

Imagine a young female Hebrew slave inadvertently left behind in Egypt when Moses leads her family and her people to freedom, who by means of her incipient mystical abilities becomes a student in a goddess-based oracle school.

Imagine her difficulty finding herself, her love, and her life's journey in that radically different world.

Imagine the impact of the wisdom goddess, Neith, on the development of her Hebrew identity.

Imagine ancient stories that offer up new insights when seen from the unique perspectives generated by her mystical trances.

And imagine a story where love is for giving, not possessing, where power is transformed by wisdom, and where enemies are respected and redeemed, not destroyed.

*Such is the story of Marah, **The Wisdom Weaver**, in this new novel by Wayne E. Gustafson, author of **Community of Promise: The Untold Story of Moses**.*

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Feminist wisdom has always been around, but in a patriarchal world it has needed to remain hidden. We can be grateful that women such as the followers of Neith thousands of years ago have kept it alive and have used it judiciously and subtly to influence human development and understanding.

This life-affirming feminist wisdom is re-emerging into the light in the twenty-first century.

The Wisdom Weaver

A Novel

Wayne E. Gustafson

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This book is a work of fiction. The words and actions of all characters, including those named in the biblical stories, are products of the author's imagination.

Biblical quotations are taken from the
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Dedication and Acknowledgments

This novel is my attempt at taking a feminist view of some biblical stories that have traditionally been understood from a masculine and hierarchical perspective. It is my belief that the stories would express very different meanings if they had been told by women.

So I dedicate this novel, first of all, to the many women in my life who have been my teachers and guides, who have challenged the worldview I inherited as an American white male, and who have opened me up to the possibilities for healthy community that feminism promotes.

These women include:

- My wife, Phebe, whose courage and dedication to a profound path of discovery require me to maintain a beginner's mind about life, power, and relationship;
- The women who have been my teachers, my colleagues, and my friends;
- And the women authors, scholars, and speakers who continue to enrich my understanding.

I also dedicate this novel to all the women throughout the years who have been the victims of sexism, misogyny, and the exclusive portrayal of the divine as a masculine figure. Whether they know her name or not, their courage and faith have kept alive the wisdom of Neith, one of Egypt's most ancient, important, and least known goddesses.

I am grateful to my friend Aileen Fitzke for her creative story editing, to Martha Stettinius for brilliant copy editing, and to sixteen-year-old Ceili Ayoung for her beautiful cover design.

Wayne E. Gustafson

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I chose to write the story of a fourteen-year-old girl in first person. From a third person perspective, I stand as just one more masculine voice commenting from on high about a woman's experience. Because I experienced her life from the inside, I believe the story turned out to be different, and, I hope, better. That perspective has changed me.

Dramatis Personae

Characters from the Exodus story

Miriam the Prophetess – sister of Moses

Pharaoh – ruler of Egypt at the time of the Exodus

Characters from Genesis stories

Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel – the first family

The Serpent in the Garden of Eden

Jacob – who wrestled with God

Joseph – Jacob's eleventh son

Abraham – first of the Patriarchs and Jacob's grandfather

Sarah – Abraham's wife

Principal Fictional Characters

Marah – Granddaughter of Miriam

The Lady Oracle – Head of the Oracle School
and adviser to Pharaoh

Menes – primary servant in the Oracle School

Senen – student in the Oracle School

Aneski – student in the Oracle School

Rudjek – Aneski's henchman

Khenti – “Friend of Pharaoh”

Raia – priestess of Neith

Teytey – marketplace merchant

Tan – artisan and Teytey's son

Nakhte – priest-trainee of Amun

Horwedja – priest-trainer of Amun and Nakhte's brother

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Prologue
Eve

Adam and our young son, Seth, watched me nurse the newborn twins. “Eve, they’re beautiful and a true blessing to us.”

I felt a warm glow that momentarily distracted me from my never-ending grief that Cain and Abel were no longer with us. From the first flutter of the twins’ growing presence in my womb, my reactions and intuitions about them had been complex. I fully expected that the boy would grow into a dutiful son, albeit in the shadow of his older brother, Seth. But for the girl, I intuited a very different future, my feelings punctuated by a deep awe at the person she would surely become and by a disturbing layer of sadness predicting that her path would necessarily take her away from us.

“I pray that I can be a better father to Seth and the twins than I was to our first two. Sadness and regret are my constant companions. I want to become the parent that Elohim created me to be. I must teach Jared to be a man, and I must keep this lovely little girl safe until she marries.”

“Now Adam, don’t burden yourself, or your children for that matter, with your expectations. You can’t make their paths nor their destiny fit your picture – whether you like the outcome or not.”

“Jared will learn to take care of himself, but how can I protect my little girl if she refuses my instruction – if she doesn’t obey?”

“Adam! Have you learned nothing from your experience with Cain and Abel?”

He hung his head and hunched his shoulders. “It was hard enough raising those boys, and we both saw how inept I was at that. I just want to do right by the twins – to bring my son to manhood and to protect my daughter. Doesn’t she need a strong father and a strong husband in her life to ensure her safety?”

“Adam, I cannot say how I know this, but I think she’ll find her own way in the world well enough.”

“Well, I hope so. I wouldn’t want her to feel abandoned.”

“For both of them, to stand solidly on their own feet and work out the destiny that is open to them is not the same as being abandoned. What do you say we give them the gifts of our love, support, and encouragement, and leave the rest to them? ”

“I know you are right, Eve, although it terrifies me. Perhaps our first gifts to them should be strong names, fitting for a strong man and a strong woman. We decided on Jared's name easily enough, but what shall we call her?”

“It came to me in a dream last night. Her name will be Neith. The dream portended that she will be remembered as a goddess.”

PART I

EXODUS

At midnight the Lord struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock. Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his officials and all the Egyptians; and there was a loud cry in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead. Then he summoned Moses and Aaron in the night, and said, "Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Lord, as you said."

Exodus 12: 29-31

Chapter 1

Marah

Midday, and I couldn't even see my feet. The darkness descending so suddenly terrified me. It swallowed everything—houses, streets, people—the whole city. I needed to find my way home but didn't know which way to go. Even if I knew the direction, the blackness made walking difficult—nearly impossible. I could barely manage to grope along the walls near the street hoping that I wouldn't fall into a hole between the buildings. My stomach alternated spasms of hunger with clenches of panic. Though I had some food, I didn't dare stop to eat it.

My sense that this blackness had something to do with the battle between Moses and Pharaoh made it no less frightening.¹ Moses was my grandmother's brother. He'd been adopted as an infant by Pharaoh's daughter but had been banished when he had protected an Israelite slave by killing the overseer. He'd recently returned to Egypt—sent by Elohim, he said—to free his people from bondage to Pharaoh. When the Egyptian king just laughed at him (who did Moses think he was!) the battle had begun.

Obviously we Israelites wanted Moses to win. After all, we'd been praying for generations to be liberated. But when Elohim plagued the city with blood in the river, frogs, flies, dead cattle, and boils on the skin, Pharaoh just made us work harder. We had to make more bricks with less straw. Thanks Moses.

1 The story of the plagues is found in Exodus 7 - 12

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I wasn't too surprised at Pharaoh's response to Moses's demands. He wasn't going to let us go until far into the future when his accursed tomb was finally completed. I figured I might see freedom when I was old and dying. The Israelites were growing angry at Moses for making our lives more difficult. Many thought he should go away and leave us alone. Sure, we were Pharaoh's slaves, but at least we had shelter and food. A lot of Israelites said they preferred security to Pharaoh's wrath. I wasn't so sure, but no one was likely to listen to my opinion.

Moses didn't leave, though. Instead, he and Elohim intensified the plagues. Hail rained down on the city. It tore at the skin and mowed down the plants. So many locusts followed that they blackened the skies and descended to finish off whatever was still edible in the fields. People tried eating the locusts. I tried eating them myself – they tasted awful. Then the horde left just as quickly as it had arrived – and the sun god Ra vanished with them.

The terrified Egyptians had had enough. They complained bitterly to Pharaoh, demanding that Moses be allowed to take us away. Frankly I could see their point. I was no sun worshiper, but this darkness was more than I could handle. Pharaoh, however, remained unmoved. Only the power of the sword mattered, so he sent his soldiers into the streets to restore order and to keep his slaves and his subjects under control. The soldiers were even more dangerous to me than the darkness.

The sudden light from a torch showed soldiers coming toward me. The faint glow illuminated a pile of rags just ahead. I dove in and pulled them over my head. As he passed me, one soldier plunged his sword into the pile. It nicked my arm but somehow missed killing me. In better light he might have noticed my blood on the blade. I let out my breath in a gasp – I didn't even realize that I had been holding it – when he moved away quickly with the others. I had just missed being a victim of Pharaoh's apparent plan: kill a few of us to keep the rest in line.

I kept moving from hiding-place to hiding-place. When I overheard some other passing soldiers, I learned that Moses

Exodus

and Elohim were not giving up. The soldiers were terrified, presumably by Moses's most recent prediction that the firstborn of every household in the city would die unless Pharaoh released the Hebrews. A chill ran up my spine. I am firstborn; maybe I won't ever get home, I thought. Then another clench of terror hit my gut; the soldiers now stood in the way of my return. I hoped desperately that my grandmother, Miriam, and the rest of my family remained safely hidden. Maybe if they stayed inside the house, the soldiers would leave them alone. Then again, I couldn't even be sure of that. I just wanted to be there with them. How was it that I found myself here instead, away from my home, enveloped in blackness, and in mortal danger? My grandmother had sent me out on a simple errand. Now the soldiers and the darkness made it impossible for me to return—maybe even to stay alive.

Contemplating death focused my thinking. Would my life end after just fourteen years? It hadn't been an easy life. I'd never known my parents. My mother had died delivering me into the world, and my father had been killed by a falling rock on the construction site for Pharaoh's tomb. So my grandmother, Moses's sister Miriam, had raised me, and her son, Bezalel, my uncle, had protected me as if I were his own younger sister. Tears welled up in my eyes when I thought of Bezalel. He's a firstborn, too. I hugged my knees and sobbed, feeling more like a grieving widow than a frightened young girl.

Suddenly, the air got cold—so cold that I began to shiver. I'd felt cold before, but not like this. Surely Death was at hand. I hoisted myself up and began to run—but who could outrun Death? My legs felt as weak as palm fronds, but I willed them to move. I ran in terror, though I knew there was really nowhere to run. Would I soon draw my last breath?

The shock of colliding with a gatepost knocked me to the ground. I reached out to grasp it, thinking I could use it to pull myself up, but it was slippery as if covered with olive oil. I couldn't tell what the substance was, and I couldn't manage to get up, so in the frigid darkness I sat clutching the post preparing to die.

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Incredibly, after Death swept over me I remained alive.

As abruptly as the coming of the cold, a blast of warm air almost knocked me flat. Not just warm, it felt like midday under the fierce desert sun—so hot that I could hardly breathe. I clamored to my feet and ran back the way I had come to get as far away as possible from the frigid wave of death that had just passed over me. Even in the persistent heat, my bones still felt frozen. I ran until my lungs felt like fire.

In the darkness I rushed into what turned out to be a blocked alley between two buildings. When I hit the back wall, the force knocked me to the ground once again. Worn out from too much running, and emotionally exhausted from too much crying, I lay still. Just before sleep overtook me, I had one last thought: maybe I'm dying after all.