

Mothers: Heroes, Then and Now

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Heroes Then

The Old Testament is full of heroes, men and women who inspire us with their courage and nobility of purpose and who are willing to risk even their lives to serve God and His people. We love to read of their miraculous and courageous deeds: Moses’s parting the Red Sea, David’s slaying of Goliath, and Elijah’s calling down fire from heaven. But Elder Neal A. Maxwell once said, “Greatness is not measured by coverage in column inches, either in newspapers or in the scriptures.” He notes that “because theirs is the priesthood and leadership line,” we often focus on the men of God. “But paralleling that authority line,” he continues, “is a stream of righteous influence reflecting the remarkable women of God who have existed in all ages and dispensations.” He further states that “just as certain men were foreordained from before the foundations of the world, so were certain women appointed to certain tasks.”¹

The Old Testament suggests that Esther was one of those women—that she came “to the kingdom for such a time as this” (Esther 4:14). But the Old Testament tells of other women who, though less well known, also fulfilled their divine missions. We read about four of these women in Exodus 1:15–2:10.² Their greatness does not lie in “column inches” (each is mentioned in only a few verses), in name recognition (most people don’t recall their names), or in exceptional, miraculous deeds (anyone could follow their footsteps). Rather, theirs is a quiet courage,

a simple nobility, an often unheralded service. They are heroes because they are examples to all women of what it means to be a mother.

Only one of the four women mentioned in these verses is actually a biological mother, at least in the context of these scriptures. But Sheri L. Dew says, “As daughters of our Heavenly Father, and as daughters of Eve, we are all mothers and we have always been mothers. And we each have the responsibility to love and help lead the rising generation.”³ In other words, for women, the role of motherhood is eternal, extending from their premortal existence, throughout their lives here on earth, and into eternity. Motherhood is more than simply bearing children; motherhood describes women’s “divine nature and destiny”⁴ to love, lead, and nurture the rising generation.

Accepting and acting upon this role and responsibility of mothering, however, is not always easy. In ancient Egypt, difficulties arose when “there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph” (Exodus 1:8). This new king, fearing the growing prosperity and power of the Hebrews, issued a decree ordering the slaying of all male children born into Hebrew families (see vv. 9–16). Although there may have been others, the scriptures mention four women in particular who refused to comply. Who were these heroes who saved the children in defiance of Pharaoh’s command, and what gave them the strength to do so?

Puah and Shiphrah were the Hebrew midwives whom Pharaoh commanded, “When ye do the office of a midwife to the Hebrew women, . . . if it be a son, then ye shall kill him” (Exodus 1:16). It must have been frightening to receive such a command from the most powerful man in their world. Their very lives could have depended on obeying him. But the midwives “*feared God*, and did not as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the men children alive” (v. 17; emphasis added). When confronted by Pharaoh, they escaped punishment by saying, “The Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women; for they are lively, and are delivered ere the midwives come in unto them” (v. 19).⁵ Because they feared, or honored, God over man—even over the king of Egypt—they had the courage to do the right, to save the children. “Therefore God dealt well with the midwives” (v. 20).

Next, we meet Jochebed.⁶ Though her name is not widely recognized, she is the mother of one of the most well known heroes of the Old Testament: the deliverer of Israel, the law-giver, Moses. When Jochebed bore her son, she saw that “he was a goodly child, [and] she hid him three months” (Exodus 2:2). The scripture does not tell us, as it does with the midwives, Jochebed’s motive for the risk she takes. But whenever I have taught this story, I have asked my class, “Why

would she do this?” Without fail, they have responded, “Because she loved him.” Perhaps she also saw, as mothers do, the great potential in this helpless infant she held in her arms.⁷ When she felt that love, saw that potential, she knew that any sacrifice was worth preserving his life. So when it became apparent that she could no longer hide him in her home, she placed him in an ark of bulrushes among the reeds along the bank of the river, where perhaps she suspected our next hero, Pharaoh’s daughter, would find him.

Often Jochebed is portrayed in movies as placing the ark into the current of the river, after which the baby floats precariously downstream before being rescued by Pharaoh’s daughter. The scripture, however, does not say this is what occurred; it states that the infant was placed and discovered among the reeds along the banks of the river (see Exodus 2:3, 5; see also footnote 3a). This wording suggests to me that Jochebed acted deliberately—that her great love for her child and consequent desperation to save his life led her to carefully ponder her plan. Perhaps she knew that this was a place where Pharaoh’s daughter came to bathe—where men (especially soldiers) did not frequent. Perhaps she knew that Pharaoh’s daughter was a compassionate woman, likely to rescue an abandoned baby.

Pharaoh’s daughter (the scriptural account does not even tell us her name)⁸ soon discovered the weeping baby, whom she immediately recognized as one of the condemned Hebrew sons. She rescued him, the scripture says, because “she had compassion on him” (Exodus 2:6), which, Elder Maxwell observes, was a sign of her “divine maternal instincts.”⁹ At this point, Moses’s sister approached and asked, “Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee?” (v. 7). Regardless of Pharaoh’s decree, she consented to the girl’s suggestion, “and the maid went and called the child’s mother” (v. 8). So the compassion of Pharaoh’s daughter extended not just to the child but also to the child’s mother; she even paid Jochebed for her service (see v. 9). Eventually, Pharaoh’s daughter took the child as her own son, giving him the name of Moses, perhaps intending to honor both his Hebrew and Egyptian heritage (see v. 10, footnote b).¹⁰

Puah, Shiphrah, Jochebed, and Pharaoh’s daughter are some of the remarkable women who exercised a “stream of righteous influence.” Their choices to be mothers in spite of difficult, even dangerous, circumstances saved the child Moses, and by so doing they shaped the history of a people and the religious faith of generations. They are heroes in the truest sense of the word—they defended the weak against the strong and showed that good can overcome evil. In the face of Pharaoh’s edict,

they quietly, faithfully, and courageously exercised their divine role as mothers. Fear and self-interest were swallowed up in faith, love, and compassion as they nurtured the children in their lives.

Heroes Now

Although modern challenges to mothering may be more subtle than Pharaoh's decree, they are no less prevalent and powerful—and they require no less faith, love, and compassion to combat. Elder Richard G. Scott warned that in the adversary's fight against the great plan of happiness, “one of Satan's most effective approaches is to demean the role of wife and mother in the home.”¹¹ One way this demeaning is accomplished is by our distorting women's perceptions of both careers and motherhood. The virtues of the former are glorified; the trials of the latter are accentuated. For example, note the false dichotomy in this comment from a writer for *Newsweek* magazine: “As mothers many women face ‘choices’ on the order of: You can continue to pursue your professional dreams at the cost of abandoning your children to long hours of inadequate child care. Or: You can stay at home with your baby and live in a state of virtual, crazy-making isolation because you can't afford a nanny.”¹² Are careers really all dreams come true, and is motherhood really all “crazy-making isolation”?

Satan also demeans the role of mother by appealing to women's pride in their education and talents. In a June 18, 2006, article in the *Washington Post*, a former professor at a prestigious university states: “The tasks of housekeeping and child rearing [are] not worthy of the full time and talents of intelligent and educated human beings. They do not require a great intellect, they are not honored.”¹³ The message here is that if a woman is educated and talented, mothering is a waste of her time—and if she is spending most of her time mothering, she probably isn't very smart or talented.

Although the views expressed by these women may be extreme, the philosophies they espouse infiltrate our society to the point that even many Latter-day Saint women, faced with everyday tasks of motherhood and the world's calls to achieve status, power, wealth, and self-fulfillment, sometimes wonder, “Is mothering really the most valuable use of my time and talents?” But the words of the prophets have been consistent and clear. It is the divine nature of women to mother, and through fulfilling this divine role, they will do the most good and achieve their greatest joy and satisfaction.

Consider these statements from Church leaders of this last dispensation. President Brigham Young asks: “Can you tell the amount of

good that the mothers and daughters in Israel are capable of doing? No, it is impossible. And the good they will do will follow them to all eternity.”¹⁴ In 1942 the First Presidency declared motherhood “the highest, holiest service . . . assumed by mankind.”¹⁵ More recently, President James E. Faust said to the women of the Church, “I truly believe you are instruments in the hands of God in your many roles, especially that of motherhood.”¹⁶ “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” declares, “By divine design, . . . mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children.”¹⁷ And President Gordon B. Hinckley says: “Of all the joys of life, none other equals that of happy parenthood. Of all the responsibilities with which we struggle, none other is so serious. To rear children in an atmosphere of love, security, and faith is the most rewarding of all challenges. The good result from such efforts becomes life’s most satisfying compensation.”¹⁸

Modern women can follow the words of these latter-day prophets by following the examples of their ancient sisters Puah, Shiphrah, Jochebed, and Pharaoh’s daughter, who taught us how to mother, even in difficult circumstances. We, too, can demonstrate courage in resisting worldly pressures, choosing instead to accept and embrace our roles as mothers. We, too, can exhibit nobility in the selfless service of nurturing children. Mothers may not gain name recognition or the praises of the world, but they are heroes to those whose lives they touch with their faith, love, and compassion. Here are just a few of their stories.

Faith in God. Diana¹⁹ is a wonderful example of honoring God more than man, as the Hebrew midwives did centuries ago. She had the faith to follow the prophets’ counsel to stay home with her young children despite pressure from her husband and others to use her considerable talents outside the home. Diana’s husband tells her story:

Diana and I have been happy nearly every day of our life together. I can only remember one time in which there has been friction in our home. This was when we were considering having Diana work outside of the home.

We had been married a year, and I had a job working twenty-five hours a week and was going to school full time. My take-home pay would not even cover our rent. I did not know what else to do and so instead of exhibiting faith, I took the “practical” approach and asked Diana to go back to work. She had a very understanding boss who would let her take the baby to work with her. This seemed like an ideal situation. In a worldly sense it was. The problem was we were not happy as a family. A few months later we decided that Diana should stop working. We struggled for a couple of months but soon found a

less expensive place to live and we have been happy ever since. Diana had the faith to do it the Lord's way from the beginning; I had to be cajoled into doing it the right way.

Diana is a gifted speaker and presenter. All through high school and college she competed at a national level for debate. She is a national award winner in debate and is recognized as an expert in her field. For years she was asked to go back to help her team fine-tune their skills and improve in competitions. In high school she thought that she would have a high-profile job. She was looking into journalism, business, law, and many other highly skilled professions. As the years went by and she got closer to having a family, she had a change of heart and decided to dedicate herself to becoming the best mother possible.

Diana devoted the same time and energy that drove her to perfection in debate to developing the skills to be a great mother. She has read nearly every book in the county on homemaking, cooking, child development, and style. Not only does she know about the principles required to be a good mother, she also has the discipline to practice them on a daily basis. I know that my children will be blessed all of their lives because of what Diana teaches them both directly and by example.

Diana has been able to stay above the influence of the world to have a career. This has come through her dedication to daily scripture study, her personal goodness, soft heart, and ability to feel what other people are feeling. Diana would make any sacrifice for the good of our family.

I do not know if Diana would be considered a hero in today's flashy sense. She is a hero to me in the fact that she dedicates her most precious resources for the good of our family.²⁰

Love. In his book, *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis tells of a fictional visitor to heaven who sees a beautiful woman approaching amidst throngs of joyful boys and girls singing her praises. In wonder, he asks his guide who she is.

"It's someone ye'll never have heard of," replies the guide.

"And who are all these young men and women on each side?"

"They are her sons and daughters."

"She must have had a very large family, Sir."

"Every young man or boy that met her became her son. . . . Every girl that met her was her daughter," the guide answers.²¹

Lewis might have been describing Samantha, who, though she has no children of her own, loves all boys and girl as if they were her own. Samantha's husband writes:

As I think about Samantha and her interactions with children, I am strongly impressed by the love that she has for all children. She treats each child as an individual who is just as important as everyone else. A child's amount of life experience or education doesn't determine the respect that Samantha gives them.

About a year ago Samantha and I were babysitting four young girls while their parents were away for the week. One night at dinner the youngest wasn't hungry; she found it more fun to play with her food. Instead of getting mad with the mess she was making, Samantha recognized that at eighteen months old the young girl found it fascinating to pour the water from her drinking glass into her bowl and back again. So when dinner was over Samantha placed the girl in the kitchen sink, with the water running, and gave her what must have represented a wondrous assortment of cups, bowls, bottles, and spoons and simply let her explore. This kept her attention riveted for over an hour.

As a full-time preschool teacher, Samantha works with children every day. The friendships that she develops with her students aren't restricted to the classroom. There have been times when Samantha has run across her students out shopping with their parents. Samantha stops and talks to each one. The children light up with the biggest smiles when they realize that their teacher recognizes them. Recently, Samantha even sent each one of her former students a card wishing them good luck starting kindergarten. She reminded them of the many things they had learned and let them know that she had confidence in them. Each one of them blossomed with the confidence that comes from realizing that someone else approves of them just like their parents do.

Samantha's love of children also extends to teenagers. There have been times when teenage girls have called Samantha for advice with boys, school, or parents. She patiently listens to their concerns and never belittles their situation. Sometimes I hear her tell them that it is OK to be afraid or nervous and that it is OK to cry when you're sad.

Finally, one last example of Samantha's wonderful relationship with children happened just the other day. While I was working in the yard, I noticed two five-year-old girls shyly sitting on their bikes in the driveway. I asked them if there was something I could do for them. They timidly asked if my "um . . . sis . . . wife" was home. When I answered that she was, they asked, "Um . . . can . . . she play?" When I told Samantha, she dropped what she was doing, came outside, greeted them both by name, and then went on a bike ride with them.²²

Compassion. Brian's mom, Peggy, was a beautiful example of mothering her own children and others' children and of supporting other mothers in their responsibilities. She suffered much from health problems in her life. This might have led some to become self-absorbed, but Peggy always lived with compassion toward others. She was born with diabetes at a time when little was known about the disease. Her first two children died in infancy. The doctors told her that her medical condition would prohibit her from having any more children, but she wanted nothing more than to be a mother. Brian writes:

She gave birth to three boys who were terrors. As we reached our teens, our mother grew sicker. She lost her eyesight. Her kidneys

failed, and she went on dialysis. She was a wonderful mother and taught us much, but it became our turn to nurture her. Mom had a Church calling that she loved, so they would not release her from it. She was a Relief Society teacher. She would have us kids read her the lessons and prepare handouts for the class. We would read the lesson to her several times until she had it memorized. As I look back on that I know that we were helping her, but at the same time I know that she was teaching us kids the gospel.

The greatest thing that I remember of my mother was how she served. When I was fifteen years old, my mother had a heart attack and needed a quadruple bypass. She spent a little over six months in the hospital, recovering from her surgery. When she arrived home, she was extremely weak. One day she got a phone call from her dear friend, Cathy, who wanted to see how my mom was. As they talked on the phone, Cathy mentioned that her daughter was pregnant and she had no money to throw her a baby shower. As soon as they were off the phone, my mother began to organize a shower, which she threw for her friend's daughter.

Six months later my mother passed away after living a life of greatness. As she was in the hospital a few days before she passed, she had a friend write her words to us kids. I still have my letter from her today. She left this world an angel and continues to mother me. She taught me some of the greatest attributes of life—to be positive through affliction and to be more like the Savior—and I thank her for it. Many years ago the First Presidency of the Church wrote, “Motherhood is near to divinity. It is the highest, holiest service to be assumed by mankind. It places her who honors its holy calling and service next to the angels.” I love the saying, “A mother holds her children's hands for a while, but their hearts forever.”²³

Conclusion

Puah, Shiphrah, and Diana are heroes because they had the faith and courage to honor God over man. Jochebed and Samantha are heroes because they showed love to children without selfishness. Pharaoh's daughter and Peggy are heroes because, regardless of their own circumstances, they treated children with compassion. Each of us can follow their examples.

“Every one of us,” Sheri Dew states, “can show by word and by deed that the work of women in the Lord's kingdom is magnificent and holy. . . . Never has there been a greater need for righteous mothers—mothers who bless their children with a sense of safety, security, and confidence about the future, mothers who teach their children where to find peace and truth and that the power of Jesus Christ is always stronger than the power of the adversary. . . . No woman who

understands the gospel would ever think that any other work is more important or would ever say, ‘I am *just* a mother,’ for mothers heal the souls of men.”²⁴ **RE**

Notes

1. Neal A. Maxwell, in Conference Report, April 1978, 13; or *Ensign*, May 1978, 10.

2. Moses’s sister is also mentioned within this block of scripture. If, as is commonly supposed, this sister is Miriam, most of her story is told elsewhere in Exodus. The stories of the other four are almost exclusively contained within this block, other than brief references such as Exodus 6:20 and Numbers 26:59, which simply mention Jochebed in genealogical context, and Acts 7:21, which refers to Pharaoh’s daughter rescuing and raising Moses. Because of this, I deal only with the four women mentioned.

3. Sheri L. Dew, “Are We Not All Mothers?” *Ensign*, November 2001, 97.

4. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 102.

5. This may have been a statement of fact. See Adam Clarke, *Clarke’s Commentary on the Bible, Vol. 1: Genesis-Deuteronomy* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1827–31), 295.

6. Though her name is not mentioned in Exodus 1 and 2, we learn her name in Exodus 6:20.

7. See Acts 7:20, footnote a: the infant Moses was “beautiful to God”; see also C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes, Vol. I: The Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 427.

8. A Jewish tradition mentioned by Josephus is that her name was Thermuthis. See Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Vol. I*, 428; *Clarke, Clarke’s Commentary on the Bible: Vol. 1*, 298.

9. Maxwell, in Conference Report, April 1978, 13; or *Ensign*, May 1978, 10.

10. This scripture implies that Pharaoh’s daughter was bilingual (see D. N. Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 4:911). If so, this would lend support to the possibility that Jochebed deliberately placed her baby where Pharaoh’s daughter would find him. If Pharaoh’s daughter was bilingual, she probably had some interactions with the Hebrews; Jochebed may have known from personal experience or by word of mouth that Pharaoh’s daughter was a compassionate woman, perhaps sympathetic to the Hebrew plight.

11. Richard G. Scott, in Conference Report, October 1996, 102; or *Ensign*, November 1996, 74.

12. Judith Warner, “Mommy Madness,” *Newsweek*, February 21, 2005, 45.

13. Linda R. Hirshman, “Mommy Rage: Unleashing the Wrath of Stay-at-Home Moms,” *Washington Post*, June 18, 2006, B01.

14. Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, comp. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 216.

15. “The Message of the First Presidency to the Church,” *Improvement Era*, November 1942, 761.

16. James E. Faust, “Instruments in the Hands of God,” *Ensign*, November 2005, 115.

17. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 102.

18. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, October 1994, 74; or *Ensign*, November 1994, 54.
19. Names have been changed.
20. Personal correspondence, August 2006.
21. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 107–8.
22. Personal correspondence, August 2006.
23. Personal correspondence, August 2006. The First Presidency statement referred to is found in Conference Report, October 1942, 12–13.
24. Dew, “Are We Not All Mothers?” 97.