

Exodus 1:15-22

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The second plan was even more severe – the midwives were to kill all the male Hebrew sons when they are born. But this plan also failed because the midwives feared God more than Pharaoh.

In this attempt to hinder the growth of the population of the Israelites, *the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives*, since the success of this plan depended on them. He (it is not known if this pharaoh is the same as the one in the previous section) spoke to only two of them – one of *whom was named Shiphrah and the other was named Puah*, both Hebrew names (“Shiphrah” means “Beautiful One” and “Puah” means “Splendid One”). That he spoke to only two of them implies that these two were supervising the other Hebrew midwives. Remember that the Hebrews were multiplying so quickly that they covered the land of Egypt (1:7), so there must have been many Hebrew women that assisted other women with childbirth.

The details of the plan were simple, “When you are helping the Hebrew women to give birth and see them upon the birthstool, if it is a son, then you shall put him to death; but if it is a daughter, then she shall live.” Pharaoh could have been thinking that killing all of the male children being born would reduce the number of potential warriors that could oppose him.

The plan would have probably succeeded, *but the midwives feared God* more than they feared Pharaoh to the point that they were not afraid of the consequences of their disobedience. As a result, *they did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them*. Instead, they *let the boys live*. This was blatant disregard for the commands of Pharaoh, who was considered a god by the Egyptians. To disobey Pharaoh was to disobey a god in the eyes of the Egyptians.

The Hebrew midwives showed immense courage in the face of great danger. It seems the fear of the One true God caused within them a revulsion for what Pharaoh was asking and gave them the courage to disobey him (see [Genesis 22:12](#), where Abraham obeys God and offers Isaac because he fears God). The fear of God is a great motivation for right behavior.

Apparently some time had passed with no result. The plan was not succeeding, *so the king of Egypt called for the midwives*. This must have been a very tense time for the midwives, sensing what he could do to them. Instead, he questioned them – “Why have you done this thing, and let the boys live?” What the midwives were doing probably had been reported to Pharaoh.

The response of the midwives is somewhat surprising. In a sense, the midwives played upon Pharaoh’s ignorance. How could he know the birthing habits of captive Hebrew women? *So they said to Pharaoh* (verse 19) that they failed in their mission *Because the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women*, Hebrew women are *vigorous* (lively) and because of that they give *birth before the midwife can get to them*.

Either Pharaoh was satisfied with the midwives’ answer in verse 19 or God supernaturally protected them from harm. Probably both are true, because God could control Pharaoh’s heart and mind ([Proverbs 21:1](#)). So, because of what they did *God was good to the midwives*. Not only that, *the people multiplied, and became very mighty*. This must have bothered Pharaoh greatly. Not only was God good to them, *because the midwives feared God* (note the repetition of this – it stresses its importance in the story), *He established households for them*. That is, because they preserved the life of others, he gave them a husband and children (both a sign of God’s blessing). The fact that their names are mentioned for us to know (note that Pharaoh’s name is not mentioned) shows that their life of faith is a great example for all of us. We are to remain faithful to God even in light of danger and suffering.

Now that the second plan to thwart the growth of the Hebrews had gone awry, Pharaoh altered the plan to make it public. Since he could not rely on the Hebrew midwives to do the job, he turned to his people to enforce his will. Notice that *Pharaoh commanded all his people*. This is not a request. He expects his people (this might refer to his advisors, not a message to the whole population) to obey because they are required to obey the gods of Egypt, of which he considered himself to be one. His command was, “Every son who is born you are to cast into the Nile, and every daughter you are to keep alive.” That is, he instructed his people to throw every male Hebrew son into the Nile River (the Egyptians worshipped a god of the Nile). To throw them into the Nile could have been an effort by Pharaoh to show the superiority of the Nile deity over the God of the Hebrews.

This verse is not only a third plan devised by Pharaoh, it is a transition to what follows in chapter 2. This plan failed as well, because in this dangerous and oppressive world the man God would use to deliver Israel was born – Moses.

Biblical Text:

¹⁵ Then the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other was named Puah; ¹⁶ and he said, “When you are helping the Hebrew women to give birth and see *them* upon the birthstool, if it is a son, then you shall put him to death; but if it is a daughter, then she shall live.” ¹⁷ But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let the boys live. ¹⁸ So the king of Egypt called for the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this thing, and let the boys live?” ¹⁹ The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife can get to them.” ²⁰ So God was good to the midwives, and the people multiplied, and became very mighty. ²¹ Because the midwives feared God, He established households for them. ²² Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying, “Every son who is born you are to cast into the Nile, and every daughter you are to keep alive.”