Their status as midwives gave these two biblical women a modicum of power, though as working women they were hardly among the elite. Yet without them, there might be no Hebrew people.

PRIVILEGE AND RESISTANCE

by Laurel Dykstra

This is a story of resistance to genocide. As told in the first chapter of Exodus, two midwives have a high-level meeting with Pharaoh. He wants them to use their position to destroy the Hebrew people by killing off the newborn sons. The orders are blunt and unambiguous: if boys, kill them; if girls, let them live.

Traditionally, these midwives – Puah and Shiphrah – have been thought to be Hebrew. But the words usually translated "Hebrew midwives" could also mean "midwives to the Hebrews," leaving the matter unresolved. Though some evidence supports their being Hebrew (for example, their names are Semitic, not Egyptian), their exchanges with the Pharaoh indicate a status that seems unlikely for slave laborers. Even more compelling, their "fear of God" is presented as a surprise – hardly the case if they are Hebrews, but certainly the case if they are Egyptians.

That their nationality remains ambiguous actually appeals to me. Seeing the midwives as Egyptian allies of the Hebrews not only strengthens my commitment to resistance, it also deepens my confidence that people of privilege can be part of God's liberating work.

Why would Pharaoh choose the midwives as his agents to wipe out the Hebrew people? Status. They had enough status with Pharaoh to permit a private face-to-face talk, and enough status with the Hebrews to have access to their newborns. As we'll see, status was not their only – or even their outstanding – quality, but it set the stage.

The Scripture reinforces this status in a way that early readers would spot immediately: It tells the women's names, but does not name the man, who happens to be the king of Egypt. This was unusual; women at that time were rarely thought important enough to be named. The effect, then and now, is that we remember and honor these named women. The passage further signals the importance of these women by using the word *midwives* seven time in just seven verses. (1:15-21).

A careful look at the text also shows that these two welcomers of life quickly found a clever way to thwart this nameless agent of death. The king said to kill the *sons* and spare the *daughters* (1:16). Though the midwives did "let the boys live" (as most translations have it), the original words are "they let live *the children* (1:17). The subtle word-change rejects the gender distinction that the Pharaoh made when he focused his attack on the most prized possession of a patriarchal culture. It whispers that "the children," not just "the sons," are the future of any people.

Apparently the distinction eludes Pharaoh, who still wants to know why his orders were ignored. In the midwives' explanation, we find yet another example of their subversive resistance. Confident in their credibility, they make up a story that traps the Pharaoh in his own ignorance and prejudice. Building on his conviction that a chasm of

class, race, and power separates Egyptian and Hebrew women, they explain that "the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are *vigorous* and give birth before the midwife come to them" (1:19).

The word translated *vigorous* has a second possible meaning: *animal-like*. If we read it as *vigorous*, the midwives are insulting the Pharaoh by contrasting his death-dealing plans with a people so full of life and strength and vitality that they do not even need midwives. But if we read it as *animal-like*, a problem surfaces: Are the midwives reinforcing the Pharaoh's stereotype that the Hebrews breed like animals?

The question has disturbing modern parallels. The present and recent past hold numerous examples of (usually) White people making just this argument to illustrate the supposed inhumanity of African Americans – and to justify their own inhumanity toward them. "They're just like animals, look at how many babies they have!" Dehumanizing the oppressed, especially in the realm of reproduction, is a hallmark of U.S. racism. Nowadays, the derision has expanded to poor people of any racial or ethnic background.

That such prejudice continues to survive is both sad and ironic. Many women of privilege are today so over-medicated during childbirth that they risk serious spiritual, emotional, and even physical harm. Many poor women are so deprived of medical care during pregnancy and childbirth that complications long consigned to the past are all too prevalent among these populations.

Is the Word repeating the stereotype? Probably not. Written from a pro-Israelite perspective and intended for an Israelite audience, the story is more likely to be construing the midwives' answer as a ruse, even enjoying the outrageous and gullible beliefs of this elite male Egyptian. Any woman, Hebrew or Egyptian, could have disabused the Pharaoh of these bizarre misconceptions that whole groups of women go through labor in a predictable (and brief!) length of time, or that they reproduce with assembly-line speed and regularity. Apparently no one set him straight.

Though the Biblical account illustrates how the midwives' privileged status allowed them some leeway in talking with the Pharaoh, it also makes clear that they lack the level of (male) trust that allows for total honesty. So they lie. Those living in oppressive contexts must often sacrifice honesty for survival. But the Bible has a disproportionate number and variety of women who use deceptive words and deeds. Whether they are commended or condemned, Rebekah, Potiphar's wife, Rachel, Aschsah, Lot's daughters, Delilah, Jezebel, Michal, Rahab, Jael, Ruth and Tamar are all depicted as liars. Why is this?

Biblical tales of lying women consistently omit or underplay an important fact: The women's status is inferior to the men they lie to. They deceive because they lack power. But when the text continually depicts women as liars – and judges them more harshly than men who similarly lie – and when it ignores the power differentials that make those lies a necessity, we must ask whether it is the texts, not the women, that are lying.

For the midwives to openly defy Pharaoh would be to risk not only their own lives but the lives of the Hebrew infants as well. Looking at their behavior from the perspective of how the Bible frequently depicts women, the midwives were not so much lying as they

were boldly taking the prerogative of the powerless, refusing to acknowledge "the truth" as the empire defined it.

How did these ordinary women find the courage to defy and deceive a king? The story answers by telling us twice that "the midwives feared God" (1:17, 21). What does it mean, to fear God?

"Fear of God" is rooted in the wisdom tradition that appears in both biblical and non-biblical literature. It means much more than being afraid of God or dreading God's punishment. To fear God is to act according to basic ethical principles. Egyptians might come to such principles through their own wisdom literature, which is surprisingly similar to the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible. Also, fear of God is not the exclusive prerogative of the Israelites; there are numerous incidents where foreigners are described as capable of fearing God.

But how could an Egyptian come to know and fear the *biblical* God? Apparently Shiphrah and Puah achieved this through their everyday work among the Hebrews. As midwives, they had access to the lives of Hebrews at intimate and intense moments. Such regular contact could have shattered their cultural biases, helping them to see that they and the Hebrew slaves had common interests, that unfamiliar habits and customs might have their own inherent dignity, that goodness and life were not dependent only on Pharaoh.

These insights probably did not come easily. Puah and Shiphrah would have been neither liked nor trusted by the Hebrews. The limited privileged status that allowed them access to the royal court kept at a distance the very people they sought to help. Even in the intimacies of childbirth, slaves know to maintain a distance, to withhold true feelings, to speak only what they think is expected, and as soon as possible to close any door they had opened to "the other" – even when that "other" is a ministering midwife.

The text does not tell us how Puah and Shiphrah bridged that gap. But it leaves no doubt that they did, because it tells the outcome: "The midwives feared God." And this fear of God led them to reject genocidal orders and to take instead a radical action for life. Fear of God preserved them from the evasive excuse of "just following orders" and engaged them in exercising compassion, following their own feelings toward women and infants, having faith in the force of life itself. In short, Puah and Shiphrah invited God to be present, and God responded. The first mention of God in the book of Exodus is in 1:17: "But the midwives feared God." God's first action in the Exodus story follows shortly: "God dealt well with the midwives" (1:20).

In Puah and Shiphrah, we encounter ordinary women who act courageously, defy authority, and break the law – all in order to do what they (and millions after them) believe to be right. Their story is but one of many accounts in the Hebrew Bible of people whose "fear of God" overcame the intimidating power of oppressive authority. The frequency with which the Bible portrays acts of deliverance as contingent on defiance of authority is not coincidence. It is an imperative, frequently a costly one.

After Exodus 1:19, Puah and Shiphrah do not speak or act again. We are told that God "dealt well" with them (1:20), but we are not told how Pharaoh dealt with them. That God "gave them families" (1:21) is a way of saying that their blessing lives on. This does not exclude the possibility that their silence means they

were imprisoned or executed. It seems unlikely that they got off unscathed. Even in our own day, subversives are seldom silent by choice.

This much we do know: As a consequence of their action, Pharaoh escalated his campaign. Instead of two agents – who are bound to miss some births – he mobilizes all the people of Egypt, commanding them to take part in the genocide. So resistance seems to have made the situation worse – except the Bible is silent about how many Egyptians actually heeded Pharaoh's command, and how many others stayed home, pondering perhaps the actions of Puah and Shiphrah.

By refusing to cooperate with Pharaoh's campaign, the midwives blow open a covert operation, forcing the Pharaoh to reveal publicly that he is on the side of death.

The book of Exodus leaves no doubt that it is about the men of Israel, not the women. The opening verses name the twelve sons of Jacob (1:1-5), sons eagerly anticipated as assurance that God's promise to Abraham and Sarah will endure. But as soon as "the land was filled with [Hebrews]" (1:7) and a suspicious Pharaoh started worrying that they could become a threat, the twelve sons disappear from the text.

Instead, twelve women appear. Besides Puah and Shiphrah, we read about he mother and sister of the infant Moses, Pharaoh's daughter, and the seven daughters of the priest of Midian, one of whom, Zipporah, became Moses' wife. The twelve sons, it seems, owe their deliverance to twelve daughters.

Nearly everyone in this cluster of women is dropped by the end of the second chapter – just before the flashy action with Moses and the burning bush begins. Yet their stories endure not just because they are strong women, of whom the Bible boasts many, but because they function in almost complete absence of men.

That mode of acting uncovers a striking contrast between the prologue to the Exodus story (the first two chapters) and the story itself (the next thirty-eight). Throughout the prologue, Hebrew and Egyptian women cooperate, communicate and work together across social divides and power differentials – all in an effort to save children's lives. In the rest of the book, Hebrew and Egyptian men clash, posture, and engage in violent struggle, bringing death and destruction to thousands.

Like Puah and Shiphrah, many of us are persons of moderate privilege and status who oppose some aspect of the reign under which we live. Perhaps we have come to that opposition through contact with those who are excluded from our privileges of race and class. If we're fortunate, we find others who share our convictions and will work with us – just as Puah and Shiphrah worked together – in resisting death and empire wherever we find ourselves.

We remember Puah and Shiphrah, then, not as fixed and flawless role modes but as courageous foremothers who acted faithfully and were not paralyzed by their privilege. Like many others who courageously worked against the grain – in these first chapters of Exodus and throughout history – their story needs to be told and retold. It is the beginning of our own stories of resistance to empire.

The Other Side Magazine
September-October 2002