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Mercy MOMENTS

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door to a world
where the
healing,
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Mercy as Liberation and Compassion in the Hebrew Scriptures



The first story comes from Israel's foundational narrative in the Book of Exodus which opens with an account of the Hebrew people's journey to and enslavement in Egypt (Exodus 1:1-14). It recounts the repeated thwarting of the Pharaoh's attempts to eliminate the Hebrew people. It features the feisty midwives of the Hebrews, Shiprah and Puah, without whom there would be no Israel, no Moses, no Exodus and no biblical story of liberation (Exodus 1: 15-22). It includes the oft-told tale of Moses as a baby (Exodus 2: 1-10) ...

Exodus 2: 1-3 tells us of a daughter of Levi, a Hebrew slave woman, who gives birth to a healthy male child and, in contravention of the Pharaoh's edict, draws on Earth elements to protect her child. She places him in a papyrus basket plastered with

bitumen and pitch and leaves the basket in the reeds by the bank of the river. As the child's sister...waits to see what might happen, the daughter of Pharaoh is said to come to the river to bathe while her attendants walk beside the river. She sees first the basket and then the child.

The Pharaoh's daughter not only sees. She hears and responds. "He was crying," says the text, "and she had pity on him". "Had pity" is a verbal form in the original Hebrew text, not a verb and a noun as in the English translation. It appears in some translations as "had compassion". It comes from the verb *hamal* that has two semantic fields. It can mean "to liberate" or "to spare a captive". It can also mean to have compassion or mercy.

In Israel's story-telling and song-making tradition, God is the one who hears the cry of the distressed, the one who has compassion and mercy on the poor ... In Israel's sacred story, it is the daughter of the oppressor who sees with the eyes of mercy, hears with the ears of mercy and has compassion on the endangered child. It is she who images the God of liberation and compassion. Her words indicate that she knows exactly what she is doing. In other words, she knowingly liberates the child, also in contravention of the Pharaoh's edict. Rule by edict is never the rule of 'mercy'.

Mercy is a way of being in the world, a way of seeing and hearing and a way of responding. While Pharaoh's daughter embodies this way of being, other-than-human Earth elements such as the basket, the bitumen, the reeds and the riverbank all function as agents of mercy protecting the child from harm.

Source: extract from Veronica M. Lawson: *The Blessing of Mercy: Biblical perspectives and ecological challenges* (2015) pp 19-21. Painting 'Moses laid amid the flags' by James Joseph Tissot.

REFLECTION

- > How does the story of Pharaoh's daughter inform your understanding of mercy and its impact?
- > Lawson challenges us to see the natural world as an agent of mercy. Can you recall a time when you experienced the mercy of the Earth?