). Later in the book of Samuel, Michal’s anger and disappointment at King David’s public behavior does merit attention (2 Sam 6:16), yet these are rare observations. Consequently, explaining Yokheved’s assessment is noteworthy. Verse 2 also explains that Yokheved actively protects her son during the most early and vulnerable months of life. Further, she hides him from view.

Vs 3. When he can no longer be hidden by ordinary means, it is the boy’s mother who comes up with a plan as what she might do to extend his life. She creates a kind of floating basket/carrycot. She finds appropriate materials, bitumen and pitch and then she herself waterproofs the apparatus and places her child in it. The word that Exodus uses for this container is teivah, the exact same word found in Genesis 6-9 where Noah builds something that will save his family from the ravages of water. She then personally sets it afloat along the banks of the Nile itself, clearly nearby a place where Egyptian royalty bathe.

It is Yokheved, although anonymized, whom the Bible credits with making this papyrus basket. She located the materials, and is the one who caulks it. There is no mention of her husband Am-
ram – or any others – aiding or abetting her in these tasks. Again, she is the one who places the basket along the banks of the Nile.

Vs 7. Although the Torah text does not explicitly say so, one imagines that it is Yokheved who directs the child’s older sister, to be alert and ready to see what will happen to the basket with the child in it. The next set of verses, while not mentioning the baby’s mother, nonetheless show how Yokheved’s thoughtful plan was in fact realized. The Pharaoh’s daughter finds the basket and takes pity on the child. The infant’s older sister then comes forward to offer help. One can imagine that it is at the pre-arranged urging of her mother, that the sister says to “Pharaoh’s daughter, ‘Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for you?’”

Vs 8. Here, the sister gets not just any wet nurse, but explicitly the infant’s own mother. The text says that the sister went and “called” the mother (va-tiqr’a).

Vs 9. The Pharaoh’s daughter then meets with the wet nurse. She gives her instructions and arranges/commands for the payment for the early upkeep of the Hebrew child. While Yokheved’s dialogue with the royal princess is not included in the Torah text, it is carried on in the reader’s mind. The Torah does not indicate the length of the weaning process, but in biblical times, it was common to wean at about age three.

Vs 10. On the surface level, on a plain reading of the text, it appears that the birth mother suckles/rears her own child and then when weaned, she brings him to the Pharaoh’s daughter. It appears as if it is the royal princess who in turn names the child “Moses” because “I drew him out” (m’shitithi, from the Hebrew root letters mem-shin-hey). Scholars point out that the narrator here offers a Hebrew-based etymology for the word Moses/Moshe, but that the more likely answer is that the name comes from the Egyptian word meaning, “give birth.” Yet, the matter of this naming may be more complex. In verses 7, 8, and 10 the Hebrew three times utilizes the same verb (from the root letters q-r-’ – quf resh alef) which is variously translated as get/called/named.

7 Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get (v’qar’ati) you a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for you?” And Pharaoh’s daughter answered, “Yes.” So the girl went and called (va-tiqr’a) the child’s mother. 8 And Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will pay your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed it. 9 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.” (Exodus 2:7-10)

In verse seven, the sister goes and gets/calls for a Hebrew nurse, who just happens, in verse eight to be the child’s birth mother. Then in verse ten, a female names the boy, linking that name to a...
Hebrew root. One way to read verse ten is that it is the birth mother speaking the words “I drew him out of the water” which becomes the appropriate bookend for the statement that it was she (in verse three) who placed him in the near the riverbank. (“She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile.”) In addition, by having Yokheved name her own child, it would fit into the pattern set by Eve (Gen 4:1) and several of the Matriarchs (Gen 29:32-35; 30:18-21, 24, each who name her own child). Notably with the Matriarchs the word used for “naming” comes from that selfsame root, q-r-’ – qáf resh ‘alef, as will also be the case of Hannah naming Samuel (1 Sam 1:20).

At this point in early Exodus (2:1-2) when she marries and gives birth, Yokheved is unnamed, as is her husband. She and he will gain their appellations four chapters later when Yokheved is termed Amram’s wife. In the intervening chapters, Moses grows up, leaves Egypt, escapes to Midian, and marries Zipporah. Moses will be commissioned by God, will meet up with Aaron, and will have his first encounter with Pharaoh. Yokheved’s “naming” comes within a long genealogy which basically focuses on the tribe of Levi (Exod 6:16-25). In this section, while the readers learn about Yokheved-the-wife-and-mother, there is no attempt to link her to the earlier figure, the woman who bravely saved her child. Chapter six represents a different tradition or author than chapter two. Exodus 6:20 not only names Yokheved, but the text also informs the reader that she is the aunt of her husband Amram, a line of consanguinity prohibited later in the Levitical legislation. “This is in keeping with biblical traditions that trace the birth or ancestry of important figures to sexual relations generally prohibited: Abraham and Sarah, his half-sister (Lev. 18:9); Judah and Tamar, his daughter-in-law (Lev. 18:15); Jacob and the two sisters Rachel and Leah (Lev. 18:18); and the marriage of the Moabite Ruth to Boaz (Deut. 23:4).”

Exodus 6

Yokheved is finally named in Exodus 6; it is within the context of her husband’s life: 20Amram took to his wife his father’s sister Yokheved, and she bore him Aaron and Moses; and the span of Amram’s life was 137 years. While the focus is on Amram, his marriage and the years of his life, Yokheved is named at this point, as is their consanguineous relationship. The name Yokheved in itself carries a certain amount of religious weight. Yokheved is connected to the tetragrammaton [YHVH], one of the names for God. “Moses’ mother is the first person recorded in the Bible with a name containing elements of the tetragrammaton . . . for her name means..."
'Yo/Yah is glorified.' The sentence concludes with the death of Amram at a very venerable age. That Yokheved’s death is not mentioned at this point is a matter of interest to the rabbis as shall be noted in the section on Midrash below.

**Numbers 26**

A final genealogical reference to Yokheved appears in a census in Numbers:

59 The name of Amram’s wife was Yokheved, the daughter of Levi, who was born to Levi in Egypt; she bore to Amram: Aaron and Moses and their sister Miriam.

Here Yokheved is both named and claimed as Levi’s daughter, although as is commonplace practice in the Bible, her mother’s name is not stated. Mentioning Levi links her directly to the eponymous figures of the twelve tribes, a granddaughter to Jacob and Leah. Being born in Egypt, she carries no memories of the ancestral homeland. The additional information that she is born in Egypt itself is also noted in midrashic writings as shall be mentioned in that section below. Following her connection to Amram, but not their aunt/nephew status, the Torah text mentions first her sons Aaron and Moses, and then her daughter Miriam (Num. 26:59). Given the central roles of these children in the Torah, and especially that of Moses, naming Yokheved as their mother is high praise for her.

**SECOND TEMPLE PERIOD REFERENCES**

In the late period of the Second Temple and for some time afterwards, c. 200 BCE-200 CE, a variety of works were produced which parallel teachings that are located in the books of Genesis and Exodus. Primary among them in terms of Yokheved are the works of *Jubilees*, Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jews*, and the *Biblical Antiquities* (*Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*), also known as *Pseudo-Philo*. *Jubilees*, which was probably composed c. 200 BCE, takes well-known passages and fleshes out details, and often condenses or omits other passages. Instead of citing a verse and offering an explanation, the basis of midrashic teachings, works like *Jubilees* offer their explanations through “retelling. Commentators would rewrite a text in their own words, inserting into it their own understanding . . . Sometimes these insertions went on for pages . . . In many cases, it seems that the writer is simply reflecting what he or she has heard or learned from others – teachers or preachers or other public figures.” This means that *Jubilees* is probably one of the earliest extant commentaries on the Bible. *Jubilees* is characterized as an example of re-worked or “Re-written Scripture.”
Generally, the author of *Jubilees* is very interested in genealogies. Since, however, the Amram-Yokheved marriage violates later Levitical legislation, the author simply chooses to ignore their consanguineous relationship. Like the Exodus text, Yokheved initially is not named, but rather is introduced anonymously as Moses’ mother, as a woman who defies Pharaoh’s decrees, by courageously nurturing and protecting her son for three months. *Jubilees* then adds some additional data not found in the biblical sources. She prepares the ark and places it in the river. Night by night for a week she comes and secretly suckles Moses (*Jub* 47.4). The inference in *Jubilees* is that this is a brave woman, who daringly puts her life at risk in order to protect her child. Her name first appears when Miriam locates a wet nurse for the Pharaoh’s daughter. *Jubilees* follows the pattern set in Exodus. It credits Yokheved with taking charge of the situation. She protects the child; she prepares the ark; she places the baby in the basket; she secretly nurses her son. Yet, the delay in mentioning her actual name results once again, as in the Torah, in separating the identity of Yokheved-by-name from the earlier person who acted with courage and foresight; it simply associates her with the relatively more passive role of being the “approved” wet nurse.

The *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* probably was written shortly after *Jubilees*. In the Testament of Levi, that patriarch twice makes specific reference to Yokheved, offering an explanation for her name, and a curious fact about her birth date in Egypt. She was named Yokheved, Levi explicates, since he was the most honored then amongst his brothers (the *kheved* of Yokheved means glory or honor – *Testament of Levi* 11.8). Levi also mentions that “Amram married my daughter Yokheved; they had been born on the same day, he and my daughter” (*Testament of Levi* 12.4). 8

Josephus, writing towards the end of the first century CE, likewise diminishes Yokheved’s role. “In his paraphrase of the Bible in the *Antiquities*, Josephus has a number of sneers directed at women,” explains Louis Feldman. Elsewhere Feldman writes of Josephus’s “misogyny.” 9 In this case, Josephus principally ignores Yokheved and casts Amram in the position of standing up to Pharaoh’s orders. God appears to Amram in a dream and reassures him that God is with him and the Israelites (*Antiquities* 2.212 ff.). Yokheved eventually is named by Josephus (*Antiquities* 2.217), but she appears in an assisting position to Amram, not as the initiator of events as in the
Torah narrative. While “they” created the cradle/ark, and chose to place it in the water, it is Amram’s idea, not Yokheved’s, to find a way to save the infant.

but after that time Amram, fearing he should be discovered . . . determined rather to trust the safety and care of the child to God. (Antiquities 2.219).

A bit earlier Josephus does mention a tradition that later is picked up by the rabbis, namely that when Yokheved gave birth to Moses, it was a painless delivery (Cf. BT Sotah 12a; Exodus Rabbah 1.20).

Unlike Josephus who often takes a misogynist approach, the Pseudo-Philo/Biblical Antiquities has passages that extol the role of women. The author adds genealogical information about some women in the primeval history and that of the Judges, but is silent about the ancestral histories. He also diminishes the lives of certain women. In this case, Yokheved’s role again is downplayed, she is mentioned merely one time; while Amram is mentioned seven times, and Miriam three. Amram and Miriam, both of whom speak while Yokheved is silent, also have more prominent positions than Yokheved in the events that transpire (Pseudo-Philo/Biblical Antiquities, chapter 9). Amram becomes the hero of this tale. He argues against the decrees of Pharaoh, and cites the example of Tamar (Gen 38), calling her “our mother Tamar” similar to the rabbinic Avraham Avinu, Sarah Imenu (Abraham our Father, Sarah our Mother). God praises Amram. It is Yokheved, however who conceals Moses’ birth for three months and eventually builds the ark and places Moses in the water (v. 12).

Philo of Alexandria, (Philo Judaeus, c. 20 BCE-50 CE) writes a biography “On the Life of Moses.” While he presents the broad outline of the biblical narrative in Exodus 2, he embellishes that account. Philo does not mention an ark, but suggests that the child’s parents (unnamed) “exposed him with tears on the bank of the river and departed groaning . . . [although] the sister of the infant castaway . . . remained at a little distance, waiting to see what would happen.”

MIDRASHIC REFERENCES

In terms of rabbinic Judaism, it is important to understand these sages in their own time and context. The rabbinic period begins in antiquity and carries on into the early Middle Ages. Rabbinic values are often taught through Midrashim. The great midrashic works flowered between c. 400-1200 CE, but they often reflect earlier traditions. The ideal society of which the rabbis conceived was oriented towards men. The rabbis were not monolithic in their views; there often are a vari-
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ey of opinions expressed, although on the whole, when it comes to matters of gender and sexuality, there is a clear sexist bias in favor of males. In BT Sotah 11b, R. Avira explains that because of the righteous women who lived in that generation, the Israelites were delivered from Egypt. This may refer to Yokheved and her courageous acts, but there is no direct link mentioned. Rabbi Avira’s observation notwithstanding, taken as a whole, there are vastly disproportionately more midrashim written about men than about women, just as men are about ten times more likely to be mentioned by name in the Bible than are women. Yet, even in terms of Midrashim, which focus on women, there are more examples dealing with Miriam than with Yokheved. Nonetheless, Yokheved does merit the rabbis’ attention and there are several Midrashim dedicated to her. These Midrashim present additional explanations beyond what are found in the limited literal biblical text. Midrashic traditions concerning Yokheved pick up the discrepancy that in early Exodus (1:5) seventy persons of Jacob’s issue came to Egypt, but that in Genesis 46 only sixty-nine names are mentioned, and Yokheved is not one of them. She was born at the entrance to Egypt, the rabbis explain, she came there in utero (BT Sotah 12a; Genesis Rabbah 94.9). Yokheved is compared to Sarah. Just as the first Matriarch conceived later in life, indeed Genesis states that Sarah was post-menopausal, Yokheved’s periods returned to her although she was no less than 130 at Moses’ birth. Since Sarah conceived at age 90, Yokheved’s pregnancy is an even greater miracle. Again, like Sarah, she did not experience pain during his birth (BT Sotah 12a; Exodus Rabbah 1.19, 20. For a more detailed explanation for Yokheved being 130, see Numbers Rabbah 13.20). Linking Yokheved with Sarah pairs the “Mother of Judaism/Israel” (Sarah Ime-inu), with the “Mother of the Exodus.” In fact, Yokheved is credited with giving birth to 600,000, linking her with the traditional number of males who left Egypt at that time (Song of Songs Rabbah 1.15.3).

The rabbis, a product of their time and place want to encourage group cohesiveness, continuity, and shared values. They are conscious of the nations all about; often they are suspicious of the ways and intentions of non-Jews. For example, as an infant Moses refused to nurse from Egyptian breasts, hence the necessity to find a Hebrew midwife for him. “He said: Shall a mouth which will speak with the Shechinah [God’s feminine presence] suck what is unclean! (BT Sotah 12b; for a variation of this explanation see also Exodus Rabbah 1.25).
The rabbis are uncomfortable with the thought that non-Hebrews, indeed Egyptians, might actually be altruistic, although Pharaoh’s daughter is clearly an exception. It is possible that the midwives Shifrah and Puah (Exod 1:15-21) were not native Egyptians, because their names may be Semitic/Canaanite. In principle, they actually may have been Hebrews. Whether they were Hebrew midwives, or midwives to the Hebrews (whether Egyptian or simply Semitic) remains a matter of scholarly discussion. In any case, the rabbis co-opted the midwives Shifrah and Puah, suggesting that they actually were respectively Yokheved and Miriam. A variation of this features Yokheved and Elisheva, her daughter-in-law, the daughter of Amminadav (BT Sotah 11b; Exodus Rabbah 1.13). This merely may be an example of the rabbinic tradition of conflating names (see the example of Yokheved/Hayehudiya below), but the net result is to deny two women (Shifrah and Puah) their own place as courageous female leaders in the history of Israel. By claiming that Yokheved is Shifrah, the midrashic tradition in effect dismisses the uniqueness of the act of Yokheved as the brave woman who hid her child for three months and then prepared a floating basket to set in the Nile.

According to the midrashic tradition Yokheved was named Shifrah because, punning on her name, she cleansed (meshaperet) newborns, washing and cleaning them following childbirth (Exodus Rabbah 1.13). Alternatively, the Shifrah-Yokheved connection is made through her good deeds, by which the Israelites were fruitful [she-paru] and they multiplied in her time (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7.1.3). Or, perhaps another explanation is possible. In associating Yokheved with Shifrah, the rabbis have a way to expand Yokheved’s role in Egypt. First, she acted on behalf of others, serving as a midwife, but then in addition, she in her own right acts with foresight and courage. She protects early Moses at home, and then she thinks of creating the ark, caulks it, and then places it in the water. Further, she makes herself available, through Miriam, to be Moses’ wet nurse so that, as noted above, he would not be dependent on non-Israelites for his sustenance (Exodus Rabbah 1.25).

Exodus 1:21 says that God “established households” for the midwives. By linking the midwives to Yokheved and Miriam, rabbinic Midrash suggests that these women in turn produce Moses and Bezalel (BT Sotah 11b; Exodus Rabbah 40.1; 48.4). Another tradition based on this same verse in Exodus suggests that Yokheved created both a royal line through Moses and a priestly one through Aaron (Exodus Rabbah 48.4).
Midrash Proverbs highlights Yokheved’s special place in history. Building on the verse, *The wisest of women builds her house* (Prov 14:1) the Midrash explains this is Yokheved who reared three righteous children, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. All three children served Israel, and provided for them; and all three were prophets (*Midrash Proverbs* 14.1).

Amram and Yokheved had been married with two children, Miriam and Aaron. Then in the face of Pharaoh’s command to kill all newborn male Israelite children (Exod 1:22), the couple divorced (*BT Sotah* 12a; *Pesikta Rabbati* 43.4). Their specific reunion, citing them by name, was directed by none other than God (*Numbers Rabbah* 3.6).

That Amram and Yokheved first separated/divorced to avoid producing more children, and their subsequent remarriage, a familiar Midrash, really highlights the role of Miriam, not Yokheved herself. Likewise, that Amram publicly celebrated their remarriage, placing Yokheved on a bridal litter with Aaron on one side, and Miriam on the other carrying castanets and marching before her, and the allusions to the Hallel psalms (Ps. 113:9; 114:1) focus more on them than on Yokheved. (*BT Sotah* 12a; *Pesikta Rabbati* 43.4). A tradition lists Amram as one of seven patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Kohat [or Levi], Amram, Moses and Aaron) (*Pesikta Rabbati* 8.4) but there is no parallel list with seven women (Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, Zilpah + Yokheved) featuring Yokheved. On the other hand, both Amram and Yokheved are named as the man and the woman whom Ecclesiastes had in mind in his statement “I have not found a man, I have not found a woman …” (Eccl 7.28). Whether this is, or is not a compliment for Yokheved is a matter of debate (*Leviticus Rabbah* 2.1).

Yokheved’s inherent respect for God, explain the rabbis, merited her giving birth to Moses (*Exodus Rabbah* 1.16). No doubt this is a pun on her name, for as noted earlier Yokheved probably means something like Yo/Yah is glorified/honored. An alternative name for Yokheved was Hayehudiya, so called because she brought Jews (Yehudim) into the world (*Leviticus Rabbah* 1.3, based on 1 Chr 4:18). Yokheved suckles Moses for two years (*Exodus Rabbah* 1.26). Yokheved is long-lived, indeed she outlives her children, all who die in the last year of the exodus wilderness wandering. To credit Yokheved with so many years is astonishing, as is her surviving the death of her husband and children. According to *Seder Olam Rabbah* 9 she enters Canaan and is buried, according to local custom, in the Kever Ha-Imahot/the tomb of the Matriarchs (Bilhah, ...
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zilpah, [jacob’s secondary wives], zipporah [moses’ wife], elisheva [Aaron’s wife], abigail [David’s wife] and yokheved.)

the mefarshim (medieval bible commentators) including rashi (rabbi shlomo ben isaac, 11th c. france) and ramban (rabbi moshe ben nachman, 13th c. spain) basically offer explanations based on previously noted midrashic material like the notion that miriam urged her father to take back his wife, and that miriam and aaron danced joyfully before the bridal palanquin. ibn ezra points out that the phase “how beautiful” (ki tov hu) Moses was in the sight of his mother means not beauty but that the child was good in a physical sense. He also suggests that, contrary to some midrashic explanations, that Moses was a full-term pregnancy. In terms of yokheved putting the basket in the nile (although he does say yokheved, but rather simply the mother), ibn ezra (rabbi abraham ibn ezra, 12th c. spain) also draws a parallel to hagar who did not want to see her child die (Gen 21:16). Hizkuni (R. Hezekiah ben Manoah, mid-13th c. france) takes note of the “forbidden” consanguineous relationship between Amram and yokheved. He comments, “A leader must carry some baggage that will prevent him from lording it over the public. David’s Moabite ancestry served the same function.” (Comment on Exod 6:20).

coincidentally, reference is made to Moses’ (anonymized) parents in the christian scriptures. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, the author writes: “By faith Moses was hidden by his parents, for three months after he was born, because they saw that he was a beautiful child and were not afraid of the king’s order” (Heb 11:23). Here again, Amram is credited with hiding Moses. Yokheved, although again unnamed, is also featured in the Qur’an.

And We revealed to Musa's mothers, saying: Give him suck, then when you fear for him, cast him into the river and do not fear nor grieve; surely, We will bring him back to you and make him one of the messengers. (Qur’an 28:7).

nineteenth/twentieth/twenty-first century references

in mid-19th century england, the popular and prolific author grace aguilar (1816-1847) draws attention to Moses’ mother. In the Women of Israel (published 1844) Aguilar devotes a chapter to Yokheved. Written in the flowery style of that period, ascribing many virtues to Yokheved, including wisdom, energy, and prayerfulness, Aguilar describes what took place. The “prayers of the mother had not been in vain. Her God was with her, endowing her with wisdom and energy . . . Fearful must have been the struggle of natural terrors and spiritual confidence, filling the
mother’s mind, ere the plan she eventually followed was matured and executed.” Aguilar then continues with the building of the ark and Yokheved placing it in the Nile.

“Gifted with unusual foresight and wisdom for the task, Jochebed carefully daubed it [the ark] with slime and pitch . . . and laid it on the flags by the river’s brink . . . And for herself? – where, where shall she find rest, from the anxiety and suffering of that fearful hour? Where, but at the footstool of her God, in whose gracious hand she has placed her babe? What could calm that heart but prayer?”

Aguilar next, again in her ornate style, explains the direct application for her contemporary understanding for her audience:

“And what will not this beautiful narrative teach us? As Jochebed, we too are in a land of bondage. Indeed, in free and happy England, not a bondage of suffering and persecution, but yet as exiles from our own land, and, alas! too often, exiles from our God . . . does it not devolve on the mothers of Israel to do even as Jochebed, and so influence the childhood of their sons, as to render them indeed faithful to their God, meek and forgiving towards man, and invulnerable to every temptation held forth by the opposers of their faith?”

Notably, in contrast to the writers of the late Second Temple period, and being faithful to the biblical text, Aguilar does not include Amram aiding Yokheved. In fact, she suggests that he is so despondent with the terrible life in Egypt that he cannot even think about his family (p. 129).

A century later, the well-respected author, community leader, and educator Elma Ehrlich Levinger (1887-1958) would write many books, many of which were directed toward children. Levinger features Yokheved in her book *Great Jewish Women* (1940). Born and reared in Chicago, Levinger studied at the University of Chicago and Radcliffe. For a time she worked for the Bureau of Jewish Education in New York City. Later she married Rabbi Lee Levinger. In addition to her own works, together they wrote a number of books on Jewish subjects. In *Great Jewish Women* Levinger features many Jewish women, from ancient times, as well as the Talmudic period, and then in the more modern period. Yokheved’s story follows that of Sarah, Rebeccah, Rachel and Leah, and precedes that of, among many others, Miriam, Deborah, and Jephthah’s daughter. In the five pages devoted to Yokheved, while Miriam is mentioned, Amram is not. The plan to hide Moses and construct the basket from bulrushes is Yokheved’s alone. Like Aguilar, who is one of the “great Jewish women” featured in the book, Levinger also ascribes to Yokheved similar virtues of courage, prayerfulness and trust in God.

In Russia in the 19th century, Jewish boys were conscripted into the Czarist army. Jewish parents faced the dilemma of how to protect their sons, trying to hide them or send them away. In like manner, the parents who volunteered their children for the Kinderttransport, which sent 10,000
children from Austria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Germany to England in the months before WW2 acted very much in the tradition of Yokheved. When referring to the Yokheved character in *The Five Books of Miriam*, Ellen Frankel writes of “parallels between this story [of Yokheved and Moses] and the Holocaust . . . the burden fell more heavily on mothers and sisters, especially as the men were rounded up and separated from their wives and children.”

Several Twentieth-century scholars focus on Yokheved’s acts in chapter two, and also her relationship to Amram in chapter six. Umberto Cassuto in his *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* goes into great detail in his analysis of the mother’s actions in chapter two. He describes her great suffering knowing that the child is in such danger. He writes of the “profound anxiety in the mother’s heart.” He suggests that she acts with great care in all that she does, and how she appoints her daughter to stand at a distance and to watch what will happen. In his remarks on chapter six he does not address the consanguineous Amram-Yokheved relationship, in fact he does not mention Yokheved by name. Brevard S. Childs features a fair amount of space to Yokheved’s actions in chapter two. He offers explanations for her actions and he speculates on her emotional state. Although of note because she is the mother of Moses, Yokheved in and of herself often does not become a line of inquiry. William Propp merely notes that “Amram and Jochebed are conceived to be exempt from the yet ungiven law . . . [i.e. Lev. 18:12; 20:19; he further states that] inclusion of wives in a genealogy is somewhat unusual.” The meaning of her very name itself is a bit problematic, and in any case, no “personal name formed with the component yo (Heb. יֹ) is otherwise attested before the time of Moses.”

When, however, including popular culture as another expression of biblical scholarship, Yokheved receives greater attention. She appears in the epic film of its decade, Cecil B. DeMille’s “The Ten Commandments” (1956). Yet here again, her role is downplayed and diminished. Indeed, her very name is changed from Yokheved to Jochabel. Just over forty years later, no doubt influenced by the rise of feminism, Yokheved is not only named Yokheved, in the movie “Moses Prince of Egypt” (1998) she sings a lullaby to baby Moses as she sets the basket in the Nile. She asks the river to deliver Moses “somewhere he can live free” (DreamWorks Animation). In the attendant publicity for the film, Yokheved is described as both kind and motherly, who loves all her children, and who risked her life to save Moses. Over the years, there have been other motion picture and TV dramas, which feature Yokheved in a supporting role as Moses’ mother.
A recent self-described *Women’s Seder Sourcebook* for Passover, features a poem titled “Yocheved Works.” There she is praised as she labors “to build an ark / . . . to set a son / . . . to nurse an infant / . . . to save a child / to mold a man / to be a mother.”24 The modern composer Andrea Clearfield features Yokheved as one of her women-heroes in a Cantata “Women of Valor” (2000).25 Sarah Barack Fishman mentions Yokheved, alongside Miriam and Pharaoh’s daughter as an example of someone showing “powerful political savvy and courage,” but again this is just a short reference, not an extended essay.26 A present-day writer takes note of the attention paid to Yokheved (as well as the midwives and Miriam) but she concludes that the positive portrayal of the women is mitigated because their actions are merely there to perpetuate masculine concerns. “The . . . women clearly demonstrate cleverness, courage, and determination. But they are celebrated in this text not for their individual accomplishments, but for their success in advancing the patriarchal agenda: establishing a male leader for the community.”27

As noted earlier, Yokheved’s daughter Miriam has captured the attention of authors in the past perhaps to the diminishment of Yokheved. In modern times, Miriam again features much more prominently than her mother. Miriam is a stable for feminist writers, as evidenced for example by references to her as taking up the timbrels and leading the women in song at the Sea of Reeds (Debbie Friedman’s “Miriam’s Song”). There are many Midrashic references to Miriam’s well, which nourished the Israelites in the desert; and in modern times, there is the tradition of adding a cup of water (*Kos Miryam*/Miriam’s Cup) on the Seder plate, parallel to the wine cup for Elijah.28

**CONCLUSION**

Although she is not identified by name when she first appears in Exodus 2, Yokheved’s daring acts to preserve the life of Moses receive serious attention in the Torah text. The background information for her deeds, why she needs to do what she does is presented in chapter one. While the wider story would include the first ten verses in chapter two, the anonymized Yokheved is directly featured in seven of these verses. She is identified as a member of the tribe of Levi, married to a Levite man, who then conceives and bears a son. She first hides him and then creates a basket for him, which she places near the Nile. She becomes the child’s wet nurse. Whether she
or the princess names Moses is debatable. While she remains anonymous until chapter six, the amount of detail concerning her actions, and the fact that she seems to work alone, is noteworthy for the amount of material devoted to a woman’s deeds. Yokheved is finally identified by name in chapter six. Her identification is within the context of her husband Amram’s life. Yokheved is specifically identified as Amram’s aunt, and the text explains that in addition to Moses, she first bore a son Aaron. Numbers 26 features the final biblical reference to Yokheved. There she is identified by name, and specifically that she is Levi’s daughter, a matter of importance because it links her to the founding fathers of the twelve tribes.

In the late period of the Second Temple and for some time afterwards, a variety of works were produced which parallel teachings that are located in the books of Genesis and Exodus. Primary among them in terms of Yokheved are the works of Jubilees, Josephus’ Antiquities of the Jews, and the Biblical Antiquities (also known as Pseudo-Philo). Yokheved is also mentioned in The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs. Jubilees adds additional data not found in the book of Exodus. Following his being hidden near the Nile for a week Yokheved comes and secretly suckles Moses. Jubilees characterizes Yokheved as a brave woman, one who daringly puts her life at risk in order to protect her child. Nonetheless, as in the Exodus account there is a delay in mentioning her actual name. In The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, the text offers an explanation for her specific name, as well as reporting that Yokheved and her husband Amram were born on the same day. Both of these items focus more on males in her life (her father, her husband) than on her. Josephus in the Antiquities of the Jews downplays Yokheved’s role and credits much of the events to Amram. This reflects Josephus’ often-misogynist tendencies.

There are several Midrashic references to Yokheved. Yokheved is favorably compared to Sarah. A number of Midrashim conflate the names and deeds of the midwife Shifrah and that of Yokheved. Elsewhere Yokheved is praised for rearing three righteous children. Yokheved’s inherent respect for God merited her giving birth to Moses. This puns on her name, for Yokheved probably means something like Yo/Yah is glorified/honored. An alternative name for Yokheved was Hayehudiya, so called because she brought Jews (Yehudim) into the world, explain the rabbis. According to rabbinic tradition, Yokheved lives through the forty years in the wilderness. She then enters Canaan and is buried, according to local custom, in the Kever Ha-Imahot/the tomb of the Matriarchs. That she outlives her children is quite remarkable. Many of the Mefarshim (Me-
dieval Biblical commentators) simply repeat midrashic ideas about Yokheved, rather than analyzing what she does.

In mid-19th century England, a new way of presenting Yokheved is featured when the popular author Grace Aguilar devotes a chapter to Yokheved in her book Women of Israel (1844). Aguilar credits Yokheved with many virtues including wisdom, energy, and prayerfulness. In the mid-20th century, Erma Ehrlich Levinger, a popular and prolific author also devotes a chapter to Yokheved in her book Great Jewish Women (1940). In this work, in the five pages dedicated to Yokheved, while Miriam is mentioned, Amram is not. It is solely Yokheved’s plan to hide Moses and construct the basket from bulrushes. Like Aguilar, Levinger ascribes similar virtues to Yokheved: courage, prayerfulness, and trust in God. These works are important because they highlight the deeds of strong Jewish women, providing both biographies and moral lessons for their contemporary readers.

Several 20th scholars focus on Yokheved’s acts in chapter two, and also her relationship to Amram in chapter six. Umberto Cassuto analyzes the mother’s actions in chapter two, describing her great suffering knowing that the child is in such danger. Childs offers explanations for her actions and speculates on her emotional state.

At mid-twentieth century America, Yokheved appears in Cecil B. De Mille’s epic “The Ten Commandments” (1956), but her role is limited. At the end of the century, in the DreamWorks Animation film, “Moses Prince of Egypt” (1998) Yokheved has a larger role; she sings a lullaby to baby Moses as she sets the basket in the Nile. She asks the river to deliver Moses “somewhere he can live free.” Expanding her role, and naming her by name reflects sensitivity to greater gender equality. Yokheved appears in several modern Haggadot and is one of the figures in composer Andrea Clearfield’s Cantata, “Women of Valor.”

Over the past decades, there are many examples that have highlighted the role of women. Athalya Brenner and Alice Shalvi, among many others have championed feminist writings and commentaries. The Torah: A Women’s Commentary (2007, edited by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss) is a marvelous example of works underscoring the place of women in the Torah. Aviva Cayam’s observation noted towards the beginning of this article, that in the Bible “God’s directives, miracles and promises are most often transmitted to men, while women’s lives form the backdrop for many biblical lessons” have been ably supplemented in the modern era.
That said, there is still much to be written, and Yokheved and her deeds deserve greater attention.

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7 James L. Kugel, “The Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha,” In *Outside the Bible: An-


11 Yokheved’s appearances in the Bible are limited, therefore one might expect less midrashic commentaries, yet biblical citations as such are not a good gauge of midrashic interest. Serach bat Asher appears but three times (Gen 46:17 [repeated in 1 Chron 7:30], and Numbers 26:46), yet there are many Midrashim about her.

12 Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Rashbam and Ramban follow the tradition that the midwives were Israelites; Philo and Josephus take a different position. Nehama Leibowitz, Studies in Shmot, (Exodus). (Jerusalem: Haomanim Press, 1976), 32-33.


14 World Heritage Site http://wiki.worldjewishheritage.com/Tomb_of_the_Matriarchs


16 Grace Aguilar. The Women of Israel. (London: Groombridge and Sons, 1870), 128-130; 133-134.


To cite but one book, Frieda Stolzberg Korobkin writes about how her parents, and more specifically her father, decided that she and her brother were to be sent on the Kindertransport to
England. Frieda Stolzberg Korobkin, *Throw Your Feet Over Your Shoulders: Beyond the Kindertransport*, (New York: Devorah, 2008), 18-19. Korobkin offers a conscious link to Yokheved/Moshe for Yokheved was her mother’s name (ix-x).


23 [filmography] [http://www.imdb.com/character/ch0006247/?ref_=ttfc_fc_cl_t13](http://www.imdb.com/character/ch0006247/?ref_=ttfc_fc_cl_t13)


