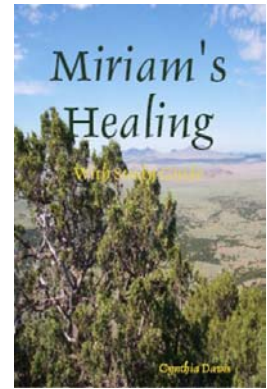


Miriam's Healing by Cynthia Davis

With Study Guide
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Chapter 1

I remember holding my brother after our mother brought him into the world. That day I left behind my childhood and assumed the mantle of guardian of my brothers and my parents. We were alone in the house. The midwives had not been summoned.

“No,” Jochebed told me when her labor began and I offered to run for Puah. “They have their orders and I will not put my friends in danger. You will help me.”

I was only a ten-year-old girl and terrified. My father had gone to the monuments to work as he did every day. Aaron, my seven-year-old brother, was out in the fields with the other children. Every day they gathered straw for the endless supply of bricks needed to build the temples and treasure houses.

Throughout that long, hot day, I gathered the blankets and water as Mother directed. Sweat ran down my back as much from fear as from the heat. She smothered her cries in the pillows.

Finally she panted an order; “It is time. Help me up.”

Using all my strength, I helped the woman lever herself into the squatting position for delivery. She clung to the table and bench I had positioned earlier for this moment. Usually midwives supported a woman at childbirth on a special stool. In that strange afternoon, I was the one to catch the baby as he emerged. Rapidly, I wrapped him in a blanket I had ready. His first cry was cuddled to silence against Mother’s breast after she lowered herself back onto the mat of twisted blankets.

“Take him quickly,” she urged after easing his first hunger.

My mother was still panting from the exertion of the birth and I was afraid to leave her. Loving hands stroked the tiny red cheek briefly.

“Go,” the word was a command. “Pharaoh’s midwives must not know that a live child was born.”

Grabbing a wool blanket to wrap my brother and the sugar tit for his grasping mouth, I slipped between the houses. With the now quiet baby in my arms, I huddled near the river. Tall stands of bulrushes hid me from all except the exploring, buzzing insects. I sat so still that a curious river rat scurried across my leg, but I dared not move.

In the tiny house, I knew my mother prepared to lie and declare that the child was stillborn. She would say that I had been sent to cast the body into the Nile. No one would question the story. It was what the midwives themselves were instructed to do with any male child, living or dead.

I knew that Puah and Shiphrah did not always follow the edict. Once I overheard them tell Pharaoh’s captain, “These Hebiru women are too strong. They deliver before we can attend them to the birthing stool. A newly borne babe is easy to kill. One that has had suck is more difficult.” Not that such deceit saved the boy babies. Bonal, captain of the guard, was thorough in his duties. I feared his scarred face more than the crocodiles in the Nile. More than once I saw him leave a home with blood on his sword. The wailing from a bereaved mother always brought Jochebed to offer comfort. My mother provided the herbs that stopped the milk and brought dreamless sleep to quiet the first grief.

The day ended and the night breezes from the river cooled my skin. Dampness, unnoticed in the heat of the day, now chilled my legs. Gently I rocked the sleeping child and softly hummed a lullaby. A rustling in the rushes made me freeze in fear.

“Miriam,” the sharp whisper came from my brother Aaron. “Come, it is safe to go home now.”

Swiftly I rose and followed the boy. He was a sturdy child and large for his age. Both my father and mother worried about the day he would join Pharaoh’s workforce on the scaffolds. So many of the young workers died in their first season of labor in the heat and from falls or from the lash.

Jochebed and Amram insisted, “It is not right for the sons of Israel to be in bondage to the King of Egypt.”

I heard their endless prayers on behalf of all the slaves.

“God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, why have you forgotten us? By the hand of Joseph you saved your people from famine. Why do you now leave us in harsh bondage?”

The agony of the clay pits, quarries, and monuments was forgotten in the little house that night as the newest son of the promise suckled happily. Amram and Jochebed sat cheek-to-cheek watching their son.

“He is safe for now,” my mother smiled triumphantly. “The silly Egyptian cows believed that I would rush to throw my dead son into the river!”

“It is how they would propitiate the god Hari,” my father replied stroking the cap of black curls on the baby’s head.

“Alive or dead, every newborn son of the children of Israel is to be thrown to the crocodiles,” I spoke partly in fear and mostly in anger. There were tears in my voice. “Has the God of our Fathers forgotten us because so many of the Hebrews no longer worship the One God but instead seek the Egyptian gods?”

“Do not condemn others, my daughter,” Amram answered gravely. His hand reached over to stroke my brown hair in comfort. “We can never understand God’s purpose or another’s heart.”

“Who knows when God will rescue his people?” Jochebed rocked her son, never dreaming that she held God’s Deliverer.

The words of my parents silenced me, but an idea began to grow in my mind. I would find a way to save my brothers and my parents. Then Aaron and this new baby would not have to serve the King of Egypt. How I would do such a thing was unclear. Prayers for inspiration were raised nightly to God.

“Help me to make a plan so that Aaron and the baby will be free. Use me to liberate my family. Tell me what to do,” I demanded.

Although I listened intently, no response came from the stars and evening breezes.

The baby was strong and healthy. Too soon it became unsafe for him to live with us. I heard my parents whispering late into the night when he was three months old.

“My love, we must act before Pharaoh’s spies hear of the child and we all die.”

Mother’s tears made me burrow into my blankets to shut out the sound of her sobs. In the morning, however, she was calm.

“Miriam, bring me the pitch,” her voice was steady and only a slight redness in her eyes indicated that she had spent a sleepless night.

I watched in amazement as she took a new basket and covered it with the tar. I couldn’t understand why we needed a new watertight basket, especially one that was so large.

“How will we carry such a big basket when it is full of water?” I asked.

My mother gave no reply, grimly continuing with her task. When she wrapped my brother securely in a new blanket with a sugar tit in his mouth, I stared in confusion. The baby dozed off contented. Then she placed the infant inside the basket. A brief kiss on his forehead was all she allowed herself before turning to me.

“Come, Miriam, bring the other water baskets,” she ordered. Lifting the precious basket to her shoulder she walked out the door. From the street, she called to me. “We will go to the river and bring water for our garden. I have neglected my duties in my mourning.”

The words were spoken loudly for the benefit of any listening ears. I balanced the smaller baskets on my shoulder and followed her down the hard-packed dirt street. Every little house was just like ours. Each one was built of packed mud bricks squatting brown and humble in the dirt from which they were formed. Unlike the homes of the Egyptians with the colorful painted scenes of gods and victories decorating the sides, ours were hardly even whitewashed. No one had the time or energy to spend on such decoration. When cracks appeared, more mud was plastered over the sagging walls.

Gracefully and in no hurry, Mother proceeded toward the river. Smiling and calling greetings to friends, she acted as though the day was no different from any other.

“Jochebed, so good to see you again.”

“Sympathy for your loss.”

“Better stillborn than killed.”

“Blessings on your head, Jochebed.”

I could barely breathe as she nodded and answered each woman. We didn’t stop until we were out of sight of the town. Finally, she paused and looked around. We were alone on the riverbank. Across the delta, the King’s monuments gleamed gold and white. The wind carried the rough shouts of the workmen laboring in the blazing sun. Far up the river, I could see the sails on some boats.

My mother slipped into the bulrushes beside the road. I followed, still wondering what we were doing. The height of the plants hid us from any passerby nearly as soon as we stepped into them. Down to the very edge of the river Jochebed walked. A cloud of birds rose up and she froze in place.

“Mother,” I whispered but she put a finger to her lips.

Another nervous look around showed me how frightened the woman was.

“Put down your baskets and help me,” she hissed finally, lowering her precious load carefully to the ground.

Tenderly she tucked the blankets more securely around the baby and moistened the sugar tit. Then she rapidly laced a shallow basket in place as a lid.

“God of our fathers, into your hands I give this child. You gave me the courage to save his life.” A tear trickled down her cheek. “Now, I give him to you. Rescue him from the river and slavery to be yours.”

I caught my breath as I realized what the plan was. My parents planned to set the baby adrift and trust the One God to keep him safe. Jochebed took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment. Releasing a shuddering sigh, the woman gave a gentle shove to the basket. In a moment, it was caught in the eddying current.

With a catch in her voice my mother whispered, “Follow and bring me word.”

A quick glance confirmed that she was crying. Then I ran along the riverside watching the basket bounce and twirl in the lapping waves.

The little vessel continued its journey, here caught in a pool, there almost capsized in the wake of some grand barge. Buoyantly it continued until a wave drove my brother’s ark into the enclosed pool of a rich Egyptian house. Low walls kept the river creatures at bay and offered a secluded place for the noble owner to bath or swim.

I wanted to dart out and put the basket back into the river. The appearance of several scantily dressed young ladies stopped me.

“God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” I breathed the prayer again and again. “Don’t let them see him.”

The girls were laughing and chatting as they splashed about in the pool. I barely listened I was so intent on my petition. Then a sharp question caught my ear.

“What is that at the end of the pool?”

One of the ladies languidly waved her hand toward the basket bobbing in the little waves created by their games. I noticed the questioner was young and lovely.

“Great Princess,” a tall black woman responded, “I believe it is a basket.”

My head jerked up when I heard the title. Fearfully I looked from my brother’s basket floating just out of my reach to the lady and beyond her to the tall columns of the house. The paintings on the walls and gold emblems on the doorways confirmed that this was the royal palace, just a few miles north of On. It had been built in the days of Joseph the Honored so Pharaoh could visit his governor even in Goshen.

“How odd,” tilting her head prettily to one side, the Princess smiled suddenly. “Perhaps it is a gift from the river god.”

“What would the god Hari send?” another of the companions asked with a laugh.

The Princess shrugged, “Who knows?” She waved her hand toward the object. “We are curious. Bring it here.”

I covered back into the reeds as one of the serving women waded to the basket and towed it back to her mistress. Everyone gathered around with high-pitched questions and exclamations.

“Do be careful!”

“How odd, it’s a lidded basket.”

“Even the top is covered with tar.”

“Is it safe?”

“Look at the workmanship, so tightly woven”

“Do you think it’s an asp?”

“In a basket on the river? Don’t be silly, Eranth.”

The Princess herself drew the basket with its precious cargo onto the lowest step. Kneeling beside it, she undid the lacing and lifted the lid. I wondered if my brother was asleep when no cries issued from the blankets.

The collective question, “What is it?” was followed by sighs of womanly adoration for the baby that was lifted out.

“A baby!”

“Isn’t he cute!”

“Look at the tiny hands and feet.”

At last, a young woman, whose beaded hairstyle and fine linen tunic proclaimed her nobility, asked the question I desperately wanted an answer to.

“Princess, what will you do?”

The royal response was reassuring. “Bring me that blanket.”

A wide-eyed maid handed the linen wrap to her mistress.

Enfolding my brother in the royal cloth, the Princess stood up and announced, “We will keep him for our own.”

The calm statement was greeted with a gasped question, “Your father...?”

“Surely you know this is a Hebiru boy child,” another girl remonstrated boldly.

The women were silenced as the Princess drew herself up proudly. “Of course he *was* the son of a slave. Now he is *our* son. He will learn the ways of Egypt and not know the ways of the Hebiru. The baby is a gift from the gods to us. It is a blessing to keep and care for him.” Silence greeted her announcement.

“Who will nurse him?” One of the women asked, seeing the baby start to squirm and seek to nurse.

Without conscious thought, I stepped out of the bulrushes into the royal pool. “I know a woman,” I began. Belatedly remembering to bow, I bent forward until my forehead touched the water.

“Come here girl,” the royal voice was not angry.

Cautiously I waded forward, ignoring the hissing whispers on every side. A raised hand quieted the women. Sitting on the top step with my brother in her arms, the royal lady actually smiled at me.

“You know a woman who would nurse our son?”

Although the tone was kind, I found myself unable to speak and could only nod.

“Would this woman bring back the child when he is weaned?” a smile accompanied the question.

“Y.. y.. yes, my lady,” I finally found my voice to stammer a reply.

Gradually hope was overcoming fear. Maybe this was the way to save my family.

Triumphantly the princess looked at the gathered women.

“You see,” she stated, “the river god not only brings a son but also provides a nursemaid.” With a smile for me, she promised, “The woman will be paid well for her duties and have our protection.”

I bowed again, shy before her glowing smile, and stunned by the speed of events.

“Come,” she held out one hand.

My brother was nestled safely in her other arm. The serving girls gathered up the pillows and discarded robes as all the ladies prepared to follow us.

“We will speak to the girl alone,” the order left them gasping almost in outrage. Nothing so exciting had happened in years. Already they were imagining how to tell the story to other friends. We left them whispering together when the door closed softly behind us.

The palace was more magnificent than anything I could ever have imagined. There were amazing paintings on the walls. Carved furniture with animal feet lined the hall and panels of gold decorated doors that loomed taller than the largest home in Goshen. Everything was polished so it reflected each movement. Light and air came in from windows high up near the ceiling. The bedroom was even more wonderful. I had never seen a bed raised off the floor. This one was carved from the same black wood as many of the doors. A wood headrest at one end would keep the royal head raised even in sleep. Linen curtains enclosed the whole thing to keep insects away at night. A large window opened toward the river and, in the distance, I could see temples and pyramids. A long low table with alabaster jars and bottles on it was against one wall. A huge bronze mirror hung over it.

I was startled to see my reflection. We used still pools of water if we took the time to look at ourselves at all. Curious, I edged closer to the mirror. Looking back at me was a somewhat muddied ten-year-old girl in clothes so faded they looked gray. The tunic was much too short because I was already much too tall. My tiny mother had to tilt her head to look at me if we were standing side by side. In the mirror I saw for the first time the resemblance to Jochebed that many people claimed to see. There was the same wavy dark brown hair, high cheekbones, and wide brown eyes. My hair, smoothly combed that morning, was now tangled and pieces of plants were sticking out of it. I ineffectively attempted to comb it again with my fingers. My skin was tanned from days in the sun tending the garden and working beside my mother. I vowed to begin using the carefully hoarded herbs and oils my mother mixed to keep her face smooth and light in color. I scrubbed one hand over my cheek trying to remove some of the dirt and sweat from my trek along the river.

The Princess’ voice caused me to jump and spin around. She held out a clean linen gown. The rough texture assured me that it was servant’s clothing but it was still softer than my wool tunic.

“Here child, the attendant for our royal son must not wear rags.” She pointed to an indoor pool just visible behind a carved screen. “Bathe there and put this on.”

Hesitantly I entered the water, but soon I was happy to splash it over my body. Washing in the Nile was never so enjoyable. There was always the fear of crocodiles or other beasts.

“Much better,” she nodded when I emerged from my ablutions. “Tell us your name.”

“Miriam, my lady,” I replied with a bow. I liked the feel of the linen sliding on my clean skin. It was so soft and light and cool. My fingers stroked the material and I kept my head lowered as much to admire my new clothes as out of homage to the royal lady.

“Mir-em,” she tried it on her tongue, “and the nurse you know of, what is her name?”

“Jochebed,” the answer was accompanied by another bow.

“Yo-ka-bad,” the lady frowned as she tried to say the name. “What is the name of this baby?”

I shook my head. We had never named the baby. Mother said ‘God will give him a name.’

When I didn’t respond, she mused, “I drew him out of the river.” Her eyes were soft as she looked at the baby nestled in her arms, content for now with the sugar tit.

“How would that be said?”

Confused at the question, I tilted my head and replied, “The word for drawing out is *mashab*.”

“*Me-she*,” her pronunciation was strange. “The Egyptian word for begetting a child is *moshe*,” she mused, nibbling her lower lip in concentration. “Moses it shall be,” she announced with a smile.

Crossing the room, she struck a bronze gong. Immediately a soldier entered to kneel in homage.

“Our litter,” she commanded.

The man saluted and marched briskly from the room. Another bell summoned a maid to assist the princess into her traveling clothes. Other attendants hurried from the room after receiving murmured instructions from the royal lady. My brother was laid in my arms. A commanding nod of her head signaled me to follow. We walked through more halls until we came to the front of the palace.

The steward bowed low as he opened the massive door. I saw a litter with delicate curtains waiting outside. Four muscular Nubians stood at attention ready to lift the burden.

“We go to take our son to the nursemaid,” the Princess announced to the man.

His training didn’t prevent a brief look of stunned surprise from slipping across his face. It was quickly gone as he bowed again.

“Yes, Great Lady.” A snap of his fingers summoned another servant who held a fan over the royal head until she was safely in the litter.

Once settled, the Princess held out her arms for Moses. Keeping my eyes on the baby, I handed him to the Lady. Still, I felt the eyes of soldiers and servants staring at me curiously. I forced myself to not show the fear the crawled up and down my spine.

The Princess ordered me to join her behind the curtains instead of running beside with the servants. She nestled Moses in her arms and gazed down into his sleeping face. Curling into as tiny a space as possible, I reveled in the luxury as the bearers set out a trot.

The captain of the Princess’ guard looked astonished at her order to proceed to Goshen. His frown was quickly hidden by a low bow although I heard him order extra vigilance from the soldiers. We arrived sooner than I would have believed. I directed the bearers through the narrow streets to my house.

“Great Lady,” the officer tried to reason with his royal mistress, “this is no place for one of your rank.”

His lip curled as he looked around at the tiny homes with dusty children now staring in startled bewilderment at the black men and the litter as well as the polished armor of the royal guard. Mothers appeared as if by magic to whisk their precious little ones inside away from the feared swords of the Egyptians.

“Nor is it your place to decide such things, Captain. You may bring the bundles,” her voice was cold and the man stepped back with a frown and nod.

With a shaking hand, I pushed open the door and bowed the Princess of the Two Lands into my home. In her arms, she held my brother wrapped in a fine linen blanket. He whimpered and squirmed.

Her tone was gentle as she crooned, “Moses, my son, you will have milk soon enough.”

My mother stood frozen in the center of the room. The bowl of bread dough in her hands tilted. I snatched it from her and placed it on the rough table. I never noticed how poor our furnishings were. Now I cringed that the royal Princess would see our poverty.

“Bow to the Daughter of the Lord of the Black Land, dog of a slave!” the Captain’s sharp words broke her trance.

My poor mother flattened herself to the dirt floor. I know she expected the sword.

“Captain, this woman is in our service and under our protection!” The flash of anger in the black eyes caused the proud Egyptian soldier to join my mother in obeisance on the floor. The Princess tapped one sandal-clad foot for a moment. Another whimper from the baby changed her demeanor. “You may go.”

The man bowed himself backward through the low doorway. The bearers set down their bundles and also departed. We three women remained. I quickly dragged out the one seat in the house. It was a rough bench pieced together, like the table, from lumber my father scavenged from old scaffoldings. I draped a clean, if worn, wool blanket over it. With a gracious smile, the Princess seated herself. She seemed entirely at home just as though she was in the tiled halls we had recently left.

“Rise, woman,” her voice was soft as she addressed my frightened mother. “Your name is Yo-ka-bad?”

The question caused my mother to dart an apprehensive glance at me before nodding mutely. I crouched beside the royal lady while she addressed my still kneeling parent.

“The god Hari brought us a gift today,” a smile accompanied her words.

When there was no response, she continued, “Hari sent me a son.”

Again my mother glanced at me. I smiled happily and nodded.

The Princess added, “We have need of a wet nurse. This girl says you would be willing to act as nursemaid for us until the boy can be weaned.”

Hope began to shine in Jochebed’s eyes but her answer was meek.

“The Great Lady honors her humble slave.”

“You will be under our protection. We have brought you food and clothing for your station,” the royal head nodded toward the packs by the door.

The two women stared into each other’s eyes, my mother with growing optimism, and the Princess with the poise born of her position. I eyed the pile of leather bags curiously, wondering what delights they contained.

“When the boy is weaned,” the young woman spoke, “you will bring him to us. He will be a Prince in the land of Egypt. The finest education will be his. Our son will learn to fight. He will have land and houses, horses and slaves.”

Jochebed bowed until her forehead touched the royal feet; “I am yours to command. The Daughter of Pharaoh is merciful and beautiful.”

“His name is Moses,” gently the lady rocked the baby one last time.

Softly the smooth hand drew back the linen blanket from my brother’s face. She kissed him gently on the forehead before handing him to my mother. With greed the woman gathered her son back into her arms. Baring a breast, she gave him suck. After watching for a moment with a half-smile, the Princess turned to me.

“Mir-em,” my name was still difficult for her, “you will help with our son and bring news every week of what he does.”

I repeated my mother’s words while I knelt to touch my forehead to the floor. “Yes, Great Lady, I am yours to command.”

She stood gracefully and walked to the door. I scrambled to pull it open. Quite a crowd had gathered outside. The captain glared around and snarled orders at the guards. He was unable to understand why his royal mistress was in this humblest of houses. The shouted questions from the neighbors wanting to know what was happening in the home of Amram and Jochebed only made him uncomfortable. When the Princess appeared, soldiers and bearers bowed low before hurrying to their places. The crowd also knelt.

“Captain,” the royal command echoed in the narrow street. “This house and all inside are under our protection. The Daughter of the King of the Two Lands has spoken. Yo-ka-bad is nurse to our adored and beloved son, Moses, gift of the Nile god Hari to his humble maidservant. Anyone found troubling the peace of this house is to be beaten and dropped in the center of the Nile as an offering to gracious Hari. Our son, granted to us by the benevolent Hari, will be a Prince in Egypt and dedicated to the one who brought him to us.”

“Yes, Most Royal Lady and daughter of the Mighty Pharaoh, it will be as you have ordered.” A low bow and salute from the Captain proclaimed his obedience. Those who understood the words hastily repeated them for friends.

“Now we will go to the temple to offer thanks to the gods for their favor.”

With a smile of farewell to me, the Princess accepted the officer’s assistance into her litter. The crowd divided as the bearers moved up the street. Everyone gathered around our door with questions. Anxious to return to my mother and brother, I answered as briefly as I could.

“The most royal Daughter of Pharaoh has honored our house by choosing it as home for her son. As she said, the river brought her the baby.” I refused to say anything more and slipped inside.

People continued to speculate and whisper for a long time before gradually returning to their homes. In each tiny house, the story would be told and retold for the men when they returned from the mud pits and brickwork.

My mother demanded a full explanation as we sat on the floor and unpacked the packages. We pulled blankets and linen garments out of one bundle. They were softer than anything I had ever felt. From the other leather bag came dried fruits and sacks of wheat. These were items we rarely had on our table. Our usual fare was bean curd with onions on barley bread. Jochebed sighed contentedly as she looked from her dozing son to the mounds of riches piled around the small room.

I had to repeat the story when my father and Aaron came home. Their looks of amazement made me smile.

“God has saved our son, given him a name and blessed us with royal favor,” the ringing proclamation from my mother was greeted with a solemn nod from Amram.

“It is as you said,” he stated. “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has great things in store for our son.” I was forgotten in the rejoicing. I was happy as I sat in the corner and wondered how to use this event to save my family.