

Beatrice Gormley. *Miriam*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 1999. 192 pp. \$6.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-8028-5156-7.



Reviewed by Alexandra O'Brien

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This book is a novelization of the story of Moses told from the point of view of his sister, Miriam, written with a clearly fundamentalist agenda. The book is divided into twenty-eight chapters preceded by two pages on "The Setting for Miriam's Story." Pages 1-2 make it quite clear that the author of this book, and its intended audience no doubt, regard the events recorded in the Old Testament to be historical fact. Gormley writes, "By the time of Rameses the Great of Egypt ... the Hebrews have been living in Goshen, in the Eastern Delta of the Nile River, for hundreds of years. But they have not merged into the Egyptian population, partly because of Egyptian prejudice against foreigners and partly because of the Hebrews' loyalty to their own culture and religion." This factually questionable statement is indicative of the tone of the rest of the book.

Page 2 has a "Note" stating that some of the chapters are told from the point of view of Miriam and some from the point of view of Nebet (a uninspired choice of name, meaning simply "Mistress" or "Lady"), the chief lady-in-waiting of the Egyptian princess Bint-Anath (a Semitic name, a

fact upon which Gormley does not comment). Nineteen of the twenty-eight chapters are told from Miriam's point of view, indicative of the overall bias of the book.

The book perpetuates the historical inaccuracies of the Bible story, while expanding hugely on the role of Miriam, who features little in the biblical narrative itself. For example, there are frequent references to the "brickyards" in which the Hebrews worked (pages 6, 11, 62, amongst others), including a reference to "baskets of clay" in these yards (page 11) and bricks and mortar (page 62). Baked clay bricks don't show up in Egypt until the Roman period, and are pretty unusual even then, since mud bricks are cheaper to make (don't have to bake them or, to put it technically, they are "thermodynamically inexpensive," an important consideration in a country where wood is at such a premium). Other strange inclusions, presumably intended to enhance the image of Egyptians as ostentatiously wealthy and self-indulgent, include a pet parrot on page nineteen. I am unaware of any examples of such a creature anywhere in Pharaonic Egypt, certainly not as a pet.

Examples do exist of pet monkeys (not just in Egypt), referred to on the same page as the parrot.

The rendering of the standard royal epithet (which follows the king's name in Egyptian texts) is not well done: "My father the King "may he live and prosper)" (page 20) sounds awfully Star Warsesque ("live long and prosper"). The usual translation is something like "[king's name] life, prosperity, health," which, since it's what the Egyptian actually says, sounds much less forced. The spelling of the name of "the royal wife," Ystnefert, is curious. No scholar of the field would spell that name in such a way, and one wonders how the child reader would be able to comprehend such a name. How on earth would she/he be able to pronounce it? I'm not even entirely sure how to! Why not spell it Isetnofret, the more usual way? And what happened to Nefertari (who actually was the chief wife of Ramesses II)?

Chapter Two starts with Nebet making an offering to Taweret, an Egyptian deity associated with fertility and successful childbirth (pages 22-23). So far, so good. However, this soon becomes a vehicle for denigrating Egyptian religion, including the greatly inaccurate statement "... Hathor was identified with the cow, but only by her gracefully curved horns. In contrast, Taweret looked silly, with her hippo ears sticking out of her long wig and her little piggish eyes outlined with kohl ..." (page 23). In fact, representations of Hathor as a (whole) cow are not infrequent, in both sculpture and scenes. Taweret's composite representation is intended to be "apotropaic," in other words, intended to scare off malicious spirits that might harm a pregnant mother or her child; to describe her as looking "silly" is patronising and naive to say the least. The following page describes Princess Bint-Anath's linen robe "with it's perfectly ironed pleats" (page 24). The Egyptians probably pleated linen using indented molds - pieces of wood with pleats carved across them - rather than "ironed" as such.^[1] Presumably the linen would be sandwiched between two such

pieces of wood and then either left, being pressed into shape with weight placed on top, or, perhaps, steamed. The exact nature of this process is not known.

There are a number of further inaccuracies or anachronisms. One example occurs on page 39 where mention is made of a scribe making "a note on his tablet;" Egyptians did not write on "tablets," they wrote on papyrus or on ostraca (stone flakes or pot sherds). Striking anachronisms are reference to a "Ministry of Foreign Residents" on pages 66 and 89 (no such governmental body existed, moreover, the administration of ancient Egypt was not divided into a series of ministries in the manner of a modern government) and on pages 73 and 79 where a "dust storm" is referred to as a "khamsin." Not only is this anachronistic, but also the explanation of the term given by Gormley in the text is incorrect. The "khamsin" is the modern Egyptian (i.e., ARABIC, i.e., post-Arab conquest in the seventh century AD!) name for a very particular wind, so called since it blows for about fifty days and "khamsin" means "fifty" in Arabic. This wind may cause sandstorms, but the word doesn't mean "sandstorm." The suggestion on page 81 that only Hebrews were tenant farmers is a further inaccuracy, since Egyptians were themselves almost all tenant farmers too. The floor painting described on page 105 seems to have a most unlikely subject matter, a powerful ritual scene which is part of the repertoire of tomb decoration (the classic "fowling in the marshes" scene).

The meaning "son" given for the name "Mose" on page ninety is inaccurate, since "Mose" doesn't really mean "son" it means "(one) born." In fact, "Mose" was a contraction of a longer, theophoric name such as Djutmose ([one] born of Thoth) or Amenmose ([one] born of Amun) and so forth. The mother's refusal to use this name for her son on page 98 is particularly ironic, since she instead decides to call him "Moshe" which is, of course, exactly the same name and just as Egyptian (since this is just a Hebraized rendering of Mose).

The overall tone of the story is objectionable. The Egyptians are depicted as thoroughly horrible people while Miriam and her "clan" are painted as spotlessly pure, which is not surprising I suppose, given the book's intended audience. However, it seems rather simplistic and unchallenging for the young reader. On page 76 we are told that "it was easy to tell the Hebrews from the Egyptians. The Hebrew women covered their hair with head scarves, while the bare-headed Egyptian women had their hair cut in bangs over their foreheads." Representations of Semitic people occur on the walls of the tomb of Khnumhotep in Beni Hassan, Middle Egypt; the women in these groups are shown with their heads uncovered, just like their Egyptian counterparts.[2] The character Miriam goes on to say that while the Egyptian girls "wore nothing but a belt of folded cloth around their hips" she and the other "Hebrew girls dressed in modest tunics." The character Peneb, the Egyptian steward who controls the estate in which Miriam and her family live is depicted as a lazy drunk (see pages 10-12). All in all, the Egyptians are depicted as licentious and immoral.

I would like to point out a few things before I end. The earliest reference to "Israel" (and just about the only pre-biblical example) occurs in the "Israel Stele" of Merneptah. This is a long listing of towns defeated by the Egyptian army under this pharaoh, and Israel is listed as a population group (not a town/state since it does not have that kind of determinative), and defeated along with all the others. Note that this "group" was in the area of Palestine, not Egypt. Of course, there's lots of evidence for Semitic people in Egypt (see note 2 below), especially in the eastern Delta (where Miriam and her family lived in the story) and most particularly at the site of Tell el-Dab'a, the "capital of the Hyksos". However, there is no evidence at all either that these people were "Hebrews," or for any "Hebrews" living in Egypt. None. The eastern Delta population was clearly worshipping the usu-

al range of Canaanite/Western Asian deities, such as Astarte and Baal, amongst others.[3]

Even if one could put aside the fundamentalist approach and historical errors, the story isn't even terribly engaging, having instead a rather pedestrian tone. I do not recommend this book and, indeed, thoroughly encourage its avoidance.

Notes

[1]. See Anna Maria Donadoni Roveri. 1987. *Egyptian Civilization. Daily Life. Egyptian Museum of Turin*. Milan, Electa Spa. page 205, fig. 286.

[2]. For examples see Abdel Ghaffar Shedid. 1994. *Die Felsgrber von Beni Hassan*. Zaberns Bildbnde zur Archologie, 16. Mainz-am-Rhein, Philipp von Zabern. ISBN: 3-8053-1532-5. pp. 54 and 61, Abbn. 91 and 104. Note that the only differences between these women and Egyptian women are the white head bands and the patterned fabric.

[3]. See Manfred Bietak. 1996. *Avaris. The Capital of the Hyksos. Recent excavations at Tell el-Dab'a*. London, British Museum Press. ISBN: 0-7141-09681. Also Manfred Bietak. 1975. *Tell el-Dab'a II. Der Fundort im Rahmen einer archologisch-geographischen Untersuchung ber das gyp-tische Ostdelta*. sterreichische Akademie Wissenschaften, Denkschriften der Gesamtakademie, Band IV. Untersuchungen der Zweigstelle Kairo des sterreichischen Archologischen Institutes, Band I. Wein, Verlag der sterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. ISBN: 3-7001-0136-8. (and Bietak's subsequent publications).

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