

Walking Together: A Three-Part Bible Study

The Women vs. the Pharaoh - Exodus 1:1-2:10

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Join me in a dive into the historical and cultural context of Exodus 1 and 2. This is the story of resistance to a powerful and violent Egyptian pharaoh by the midwives Shiphrah and Puah, who are named in these chapters, and by Moses' mother Jochebed and his sister Miriam, who are named in later chapters, and by the pharaoh's daughter, who remains unnamed.

Things to notice from the top:

Notice that the Bible gives the names of four of these five women. Many times, the Bible doesn't name women. When women are named, it's a signal to pay special notice.

Notice that the start of Exodus only lists Jacob's sons by name. The *Harper Collins Study Bible* notes that, for example, Jacob's daughter Dinah is not named among his children.

Notice how the Bible uses numbers. Where Exodus says, "The total number of people born to Jacob was 70," that would only include sons and grandsons (*Harper Collins Study Bible*, p. 79).

Notice that, in such a patriarchal society as the one that produced the book of Exodus, right at the start we find four named women playing crucial parts.

Notice that women are named, but the pharaoh is not! Some scholars think the pharaoh was Ramses II, who ruled Egypt from 1290 to 1224 BCE (*Harper Collins Study Bible*, p. 79). Others think it was Ramses II's father, Sethos I (*Believers Church Bible Commentary: Exodus* by Waldemar Janzen, p. 36-37). Some think Exodus combines their reigns.

Whether it was Sethos I or Ramses II, or both, the pharaoh felt so threatened by the Israelites as a large immigrant community that he decided they had to be controlled and contained. First, he tried enslavement and got cheap labor for his construction projects (*Harper's Bible Commentary*, p. 70). But when the Israelite population continued to grow, the pharaoh decided to destroy them by killing their baby boys.

Many Bible scholars name this as genocide. Murdering all the male babies of a generation of people leaves the women vulnerable to being made pregnant by and bearing children to men of the dominant culture. In a patrilineal society, in which succeeding generations are named only if they are male, eliminating the male children destroys the identity of the group (*Harper Collins Study Bible*, p. 80). Eventually, if the pharaoh's strategy succeeded, over time the Israelite population would have disappeared as a distinct ethnicity, subsumed into the dominant Egyptian population.

The *Believers Church Bible Commentary* on Exodus says this story of genocide "should evoke in us an abhorrence of all anti-Semitism, but also of any hostility toward a person or people based on race, nationality, religion, or other group membership" (p. 43).

The fact that Exodus does not name the pharaoh is a deliberate insult to him, but also makes him an archetype of all earthly rulers who stand in God's way—as the *Believers Church Bible Commentary* says, "the type of a tyrant who claims autonomous power to assert his will, to resist God, and to oppress people" (p. 37).

Given who the pharaoh was, it is all the more interesting to ask who the midwives were. Who were Shiphrah and Puah, who took such risks to resist the pharaoh? Theirs are semitic names, so they could have been Hebrew women. But the way they are characterized in the original language leaves the question open. Were they “Egyptian women serving the Israelites” (*Harper Collins Study Bible*, p. 80)?

Whether they were Hebrew or Egyptian, Shiphrah and Puah feared and followed God—the one true God and not the pantheon of Egyptian deities. This must be considered exceptional, as they appear at the crucial moment described by one commentator as the moment when God “birthed” the Israelite nation (*Harper’s Bible Commentary*, p. 67).

Commentaries written by women ask us to notice other things in this story. *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, for example, urges readers to notice the many images in Exodus that evoke the birth experience: new life emerging via water and blood. The baby Moses is drawn up out of the waters of the river. Blood smeared above the Israelites’ doors saves their lives on that first Passover. It is through the parted waters of the sea that they escape slavery and emerge into a new life of freedom (*Women’s Bible Commentary*, “Exodus” by Drorah O’Donnell Setel, p. 30).

The experience of escaping slavery in Egypt became ingrained in their identity. That memory became “motivation for the later Israel to care for the oppressed, the disadvantaged, and the stranger,” says the *Believers Church Bible Commentary*. This memory of having been vulnerable immigrants was written into the laws in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt” (Leviticus 19 and Deuteronomy 24).

If we move on from the midwives to Moses’ mother, Jochebed, and his sister Miriam, and then to the daughter of pharaoh, we notice that these courageous, faithful women all use the tools of secrecy and deception to resist violence and evil. The midwives secretly save the boy babies and lie to the pharaoh about it. Moses’ mother and sister use secrecy and deception to save his life. The pharaoh’s daughter uses secrecy and deception to bring an Israelite into the pharaoh’s court as her own son.

Courage, faith, secrecy, and deception are classic tools of resistance and survival, used by women living in patriarchal societies, and by vulnerable minority communities in hostile dominant cultures.

These women, says the *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, also “speak to us of the gentleness by which God achieves his purposes in face of the ruthless weapons of human power” (p. 70). The pharaoh’s daughter, presented as a contrast to her father’s cruelty, subverts his evil schemes through her love and compassion (*Harper Collins Study Bible*).

“God’s ways of undoing” is how the *Believers Church Bible Commentary* talks about the actions of these women (p. 52).

The story of the women vs. the pharaoh gives us hope because, as the *Believers Church Bible Commentary* says of Shiphrah and Puah, “God’s agents are two women, a small force indeed when arraigned against the absolute ruler of an empire. Here, as throughout the Bible, victory does not depend on numbers and strength, but solely on alignment with God’s will” (p. 38).

The same commentary, however, shares a critical warning: “It is so easy to remain inactive when an injustice we observe is done to someone not of our group: our family, church, ethnic group, nation, race... We must not forget the figures on the fringe” (p. 53-54).

Questions for reflection and discussion:

As we've explored this story of resistance to violence and evil, have you found yourself listening to echoes in events and stories from other times and places? What other stories can you think of in which compassion and love subvert evil? In what other places and times have people put courageous faith into action as "God's way of undoing"?

Consider the way our Brethren movement started as one of the echoing stories: a small group of women and men resisted the laws of the land in central Germany in the early 1700s, and baptized each other as adults in an act of civil disobedience. How does the start of our own faith tradition echo the women's resistance to pharaoh?

How do these stories echo events of today? Can we make a comparison to the people resisting violent immigration enforcement?

What are we called to do in response to the women's stories in Exodus 1 and 2? What risks did those women take, and what risks are called for today? What are acceptable strategies and appropriate actions when following the call of God to resist violence and evil? Are secrecy and deception okay, when in the service of God?

How did the women's actions align with the Church of the Brethren traditions of civil disobedience and conscientious objection? Civil disobedience meaning obeying God's call when it is in opposition to the laws of the land, and conscientious objection meaning following our conscience as Jesus' disciples and choosing peace when authorities tell us to participate in violence and war.

Who are the Shiphrahs and Puahs, Jochebeds and Miriams, and daughters of pharaoh today? Are we called to join them in courageous, faithful resistance to violence and evil in our own time and place?

Sources:

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