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SCIENCES OF THE QUR'AN



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Asiyah bint Muzahim

The wife of Fir'awn: the woman who drew Musa from the river, believed in his Lord inside the palace of a tyrant, and asked Allah for a house near Him.

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

The lives of the great women of Islam, one part every Wednesday, told from the sources. A reference follows each statement: the Qur'an by surah and ayah, hadith by collection and number, and the early biographies by name.

Reports from the biographies and the historians are historical accounts and are not held to the standard of authentic hadith; the text says when a statement rests on such a report. Dates before the Hijrah are approximate.

CHAPTER 1

Her Name and Her Family

Asiyah bint Muzahim was the wife of Fir'awn, the ruler of Egypt in the time of the Prophet Musa. The Qur'an does not give her name. It calls her simply "the wife of Fir'awn", and it mentions her twice: once on the day she drew a child out of the river and pleaded for his life, and once as an example, for all believers until the end of time, of faith held firm in the house of the worst of tyrants. (Qur'an Al-Qasas 28:9; Qur'an At-Tahrim 66:11)

Her name comes from the Prophet ﷺ himself. Ibn 'Abbas narrated that he named her among the best of the women of Paradise as "Asiyah bint Muzahim, the wife of Fir'awn". (Musnad Ahmad 2668) Beyond her name and her father's name, almost nothing about her family is known with certainty, and the reader should know from the start that her life, like the lives of most people of that age, comes down to us in only a few fixed points. Those points are fixed by revelation. Around them the commentators and the historians recorded a number of further reports, and this part marks each of them as such.

What the historians say of her lineage

The historians differed over her origin. Ibn Kathir records that she was said to be of Bani Isra'il, from the tribe of Musa himself, and that it was even said she was his paternal aunt; he also records the opposite view, that she was an Egyptian of the people of Fir'awn. (Al-Bidayah wan-Nihayah, Ibn Kathir; Qasas al-Anbiya', Ibn Kathir) None of these reports goes back to the Prophet ﷺ, and none can be settled. The Qur'an tells us only that she lived in the household of Fir'awn as his wife, and that what she believed was not what he believed.

Al-Muzahim, her father, is a name and nothing more. No report describes him, his work or his standing. Nor is anything known of her mother, of any brother or sister, or of her age when she married. The commentators say that she had no children by Fir'awn, and they take this from her own words in the Qur'an, "or we may take him as a son", spoken over the infant Musa. (Qur'an Al-Qasas 28:9; Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

Why so little is known

Asiyah lived many centuries before the Prophet ﷺ. Her story was not preserved by her own people in any book that has reached us, and the Arabs had no written record of Egypt. What Muslims know of her comes from three sources. The first and only certain one is the Qur'an. The second is a small number of sound hadith in which the Prophet ﷺ spoke of her rank. The third is the body of reports gathered by the early commentators from the Companions, the generation after them, and in some cases from the People of the Book, which the scholars call *Isra'iliyyat*.

The Prophet ﷺ gave a rule for this third kind of material: "Do not confirm the People of the Book and do not deny them, but say: We believe in Allah and what has been revealed to us." (Bukhari 4485) The commentators therefore recorded such reports, and the scholars after them were careful to distinguish them from revelation. Ibn Kathir, whose commentary and whose stories of the prophets are the main later sources for this part, repeatedly warns that much of what is narrated about Musa and Fir'awn comes from this kind of material. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) The same care is taken here.

CHAPTER 2

Egypt and Its Ruler

The land in which Asiyah lived was Egypt, which the Qur'an calls *Misr*. It was a land of one great river, the Nile, which ran from the south to the sea through a narrow green valley between deserts, and on whose yearly flood the whole country depended. It was rich in grain, in gardens and springs, and it had been ruled for many centuries by kings who built on a vast scale. The Qur'an describes what Fir'awn and his people left behind them when they were destroyed: gardens and springs, crops and noble dwellings, and comforts in which they had delighted. (Qur'an Ad-Dukhan 44:25–27)

The title Fir'awn

The Qur'an refers to the ruler of Egypt in the time of Musa as Fir'awn, the word that came into English as Pharaoh. Many scholars understood it as the title of the kings of Egypt, as Kisra was the title of the kings of Persia and Qaysar of the kings of Rome. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) It is worth noticing that in the story of Yusuf, which took place in Egypt several generations earlier, the Qur'an calls the ruler "the king". (Qur'an Yusuf 12:43; Qur'an Yusuf 12:50)

The historians attempted to give the Fir'awn of Musa a personal name. Ibn Kathir records that he was said to be al-Walid ibn Mus'ab ibn ar-Rayyan, and he records other names as well. (Al-Bidayah wan-Nihayah, Ibn Kathir) Modern writers have tried to match him with one of the kings known from the monuments of Egypt, and have not agreed. The Qur'an does not name him, and nothing in the religion depends on knowing which of the kings he was.

His claim

What the Qur'an does describe, at length, is the man. He was a tyrant who exalted himself in the land. (Qur'an Al-Qasas 28:4) He gathered his people and proclaimed: "I am your lord, the most high." (Qur'an An-Nazi'at 79:23–24) He said to his chiefs: "O chiefs, I have not known for you any god other than me." (Qur'an Al-Qasas 28:38) He reminded his people that the kingdom of Egypt was his and that the rivers flowed beneath him, and he despised Musa as a man of

no standing who could barely make himself clear. (Qur'an Az-Zukhruf 43:51–52) The Qur'an says: "So he made fools of his people, and they obeyed him. Indeed, they were a people who were disobedient." (Qur'an Az-Zukhruf 43:54)

Around him stood a court of powerful men. The Qur'an names one of them, Haman, whom Fir'awn ordered to bake bricks and build him a tower so that he might look, as he mocked, at the god of Musa. (Qur'an Al-Qasas 28:38; Qur'an Ghafir 40:36–37) It also mentions Qarun, a man of Musa's own people who was given treasures so great that their keys were a burden for a band of strong men, and who sided with the oppressors. (Qur'an Al-Qasas 28:76; Qur'an Al-'Ankabut 29:39) This was the household and the court into which Asiyah was married. She lived as the wife of the man who called himself the highest lord, in a palace where his word was law.

CHAPTER 3

Bani Isra'il in Egypt

The people at the centre of her story, apart from her own household, were Bani Isra'il, the Children of Isra'il. Isra'il was the name of the Prophet Ya'qub, the son of Ishaq, the son of Ibrahim, and his descendants were called after him. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

How they came to Egypt

The Qur'an tells in Surah Yusuf how Ya'qub's son Yusuf was thrown into a well by his brothers, sold into Egypt, imprisoned unjustly, and raised at last to authority over the stores of the land. When famine came, his brothers came to Egypt for grain, and in the end Yusuf brought his parents and his whole family from the desert to live with him there. (Qur'an Yusuf 12:99–101) The family of Ya'qub settled in Egypt and multiplied over the generations.

The Qur'an does not say how long a time passed between Yusuf and Musa. The historians give figures of several centuries, but they differ, and no figure is certain. (Al-Bidayah wan-Nihayah, Ibn Kathir) By the time of Musa's birth, the descendants of Ya'qub were a large people living among the Egyptians, and their position had changed completely. The family that had once been honoured by the king of Egypt had become a people held in subjection.

A people enslaved

The Qur'an describes their condition in the words of Musa himself. When Fir'awn later reminded him of the favour of having raised him in the palace, Musa answered: "And is this a favour with which you reproach me, that you have enslaved the Children of Isra'il?" (Qur'an Ash-Shu'ara' 26:22) Allah reminds Bani Isra'il in several places of what they suffered: "And

when We saved you from the people of Fir'awn, who afflicted you with the worst of torment, slaughtering your sons and keeping your women alive. And in that was a great trial from your Lord." (Qur'an Al-Baqarah 2:49)

Ibn Kathir explains that Fir'awn used them for the hardest and most menial work in his kingdom, labour that went on day and night, while the Egyptians held the land and its wealth. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) The Qur'an describes Fir'awn's method of rule: "Indeed, Fir'awn exalted himself in the land and made its people into factions, oppressing one group among them." (Qur'an Al-Qasas 28:4) Egypt under him was divided into classes, each with its work, and one of those classes was the Children of Isra'il.

They were, nevertheless, the descendants of prophets, and they had kept something of the religion of Ibrahim, Ishaq, Ya'qub and Yusuf. They knew that they were a people with a covenant, and that a deliverer would one day come to them. It was into this people that Musa was born.

CHAPTER 4

The Decree Against the Sons

The Qur'an states plainly the worst of Fir'awn's crimes against Bani Isra'il: "He slaughtered their sons and kept their women alive. Indeed, he was of those who cause corruption." (Qur'an Al-Qasas 28:4) The same words are repeated in several surahs, so that the believers would never forget what their forefathers had endured. (Qur'an Al-Baqarah 2:49; Qur'an Al-A'raf 7:141; Qur'an Ibrahim 14:6)

Why he did it

The Qur'an itself gives the deeper reason in the next ayat: "And We wished to confer favour upon those who were oppressed in the land, and to make them leaders and make them the inheritors, and to establish them in the land, and to show Fir'awn and Haman and their soldiers through them that which they feared." (Qur'an Al-Qasas 28:5–6) Fir'awn feared something from Bani Isra'il, and the ayah says that what he feared would come to pass.

What exactly he feared is explained in reports from the commentators. Ibn Kathir records that Bani Isra'il used to speak among themselves of what had come down to them from Ibrahim: that a boy would be born among them at whose hands the kingdom of Egypt would be destroyed. The news reached Fir'awn, and he ordered that every male child born to them be killed. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) Another report, from as-Suddi, says that Fir'awn saw in a dream a fire coming from the direction of Bayt al-Maqdis which burned the houses of the Egyptians and spared Bani Isra'il, and that his soothsayers interpreted it to mean that a

man of Bani Isra'il would end his rule. (Tafsir at-Tabari; Tafsir Ibn Kathir) These are reports of the commentators, of the kind that came from the People of the Book. The Qur'an confirms only that he feared something from them and that he slaughtered their sons.

The year of killing and the year of sparing

Ibn Kathir records a further report. The Egyptians, it says, came to Fir'awn and complained that if the killing continued, the old men of Bani Isra'il would die out and the young would be killed, and there would be no one left to do the labour on which the country depended. So Fir'awn ordered that the boys be killed in one year and spared in the next. Harun, the brother of Musa, was born in a year of sparing, and Musa was born in a year of killing. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir; Qasas al-Anbiya', Ibn Kathir) The Qur'an confirms that Harun was Musa's brother, but it does not mention the alternating years; this detail rests on the reports of the commentators.

Whatever the exact arrangement, the decree meant that the birth of a son among Bani Isra'il had become an occasion of terror. Ibn Kathir describes officials and midwives going among the houses to find pregnant women and record the births. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) The palace in which Asiyah lived was the place from which these orders went out.

CHAPTER 5

The Mother of Musa

Into this time of fear a son was born to a family of Bani Isra'il. The Qur'an does not give the names of his parents. The historians name his father as 'Imran, a descendant of Ya'qub through his son Lawi, and some give his mother's name as Yukabid, but these names come from the historians and the People of the Book. (Al-Bidayah wan-Nihayah, Ibn Kathir) The Qur'an calls her only "the mother of Musa", and it tells her part in the story with great tenderness. The family already had a daughter, Musa's sister, and a son, Harun. (Qur'an Al-Qasas 28:11; Qur'an Ta Ha 20:29–30)

Ibn Kathir records that she hid her pregnancy, that it did not show as other pregnancies show, and that the women sent to watch the households of Bani Isra'il did not notice it. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) When the child was born, the fear for his life was with her from the first day.

The inspiration

Then Allah gave her a command that no mother would ever think of by herself:

> *And We inspired the mother of Musa: "Nurse him; but when you fear for him, cast him into the river, and do not fear and do not grieve. Indeed, We will return him to you and make him one of the messengers."*
>
> Qur'an Al-Qasas 28:7

The word used is *wahy*, inspiration. The scholars explained that this was not prophethood. It was an inspiration placed in her heart, of the kind Allah gives to whom He wills of His servants, or, as some said, a dream; the majority of the scholars hold that she was not a prophet. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) The same word is used in the Qur'an for the instinct Allah places in the bee. (Qur'an An-Nahl 16:68)

The command contained two promises: that the child would be returned to her, and that he would be made one of the messengers. In Surah Ta Ha, Allah reminds Musa of the same moment in more detail:

> *When We inspired to your mother what We inspired: "Put him in the chest and cast it into the river, and the river will throw it onto the bank. An enemy to Me and an enemy to him will take him." And I cast upon you love from Me, and that you would be brought up under My eye.*
>
> Qur'an Ta Ha 20:38–39

The ayah already tells the end of the story: the child would be taken by an enemy of Allah, and by an enemy of the child himself. What the mother could not know was that inside that enemy's house there was a woman whose heart Allah would turn towards her son.

CHAPTER 6

The Chest on the River

The house of Musa's family stood, according to the reports, near the bank of the Nile. Ibn Kathir describes how his mother made a wooden chest, laid a cradle inside it, and nursed the child. When she feared that someone was coming, she put him in the chest and let it float on the river, holding it by a rope tied to the bank, and drew it back when the danger had passed. One day, the report says, she let the chest go and forgot to tie the rope, and the current carried it away. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) Other reports say that she set it on the river deliberately, in obedience to the command, once it was no longer possible to hide him. (Tafsir at-Tabari) The Qur'an says only that she cast him into the river as she had been told.

The ayah of Surah Ta Ha calls the vessel a *tabut*, a chest or box. It was a small wooden thing on the largest river her people knew, carrying the child who would one day lead them out of Egypt.

His mother's heart

The Qur'an describes what happened to her when he was gone:

> *And the heart of the mother of Musa became empty. She was about to disclose it, had We not bound fast her heart so that she would be of the believers. And she said to his sister: "Follow him." So she watched him from a distance, while they did not perceive.*
>
> Qur'an Al-Qasas 28:10–11

Ibn 'Abbas, Mujahid, 'Ikrimah, Sa'id ibn Jubayr, al-Hasan al-Basri, Qatadah and others explained that her heart became empty of everything in the world except Musa, and that in her grief she nearly cried out that the child was hers. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) Allah strengthened her heart so that she held her tongue, and trusted the promise she had been given. She sent her daughter to follow the chest along the bank, and the girl walked behind it, watching from the side, as if she were not concerned with it at all. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

The palace on the river

The chest floated down to the palace of Fir'awn. The Qur'an says: "Then the family of Fir'awn picked him up, so that he would become to them an enemy and a cause of grief. Indeed, Fir'awn and Haman and their soldiers were wrongdoers." (Qur'an Al-Qasas 28:8)

The commentators explain that the words "so that he would become an enemy to them" do not describe their intention. They picked the child up hoping for a son or a servant; the ayah describes the outcome Allah had decreed, that the child they saved would be the cause of their ruin. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

Ibn Kathir records that the chest was taken from the water by the maidservants of the palace, who brought it, still closed, to the wife of Fir'awn, not daring to open it without her. When she opened it and uncovered the child, she saw his face, and Allah placed in her heart a love for him. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) In the long narration of Ibn 'Abbas known as *Hadith al-Futun*, the maidservants thought there was treasure inside, and when the wife of Fir'awn looked at the child she felt a love for him that she had never felt for anyone. (As-Sunan al-Kubra, an-Nasa'i) This is the moment at which Asiyah enters the Qur'an.

CHAPTER 7

"A Comfort of the Eye for Me and for You"

Fir'awn's men saw the child, and they understood at once what he was. A baby boy hidden in a chest on the river in a year of killing could only be a child of Bani Isra'il whose mother had tried to save him. Ibn Kathir records that Fir'awn wanted him killed, fearing that he was one of them. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) The wife of Fir'awn stood between the child and the knife:

> *And the wife of Fir'awn said: "A comfort of the eye for me and for you. Do not kill him. Perhaps he will benefit us, or we may take him as a son." And they did not perceive.*
>
> Qur'an Al-Qasas 28:9

These are the only words of Asiyah's in the Qur'an apart from her final prayer, and every phrase of them is chosen with care.

Her words

Qurratu 'ayn, "a comfort of the eye", is an Arabic expression for someone whose presence brings rest and joy, so that the eye is cooled and settled by looking at him. The Qur'an uses it for the righteous spouses and children the believers ask Allah for. (Qur'an Al-Furqan 25:74) She said "for me and for you", joining her husband to her own feeling so that the request would not seem to set her against him.

"Do not kill him." In the Arabic the command is in the plural, addressed to Fir'awn and to the men around him who carried out the killings. Then she gave reasons a ruler might accept: perhaps the child would be of use to them, or perhaps they would adopt him as a son. Ibn Kathir explains that she said this because she had no child by Fir'awn. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) She was asking to keep the son she had never had.

"And they did not perceive." The ayah ends with the words of Allah, not hers. Neither Fir'awn, nor his men, nor the woman pleading for the child knew whom they were sparing. Ibn Kathir comments that Allah guided her through this child, and that her place in Paradise came through him, while Fir'awn's destruction came at his hands. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

"For you, not for me"

The commentators record Fir'awn's answer from the narration of Ibn 'Abbas: "For you, yes. As for me, I have no need of him." (Tafsir Ibn Kathir; As-Sunan al-Kubra, an-Nasa'i)

The child was spared. A woman who lived in a palace from which the order to kill every son of Bani Isra'il had gone out had saved the very son whom that order had been made to destroy. She did it with nothing but her words and her husband's regard for her.

Under the eye of Allah

The scholars connected this moment with the words of Allah to Musa: "And I cast upon you love from Me." Salamah ibn Kuhayl explained it as: I made you beloved to My creatures. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) No one who saw the child could help loving him, and this, the commentators said, was why the wife of Fir'awn loved him the moment she saw him, and why even Fir'awn let him live. (Qur'an Ta Ha 20:39; Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

CHAPTER 8

His Mother Restored

A newborn child needs milk, and the wife of Fir'awn had none to give. The palace sent for wet nurses. The Qur'an says:

> *And We had forbidden him the wet nurses before, so she said: "Shall I direct you to a household who will take care of him for you, and they will be sincere to him?" So We returned him to his mother, that her eye might be comforted and she would not grieve, and that she would know that the promise of Allah is true. But most of them do not know.*
>
> Qur'an Al-Qasas 28:12–13

The phrase "We had forbidden him" means, the commentators explain, that Allah made the child refuse every breast offered to him. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) Ibn Kathir describes how the women of the palace were brought one after another, and the child would not feed, and how in their anxiety they took him out into the market to find any woman whose milk he would accept. It was there that his sister, who had followed him, saw him. She recognised him and gave no sign. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

His sister

When she saw how anxious they were, she offered to lead them to a household that would care for the child. Ibn 'Abbas reported that her words made them suspicious, and they seized her and asked how she knew this family would be sincere to the child. She answered that they would be sincere out of a wish to please the king and in hope of his favour, and they let her go. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) The ayah of Surah Ta Ha records her question: "When your sister went and said: Shall I direct you to one who will take care of him?" (Qur'an Ta Ha 20:40)

Back in his mother's arms

The child was brought to his mother, and he took her breast at once. Ibn Kathir records that the news was carried to the wife of Fir'awn, who sent for the woman and treated her generously, not knowing that she was the child's own mother. She asked her to live in the palace and nurse him there. The mother of Musa declined, saying that she had a husband and children of her own whom she could not leave, and offered to nurse him in her own home. The wife of Fir'awn agreed, and sent the child home with her, with a regular payment, clothing and gifts. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

So, the commentators observed, the mother of Musa was paid by the house of Fir'awn to nurse her own son in her own house, and the son whom Fir'awn had wanted dead was now under the protection of Fir'awn's wife. Ibn Kathir notes reports that only a day and a night had passed between her casting him into the river and his return to her arms, adding that Allah knows best. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

The first promise had been kept: "Indeed, We will return him to you." The ayah says that this was so "that she would know that the promise of Allah is true". The second promise, "and make him one of the messengers", would take many years.

CHAPTER 9

Raising Musa in the Palace

The Qur'an tells us that Musa grew up in the house of Fir'awn. Years later, when Musa returned as a messenger, Fir'awn reproached him with it: "Did we not raise you among us as a child, and you remained among us for years of your life?" (Qur'an Ash-Shu'ara' 26:18) Asiyah had asked to take him as a son, and the household had accepted him. He was brought up as a member of the royal household, with the honour and the protection that went with it.

Very little is known of these years. The Qur'an passes over them in one ayah: "And when he reached his full strength and was mature, We gave him wisdom and knowledge. And thus do We reward those who do good." (Qur'an Al-Qasas 28:14) Nothing in the Qur'an or the sound hadith describes the relationship between Musa and the wife of Fir'awn during his childhood and youth. It is natural to assume that the woman who had chosen him from the river and asked to adopt him remained close to him, but the sources do not describe it, and it is better not to invent what they do not say.

The report of the ember

The commentators record one story from these years, from the long narration of Ibn 'Abbas and from other early reports. It says that the child Musa, sitting in Fir'awn's lap, took hold of his beard and pulled it, and Fir'awn, taking this as an omen, wanted him killed. His wife said that he was only a child who did not know what he was doing, and proposed a test: a jewel and a burning ember were put before him, and if he reached for the jewel it would show that he understood. He reached for the ember and put it to his mouth, and this, the report says, was the cause of the difficulty in his speech that Musa later asked Allah to remove. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir; Tafsir at-Tabari) This story is not in the Qur'an or in any sound hadith. Ibn Kathir, following his teacher al-Mizzi, placed it among the reports from the People of the Book which may be narrated but are not confirmed. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) The Qur'an confirms only that Musa asked Allah to untie a knot from his tongue so that people would understand him. (Qur'an Ta Ha 20:27–28)

A believer in a house of idolatry

When did Asiyah come to believe? The sources do not give a clear answer. Some reports in the commentaries place her open declaration of faith at the time of the contest between Musa and the magicians, many years later, as will be seen. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) Ibn Kathir's remark that Allah guided her through this child suggests that her guidance was bound up with Musa from the beginning. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) Whether she held faith in Allah privately during the years she raised him, and how much she knew of his people's religion, is not known. What is certain is where she ended: the Qur'an records her as a believer who asked Allah for a house near Him.

CHAPTER 10

Musa Leaves Egypt

Musa grew to manhood in Egypt, and with manhood came the event that took him away from the palace. The Qur'an tells that he entered the city at a time when its people were unaware, and found two men fighting, one of his own people and one of his enemies. The man of his people called to him for help, and Musa struck the other man, and he died. Musa did not intend to kill him. He turned at once to Allah: "My Lord, I have wronged myself, so forgive me," and Allah forgave him. (Qur'an Al-Qasas 28:15–16)

The next day the matter became known, and a man came running from the far end of the city to warn him: "O Musa, the chiefs are conspiring about you to kill you, so leave. I am one of those who wish you well." Musa left the city, afraid and watchful, praying: "My Lord, save me from the wrongdoing people." (Qur'an Al-Qasas 28:20–21) Ibn 'Abbas counted this man among the very few of the people of Fir'awn who believed, together with the believing man of Surah Ghafir and the wife of Fir'awn herself. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

The years in Madyan

Musa travelled to Madyan, a land to the east beyond Sinai. There he helped two young women water their flock, married one of them, and agreed to work for her father for eight or ten years. (Qur'an Al-Qasas 28:22–28) Ibn 'Abbas said that he completed the longer and better of the two terms, because a messenger of Allah does what he says. (Bukhari 2684)

Nothing is recorded of Asiyah in all these years. The boy she had saved from the river and brought up as her son was gone, a fugitive under sentence of death from her husband's court. Whether she grieved, or knew where he was, the sources do not say.

The call at the valley

On the road back towards Egypt with his family, Musa saw a fire on the side of Mount Tur. When he came to it, he was called from the blessed ground: "O Musa, indeed I am Allah, the Lord of the worlds." (Qur'an Al-Qasas 28:29–30) He was given the signs of the staff and the shining hand, and commanded: "Go to Fir'awn. Indeed, he has transgressed." (Qur'an Ta Ha 20:24) Musa asked Allah to send his brother Harun with him, and Allah granted his request. (Qur'an Ta Ha 20:29–36) The second promise made to his mother, "and We will make him one of the messengers", had been fulfilled.

CHAPTER 11

The Messenger at the Palace

Musa and Harun were commanded to go to Fir'awn together and speak to him gently: "And speak to him with gentle speech, that perhaps he may be reminded or fear." (Qur'an Ta Ha 20:43–44) So Musa returned to the palace in which he had grown up, and stood before the man who had wanted him dead as an infant and who had raised him as a child.

Fir'awn recognised him at once and reminded him of his past: "Did we not raise you among us as a child, and you remained among us for years of your life? And you did the deed which you did, and you are of the ungrateful." Musa answered that he had done it when he was astray, that he had fled when he feared them, and that his Lord had since given him wisdom and made him a messenger. And he added: "And is this a favour with which you reproach me, that you have enslaved the Children of Isra'il?" (Qur'an Ash-Shu'ara' 26:18–22)

The house that had raised Musa was the house of Asiyah. The favour Fir'awn spoke of was, in its beginning, her favour: it was she who had pleaded for the child and asked to keep him. Fir'awn now used it as a reproach against the man she had saved.

"Who is the Lord of the worlds?"

The Qur'an records the argument that followed. Fir'awn asked: "And what is the Lord of the worlds?" Musa answered: "The Lord of the heavens and the earth and whatever is between them, if you are certain." Fir'awn turned to those around him and mocked: "Do you not hear?" Musa continued: "Your Lord and the Lord of your first forefathers." Fir'awn said: "Indeed, your messenger who has been sent to you is mad." Musa said: "The Lord of the east and the west and whatever is between them, if you would reason." Then Fir'awn threatened him with prison if he took any god other than him. (Qur'an Ash-Shu'ara' 26:23–29)

Musa showed him the signs. He threw down his staff, and it became a serpent, plain to see; he drew out his hand, and it was white for the onlookers. (Qur'an Ash-Shu'ara' 26:32–33) Fir'awn's chiefs said that this was a skilled magician who wanted to drive them out of their land, and advised him to gather the magicians of all the cities of Egypt to answer him. (Qur'an Al-A'raf 7:109–112)

CHAPTER 12

The Day of the Magicians

The contest was set for a festival day, the day of adornment, when the people would be gathered in the forenoon. (Qur'an Ta Ha 20:59) The magicians came from across Egypt and asked Fir'awn whether they would be rewarded if they won. He promised them wealth and a

place close to him. (Qur'an Ash-Shu'ara' 26:41–42)

They threw their ropes and their staffs, and by their magic these seemed to move, so that Musa felt a fear within himself. Allah said to him: "Do not fear. Indeed, you are the superior. And throw what is in your right hand; it will swallow up what they have made." (Qur'an Ta Ha 20:66–69) Musa threw his staff, and it swallowed what they had fabricated.

The magicians believe

The magicians knew their own craft better than anyone, and they knew that this was not magic. "So the magicians fell down in prostration. They said: We believe in the Lord of the worlds, the Lord of Musa and Harun." (Qur'an Ash-Shu'ara' 26:46–48)

Fir'awn's answer was rage. He accused them of conspiring with Musa, and threatened them with the most terrible punishment: "I will surely cut off your hands and your feet on opposite sides, and I will surely crucify you on the trunks of palm trees, and you will surely know which of us is more severe in punishment and more lasting." The magicians, who that morning had come to win his favour, answered:

> *We will never prefer you over what has come to us of clear proofs, and over He who created us. So decree whatever you will decree. You can only decree for this worldly life.*
>
> Qur'an Ta Ha 20:71–72

The commentators recorded the saying of Ibn 'Abbas and others about the magicians, that they began that day as sorcerers and ended it as martyrs. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) Their courage would be matched by a woman of Fir'awn's own house.

Asiyah on that day

Several reports place Asiyah's open declaration of faith on the day of the magicians. Ibn Kathir records, through Ibn Jarir at-Tabari, the report of al-Qasim ibn Abi Bazzah: the wife of Fir'awn used to ask who had prevailed, and when she was told that Musa and Harun had prevailed, she said: "I believe in the Lord of Musa and Harun." (Tafsir Ibn Kathir; Tafsir at-Tabari) In the long narration of Ibn 'Abbas it is said that during the contest she was praying openly to Allah for the victory of Musa over Fir'awn and his followers. (As-Sunan al-Kubra, an-Nasa'i) These are reports of the commentators and the early generations, and the Qur'an does not fix the day of her declaration. But they agree with the Qur'an in the one thing that matters: that the wife of Fir'awn believed in the Lord of Musa, and that her belief could not be hidden from her husband for ever.

CHAPTER 13

Believers in the House of Fir'awn

Asiyah was not the only one in Fir'awn's circle whose heart had turned. The Qur'an records the stand of a man of Fir'awn's own family, and the commentators record the story of a woman of his household. Together they show the kind of faith that was being tested in the palace of Egypt in her time.

The believing man of Fir'awn's family

When Fir'awn announced his intention to kill Musa, a man spoke up in his court:

> *And a believing man from the family of Fir'awn, who concealed his faith, said: "Do you kill a man because he says: My Lord is Allah, while he has brought you clear proofs from your Lord? And if he should be lying, then upon him is his lie; but if he should be truthful, there will strike you some of what he promises you."*
>
> Qur'an Ghafir 40:28

The well-known view is that he was an Egyptian of Fir'awn's own people; as-Suddi said that he was Fir'awn's cousin. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) He had hidden his faith until the life of Musa was at stake, and then he spoke. Surah Ghafir records his long appeal to his people: his reminder of the nations destroyed before them, of Yusuf who had come to their forefathers with clear proofs, and of the Day of Calling when they would turn back in flight with no one to protect them from Allah. (Qur'an Ghafir 40:29–35) He ended with words that have become the motto of every believer who has stood alone: "And I entrust my affair to Allah. Indeed, Allah is Seeing of His servants." Allah protected him from the evils they plotted, while the people of Fir'awn were enveloped by the worst of punishment. (Qur'an Ghafir 40:38–45)

The words of this man were repeated, centuries later, in Makkah. 'Abdullah ibn 'Amr narrated that once, while the Prophet ﷺ was praying, 'Uqbah ibn Abi Mu'ayt twisted his garment around his neck and choked him violently, until Abu Bakr came, pushed him away and said: "Do you kill a man because he says: My Lord is Allah?" (Bukhari 3678)

The hairdresser of Fir'awn's daughter

Imam Ahmad records a narration from Ibn 'Abbas that on the night of the Isra' the Prophet ﷺ noticed a sweet fragrance and asked Jibril about it. Jibril told him it was the fragrance of the woman who had combed the hair of Fir'awn's daughter, and of her children. One day, the narration says, the comb fell from her hand and she said, "Bismillah". Fir'awn's daughter asked: "My father?" She said: "No. My Lord and your father's Lord is Allah." When Fir'awn learned of it, he demanded that she renounce her faith, and when she refused he had a great vessel of copper heated, and her children were thrown into it one after another

before her eyes. When it came to her infant, she hesitated, and the child spoke and told her to go forward, for the punishment of this world is lighter than the punishment of the Hereafter. (Musnad Ahmad 2821)

The scholars of hadith differed over this narration. Its chain in the Musnad has been graded *hasan* by some later scholars, while others pointed to weakness in one of its narrators, who suffered from confusion of memory in later life; a related version in Sunan Ibn Majah, through Ubayy ibn Ka'b, has been graded weak. (Ibn Majah 4030; Musnad Ahmad 2821) It is included here as a narration about the believers in Fir'awn's household, not as part of Asiyah's own story. It shows what the price of faith in that house was.

CHAPTER 14

Her Trial

The Qur'an does not describe what Fir'awn did to his wife when her faith became known. It records only her prayer, which shows that she wished to be saved "from Fir'awn and his deeds" and "from the wrongdoing people". (Qur'an At-Tahrim 66:11) The details of her suffering come from reports recorded by the commentators and the historians from the Companions and the generation after them. None of them is a statement of the Prophet ﷺ, and they should be read as such.

The pegs and the sun

The best known of these reports says that Fir'awn had his wife stretched out on the ground and pinned by four stakes through her hands and feet, and left in the sun. Ibn Kathir records, through Ibn Jarir at-Tabari, the report of Sulayman at-Taymi that the wife of Fir'awn was tortured in the sun, and that when her torturers left her, the angels shaded her with their wings, and she was shown her house in Paradise. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir; Tafsir at-Tabari) At-Tabari also records, from Abu Rafi' through Thabit al-Bunani, that Fir'awn pinned his wife with four stakes and laid a great millstone on her back until she died. (Tafsir at-Tabari) A similar report about the four stakes, the angels and the house in Paradise is recorded by Abu Ya'la and others from Abu Hurayrah, and Ibn Hajar mentions it in *al-Matalib al-'Aliyah*; it is described as sound in its chain to the Companion, but it stops with him and is not attributed to the Prophet ﷺ. (Musnad Abi Ya'la; Al-Matalib al-'Aliyah, Ibn Hajar)

The commentators connected these reports with the Qur'an's description of Fir'awn as *dhul-awtad*, "the owner of the stakes". (Qur'an Al-Fajr 89:10; Qur'an Sad 38:12) Ibn 'Abbas explained the stakes as the armies that held his rule in place; Mujahid, Sa'id ibn Jubayr, al-Hasan and as-Suddi explained them as the stakes on which he nailed people's hands and feet to punish them. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) Both views are recorded, and the ayah does not mention his wife.

The rock

The report of al-Qasim ibn Abi Bazzah, recorded by Ibn Jarir and quoted by Ibn Kathir, continues the account of her declaration of faith. Fir'awn, it says, sent men to her and told them to find the largest rock they could. If she held to her faith, they were to throw it down on her; if she renounced it, she was still his wife. When they came to her, she raised her eyes to the sky and saw her house in Paradise. She held to her faith, and her soul was taken. The rock was thrown down on a body that no longer had a soul in it. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir; Tafsir at-Tabari)

These reports differ in their details: the stakes, the sun, the millstone, the rock. They come from the early generations and do not reach the strength of revelation or sound hadith. What they share is what the Qur'an itself makes clear: that she suffered at the hands of Fir'awn for her faith, that she asked Allah to save her from him, and that she did not give up her faith to save her life.

CHAPTER 15

Her Prayer

Whatever the details of her last days, the words she spoke are certain, because Allah preserved them in the Qur'an. In Surah at-Tahrim, after the examples of two women who were married to prophets and betrayed them, Allah gives the believers two women as their example. The first is Asiyah:

> *And Allah presents an example for those who believe: the wife of Fir'awn, when she said: "My Lord, build for me near You a house in Paradise, and save me from Fir'awn and his deeds, and save me from the wrongdoing people."*
> Qur'an At-Tahrim 66:11

The second is Maryam, the daughter of 'Imran, who guarded her chastity, believed in the words of her Lord and His books, and was of the devoutly obedient. (Qur'an At-Tahrim 66:12)

The example

The pairing is deliberate. In the ayah before, Allah gives as an example for those who disbelieve the wives of Nuh and Lut, who were married to two of His righteous servants and betrayed them, so that their husbands could not help them at all against Allah. (Qur'an At-Tahrim 66:10) Then He gives the opposite case: a believing woman married to the worst of disbelievers, whose husband's disbelief could not harm her. Qatadah said: Fir'awn was the most tyrannical of the people of the earth and the most disbelieving, and by Allah,

the disbelief of her husband did not harm her when she obeyed her Lord, so that people would know that Allah judges with justice and does not take anyone to account except for his own sins. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

Ibn Kathir explains that the lesson for the believers is that their mixing with disbelievers, when they are compelled to it, does not harm them, so long as they hold to their faith. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) Asiyah did not choose her husband for his religion, and she could not leave his house. She held her faith inside it.

"Near You"

The scholars have long noted the order of her words. She did not say "build for me a house in Paradise near You" but "build for me near You a house in Paradise". She asked first for nearness to Allah, and then for the house. Ash-Shawkani explains "near You" as near to Your mercy, or in the highest ranks of those brought near to You. (Fath al-Qadir, ash-Shawkani) Later scholars summed up the order of her words with an Arabic saying: the neighbour before the house. She had lived in a palace, among every comfort Egypt could provide, in the house of a man who called himself the highest lord. What she asked for at the end was a house near her Lord.

"Save me from Fir'awn and his deeds"

She asked to be saved not only from Fir'awn but from his deeds. Ibn Kathir explains that she declared herself free of his actions. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) She had lived as his wife, but she wanted nothing of his rule, his claim or his oppression to be counted with her. And she asked to be saved from "the wrongdoing people", the whole system of injustice of which he was the head.

The reports of the commentators say that in answer to this prayer she was shown her house in Paradise before she died. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) The Qur'an does not say this. It does say that her prayer was preserved, and that she was made an example for every believer, man and woman, until the Day of Judgement.

CHAPTER 16

The End of Fir'awn

Asiyah did not live, according to the reports, to see what became of her husband. But the Qur'an tells the end of the story in full, and her prayer to be saved "from Fir'awn and his deeds" cannot be understood without it.

The signs

After the day of the magicians, Fir'awn's chiefs urged him not to leave Musa and his people free to spread corruption in the land. He answered that he would kill their sons and keep their women alive as before, and that he was in full control over them. (Qur'an Al-A'raf 7:127) Musa told his people: "Seek help from Allah and be patient. Indeed, the earth belongs to Allah. He gives it as an inheritance to whom He wills of His servants, and the best outcome is for the righteous." (Qur'an Al-A'raf 7:128)

Allah then seized the people of Fir'awn with years of drought and shortage of fruits, and sent upon them the flood, the locusts, the lice, the frogs and the blood, as distinct signs. Each time a punishment fell on them they said: "O Musa, invoke your Lord for us; if you remove the punishment from us, we will surely believe in you and send the Children of Isra'il with you." And each time it was lifted, they broke their word. (Qur'an Al-A'raf 7:130–135)

The sea

Then Allah commanded Musa to travel by night with Bani Isra'il, for they would be pursued. (Qur'an Ash-Shu'ara' 26:52) Fir'awn gathered his armies from the cities and followed them at sunrise. When the two groups saw each other, the companions of Musa said: "We are surely overtaken." Musa said: "No. Indeed, with me is my Lord; He will guide me." Allah inspired him to strike the sea with his staff, and it parted, and each part was like a great mountain. Allah saved Musa and all who were with him, and drowned the others. (Qur'an Ash-Shu'ara' 26:53–66)

When the water closed over him, Fir'awn cried out: "I believe that there is no god except the one in whom the Children of Isra'il believe, and I am of the Muslims." He was answered: "Now? And you had disobeyed before and were of the corrupters. So today We will save you in body, that you may be a sign for those who come after you." (Qur'an Yunus 10:90–92) Ibn 'Abbas narrated that the Prophet ﷺ said that when Allah drowned Fir'awn and he said these words, Jibril said: "O Muhammad, if only you had seen me as I took mud from the sea and stuffed it into his mouth, for fear that mercy would reach him." (Tirmidhi 3107) His belief came at the moment of death, when belief no longer benefits.

The man who had called himself the highest lord was destroyed in the river and the sea over which he had claimed dominion. Allah says: "So We seized him and his soldiers and threw them into the sea. So see how was the end of the wrongdoers." (Qur'an Al-Qasas 28:40) The gardens, the springs and the noble dwellings of which he had been so proud were left behind for others to inherit, "and the heaven and the earth did not weep for them". (Qur'an Ad-Dukhan 44:25–29)

'Ashura

The day of deliverance was remembered. Ibn 'Abbas narrated that when the Prophet ﷺ came to Madinah, he found the Jews fasting on the day of 'Ashura. He asked them about it, and they said it was the day on which Allah saved Musa and Bani Isra'il from their enemy, and Musa had fasted it in gratitude. The Prophet ﷺ said: "We have more right to Musa than you," and he fasted it and commanded the Muslims to fast it. (Bukhari 2004; Muslim 1130) The Muslims who fast on the tenth of Muharram are remembering the end of the tyranny under which Asiyah lived and died.

Two promises fulfilled

At the beginning of Surah al-Qasas, Allah said that He wished to show Fir'awn and Haman and their soldiers through Bani Isra'il "that which they feared". (Qur'an Al-Qasas 28:6) The child whom Asiyah had drawn from the river and saved from the knife was the one through whom it came to pass. And when the household of Fir'awn picked him up, the Qur'an had said it was "so that he would become to them an enemy and a cause of grief". (Qur'an Al-Qasas 28:8) Of that whole household, the only one for whom he became a cause of guidance was the woman who had loved him first.

CHAPTER 17

Her Rank in Islam

Asiyah lived and died centuries before the Prophet ﷺ, and yet he spoke of her in terms that he used for almost no one else. Her rank is established by sound hadith in the two Sahihs and in the other collections.

Perfection among women

Abu Musa al-Ash'ari narrated that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: (Bukhari 3411)

> *Many among men attained perfection, but none among women attained perfection except Asiyah, the wife of Fir'awn, and Maryam, the daughter of 'Imran. And the superiority of 'A'ishah over other women is like the superiority of tharid over all other food.*
>
> Sahih al-Bukhari 3411; Sahih Muslim 2431

Al-Bukhari placed this hadith in his book of the prophets, in a chapter headed with the ayah "And Allah presents an example for those who believe: the wife of Fir'awn", and repeated it in other chapters. (Bukhari 3411; Bukhari 3433; Bukhari 3769) The scholars discussed what "perfection" meant here. Some held that it meant the highest degree of excellence in faith and righteousness, below the rank of prophethood; a few held that it pointed to

prophethood, but the majority of the scholars of Ahl as-Sunnah hold that no woman was a prophet, and they explain the perfection of Asiyah and Maryam as perfection in faith, devotion and patience. (Fath al-Bari, Ibn Hajar) The scholars also noted that other sound hadith place Khadijah and Fatimah in the same company, and that the perfection mentioned here does not exclude them. (Fath al-Bari, Ibn Hajar)

The four best women of Paradise

Ibn 'Abbas narrated that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ drew four lines on the ground and said: "Do you know what this is?" They said: "Allah and His Messenger know best." He said: "The best of the women of the people of Paradise are Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, Fatimah bint Muhammad, Maryam bint 'Imran, and Asiyah bint Muzahim, the wife of Fir'awn." (Musnad Ahmad 2668) It is from this narration that her full name is known, and it is from this narration that this series takes its name.

Anas ibn Malik narrated that the Prophet ﷺ said: "Sufficient for you among the women of the world are Maryam the daughter of 'Imran, Khadijah the daughter of Khuwaylid, Fatimah the daughter of Muhammad, and Asiyah the wife of Fir'awn." (Tirmidhi 3878) At-Tirmidhi graded this hadith sound.

An example for all believers

Of the four women named in these hadith, Asiyah is the only one who did not live in a household of prophets or of believers. Khadijah was the wife of the Prophet ﷺ and Fatimah his daughter; Maryam was raised in the sanctuary under the care of the Prophet Zakariyya. (Qur'an Al 'Imran 3:37) Asiyah's husband was the man whom the Qur'an returns to again and again as the example of arrogance and disbelief. This is why Allah made her, and not another, the example "for those who believe" in Surah at-Tahrim: for men as well as women, the example of faith that does not depend on the people around it. (Qur'an At-Tahrim 66:11; Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

Her place in this series

Asiyah has no tomb that is known and no descendants who are known. She left no words of her own except two sentences preserved in the Qur'an: the plea she made for a child in a chest, and the prayer she made for a house near her Lord. The first saved the life of Musa. The second is recited by Muslims in their supplications to this day. Between them lies everything the sources know of her, and it was enough for the Prophet ﷺ to name her among the four best women of Paradise.

AT A GLANCE

Timeline of Her Life

PERIOD	EVENT
Before her time	The family of Ya'qub settles in Egypt in the days of Yusuf. Their descendants, Bani Isra'il, multiply and are later enslaved.
Her early life	Asiyah bint Muzahim; her origin is disputed by the historians. She becomes the wife of Fir'awn and has no children by him.
The decree	Fir'awn orders the killing of the sons of Bani Isra'il.
The river	The mother of Musa casts him into the river in a chest. Asiyah takes him from the water and pleads for his life: "a comfort of the eye for me and for you".
Soon after	Musa refuses every wet nurse and is returned to his mother, who nurses him with Asiyah's support.
His youth	Musa is raised in the household of Fir'awn.
His flight	Musa leaves Egypt for Madyan after the death of the Egyptian, and remains there for about ten years.
His return	Musa returns as a messenger with Harun and calls Fir'awn to Allah.
The festival day	The magicians are defeated and believe. Reports place Asiyah's open declaration of faith at this time.
Her death	According to reports from the commentators, she is tortured for her faith and dies; her prayer for a house near Allah is preserved in the Qur'an.
After her	The signs upon Egypt; the parting of the sea; Fir'awn and his armies are drowned.

No dates can be given for her life. The order of events follows the Qur'an; details marked as reports in the text come from the commentators and the historians.

Sources

The Qur'an
Sahih al-Bukhari
Sahih Muslim
Jami' at-Tirmidhi; Sunan Ibn Majah
Musnad Ahmad
As-Sunan al-Kubra, an-Nasa'i
Musnad Abi Ya'la
Jami' al-Bayan, at-Tabari
Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim, Ibn Kathir
Qasas al-Anbiya', Ibn Kathir
Al-Bidayah wan-Nihayah, Ibn Kathir
Fath al-Qadir, ash-Shawkani
Fath al-Bari, Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani
Al-Matalib al-'Aliyah, Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani

Qur'an and hadith are given in English meaning. Please refer to the Arabic in the mushaf and the books of hadith.

Next Wednesday, in sha Allah: Part 5, 'A'ishah bint Abi Bakr.