

SHIPRAH AND PUAH: TWO STRONG WOMEN IN EXODUS

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The book of Exodus is well known for its vivid characters, intense narrative drama, and powerful themes of freedom and redemption. Recent biblical scholarship has examined the relationship between biblical texts and the social reality of ancient Near Eastern women. This task is difficult and controversial since most scholars assume that biblical texts were written by and for men and preserve traditions that may or may not relate to actual female experiences. As a result, many women's stories and activities may be lost to us.¹ For example, practices related to pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing that were not part of the daily experiences or concerns of men within gender-segregated social contexts seem to receive "summary treatment" in biblical commentaries. However, while the specific acts of midwifery aren't overly detailed in the Bible or subsequent commentaries, the courage and moral strength of the midwives is stressed in the biblical text and midrashic literature.

Once the oppressive acts of the Pharaoh built to a climax, infanticide is never referred to again in the Bible. The Bible does not report the extent of its implementation nor whether it was later rescinded.² The primary function served by its narration was to set the stage for the story of the birth and survival of Moses. His arrival gave new direction to the life of the suffering people. The unseen hand of God was at work so that Pharaoh's monstrous decree initiated a series of events that culminated in the humiliation of Egypt's ruler and the liberation of Israel.

This paper focuses on Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives who saved the lives of the newborn Israelites, and are the first example of Israelite resistance to the genocidal decrees of Pharaoh.

The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, saying, "When you deliver the

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Hebrew women, look at the birthstool:³ if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live". The midwives, fearing God,⁴ did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live.⁵ So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth". And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly. And [God] gave them houses for the midwives, because they feared God (Ex. 1: 15-21).

BACKGROUND

Ancient Mesopotamian artifacts include several medical handbooks,⁶ but there do not seem to be any similar relics from Ancient Israel. Physicians may have studied obstetrics, and rabbis may have been consulted with regard to the ritual cleanness or uncleanness of the mother, but neither biblical nor talmudic writings indicate that men were ever asked to assist a woman in her delivery.⁷

As late as the sixteenth century of this era, midwifery was an exclusively female occupation and men were rarely present at a birth.⁸ As a result, midwifery was one of the few occupations open to women; and it appears to have been a prestigious profession in the ancient Near East.

SHIPHRAH AND PUAH

The prologue begins with the Israelites in Egypt, enslaved by a Pharaoh *who did not know Joseph* (Ex. 1:8). Fearful of the Israelites' growing population, Pharaoh commanded the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill every Hebrew boy they deliver.

While Pharaoh commanded them to kill these baby boys, the verse states: *the midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live* (Ex. 1:17). "Fear of God" as used in Torah is a concept of human decency⁹ and thus functions as the ultimate restraint on evil and the supreme stimulus for good. Faced with a conflict between the laws of God and those of the Pharaoh, the midwives followed the dictates of conscience. Their defiance of tyranny is perhaps the Bible's first recorded act of civil

disobedience in defense of a moral imperative.¹⁰ His plan frustrated, Pharaoh then commanded all his people to throw every new-born Hebrew baby boy into the Nile.

Scholars have discussed how two midwives could have served a whole community (Ex. 12:37; cf. Num. 1:46), even if the figure of six-hundred thousand men is not taken literally. Ibn Ezra suggests that there were many midwives, suggesting that Shiphrah and Puah were the overseers of the practitioners, directly responsible to the authorities for the many women under them.¹¹

But who were Shiphrah and Puah and why did they disobey Pharaoh's command? As Francis Nataf discusses,¹² the question of whether Shifra and Puah were Hebrew or Egyptian is an old one.¹³ As many have already pointed out, the phrase, *miyaldot ha-Ivriot*, can have one of two meanings. It can either mean that "the Hebrew midwives", or "the midwives to the Hebrews", the latter of which opens up the possibility that they themselves were not Hebrews. Scholars such as Nataf¹⁴ support that the position that these two midwives were Egyptian. First, Pharaoh relied upon them to kill mass numbers of Hebrew baby boys: "Given Pharaoh's brutal treatment of the Jewish people, it is astounding how mild he is in his behavior towards the insubordinate midwives. When he questions their insubordination, he gets an answer that should have been, at least, suspect. But the very fact that he allows them to give an answer should make us question the possibility of their being Israelites. Nor is it likely that this was the result of divine intervention, as we are only told that God favored them (1:20) after – and perhaps even, also as a result of – this interview."¹⁵

Second, there is another indication, which Nataf writes: ¹⁶ "should ultimately 'tip the scales'. The verses emphasize that the source of their insubordination was the fear of God (1:17) . . . a phrase that the Torah generally uses with regard to gentiles. The Torah frequently uses this term as a synonym for basic human decency. The Torah is suggesting the maidservants excelled in a trait that the Torah was particularly interested in when evaluating *gentiles*. This is not a full-fledged proof that Shiphrah and Puah were not Israelites, but added to the other evidence, it is strongly possible."¹⁷

On the other hand, according to the Talmud, Shiphrah and Puah not only Israelites, they were related:

Rav and Samuel [differ in their interpretation]; one said they were mother and daughter, and the other said they were daughter-in-law and mother-in-law. According to him who declared they were mother and daughter, they were Jochebed and Miriam; and according to him who declared they were daughter-in-law and mother-in-law, they were Jochebed and Elisheva. There is a teaching in agreement with him who said they were mother and daughter; for it has been taught: "Shiphrah is Jochebed; and why was her name called Shiphrah? Because she straightened [*meshappereth*] the limbs of the babe. Another explanation of Shiphrah is that the Israelites were fruitful [*sheparu*] and multiplied in her days. Puah is Miriam; and why was her name called Puah? Because she cried out [*po'ah*] to the child and brought it forth. Another explanation of Pu'ah is that she used to cry out through the Holy Spirit and say: "My mother will bear a son who will be the savior of Israel" (TB So-tah 11b).

Questioning the ethnicity highlights the important role of these two women: Egyptian or Hebrew they were extremely strong women. The crucial role of the midwives in subverting Pharaoh's decree is, perhaps, reflected in the Talmudic attribution of the redemption from Egypt to the merit of the virtuous women of that generation. In rabbinic thought, these remarkable figures must have been Hebrews, and these heroic women could not simply fade from history, so they were conflated with other prominent women, Jochebed, Miriam and Aaron's wife Elisheva.

Rabbis regarded midwifery as a profession that entails a great deal of responsibility, along with numerous risks, both to the life of the mother and to that of the newborn. This gave the sages an opportunity to ascribe further righteousness to Shiphrah and Puah, beyond what can be found in the text, but following the theme of communal responsibility and trust in God. The sages state that the midwives knew that in the course of delivery a child is liable to be harmed and emerge with some physical defect, or even to die. Fearing that in such instances the Israelites would accuse them of fulfilling Pharaoh's decree, they prayed to God to grant life to the mothers and their children and ensure that the fetus emerge unscathed. God accepted their prayer and kept alive both the mothers and their children, who were born whole and unblemished meeting the nutritional needs of the mother and infant. Not only did the Hebrew midwives not kill the boys, they also helped

them to live by providing them with food and water (TB Sotah 11b; Exodus Rabbah 1:15). If the midwives saw that the new mothers were poor, they would go to the houses of rich women and collect food and water, thus enabling the poor women to keep their children alive (Exodus Rabbah 1:15). This depiction does not appear to relate to the profession of midwifery in general; rather, it is a description of the communal caring and responsibility shown by these women even under the servitude from which the Israelites suffered in Egypt.

Because of their heroic acts, Shiphrah and Puah were rewarded by God with “houses.” The meaning of “houses” here is unclear. Commentators have interpreted Exodus 1:20–21 in various ways.¹⁸ The most common interpretation is that the midwives are promised progeny, which would be a fitting measure for measure reward for saving the lives of the Hebrew infants. It is also possible that the women are promised freedom from the “house” or royal harem of the Pharaoh. If this is the case, then God’s reward would be more about freedom than fertility, and a foreshadowing of the salvation of the Israelites in general.

CONCLUSION

Biblical interpretation is as old as the Bible itself. The desire and the need to go beyond the brevity of the Biblical text have generated rich exegetical literature in antiquity, and modern scholars have provided further interpretation. The Torah ascribes extraordinary qualities of leadership on Moses whom ancient (and contemporary Jews) have regarded as the greatest biblical hero. But it is inarguable that the prologue to Exodus features two women who are courageous, capable, and clever. Both the biblical text and rabbinic literature emphasize their heroism and strength.

The evasiveness of the midwives in response to the Pharaoh’s question (and possible charge of disobedience) *Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?* (Ex. 1:18) may have been motivated by a sense of self-preservation and by the desire to be able to continue to save lives. At the same time their excuse, *Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth* (Ex. 1:19) has a sardonic twist. It unfavorably contrasts Egyptian women with their Israelite slaves, who are portrayed as more healthy and

stronger than their oppressors. This statement itself is a subtle act of resistance.

The narrative closes on the same note with which it began (v. 7). All else having failed due to the courageous and resourceful midwives, Pharaoh promulgates one last genocidal decree. He mobilizes *all his people*, the entire apparatus of the state, to annihilate the Israelites. There is an irony in his decree, for the chosen instrument of destruction (water) will in the end become the agency of Egypt's punishment (Ex. 18:11; Exodus Rabbah 1:22). Pharaoh's diabolical measures have not changed the situation because although the Israelites themselves are powerless against an entire society seeking to destroy them, God has willed otherwise. In this sense God is continuing the work of the heroic midwives, working to ensure the survival of the Chosen People in the face of annihilation by their enemies.

NOTES

1. See Junior, Nyasha. "Exodus." *Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol A. Newsom et al., (Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), pp. 57–58.
2. Although the infanticide perpetrated by Pharaoh is not discussed in later portions of the Bible, Moses' order to exterminate all Midianite male babies (Num 31:17–18), uses language which echoes Pharaoh's order in Exodus. See Lasine, Stuart. "Moses the Infanticidal Avenger". *Divine Envy, Jealousy, and Vengefulness in Ancient Israel and Greece* (Routledge. 2022).
3. The Hebrew *'ovnayim*, literally "two stones," probably refers to the two bricks on which women in labor crouched opposite the midwife during parturition. The squatting position made for easier delivery. Sarna, Nahum M. *Exodus* (Jewish Publication Society, 1991, p. 81).
4. The midwives apparently believed that God's moral demands outweighed Pharaoh's legal demands. Kushner, Harold, ed. *Exodus: Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (The Jewish Publication Society, 2001).
5. The Hebrew verbal form can also mean sustaining life, (Cf. 2 Sam 12:3; Psalm 33:19; Neh 9:6). Midrash sees the midwives actively providing the indigent mothers with food and shelter in addition to obstetric services (Exod. R. 1:19–20). On the verse, see J. C. Exum, " 'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live': A Study of Exodus 1:8–2:10," *Semeia* 28 (1983): 63–82.
6. The largest surviving medical text from the Ancient Near East is the "*Treatise of Medical Diagnosis and Prognosis*". Thompson, Campbell. *Assyrian Medical Texts in the British Museum* (London, Milford, 1923).
7. As I have written elsewhere, there are numerous references to physicians and other "men of healing" throughout the Bible, but for the most part, the Bible expresses a negative attitude toward physicians. The title *rofe* ("healer") was never adopted by physicians during the Biblical period; where it occurs it invariably refers to foreign doctors, who were usually assumed to be helpless because they were not aided by God. See, Rashkow, Ilona. "I Am the Lord Who Heals You (Exodus 15:26)", *Jewish Bible Quarterly*. Vol. 51, No. 3, 2023.

8. Slovenko, R. "Obstetric science and the development of the psychiatrist in surrogate motherhood," *Journal of Psychiatry and Law* (Winter 1986): 488-489.
9. See Nataf, Francis. *Redeeming Relevance in the Book of Deuteronomy* (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2016), pp. 87-88.
10. Jonathan Magonet refers to them as "the earliest, and in some ways the most powerful, examples, of resistance to an evil regime" Magonet, Jonathan, *Bible Lives* (London: SCM Press, 1992), p. 8.).
11. See Ibn Ezra, Sforno, Ohr Hachayim on Exodus 1:15.
12. Nataf, Francis. "Shemot's Names", *Jewish Bible Quarterly* Vol. 45, No. 3.
13. Leibowitz, Nechama. *Studies in Shemot* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1981), pp. 31-36. It should be noted that while most understand the rabbinic tradition to identify them as Jews based on TB *Sotah* 11b, there is a later midrash (*Midrash Tadshe* 21), that explicitly identifies them as converts from the nations.
14. Nataf, op.cit.
15. Ibid.
16. Nataf, Francis. *Redeeming Relevance in the Book of Deuteronomy* (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2016), pp. 87-88.
17. Ibid.
18. Joseph Telushkin writes that the two halves of each verse are parallel, so that it is the Israelites ("who multiplied and grew greatly") for whom God "made houses". Telushkin, Joseph. *A Code of Jewish Ethics: Volume 1 - You Shall Be Holy* (New York: Bell Tower, 2006), p. 488. However, Jonathan Magonet notes that the more common view is that the houses are for the midwives - "houses" here being understood as "dynasties." Magonet, Jonathan *Bible Lives*. (SCM Press, 1992).



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