

THE BABE IN THE BULRUSHES

by Amy Steedman

Steedman's collection of biblical narratives featuring Moses, Ruth, and Samuel—three figures found in humble circumstances—illustrating themes of divine providence and the potential for greatness from unlikely origins.

5 Chapters

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The Babe In The Bulrushes

THE FINDING OF MOSES

Many long years had passed since the days when Joseph's brothers and their families had settled in the land of Egypt. They were a great nation in numbers now, but the Egyptians still ruled over them, and used them as servants. The Pharaoh who had been so kind to the shepherds from Canaan was dead long ago, and the new kings, or Pharaohs as they were called, hated foreigners, and began to treat the Israelites very harshly. There were too many of them, they said; it was dangerous to have so many strong, powerful slaves. They must be kept down, and made to work from morning till night, and be beaten if they did not work fast enough. That was very hard for the poor people; but worse was to come. An order was issued one day which spread sorrow through all the land of Goshen, where the Israelites lived. Every baby boy that was born was to be thrown into the river. Girl babies might be allowed to live, for they would be useful as slaves, but boys might grow up to fight for their country, and so they must be destroyed. In one little house, not far from the great river Nile, a woman sat holding her tiny baby in her arms, while the tears ran down her cheeks. He was such a beautiful baby, so strong and fair and healthy; but the king's order was that he was to be thrown into the river, where the cruel, hungry crocodiles were waiting to snap up everything they could find for a meal. Jochebed, the poor mother, held her baby closer in her arms. No, she could not obey the king's order. She would try and hide the baby for a little while, at any rate. It was easy to hide a baby while he was still tiny and slept most of the day; but when he grew bigger it was much more difficult. His sister Miriam did her best to help her mother; but any day, now that the baby was three months old, he might be discovered, and something must be done at once. So Jochebed thought of a plan, and prayed to God that He would help her to carry it out. At the edge of the river there grew tall bulrushes, which, when cut down and dried, could be made into many useful things. Taking some of these bulrushes, she wove them into a little cradle with a cover to it, just like a little ark, and this she covered with a kind of pitch, so that not a drop of water could come through. Inside the cradle she made a soft bed, and laid the baby there while he was fast asleep, and set the ark afloat in the water where the bulrushes were growing. She knew that presently the great princess, Pharaoh's daughter, would come down to bathe in the river, and would notice the queer little ark floating there. [Illustration: She laid the baby there while he was fast asleep.] Very soon the royal procession came winding down from the palace towards the river, as the princess in her gorgeous robes made her way to bathe in the pool of the lotus flowers. But at the edge of the river she stopped. What was that among the bulrushes? It was no lotus flower, but a strange-looking covered basket, and she ordered her maidens to bring it to her. The little ark was lifted out of the water and carried to the princess. There was surely something alive inside, and the princess was full of curiosity as she leaned down and lifted the cover to look in. Then she started back in amazement. The dearest little baby she had ever seen lay there, all rosy and fresh after his sleep, gazing up at her with wide-open eyes. The maidens crowded round, and the sight of all those strange faces was more than the baby could bear. He puckered up his face and began to cry. The princess loved babies, and she had none of her own. That little wailing cry went to her heart. She guessed at once that this was one of the Hebrew babies which had been ordered to be destroyed, and she made up her mind that this beautiful boy

should at least be saved. All this time Miriam had been watching from her hiding-place close by, and with anxious, beating heart she came forward now. Could she help the princess? she asked. Should she run and find some Hebrew woman who might look after the baby? Perhaps the princess guessed that the baby's mother would not be far off, and she must have smiled a little when a nurse was so quickly found. But she took no notice of that. "Take this child away," she said, when Jochebed stood humbly before her, "and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages." It was merely as a nurse that the mother was hired. The great princess meant to adopt the baby as her own. But he was safe, and Jochebed's heart was full of gratitude to God as she took her little son into her arms again. As long as he needed a nurse the baby was left to be looked after by his mother in the little house by the river-side. The princess called him Moses, which means "drawn out," because he had been drawn out of the water, and she had made up her mind that as soon as he was old enough he should come to live with her at the palace, and be brought up as a prince. He would be treated just as if he was really her son. [Illustration: She taught him about God.] But his poor mother had him for those first precious years while he was still a little boy, and she did not waste one minute of that time in her training of him. She taught him about God, and told him all the wonderful stories about his own country, so that he should never forget that he belonged to God's people, even when he should become a prince in the Egyptian palace. Just as a gardener sows seeds in a garden which afterwards grow up into beautiful flowers, so she sowed the seeds of truth in the heart of her little son, which long afterwards were to blossom out and bear such wonderful fruit. [Illustration: Beating him unmercifully with a long whip.] Then when Moses was old enough to do without a nurse, she took him to the palace, and "brought him unto Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son." But deep down in his heart he never forgot his own people. It happened one day that he saw one of the Egyptian taskmasters treating one of the poor Israelite slaves with great cruelty, beating him most unmercifully with a long whip. This made Moses so angry that he rushed in to defend the slave, and dealt the taskmaster such a blow that it killed him. But instead of being grateful the Israelites would not trust him, and began to whisper the tale of how he had killed the Egyptian, so that Moses was obliged to flee for his life, leaving behind all the riches and honours he had enjoyed so long. A very different kind of life began now for Moses. He journeyed far into the desert and joined company there with an Arab tribe, and wandered from place to place feeding their flocks and living the life of a shepherd. But God had more difficult work for him to do than feeding sheep, and one day when he was in the desert he saw a strange sight. A bush was growing there, and in the middle of the bush a fire was burning, and the strange thing was that although the fire kept on burning fiercely the bush was not burnt at all. It was the Angel of the Lord that was in the midst of the fire, and as Moses drew near God called him by his name, and told him that he was to go back and set his people free from the tyranny of Pharaoh and lead them into the Promised Land. [Illustration: In the middle of the bush a fire was burning.] At first Moses said it was impossible for him to do this. His own people would not trust him, and he was no great speaker; he would certainly fail. But God bade him do his best, and Aaron his brother would speak for him; and above all God would be his helper. [Illustration: "Arise, go over this Jordan, thou, and all this people." Joshua i.2.] So Moses returned to the land of Egypt and boldly asked Pharaoh to allow the people to go and worship God. Time after time Pharaoh refused, although God sent dreadful plagues to warn him. At last, however, when the angel of death killed all the eldest sons of the Egyptians, Pharaoh was terrified and said the people might go at once and take all their belongings with them. [Illustration: The Land of Canaan lay stretched out before him.] It was

a great company of people that set out, and Moses the great leader guided them on their way. They had many adventures, and braved many dangers and difficulties, but God was always their shield and defence. He delivered them by parting the waters of the Red Sea and allowing them to walk over dry-shod when Pharaoh and his army were pursuing them. And when the pursuers tried to follow them, the waters rolled back, and the whole great army were swept away by the returning tide. Yet in spite of God's care and goodness towards them, these Israelites were often ungrateful, and complained bitterly when they suffered any want. And it was always Moses whom they blamed. Moses was very patient with them; but once he was so angry that he was tempted to disobey God's direction, and as a punishment God told him that though he should see the Promised Land from afar he would never enter it himself. There on the mountain top he stood, gazing into the far distance, where the Land of Canaan, that fair land flowing with milk and honey, lay stretched out before him. Then he bowed his head to God's will. The murmuring people never saw their great leader again. He "was not, for God took him."

RUTH, THE GLEANER

Along the hot, dusty road that led from the country of Moab to the fair land of Judah three women were walking with bowed heads and weary, halting steps. Their sorrowful, heavy eyes took no pleasure in the summer beauty of the harvest fields, the shimmering silver of the olive trees, and the rich promise of the vineyards which bordered their way. The whole world looked sad to them, seen through a mist of tears. There behind them, in the land of Moab, each of these women had left green graves, which held all they loved best. Naomi, the eldest, was perhaps the most desolate. Her thoughts went back to the time when she was as young and fair as the two daughters-in-law who walked at her side -- when with her husband and her two boys she had trod that very road, seeking a home in a strange country to escape the famine which threatened them in her own land. Now she was returning to her native town of Bethlehem, a childless, lonely widow. The younger women, who were the wives of those two dead sons, were very sorrowful too, but for them there might yet be happiness in the world. They still had near and dear relatives and many friends in Moab, which was their native land. They had come far enough now, and it was time for them to return. "Turn again, my daughters," said Naomi, "and go your way." Their homes lay behind, and she must journey on alone to the little hill town which she had not seen for so many long years. They had kindly come so far to see her on her way, but they must come no farther. So the little party halted, and one of the young women, weeping bitterly, kissed her mother-in-law and turned to go back. But the other one, whose name was Ruth, clung to Naomi, and would not leave her. In vain the elder woman urged her to return, and pointed out that Orpah had gone, that home and friends and happiness awaited her there, while in front was only poverty and loneliness. Ruth only clung the closer as she sobbed out her tender, loving words. "Entreat me not to leave thee," she said, "or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me." The tender words brought comfort to the heart of Naomi, as soft rain brings refreshment to the hard, dry earth. After all, she was not quite alone; she still had some one to love and care for. So together they journeyed on again, and at last came to the winding road which led up to the town of Bethlehem, nestling like a white bird upon the long ridge of hills. Naomi knew every step of the way. It seemed almost like a dream to tread on more that winding road, to pass through the city gates and find her way to the little house she knew so well. Although she had been gone so many years there were still people who remembered her, and these came running out to greet her. "Is this Naomi?" they asked wonderingly. They could scarcely believe that this sad, broken-down woman could be the pleasant-faced, happy girl who had gone away with her husband and boys in the year of the great famine. But as they listened to her story they did not wonder that she seemed so old and talked so bitterly. It made them look very kindly upon the beautiful girl who kept so close to her mother-in-law, who had given up everything rather than leave her alone. [Illustration: He spoke very kindly.] Naomi had been quite right when she had told Ruth that poverty lay before them. She had come back quite empty-handed, and it was necessary to find some work at once which would at least provide them with daily bread. Ruth, looking out over the fields where already the barley

was being cut, made up her mind to go and work there. The poor were always allowed to follow the reapers and glean the stray ears of corn that fell unnoticed. She might at least gather enough to feed her mother-in-law and herself. Very happily, then, Ruth set out, and found her way into the harvest field, which belonged to a rich man called Boaz. The reapers treated her kindly when she timidly asked for permission to glean there, and when the master arrived to see how the harvest went, he too noticed her at once, for she was very beautiful. "Whose damsel is this?" he asked. There were many people ready to tell him her name, and also to tell him how she had left her land and her people to come with Naomi, her mother-in-law. The story had been repeated all through the town. Boaz listened with interest. Naomi was his kins-woman, and it was only right that he should help her. He would begin by helping the sweet-faced daughter-in-law who had chanced to come gleaning upon his land. So he went and spoke very kindly to the beautiful Ruth, and told her to come every day to his harvest field and share the reapers' food, and he would see that no one troubled her. He even told the reapers to let some handfuls of corn fall in her way, on purpose, so that there might be plenty for her to glean. [Illustration: The two loving hearts rejoiced in their happiness.] So each day Ruth went back and worked in the harvest fields, and each day as Boaz watched her he grew to love the gentle, loving-hearted woman more and more. And when at last the harvest days were over, he went to Naomi and asked that Ruth might become his wife. There was no more poverty or hard work now for Ruth or Naomi, no anxious days of wondering how long their flour and oil would last. Boaz was very rich, and nothing was too good for his fair young wife, whom he had first seen humbly gleaning in his harvest field. Happiness, too, began to steal back into the life of Naomi. Winter and spring passed, and when harvest time came round once more, all the sorrow and bitterness faded from her heart, for God sent a little child to comfort her. A baby son was born to Ruth, and the whole world seemed full of sunshine and happiness as she laid him in his grandmother's arms, and the two loving hearts rejoiced in their happiness, just as they had clung together in their sorrow. Of course, they dreamed many happy dreams over the little downy head, and planned a splendid future for the baby, as all mothers and grandmothers will do. But even their dreams never touched the golden reality, for they did not know that he was to be the grandfather of King David, that in this same little town of Bethlehem there was to be born of his line a greater King yet, the King of Heaven.

SAMUEL, THE LITTLE SERVER

It was some years after Ruth's son had been born in Bethlehem that another mother was made glad by the precious gift of a little son. This mother's name was Hannah, and her baby was a special joy to her because she had so longed to have a son and had prayed so earnestly to God for this great gift. There was no doubt about the baby's name. He was called "Samuel," which means "God has heard." [Illustration: "Samuel answered, Speak; for Thy servant heareth." 1 Sam. iii.10.] For had not God listened to his mother's prayers and given her her heart's desire? [Illustration: The time came that she should take him to Eli.] Hannah held her baby close in her arms. He was her very own, and yet he belonged also to God. She had promised, if her prayer was heard, that she would lend him to God, to serve Him in His Holy Temple. Only for a little while could she keep the baby all to herself. The months passed and then the years, and Samuel grew old enough to run about and take care of himself, needing no longer to be carried in his mother's arms. Then the time came that she should take him to Eli, the priest of God, and leave him to be brought up in the Temple and taught to be a servant of God. Perhaps at first Samuel cried for his mother, for he was only a very little boy, and must have felt strange and lonely without her; but he very soon grew happy again, and learnt to love the old priest and the new life. It was his mother who suffered most. She missed him so sorely, and mothers do not forget as quickly as children do. But although she had lent him to God, he was still hers too; and every year she went back to see him, and through the long months in between, her fingers were busy making him a little coat of a beautiful blue stuff, sewed with a border of exquisite embroidery, blue and purple and scarlet, that was like a wreath of pomegranates. Just as certain as his birthday came round his mother came and brought with her his little coat, and as he grew bigger every year the coat was bigger too. Now, as soon as Samuel was old enough he went with Eli, the old priest, into God's house to learn how to help in God's service. Just as we sometimes see now a very little boy helping the priest at God's altar, so Samuel was like a little server as he helped Eli, and he too wore a linen surplice, or ephod as it was called. Although he was such a little boy, Samuel already showed that he was straightforward, brave, and obedient, a boy who could be trusted. He did his work faithfully, and when Eli began to grow feeble and his sight became dim, the little server was ready with his clear sight and eager footsteps to be both eyes and feet to the old priest. But besides growing old and feeble, Eli was also growing more and more unhappy day by day. His two sons were wicked and disobedient, and, what was worse, they were teaching God's people to be wicked too. Eli would not punish them as they deserved, so at last the time came when God took the punishment into His own hands. Only He would warn Eli before-hand, for the old priest was His servant. So one night God's message came, spoken by God's own voice -- spoken not to the great priest, but to the humble little server. It was evening time. All the work of the day was over, and Eli had gone to rest. The lamp in the temple was burning dimly, sometimes flickering as if it would go out altogether, and leave the holy place in darkness. Samuel, tired with his day's service, was fast asleep, when suddenly he woke up, startled and attentive. Some one had called his name: "Samuel, Samuel." "Here am I," answered the boy at once. Perhaps the old priest was ill, and wanted him. Hastily Samuel slipped out of bed, and ran to Eli. But the old man was lying there

quite calmly, and when Samuel asked why he had called, he answered quietly, "I called not; lie down again." It was very strange; but perhaps he had been dreaming, so Samuel went back and crept into bed, and very soon was once more fast asleep. Then again the voice came: "Samuel." This time Samuel was sure it was no dream, and he ran to Eli and cried to him, "Here am I, for thou didst call me." "I called not, my son," said Eli. "Lie down again." But when it happened a third time, and the little white figure stood by the priest's bed, declaring positively, "Thou didst call me," Eli suddenly realized that perhaps it was God whose voice the boy had heard. "Go, lie down," he said gently to the bewildered child, "and it shall be if He call thee that thou shalt say, 'Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth.'" One great lesson Samuel had learnt, and that was to do exactly what he was told, never questioning. So now he went back to bed without another word. Did Eli mean that it was the Lord who had called him? The great God who was so wonderful, whose Ark was in the Holy Place behind the veil of blue and purple and scarlet, guarded by cherubim? He had only seemed like a far-off name to Samuel. Could it really be God's own voice that had called Samuel? If that was so, then the great unknown God must all the time have known the little servant in His house. Then again the voice sounded: "Samuel, Samuel." This time Samuel was listening with all his might, and obediently his answer rang out fearlessly and clearly -- "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth." [Illustration: "I called not, my son."] God knew that His little servant was fit to be trusted with a message, although it was a terrible one; and He told Samuel that a dreadful punishment was to fall upon the old priest Eli and his wicked sons, and so awful would it be that even the ears of the people who heard about it should tingle. There was no more sleep for Samuel that night. God's voice rang in his ears; his heart was filled with the thought that Eli would ask him what God had said, and he would have to tell him that dreadful message. At last the morning light began to steal in, and it was time to open the doors of God's house. The little server in his linen ephod was at his post as usual, but to-day his shining morning face was clouded and troubled, and there must have been a look of awe in his clear eyes. The call he dreaded came all too soon, and for the first time the sound of Eli's voice was unwelcome in his ears. "Samuel, my son," called the old man. Immediately Samuel went and stood at his side, "Here am I," he said. "What is it that the Lord hath said unto thee?" asked Eli. His eyes were very dim, but he felt sure that the boy had a troubled and fearful look. "I pray thee hide it not from me: God do so to thee, and more also, if thou hide anything from me of all the things that He said unto thee." The very worst must be told, and Samuel knew he must hide nothing now. He repeated God's message word for word, and Eli bowed his head as he listened. The poor old priest had been a weak father, but he was a faithful servant, and knew that God was just. "It is the Lord," he said: "let Him do what seemeth Him good." From that day all things were different to Samuel, and year by year as he grew older he learned more and more to love and serve the God who had spoken to him and trusted him. So also as the years went by the people who worshipped at the Temple began to know that the little child who had been such a faithful server was chosen for a post of great honour -- that he had been called, indeed, to be a prophet of the Lord. * * * * *

BOOKS IN THIS SERIES

JOSEPH THE DREAMER THE BABE IN THE BULRUSHES DAVID THE SHEPHERD BOY THE
CHILD JESUS THE GOOD PHYSICIAN THE GOOD SHEPHERD * * * * *

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