

Forgotten Lives
Shiphrah and Puah
Exodus 1:1-22

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HDBC

Today we continue survey of some of the ***forgotten lives*** in the Bible. People who played key roles, either for good or bad, but who have been somewhat overshadowed by more well-known personalities.

Shiphrah and Puah are names you are probably not familiar with. But they deserve to be included in this list. They were key characters during one of the most important seasons in Israel's history. They are mentioned in only one place in the Bible, yet their legacy lives throughout the generations.

Their story is hidden within the grander story of Moses and his key role in leading the nation of Israel out of Egypt and through the wilderness. One could argue that without these ladies, Moses would never have lived long enough to do anything for his people. **Their story is found in Exodus 1.**

Backstory

Abraham had a son named Isaac.

Isaac had twin sons, Esau and Jacob.

Jacob was the son through whom God would create the chosen nation.

Jacob's name was changed to Israel.

Israel had twelve sons.

The 11th son, Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers.

Through the providence of God he rose to a position of authority in Egypt.

His leadership saved Egypt from starvation. Also saved his own family.

He moved his father and brothers to Egypt where they lived in peace.

That brings us to this portion of the story. So let's look at it under 5 headings.

1. The enslavement of the people (6-14)

Joseph, the governor of Egypt and protector of the Israelites, was dead. A new Pharaoh was on the throne, one who did not know Joseph's history, and did not care about the Israelites. But he was afraid of them because of their great numbers. He feared that they might align themselves with one of his enemies and fight against them. He was a vicious and paranoid leader who was determined to minimize this potential threat.

And so, he enslaved the Israelites. We are not told how he accomplished this. Maybe he used a subtle strategy **similar to Hitler's approach when gradually moving the Jews of Europe into ghettos, then into work camps, and ultimately to extermination.** He appointed taskmasters and instructed them to brutally work the people.

The king had a **two-fold motive** for these actions. **First**, he would use the Israelites as a labor-force. They would provide free labor and enable him to build his infrastructure and expand his empire. **Note verse 11.**

Second, his hope was that the brutal labor would curtail their population growth. He hoped it would create an atmosphere where having children would be difficult and discouraged. It was a strategy to get control of the situation and minimize the threat of their great numbers.

Unfortunately, for the king, his plan did not work. In spite of their enslavement and brutal conditions, the Israelites continued to have babies and their numbers continued to rise. **Verse 12.** That leads us to the next desperate attempt by Pharaoh.

2. The command of the king (15-16)

He called for the Hebrew midwives, giving them shocking instructions. If the baby is a girl, let her live. If it is a boy, kill him. WOW. Can you imagine how this must have crushed the hearts of the midwives.

It is at this point that Shiphrah and Puah are named. Were they the only

midwives? Maybe. Or maybe they were the ones in charge of all the midwives. Either way, they were the ones who heard the command. **Shiphrah means splendid. Puah means beautiful.** Love those names.

Why just the boys, though? Boys were a threat in that they would grow up to be men; men capable of rebelling and revolting. Women would not. At least in that time and culture.

3. The courage of the midwives (17-19)

The king met his match with these two women. Love their grit and courage. They had no intention of killing any babies; boys or girls. And they did not.

Some say these women were a mother and daughter. What drove these two women to defy the king and risk their own lives? What led them to commit civil disobedience? I'll come back to that after we finish walking through the text. For now, let's look at what happened.

1) They allowed the boys to live. (17)

This was in complete disobedience to the command of the king this was civil disobedience. They were violating a direct command.

Sometimes this is necessary. In general we are to obey the laws of the land. But there are times when we must respectfully disobey.

- a. If the government requires us to do what the Bible forbids.
- b. If the government forbids what the Bible requires.

2) They responded, when questioned by the king. (18-19)

Here is where it gets a bit tricky. They offered a plausible explanation to the king. *The Hebrew women are strong and we cannot get there before the birth.* We know the whole story. We know their motivation for not killing the boys. They could have responded with a statement of conscience and conviction. ***It is wrong to murder those baby boys and we will not do so.*** They would have been justified in responding that way. They did not.

I'll come back to that in a few minutes.

4. The response of the Lord (20-22)

1) God blessed the midwives.

What an interesting way for this to be written. He was *good to them*. The text offers no specifics in this verse. Maybe it was a general statement of goodness with a specific application in 21.

In the next verse it says He *established households for them*. Their families, scholars believe, *may have been in the Levitical line, the highest and most respected sect in the Israelite echelon*. An honor and blessing, indeed.

2) God multiplied the people.

Once more the plans of the wicked king were thwarted by God. The people continued to multiply in spite of his plans. Unfortunately the king was not ready to give up.

Notice verse 22. He then ordered the entire Egyptian population to join in the killing of Hebrew baby boys.

5. The ethical questions raised

There are at least two ethical questions raised in this account. I think it is important to address each of these. Then we'll wrap it up by looking at their motivations.

1) Is it ever okay to disobey the government?

These ladies defied a direct order from the Pharaoh. In doing so they were practicing *civil disobedience*. Raises the question of if and when are we allowed to disobey the government. We know that the Bible clearly teaches that we are to obey the laws of our land.

Romans 13:1-2, *Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has*

established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.

We see from other instances in the Scriptures when it was not only right but justified, when non-violent, civil disobedience was condoned:

Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: twice defied the Babylonian king's edict to pray and bow down to his golden idol and worship.

Jesus: healed a man's shriveled hand, healed a hemorrhaging woman, and plucked and ate wheat from a field, all of which were done on a Sabbath, when it was unlawful to do any kind of work.

Peter and John: arrested for preaching about Jesus and were told to stop. They explained that they had to obey God rather than man.

We are not to blindly, unconditionally follow every government edict or authority. There are times (rare times) when we believers today are also justified in our disobedience.

I defer to the late theologian, John Stott. He says in his commentary on Romans 13, *We are to submit right up to the point where obedience to the state would entail disobedience to God. But if the state commands what God forbids, or forbids what God commands, then our plain Christian duty is to resist, not to submit, to disobey the state in order to obey God... This is the strict meaning of civil disobedience, namely disobeying a particular human law because it is contrary to God's law... Whenever laws are enacted which contradict God's law, civil disobedience becomes a Christian duty.*

2) Is it ever okay to be dishonest?

When those ladies were asked why they had not carried out the commands of the king, their response certainly appears to be dishonest. What are we to make of this? Is it every okay to lie?

We know that the Bible teaches us to be truthful in our words and to not lie or be dishonest. So, how are we to react to their actions? Here are some things to consider as we think through it. What are our options as we think about their actions?

Two ways to understand their statements to the Pharaoh:

First, this was a complete lie.

Second, it was true, but not the whole truth.

Two ways to view their action through theological perspectives.

a. It was sinful and unnecessary. But God allowed it.

b. The situation allowed for dishonesty, without sin.

They lied not out of selfish motives, but to save others. I may be in the minority, but I think there are limited situations where lying may not be considered sin in the eyes of the Lord. I think about **Nazi Germany when brave people were sheltering Jews** to protect them from the death camps. I think of **prisoners of war** who are questioned about war plans and other soldiers. They lie to protect them.

If someone broke into my house and one of my grands was hiding, and I was asked if anyone else was in the house, I would likely lie. And I don't think the Lord would view that as a sin. Let me be quick to say everyone has to follow the leadership of the Holy Spirit and to follow your own conscience.

6. The motivations of the midwives

What was it that enabled these two women to act in such a bold, courageous, daring way? Three things seem evident.

1) They feared God more than people. (17)

Typically, we associate the word “fear” with being afraid or frightened. Scared. That was not the case with Shiphrah and Puah, however. The fear they felt toward God was one of “reverence, respect, awe.” Their reverence for the holy God was greater than fear of any person, even a king.

They were God-pleasers, not men-pleasers.

2) They had respect for human life.

It’s interesting to note that Shiphrah and Puah did not for one minute wrestle with the immorality or unethical moorings of Pharaoh’s edict. It was wrong. Period. Their faith told them so.

God is not about destroying life. He created (and continues to create) life. He highly values life. All life! So did Shiphrah and Puah. What Pharaoh told them to do went against God’s values, which they held as their own. They chose to protect the lives of those who could not protect themselves.

Proverbs 31:8-9 says to *Open your mouth for the speechless, in the cause of all who are appointed to die. Open your mouth, judge righteously, and plead the cause of the poor and needy.*

Again, these unsung Biblical heroines did not know this verse, yet they exercised it in their own brave, fearless way.

And in saving the baby boys from systematic extermination, they also saved their own nation of Israel and its future leader, who would later lead them—some two million of them, no less—away from slavery to freedom in the Promised Land.

3) They trusted God for protection.

Shiphrah and Puah weren’t naïve. They were well aware of the danger they put themselves in. They knew Pharaoh could execute them for defying his orders, but they did not care. But, again, their

faith was in God Almighty. Long before it was written they practiced the words uttered by Jesus and recorded by Matthew (10:28).

Do not be afraid of those who can kill the body but cannot destroy the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both the soul and body in hell.

They believed it and lived it.

In a world of compromise, stand firm on Biblical convictions.
In a world of dangerous and powerful leaders, fear God more than others.
When forced to choose obedience to God or human leaders, choose God.