



Studies in the Book of Exodus

Text

Exodus 1:1-22

Topic

The midwives disobey Pharaoh's direct order to murder any male babies that are born to the Hebrews

Title

"The Real Midwives of Egypt"

The article was titled, *Unique Birthing Traditions Around the World*. Here is a sampling:

- While it is customary in many places across the globe to bring gifts to a new mother, it is rare for her to give a gift to you. However, in Brazil, many new moms do exactly that when visitors come to the hospital after childbirth.
- In Turkey, it is traditional for new mothers to drink *Lohusa Serbeti*, a beverage made with cinnamon, sugar and red food coloring. It is first served to the new mom in the hospital, and then is enjoyed at home by guests who come to pay the new infant a visit.
- In Pakistan and other Islamic republics, *aqiqah* is a common practice. During this baby-naming tradition, which takes place

on the 7th, 14th or 21st day after a baby is born, the infant's head is shaved and an animal sacrifice is offered on his or her behalf.

Our study of the Book of Exodus begins with Pharaoh of Egypt forcing a new birthing tradition on the Israelites:

Exo 1:15 Then the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, of whom the name of one was Shiphrah and the name of the other Puah;

Exo 1:16 and he said, "When you do the duties of a midwife for the Hebrew women, and see *them* on the birthstools, if it *is* a son, then **you shall kill him**; but if it *is* a daughter, then she shall live."

These midwife murders never happened; but that's not to say boy-babies were safe. Pharaoh went on to command his own people, "Every [Hebrew] son who is born you shall cast into the river, and every daughter you shall save alive" (v22).

If you're wondering "Why?" there are two reasons - one stated in the text, the other implied by the context:

- The stated reason was, "the people of the children of Israel *are* more and mightier than we; come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and it happen, in the event of war, that they also join our enemies and fight against us, and *so* go up out of the land" (v9 & 10).
- The implied reason was that the Savior of the world would be born through the nation of Israel, and the prince of this world, Satan, was trying to inhibit His birth.

This wasn't only a battle being waged in Egypt; it was also a battle on a cosmic scale.

Fast-forward many centuries. The Savior came, as promised, despite constant attempts by Satan to hinder His birth. Now the devil wants to destroy those of us who are born-again into God's family.

The world we find ourselves occupying is still an 'Egypt' for believers in Jesus. The first chapter of Exodus will put our harrowing situation into perspective.

I'll organize my comments around two points: #1 We're Still In Egypt, And You Are A High-Value Target, and #2 We're Still In Egypt, And You Have A Valuable Tactic.

#1 We're Still In Egypt,
And You Are A High-Value Target

(v1-14)

During the 2003 invasion of Iraq by a United States-led coalition, the US military developed a set of playing cards to help troops identify the most-wanted members of then President Saddam Hussein's government.

The highest-ranking cards, starting with the aces and kings, were used for the most high-value targets. The ace of spades was Saddam Hussein, the aces of clubs and hearts were his sons Qusay and Uday respectively.

Such playing cards have been used as far back as the US Civil War and again in World War II and in the Korean War.

The devil might not use playing cards, but be assured you are a high-value target. Jesus told the apostle Peter, "Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat."

It isn't just apostles he seeks. The devil is described as going about like a roaring lion, seeking whomever he may devour (First Peter 5:8). You're on his hit-list.

Keep that application in mind as we take a look at the chapter verse-by-verse.

Exo 1:1 Now these *are* the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt; each man and his household came with Jacob:

Exo 1:2 Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah;

Exo 1:3 Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin;

Exo 1:4 Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher.

Exo 1:5 All those who were descendants of Jacob were seventy persons (for Joseph was in Egypt *already*).

The Book of Exodus opens with a five-verse summary of the final fourteen chapters of Genesis. *Talk about being concise.*

Genesis ended with the story of Joseph and his amazing technicolor dreamcoat. He was the son of Jacob who was despised by his brothers and sold by them into slavery. They told their father Joseph had been killed by a wild beast, and brought Jacob Joseph's coat of many colors stained with blood as proof.

In a stunning display of God's providence, Joseph ended-up second in command to Pharaoh in Egypt just at the time a great famine hit the land. The famine was so severe it endangered the survival of the Israelites.

His exalted position enabled Joseph to care for his father and brothers, moving them to Goshen and under the protection of Egypt. Those are the "seventy persons," including Joseph who "was in Egypt already."

Exo 1:6 And Joseph died, all his brothers, and all that generation.
Exo 1:7 But the children of Israel were fruitful and increased abundantly, multiplied and grew exceedingly mighty; and the land was filled with them.

Looking ahead, when the Israelites leave Egypt headed for the Promised Land, there were “about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children” (12:37). Conservatively, they would have numbered 2-3 million people, counting women and children.

We’ll see that their numbers worried Pharaoh. But he wasn’t the only enemy. Further back still, in the Garden of Eden, God had promised to send a Seed of Eve’s to be the Savior of the world.

The world, and all mankind descended from Adam and Eve, needs saving on account of the sin of our parents.

If you’re not a Christian, **you need saving**. You were born dead in trespasses and sins. There is no good work you can ever perform that will earn you salvation. The good news is that Jesus - God’s promised Seed - came to save you, and by dying on the Cross and rising from the dead, you can be saved. “If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9 NIV).

Part of the promise was that the Seed was going to crush him, so Satan got to work right away trying to stop the Seed. He incited Cain to kill Abel. Later on, some of his fallen angels mated with human women in an attempt to corrupt human DNA.

Their offspring were called Nephilim. They were a race of giants that threatened the survival of mankind. They were a major reason God sent the global flood, preserving eight souls on the Ark to repopulate the earth.

Enter Abram and God reveals that He is going to bring the promised Seed from the miracle child born to Abram and Sarai. Their names got changed to Abraham and Sarah, and the child promised them after it was impossible for them to produce a child was Isaac.

Isaac's sons were Esau and Jacob - the Jacob who, with his twelve sons and their families, made-up the seventy who settled in Goshen. They became millions.

God was honoring His promise to send the Seed, and His further promise to Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore (Genesis 22:17).

Satan is going to interfere in Egypt. If he could see to it that all the male babies were killed, it would stop the Seed from ever being born.

It's a go-to strategy of his. In New Testament times, once the birth of Jesus was announced to King Herod by the Magi, Satan interfered by having Herod order the murder of infants, hoping to kill the baby who was born to be King of the Jews.

Mark that God's chosen people were targeted. We still are today, for different reasons. Satan is no less malevolent and destructive. If anything, he's had more practice.

Exo 1:8 Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.

Scholars can't agree on exactly who was this "king over Egypt." The point is that he was not favorably inclined towards Joseph's descendants.

We experience something like this, do we not? It seems almost every month there is some new government restriction on the practice or promotion of biblical Christianity in America. We're coming into the Christmas season, and that means municipalities that allow manger scenes on public property, or Christian images, will be vigorously challenged in courts.

Exo 1:9 And he said to his people, "Look, the people of the children of Israel *are* more and mightier than we;

Exo 1:10 come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and it happen, in the event of war, that they also join our enemies and fight against us, and *so* go up out of the land."

The Israelites were immigrants that were beginning to outnumber Egyptians. They lived along the route invading armies would take. They could therefore be a considerable threat.

Exo 1:11 Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with their burdens. And they built for Pharaoh supply cities, Pithom and Raamses.

Exo 1:12 But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew. And they were in dread of the children of Israel.

Exo 1:13 So the Egyptians made the children of Israel serve with rigor.

Exo 1:14 And they made their lives bitter with hard bondage - in mortar, in brick, and in all manner of service in the field. All their service in which they made them serve was with rigor.

Twice their servitude is described as being “with rigor.” Commenting on that, one historian wrote,

They not only put them to hard work, but used them in a very barbarous manner, abusing them with their tongues, and beating them with their hands... the king not only compelled them to servile works, but commanded them heavier things than they could bear, heaping labors one upon another; and if any, through weakness, withdrew himself, it was judged a capital crime, and the most merciless and cruel were set over them as taskmasters.

Notice in verse twelve: “the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew.” Who would have thought the strategy would have the opposite effect?

It’s the same today. The apostle Paul said of *any* and *all* afflictions, “For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (Second Corinthians 4:17-18).

A common way of describing growth from afflictions is to compare us in our troubles to gold being refined in the furnace. Thus Job could say, “But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold” (23:10).

Likewise the apostle Peter wrote, “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, *being* much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ...” (First Peter 1:6-7).

It’s because I’m older, and have been buffeted more, that I believe this more than ever, but I also tack-on a footnote.

I believe God brings us forth as gold; it’s His promise. But it takes time in the crucible; and it’s hot in there, almost unbearably so.

It took months for Job to come forth as gold. Along the way, he often faltered. I don’t think it’s going too far to say it could take years, in some furnaces, to come forth as gold.

Notice, too, that Peter talks about the ultimate end of your affliction, saying, “though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory **at the revelation of Jesus Christ...**”.

We’ll be golden at His coming for us, to reward us. Until then, you’ll have your ups and downs - like Job, who struggled to put his suffering into perspective.

If you’re being buffeted, and you’re having a hard time with it, you’re normal. Gold is definitely in your future. Hang in there.

In Exodus, “the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew.” The afflictions were real; they were severe. Israelites died from the rigor inflicted by their taskmasters.

They persevered. They endured. Therein is your victory while you wait for your “light affliction” to pass, and your refining to end.

If you are a Christian, you are a high-value target. You don’t need to be famous, or in charge of a large ministry. Since we are all members of the one body of Jesus, all of us are under attack.

#2 We’re Still In Egypt, And You Have A Valuable Tactic

(v15-22)

I love the original *Karate Kid* with Ralph Macchio. It all comes down to the crane kick. One film critic wrote:

Everyone knows it. Who doesn’t get chills up their spine when Daniel Larusso sets up for the kick, Kreese yelling to Johnny from the sidelines, “FINISH HIM!,” dramatic horns blaring as part of the film’s score? It has been firmly embedded in the public consciousness ever since Daniel used it to snap back Johnny Lawrence’s head and win the All Valley Karate Tournament.

Mr. Miyagi had promised Daniel, “If do right, no can defense.”

We have a tactic like that in our spiritual arsenal. It is mentioned in verse twenty-one, where we read, “the midwives **feared God.**”

Keep the fear of God in mind as we look at Pharaoh’s next strategy as a tool of Satan’s to stop the Israelites from growing.

Exo 1:15 Then the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, of whom the name of one was Shiphrah and the name of the other Puah;

Exo 1:16 and he said, "When you do the duties of a midwife for the Hebrew women, and see *them* on the birthstools, if it *is* a son, then you shall kill him; but if it *is* a daughter, then she shall live."

These ladies were either Hebrew midwives... Or they may have been Egyptians who were the midwives to the Hebrews. I read a lot of arguments both ways and, frankly, I can't figure it out.

They were more like supervisors of other midwives. After all, you'd need more than two midwives to serve the needs of several hundred thousand prolific women. In our modern world, for example in Africa, a single midwife can provide care for 500 women every year, including the safe delivery of 100 babies.

I'm guessing that Shiphrah and Puah were not regular guests of the Pharaoh. I don't see him taking meetings with them.

There they are, surrounded by the power of Egypt. Can you imagine how very small and intimidated they might have felt?

They must have been wondering what in the world they were doing there. Then, suddenly, there was Pharaoh himself. "And he said, "When you do the duties of a midwife for the Hebrew women, and see *them* on the birthstools, if it *is* a son, then you shall kill him; but if it *is* a daughter, then she shall live."

End of meeting; no discussion. Murder the male babies, with all the authority of Egypt. What's a midwife to do?

Exo 1:17 But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the male children alive.

I note first that they said nothing to Pharaoh. In the New Testament, in the Book of Acts, when Peter is confronted by the Jewish leaders and told to cease from preaching the Gospel, he immediately says, "We ought to obey God rather than men."

Shiphrah and Puah didn't do that. Maybe they hadn't thought through their civil disobedience yet; or maybe they had a plan - like the one we will discuss in a moment.

Either way, the point I'm trying to make is that God will be with you in the moment, leading you and guiding you. Let Him.

They "saved the male children alive." Here is where it gets important to remember they were probably not the only midwives. If there were others, then they either *all* decided to disobey Pharaoh; or Shiphrah and Puah came up with a plan to undermine Pharaoh's command.

Exo 1:18 So the king of Egypt called for the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, and saved the male children alive?"

They were called back, and obviously it was on account of the news Pharaoh had heard that male babies were being allowed to live. Mind you, Pharaoh had told these ladies to murder babies. He would have no reservations about murdering them.

It's like in *Star Wars* when Darth Vader tells the Admiral, "You have failed me for the last time," then slowly chokes him out from a distance, replacing him with his next in command.

Exo 1:19 And the midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women *are* not like the Egyptian women; for they *are* lively and give birth before the midwives come to them."

Were they lying? Maybe. In favor of it being a lie, we were just told that they actively "did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them." But a refusal to act may not be a lie.

Here is what I mean. Suppose they changed their own policy and delayed their response time? I could see that as an 'honest' workaround.

In favor of them not lying, perhaps God miraculously intervened, and gave all the Hebrew women quick labor, so that the midwives could not get there in time even if they tried.

Can we, as Christians, lie to save lives? One writer introduces the subject this way:

Christian theologians are divided on this subject. Some - like Saint Augustine - believed that it is never permissible to lie. Others - like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who had ample time to contemplate this issue from the perspective of a Nazi prison cell - held that under certain circumstances lying was not only morally permissible but morally mandated. Thus, Bonhoeffer advocated deceiving the enemy in circumstances of war, and he had no compunction about lying in order to facilitate escape for Jews facing extermination.

It's easy to say lying to save lives is wrong - until you're faced with it yourself. I'll leave it there for us to ponder.

Exo 1:20 Therefore God dealt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and grew very mighty.

The wording seems to indicate that the midwives did something - like delay their arrival. At any rate, Pharaoh's strategy failed.

Exo 1:21 And so it was, because the midwives feared God, that He provided households for them.

God caused the family's of the midwives to flourish. It might be that they had no kids of their own until this happened.

Score one for the good guys. But know that Pharaoh was not about to be that easily thwarted.

Exo 1:22 So Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying, "Every son who is born you shall cast into the river, and every daughter you shall save alive."

A command went out to all the citizens of Egypt. If they saw a Hebrew baby boy, they were to take him from his mother and toss him into the Nile River to drown.

I see this as satanic. I know studies have been done on group behavior; on mob behavior. People have researched Nazi Germany under Hitler to try to understand how ordinary German citizens could condone and even participate in the Final Solution.

To my limited knowledge, those studies overlook something that seems foundational - that Hitler was involved in the occult.

One historian wrote, “The truth of the matter is that Hitler had a *direct* and *personal* experience of occult forces and entities and, in addition, a direct and personal *relationship* with such occult forces...”

You cannot understand human history, nor address the problem of evil, apart from an understanding that God is at war with the prince of this world. God’s Seed will crush the devil’s seed - but there’s going to be a lot of fighting along the way to the promised redemption and restoration of Creation.

The chapter ends with baby boys sinking to the bottom of the Nile. It doesn’t seem like a win for Israel. But the account is not without its spiritual victories.

For one, God worked through the most unlikely people. Who would have thought that two women - midwives - could withstand the command of the mightiest man on earth?

God uses the weak, the small, the poor, the disadvantaged, in order to show Himself to the world. We are among those - the foolish things that confound the wise.

For another thing, God shows us we do not need anything other than Him in our battles. These midwives were not provided weapons; they weren’t given the ability to perform miracles. They remained ordinary, but did something extraordinary thanks to their believing in God.

Ultimately our point is that they feared God more than they feared any man.

They stood before Pharaoh, knowing he had the power of life and death over them, and did not blink.

They are an embodiment of Jesus' words in Matthew's Gospel, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (10:28).

In their case, God blessed their fear with families. The history of God's people, however, is overflowing with those who did not blink, but were martyred where they took their stand. The writer of Hebrews puts it this way:

Heb 11:35 Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection.

Heb 11:36 Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment.

Heb 11:37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented -

Heb 11:38 of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, *in* dens and caves of the earth.

Heb 11:39 And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise...

To all these, "to die was gain."

Your only tactic, ultimately, is to fear God rather than man. Then you won't care if you live, or if you die, but only that God receives the glory.

Listen: The story of the Exodus is brutal and bloody. There's no version of it that comes in with less than an R or NC-17 rating for violence. People died, by the tens of thousands.

It will take its toll on you, as you go from skirmish to skirmish, from battle to battle. In the movies, by the end, Captain America's mighty shield is scratched and dinged. You can tell by looking at it that the fighting was fierce. We have armor, including a shield - "the shield of faith." It isn't a dress uniform for special occasions. It's for fighting, and it's going to take hits, and look like it did.

You're a spiritual target, with that one tactic that will make the devil blink. You are to obey God, rather than men.

"If do right, no can defense."