

MIRIAM'S SONG

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Revell

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Smith, Jill Eileen, 1958– author.

Title: Miriam’s song / Jill Eileen Smith.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2021]

Identifiers: LCCN 2020019551 | ISBN 9780800739706 (casebound) | ISBN 9780800734725 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Miriam (Biblical figure)—Fiction. | Moses (Biblical leader)—Fiction. | Exodus, The—Fiction. | Christian fiction. | GSAFD: Bible fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3619.M58838 M57 2021 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020019551>

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Published in association with Books & Such Literary Management, 52 Mission Circle, Suite 122, PMB 170, Santa Rosa, CA 95409-5370, www.booksandsuch.com.

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Keaton and Jade.
Gramma loves you.
This story is for you.

PART ONE

Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. “Look,” he said to his people, “the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.”

So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly.

Exodus 1:8–13 NIV

PROLOGUE

1526 BC

Hatshepsut peeked through a slit in a curtain that allowed her to watch her father in his audience chamber and listen to his magicians and advisors speak to him. She had escaped her servants and tutors as she often did to watch Pharaoh Thutmose I in his jeweled clothes, his crook and flail crossed before him and the sign of the cobra on his head. One day she would wear that crown, she promised herself. It was a big dream for a young girl, but she had never wanted anything more.

It was all in fun, she'd told her mother when she scolded Hatshepsut for her daydreams. But in her heart Hatshepsut knew better. She *would* wear her father's crown, and since she was the only child of his first wife, she knew, even in her seven years on earth, that she held a highly favored position. She let the curtain fall back into place lest she be seen but sat quietly, straining to hear the men.

"My lord," one said, "the Hebrews only grow stronger, despite the added work we give them. They breed like cattle even when we beat them with whips and rods. What can we do?"

Silence followed the desperate question. She peered again through the slit and held her breath. If she were caught here, her father would ban her from the audience chamber. But she had to know. What did her father plan to do with the Hebrews?

“You have sent them to the fields and forced them to make their own mortar to go with the bricks?”

“Yes, my lord. We have upped their quotas and put them in rocky fields and forced them to make the land smooth. Nothing works,” the man said.

Hatshepsut released her breath as quietly as she could. They had to be cruel to people who could oppress them. That’s what her father had said many times. She watched him stroke the fake beard he wore on his normally smooth chin. His eyes were slits, painted with kohl, and they narrowed even more now.

“Then we will have to resort to harsher means,” he said. “Call to me the Hebrew midwives.”

Hatshepsut scrunched her brow, mimicking the surprised looks on the faces of her father’s men. What were midwives? And how could they help against so fierce a people as the Hebrews?

“Yes, my king,” two or three men said at once. They retreated backwards from the pharaoh’s presence, and Hatshepsut leaned on her heels and placed both hands around her knees. Her father would not wait long for these midwives to appear before him. No one resisted a summons from the pharaoh.

So she would wait. And learn. She wished she could ask her mother or her servants what a midwife was or why her father wanted to speak to them, but she would figure it out

if she could just sit here quietly and not be discovered. Her stomach growled, and she almost rose to hurry to the palace cooking rooms to coax the cooks for a treat, but she didn't want to miss whatever happened next.



An hour passed and Hatshepsut grew tired in her cramped position, but still she waited. At last the big doors swung open, and two young women slowly walked the length of the audience chamber. They bowed before Pharaoh, their faces to the ground.

Hatshepsut studied them. They wore woolen robes over linen or woolen tunics, with no ornaments in their hair or jewelry on their arms. They were slaves like the rest of the Hebrews. Suddenly Hatshepsut didn't see them as people to fear. Why, they were no different from her servants, only poorer. As they lifted their heads at her father's order, she saw that they wore no makeup to enhance their plain features.

"Tell me your names," Pharaoh barked, making her jump.

The women still knelt, eyes looking again at the floor. "Shiphrah and Puah," one said, her voice shaking. They were obviously afraid of her father, and she felt sorry that the women had been forced to come here at all. Why did her father want them?

"You are the heads of the Hebrew midwives?" Pharaoh's voice carried unquestioned authority.

"Yes, my lord."

"Look up," he said. "I want to see your faces when I tell you this."

They both lifted their heads, and Hatshepsut read fear in their eyes.

“When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him, but if it is a girl, let her live.”

Her father’s words echoed in the hall, and a heavy silence followed. A shiver rushed down Hatshepsut’s spine. A midwife must be a person who helped deliver babies.

“If you see that the child is a boy before the mother completely delivers it, kill the child before it sees the light of day,” he added. “Now go. See that you do not disobey my orders.”

The two women backed from the pharaoh’s chambers without a word, not even an acknowledgment that they would do as he said. Shock filled their faces, and Hatshepsut felt the same.

Her father wanted to kill the Hebrew babies because the Hebrews were becoming too strong for him. Even a child could understand that. But why not just let the Hebrews move away? Send them out of Egypt and ban them from coming back.

She saw the tiniest hint of movement in her father’s quiet sigh. His shoulders slumped. Her father was afraid. Was it true, as her mother had hinted when she didn’t know Hatshepsut heard? Was the pharaoh of Egypt, the grandest nation on earth, weak?

ONE

O hhh!” A woman’s cry woke Miriam with a start. She pulled the light blanket from her shoulders and tossed it aside. The sky was still dark. Had she been dreaming?

“Ima?” she called out, leaning on an elbow and rubbing her eyes.

“Go back to sleep, Miriam. Marta’s baby will be here soon.”

“Please, dear God, let Hava’s ima have a girl.” Miriam pulled the covers over herself again as she prayed for her best friend’s mother. She squeezed her eyes tight, trying to block out the fear. Everyone knew that a boy baby would be sacrificed to the river god.

A girl, O God. Please let it be a girl.

When Miriam awoke later to the *croo-doo-doo* of a laughing dove, she strained to listen for Marta’s cries. Instead, she heard the soft whimper of a baby.

Miriam jumped out of bed and hurried to where her mother stood by the curtained window and watched the rising sun color the sky in pink predawn light. She touched her mother’s round stomach with one hand. Her father

came and stood behind them, stiff and silent, his robe warm against her back.

“The head taskmaster knew Marta was in labor, poor girl,” Ima said, her voice soft and sad.

“It was a boy?” Miriam whispered against her mother’s side and felt her father’s arm touch her shoulder. She glanced back at him and caught the tears flowing down Ima’s cheeks. Abba nodded.

Ima turned from the window and pulled Miriam to sit beside her on a low stool. “They will come for him, won’t they?” Miriam’s throat hurt as she voiced the words.

“We can pray that they won’t. But no boys have survived since Shiphrah and Puah refused to obey the pharaoh’s orders.”

Tears stung Miriam’s eyes, and she swiped at them with one hand. “Can I go to Hava?”

Abba came and knelt at her side. Her little brother, Aaron, rose from his cot, pulling his blanket with him. “Hungry,” he said, as though nothing awful had just happened.

“I prayed, Abba. Why did God give them a boy instead of a girl?” She was crying now, though even at five years old she knew crying wouldn’t change anything. Her gaze turned from her father to her mother, who would give birth to another baby soon.

“We don’t know the ways of our God, my daughter.” He shook his head.

The sound of horses’ hooves pounded the pavement outside of their little hut, shaking the earth and the walls along with it. They all stilled, even Aaron, though he climbed onto Ima’s lap.

“We will speak of this later,” Abba whispered.

Miriam crept from the table to peek through the curtain again. Bare-chested soldiers dressed in red and white skirts stood beside their captain, who hopped off his horse and pounded on Hava's door with his fist.

The door creaked open.

Miriam heard shouts, then a baby's wail.

"Don't take my baby!" Hava's ima screamed.

But the soldiers marched out of the house, carrying the newborn boy by his legs, and mounted their horses. Miriam watched Hava and her father run after them, leaving her mother sobbing in the house.

When the soldiers had disappeared from view, Ima slipped quietly from the house to comfort Hava's mother.

"Can I go with you, Ima?" Miriam stood at the door, longing to run after her friend. But her father, who now held Aaron in his arms, pulled her back. She turned slowly to face him.

"You must protect your ima now, Miriam. Only God can comfort Hava's family, and we must pray that He does the same for us."

Miriam looked at him, her eyes widening. "What if Ima has a boy?"

Abba held a finger to his lips. "Do not speak of it, child. You must keep our secret. Not even the taskmasters know of your ima's condition. And when the baby comes . . ." He paused, his gaze traveling toward the thatched ceiling. "When that day comes, we must trust our God."



Several weeks later, Miriam awoke to the soft mewling of a newborn. She threw off her blanket and padded quickly

across the floor to her mother's side. "What is it, Ima?" she whispered, bending close.

Her mother opened the blanket to show her.

Miriam sighed. "He's beautiful!" She put a shaky hand to her chest. "But what about the soldiers . . . the river god?"

"There is no river god, Miriam. There is only one God, and He alone can keep your brother safe." Ima's voice was soft, barely above a whisper. "We will keep him quiet, and we will tell no one of his birth. Not even Hava." She looked at Miriam with sternness in her gaze. "Do you understand, Miriam?"

A tear slipped down her cheek, but she nodded. "I won't tell anyone." She reached one hand to touch her baby brother's creamy soft skin. He had a head of thick black hair, and his black eyes were wide with wonder. His mouth opened and closed, and he sucked on Miriam's finger as though he thought it was food.

Miriam coughed, forcing back the urge to laugh. A moment later, she remembered Hava's brother. "Why does the king take the boy babies, Ima?"

"The king is afraid of us, my daughter. He throws our boys into the river because he thinks we will grow too powerful and rise up against him."

Ima placed the baby's mouth to her breast, leaned against the cot, and closed her eyes. What would she do with him when she was expected to work in the fields?

"I could take your place in the fields today," Miriam offered, wishing she were bigger so she could truly help.

Ima opened her eyes and smiled. She shook her head. "No, my sweet girl. You will come with me as you always do. I will feed your brother, and then we will go."

“But you just gave birth.” Though Miriam was young, she knew that women needed time to heal after birthing a baby.

“I worked the fields after Aaron’s birth. I will do the same now.” She stood with the sleeping baby in her arms. She placed him in the large lunch basket she always carried and covered him with a blanket, then placed bread and cheese on top.

“Our God sees what the king is doing to us, Miriam. He will not forget His people forever. Someday He will send a deliverer. And no river god, or any other god, will stop Him.”



Eight days later, Miriam’s father planned to circumcise the new baby after a long day of working on one of Pharaoh’s cities. He did not call the elders to join him but took the family to the river, where the sound of lapping water might drown out the baby’s cries.

Miriam clasped Aaron’s hand as they knelt beside their mother. Their father quickly cut off the baby’s foreskin along the banks of the Nile. “What shall we name him?” he asked Ima.

She shook her head. “I cannot name him yet. He will be our *tikvah*, our hope. When he is old enough to go unnoticed, then we will name him.”

Miriam stared at her baby brother, her mouth agape that he had not cried. Her mother had been quick to cover and soothe him and put him to her breast. Miriam let out a relieved breath as she watched her mother tuck the baby into her robe, blocking all view of him.

They stood slowly and moved back to their hut by the light of the moon. When they were settled inside, Miriam

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led Aaron to his pallet and told him a story while her parents sat at a small table, her mother still nursing the baby.

“He is an unusual boy,” her father said softly. “There is something about him . . .”

“Do you see it too?” Her mother’s voice held awe. “I sensed it even before his birth. This child has a future ahead of him. God has surely set him aside for something. Perhaps he is the answer to all of our prayers.”

Miriam listened to her father’s agreement and their talk of a deliverer. What would it be like to live in a place other than Egypt? To be free of taskmasters and guards who threw boy babies into the river? Could her brother be that person?

She tucked Aaron into bed and touched his soft hair. What would it be like to be considered special by God? She had thought about Him ever since her parents began to teach her of Him when she was no bigger than Aaron.

What was God even like? She pondered the thought as she lay down on her own pallet beside Aaron’s. Maybe someday she would know. For now she was simply glad that her baby brother was safe for one more day.