

This is not a trick question – How many years passed between the death of Joseph and the birth of Moses? Well, I googled that question and got a number of very definitive and authoritative answers ranging between 75 years and 500 years. My study bible says 279 years. Take your pick.

Less contentious is how long Moses lived; Deuteronomy 34:7 tells us that he died at the age of 120 years as God had told him he would, but only after seeing for himself the promised land spread out before him.

Over the coming weeks we shall be looking at different aspects of and events in Moses' life revealing him to be what most people consider to be the most important figure in the Old Testament. But first, let me put Moses' birth into context.

Joseph, he of the technicolour dream coat and favorite son of Jacob is sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, but manages to rise to the position of Vizier; the second most powerful man in Egypt after Pharaoh. The whole of his family are saved by Joseph from starvation during a lengthy period of famine leading to their reconciliation and the entire family permanently settling in Egypt, welcomed literally with welcome arms by the Pharaoh. These events in effect meant that Israel, which was the name given by Jacob to his family tribe, was saved from extinction.

That God's blessing of mankind initiated through Adam, Noah, Abraham and Isaac was now being fulfilled is made clear in the previous chapter:

the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them v7

It's a fact that memories fade over time; truths and facts become distorted; relationships change and that's exactly what happened in Egypt. The Israelites, once welcomed with open arms were now, decades or more likely centuries later, seen by the current Pharaoh not as a mutually beneficial and convenient source of labour to enhance the country's economy but as an outright danger to the country's security.

Pharaoh determines to weaken the Israelites by effectively making them slaves by imposing Egyptian overseers on them and also to gradually deprive Israel of its male leadership by ordering all male children born to the Israelites to be killed at birth. We don't know how long this had been going on for before Moses' mother gave birth to him, but certainly long enough for her to realize that her baby was as good as dead when his birth was discovered.

And the saddest thing about all this is that similar situations still exist in the 21st century. When China decreed that families may only have one child, the deliberate killing of baby girls became widespread, not to wipe out a generation of potential leaders, but simply on economic grounds that a boy would be more use as a bread winner when he grew up. Or in India where female infanticide has been a significant problem for many centuries and with the advances in science, the selective abortion of girls in the womb – what is known as female foeticide – has become widespread because the belief is held that boys will be able to financially support their parents in old age whilst a girl will make the family poorer because the parents will have to provide a dowry when she marries.

Fortunately, infanticide is very rare in this country and equally important it is usually restricted to isolated family tragedies with no underlying pattern or gender basis.

But back to Moses. As we heard, the mother decides to place him in a water tight basket in the reeds. Why? Well we can only speculate, but I imagine she hoped to nip down to the reeds to feed and

nurse the baby whenever the opportunity arose. You can almost feel the anguish and pain of the mother as she tries to put off the inevitable. Maybe she remembered the story of Noah and somehow hoped the basket might become, like the Ark, the means through which God provides protection from death. More likely, the mother was desperate to delay the inevitable until eventually her child would succumb to drowning or become supper for one of the many crocodiles lurking in the Nile.

Then a miracle occurs; not only is her baby saved, but saved by Pharaoh's daughter who gets her Father's permission to adopt and raise the baby as her own. She must have been either a very determined person or able to twist her daddy around her little finger because there's no doubt she recognized the child as a Hebrew baby; he would have been circumcised when 8 days old.

The miracle is multi faceted because not only is the baby saved but also through the quick thinking of his sister who has been left on lookout by their mother, the mother is brought into a situation where she in effect raises her own son, in Pharaoh's household. I love God's sense of humour in this whereby Pharaoh's efforts to permanently enslave Israel through infanticide results in his own household raising and educating the very man who would eventually free the enslaved Israelites.

Not only that, but if you think about it, Moses was saved by the unlikeliest of means in a male dominated society – three women; a determined and brave Hebrew mother, a daring and quick thinking sister, and a compassionate and persuasive Egyptian princess. It had never occurred to me before when considering the role women play in the bible that here was a classic example of how God uses ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances.

And yet, God is not mentioned at all in Exodus until, as we will hear in a couple of weeks, the adult Moses encounters a burning bush. Yet surely God is active behind the scenes in today's story, otherwise the story unfolds purely out of coincidence.

One final point.

As I have been talking, has it occurred to you that Moses, the savior of Israel, was born into the suffering of his people, was born under the sentence of death, was placed in the Nile which was to serve as his grave, but was raised up out of the Nile to be the deliverer of his people. Remind you of anyone? I don't want to push the parallels too far, but in both Moses and Jesus, God brings about deliverance and salvation and therein lay one of Jesus' biggest problems; how to persuade the people that he was the fulfillment of the law instituted by Moses, the most revered and respected figure known to the 1st century Jews.

Today is the first piece in our jigsaw of seeing Moses in a new light and learning from him and the events surrounding his life. For my part, I now realize the part that ordinary people can and do play in extraordinary situations as part of God's great plan of salvation.

God's people were enslaved and one family suffered like all other families. Through faith, through desperation, through quick thinking, through a miracle, God's purpose takes shape. Whatever situation we face is an opportunity for showing faith, for doing what WE can, but also seeing God's hand at work.

So let's not rush on...let's take a moment.