



DISCOVERING THE BIBLE & OUR BIBLICAL HERITAGES

Providing factual information about the Bibles, beliefs, movements, institutions, events and people of historical Christianity & Judaism.

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Pharaoh vs. Two Midwives

By Jim Myers

Reading a book, especially the Bible, is much more than just seeing words and turning pages. It means pausing to think about what you have read, identifying parts that you want to go back to again, asking how to place it in a broader context, and pursuing ideas you discover. It becomes a much deeper intellectual and spiritual exercise that stimulates thought, questions, and imaginations when you put yourself in the shoes of characters, and see the experiences through their eyes, and feel what they felt. A great example to begin with is found in the first chapter of Exodus.

⁸ Now there arose a **new king** over Egypt, who **knew not Joseph**.

The setting is Egypt and the first people we read about are a “new king” and “Joseph.” We are not told the name of the new king, who the old king was, or the time period between the death of Joseph and the new king. The story of Joseph is recorded in Genesis 37-50 came immediately before this account. Joseph is one of the major characters of Genesis, along with *Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*.

Joseph had a dream about a future famine, warned the king, and revealed a plan to save the Egyptians. The king placed Joseph in charge of the implementing it and it was a success -- many people were saved, including the Israelites. The king rewarded Joseph abundantly and made him viceroy. When Joseph’s father died, Joseph took his body back to Canaan to be buried and all of Pharaoh’s officials accompanied him.¹ Think about what a procession like that would have looked like to all of those who encountered it. By the way, they made the trip in much less than forty years.

When Joseph and his family returned to Egypt, they continued to live there in peace with Pharaoh and the Egyptian people. We do not know how long they lived there after Joseph’s death unto the coronation of the new king.

⁹ And the king said unto his people, "Behold, the people of the sons of Israelites are more and mightier than we. ¹⁰ Come, **let us deal wisely** with them, lest they multiply, and it come to pass, that, if war breaks out, they will join themselves unto our enemies, and fight against us, and go up from the land."

Notice that the text said that the new king "did not know Joseph," it did not say that the new king "did not know **about** Joseph." This may explain why the new king chose to "deal wisely" with the Israelites. There may have been a lot of Egyptians that remembered what Joseph had done. This may also explain why he made the statement to **his people**, not **the people**. Who would "his people" have been?

The subject of the statement the king made provides us with an important clue. The subject was "military strategy in case of war." The people that would have been involved in such a discussion would have been his court officials. Why did the king think the Israelites would join with Egypt's enemies? A clue may be the words "up from the land." The Canaanites were "up" from the land of Egypt and that was also where the Israelites "came down from." But, as we saw above, the king's strategy was to "deal wisely," instead of just order his army to kill them. It was probably the fear that a direct attack might cause the Egyptians to revolt.

The primary he was worried seems to be that the Israelites were multiplying and becoming mightier. Not only were they increasing in number, they were likely growing in economic power too. This caused another problem because in the ancient world fertility was understood to be evidence of a god's favor. The Egyptians knew that their gods weren't the Israelite's God. Was the king worried about that too? Notice he framed everything in a "national security strategy." Sound familiar? What did he mean by "deal wisely" with the Israelites?

¹¹ Therefore **they set** over them taskmasters in order to inflict them with **their burdens**. And they built **store-cities** for Pharaoh, **Pithom** and **Rameses**.

It was setting taskmasters over them to "inflict them with their burdens." What were "their burdens"? The answer is linked to *Pharaoh's store-cities*. What did Pharaoh use them for? The story of Joseph provides a clue.

Joseph collected all the food produced in those seven years of abundance in Egypt and stored it in the cities. **In each city he put the food grown in the fields surrounding it.**²

During most of ancient Egypt's pharaonic history, there was no money as such, at least in the form of coinage.³ Pharaoh owned everything and could give parts of his land away, and so lose its surplus. Economical transactions involved commerce "in natura."⁴ In other words, things of nature were used instead of money for trade – *including the payment of taxes*.



The king's plan afflicted the Israelites in two ways. First, they would be forced to build the store-cities of Raamses and Pithom, which would then be used to store the taxes harvested from crops grown in those districts. The Israelites lived in the Land of Goshen and their fields were in those districts. This brings us to the second part of the affliction. Once they finished building the store-cities, it would be portions of their own crops that would be collected and stored in them. The king's plan was to use taxes to afflict the Israelites. This would transfer wealth of the Israelites into store-cities of the king. *Some things never change.*

The text reveals nothing about how the Israelites reacted. We do not know if they openly opposed the king or if they just accepted it with resignation.⁵ But, at some point, the king realized that his "dealing wisely" plan wasn't working.

¹² But as they afflicted them, so they multiplied, and so they spread.
And the Egyptians came to dread the sons of Israel.

This is an "in your face" statement, to put it bluntly. Notice the rapid sequence of events and the parallelisms revealed in two sentences:

*Egyptians afflicted // Israelites multiplied
Israelites spread // Egyptians' dread increased*

Notice that it is now the Egyptians, not just the king, that are apprehensive and afraid something very bad will happen to them in the future.⁶ Why were the Egyptians so afraid? Most likely it would probably have been that they witnessed the affliction of the Israelites by Egyptian taskmasters. It is clear that one sure way to create an enemy is to harm or oppress someone or passively sit by and watch someone else do it.

¹³ And the Egyptians made the sons of Israel work with **rigor**. ¹⁴ And they made their lives **bitter** with hard work, in mortar and in bricks, and in all manner of work in the fields; all their work, wherein they made them work with rigor.

The Hebrew word translated "rigor" is best described as *breaking and crushing*. The idea embedded in the root word is that by using force to crush a big rock, it will turn into a pile of small pebbles.⁷ Notice that it is not just the taskmasters that are now afflicting the Israelites – *it is the Egyptians*. The quality of life for the Israelites has decreased dramatically. They are living lives of unrelieved gloom -- *a people characterless and faceless, devoid of personalities, and without leadership*. They are a suffering downtrodden mass with no heroic figures.⁸ The bitterness of their lives is symbolically remembered in every Passover Seder.

¹⁵ And the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew **midwives**, of whom the name of the one was **Shiphrah**, and the name of the second **Puah**; ¹⁶ and he said: "When you do the office of a **midwife** to the Hebrew women, the **you shall look** upon the birth-stool; if he is a son, **then you shall kill him**; but if it is a daughter, then she shall live."

The Egyptians were afraid and living in dread of the Israelites, so wouldn't you think the king would mobilize his armies and attack Israelites strongest men? But, the king comes up with another plan – a really strange one when you think about it. **He mobilizes two midwives and orders them to murder just born Israelite male infants while they are still one the birth-stools!**

The Hebrew term for "birth stool" in Exod 1:16, *obnayim*, means literally "**two stones**." It refers to the primitive form of the birth stool, which was simply two bricks (or stones) placed under each of the buttocks of the woman in labor. . . . Ancient Egyptian pictorial art shows that the two bricks were replaced by a chair with an opening in the middle (like a toilet seat) through which, with the help of gravity, the mother could push out her baby into the deft hands of the midwives.⁹

The king wants the midwives to murder the infant boys while the mothers are still on the birthing-stools, before they have been given their child. It is the only opportunity the midwives would have to murder the infants. Is that the kind of plan a Pharaoh would come up with? Before you answer, consider how a Pharaoh was viewed through Egyptian eyes.

Pharaoh means, "Great House." In ancient Egypt, the Pharaoh had many roles in his kingdom. He watched over the law courts and was the chief of the temples. He was an army leader and controlled trade expeditions. He supervised the water system and stored the grain. Ancient Egyptians believed that each living pharaoh was a living god. They believed that each pharaoh was the human form of Horus.¹⁰

Pharaoh, a living god and commander of the Egyptian armies, stood there commanding two women to murder newborn infants. In cultures where power is respected, this Pharaoh would fail to meet the expectations of what a great leader would do.

Now let's consider the midwives. There is a debate as to whether they were Hebrew or Egyptian. Many rabbis maintain they were Hebrew. But there is a tradition that goes back as far as Philo that they were Egyptian. Josephus held that opinion.¹¹ In either case, they were ultimately just two women facing a great and powerful king. They were given a command and they each had to decide whether to obey it. Take another look at the command: *(1) you shall look; and, (2) you shall kill.*

¹⁷ But the **midwives** feared **the ELOHIYM** and they did not do as the king of Egypt, had spoken unto them **but they saved** alive the male children.

Now we learn something that Pharaoh didn't know about the two women he had picked to carry out his plan: "but the midwives feared **the ELOHIYM,**" and "**the ELOHIYM**" was the God of Joseph and the Israelites. The women were in the same position as Adam had been in the Garden in Eden and Cain had been before he murdered Abel. They had to decide whether they would choose to do acts that protect and preserve life, or, acts that would destroy life. "*The ELOHIYM*" *does acts that protect and preserve life, and enhance the quality of life.* Those acts are called **TOV** in Hebrew and they are the standard by which the Creator judged His own actions during the creation of the heavens and earth. Since every person is made in "the image of the ELOHIYM," then they have a moral responsibility of doing the same thing.

The Torah reveals that it is the attitude towards the minority, towards the defenseless outsider or stranger that one must ensure that the Creator's

standard is observed.¹² Each individual must resist evil and not shirk their moral responsibility, even when given “orders by a superior.”¹³ God doesn’t accept the excuse that “I was ordered” or “my boss told me to do it” for doing acts that do not meet His standard.

¹⁸ And the king of Egypt called the **midwives**, and said unto them, “Why have you done this? Why have you saved the male children alive?”

The king was watching. When the midwives failed to follow his orders they were called before him. Think about what they must have felt.

¹⁹ And the **midwives** said unto Pharaoh: “Because Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women, because they are lively; before the **midwife** comes unto them they are delivered.”

Don’t project your world into the story and picture pregnant women going to an Egyptian hospital to deliver their babies. Here, the midwives were called to go to the pregnant women to help with the deliveries, most likely in their own homes. According to the midwives, they didn’t have an opportunity to kill the infants because they had already been born before they arrived. By the time they arrived, the mothers had already seen their babies, along with the fathers and other family members. It would have been impossible to carry out the king’s command at that point. Of course, it would be interesting to know how quickly the midwives responded to calls from Hebrew women or if they were in a big hurry to get there.

²⁰ And **ELOHIYM** did **YTV** to the **midwives**; and the people multiplied, and waxed very mighty.²¹ And it came to pass, because the **midwives** feared **the ELOHIYM**, He **made them houses**.

The word **YTV** links this account to the Creation account and the story of Cain and Abel. As pointed out above, the Creator did acts of **TOV**. When Cain was burning with anger God said to him: “Surely, if you do **YTV**, you shall be upstanding; but if you do not do **YTV**, sin will be a crouching at your door; its desire shall be for you, but you will be able to master it.”¹⁴

YTV is an alternative form of **TOV**. The message here is very important – *because the midwives did YTV for others, the ELOHIYM did YTV for them.* This is the foundation of ELOHIYM’s justice system. It is found in the teachings of Jewish teachers throughout history, including Jesus: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” I am sure his disciples knew that this reflected the core principle – *you will ultimately be judged by God on what your actions towards others.*

The above verse contains an interesting word play on the Egyptian word for "Pharaoh." Above we saw that the word "Pharaoh" meant "Great House." God made the two midwives "houses." Their houses were greater than that of the "Great House." The nameless Pharaoh faded away in history and was forgotten, but the houses of Shiphrah and Puah have remained; their names and deeds have endured for centuries and born witness to the greatness of their Creator and served as instructions for all who have ears to hear.

²² And Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying: "Every son that is born you shall cast into the river, but let every daughter you shall save alive."

Pharaoh wasn't finished yet. He commanded all his people now to do what the midwives wouldn't do. The Nile River was a god to the Egyptians, so casting children into it would have been a form of human sacrifice.

^{2:1} Now a man of the tribe of Levi married **a Levite woman**, and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months. But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. **His sister** stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.

This is the beginning of the next account. It is about three women who are also faced with the decision of choosing life or obeying Pharaoh – a Levite woman, her daughter, and a daughter of Pharaoh. *But that story will have to be told at another time.*

Show your children, especially your daughters, the deeds and lives of these five great women. Teach them to see the experiences through the eyes of the women that lived them and chose life as their highest value.

¹ Genesis 50:4-10

² Genesis 41:48

³ <http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/prices.htm>

⁴ <http://www.maat.sofiatopia.org/ptahhotep.htm>

⁵ *Studies in Shemot*; p. 16.

⁶ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/dread?s=t>

⁷ *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*; p.11.

⁸ *Studies in Shemot*; p. 17.

⁹ <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/puah-bible>

¹⁰ <http://edweb.sdsu.edu/courses/edtec670/egypt/pharaohreport.html>

¹¹ *Studies in Shemot*; p. 32-33.

¹² *Studies in Shemot*; p. 36.

¹³ *Studies in Shemot*; p. 36.

¹⁴ Genesis 4:6-7

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April Memorials

In Loving Memory

**WILLIAM
LESTER
STEWART**

April 26, 2005

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

As We Remember Them

*May their memories inspire us to
seek those qualities of mind and
heart which they shared when we
walked life's journey together.*

*May we help to bring closer to
fulfillment their highest ideals
and noblest strivings.*

*May their memories deepen our
loyalty to those things which we
valued and shared --
faith, love, peace and devotion.*

*As long as we live, they too will
live; for they are now a part of
us, as we remember them.*

(Inspired from prayers found in Yitzhor
Reflections - The New Mahzor - The
Prayer Book Press)

In Loving Memory

**GEORGE
WASHINGTON
HARLESS**

October 1864
April 6, 1923

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

In Loving Memory

**CHARLES L.
"CHUCK"
GREGORY**

January 25, 1925
April 11, 2010

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

SHALOM
*Peace, totality &
wholeness!*

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