

**Exegetical Notes, Exodus 1:15-22**  
**“Shiphrah & Puah”**

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**Exodus 1:15-22**

**Verse 15-16**

*The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah , “When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.”.*

- For background notes on this section of Scripture, see the exegetical notes prepared for Exodus 1:1-14. In summary, a dynastic change had occurred in Egypt. The favored position that the Jews had held in Egypt since the time of Joseph ended, and the new Pharaoh was concerned about the increasing population of Jews in Egypt. His plan to deal with this problem was to reduce the Jews to the status of slaves in Egypt and work them so hard that they would not have time to breed. His plan failed for, despite the long hours of hard work and their reduced status, the Jewish population continued to increase.
- Given the failure of his plan to solve the Jewish problem in Egypt, Pharaoh added a new dimension to the project. He ordered the women who served as midwives among the Jews to kill every Jewish male at birth, only letting girl babies live. The idea was that this would reduce the population of Jews in Egypt in future generations. The girls were left alive because, as female slaves, they would be sold to masters who would breed them with Egyptians. Thus, the children produced by these unions would grow up as non-Jewish slaves.
- The names of the two chief Jewish midwives at the time were Shiphrah and Puah. These women received a direct order from Pharaoh to kill every male baby born to a Jewish family in Egypt. The order is direct. It came from Pharaoh to them. And it is clear. There is no way that the message, as delivered, could be misunderstood.

- As a result of Pharaoh's order these women are put in a very hard place. If they do as ordered, they will become guilty of infanticide, the killing of the innocent children among them. If they do not do as they have been ordered to do, they will be guilty of disobeying a direct order from Pharaoh. This crime would mean their deaths. The text presents us with a dilemma. Should these women do what they have been ordered to do knowing that it contradicts the ways of God or should they risk their own lives by refusing to obey the order?
- This dilemma is intensified when we remember that these women lived before the time of Moses. The Law of God had not yet been given to them in written form!

### **Verse 17**

***The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live.***

- Shiphrah and Puah respected, that is what the word translated "fear" means, God. Therefore, they knew, even without the written law, that killing children would not please God. They chose to disobey Pharaoh rather than do what they knew would displease God. So, they did not kill the male babies born to the Hebrews.
- This action makes these women heroines. It also puts their lives at risk.

### **Verse 18**

***Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, "Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?"***

- Pharaoh's action is designed to intimidate the midwives. He ordered them to come before him and give account for their disobedience to his command.

### **Verse 19**

***The midwives answered Pharaoh, "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women, they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive."***

- Apparently, Pharaoh's intimidation works to a point because Shiphrah and Puah lie to him or, at least, stretch the truth. But, in so doing, they place the blame for their disobedience on Pharaoh's shoulders. They tell Pharaoh that they do not kill the male babies because they get to the birthing after the children have already been born, and this is

because the Hebrew women are strong, apparently made so by the hard labor forced on them by Pharaoh..

- It is important to note that some scholars contend that the story told by the midwives was the truth, that the Hebrew women did bear children so quickly that midwives always arrived late. Those scholars contend that this was the deliberate act of God to thwart the plan of Pharaoh. Other scholars contend that the women's statement was true because they deliberately went to the birthing late so as to arrive only after the births. My contention is that the Bible takes ordinary people, imperfect people, and shows them as they are. The women were intimidated by Pharaoh as any of us might have been. So they lied. They are not honored because they lied. But they were, as we so often are, afraid by the power they faced. None-the-less, they chose to obey God. Clearly, the text is pushing us to make the decision to obey God even in the face of overwhelming odds.

#### **Verse 20-21**

***So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.***

- Because they honored God by their decision not to kill the male infants, God blessed the midwives and the Hebrews. Apparently the midwives were either unmarried or barren. God blessed them by giving them families of their own. God blessed Israel by increasing their population in spite of Pharaoh's plan.

#### **Verse 22**

***Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: "Every boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live."***

- It is clear that Pharaoh was simply repeating his command to the midwives concerning Hebrew babies to the larger population. He was not suggesting that this rule be extended to include Egyptian babies. He ordered all of his subjects to kill the male children born to the Hebrew slaves. He ordered that the male Hebrew babies be drowned in the Nile River. Pharaoh resorted to legalized infanticide.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *Shiphrah and Puah*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)