

Exodus, Chapter 1, Verses 15-22

15. וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְמִיִּלְדוֹת הָעִבְרִיִּית אֲשֶׁר שָׁם הָאֲחֵת שִׁפְרָה וְשֵׁם הַשְּׂנִיית פּוּעָה:

16. וַיֹּאמֶר בְּיָלְדָכֶן אֶת־הָעִבְרִיִּיֹת וּרְאִיתֶן עַל־הָאֲבָנִים אִם־יֵבֶן הוּא וְהַמֶּתֶן אֹתוֹ וְאִם־בֵּת הוּא וְחַיָּה:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, saying, “When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live.”	Now the king of Egypt said to the midwives of the Hebrews* —of whom the name of the first one was Shifra, and the name of the second was Pu’a—he said: When you help the Hebrew women give birth, keep sight of the supporting-stones:if he be a son, put him to death, but if she be a daughter, she may live.	And the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives — of whom the name of one was Shiphrah and the name of the second was Puah — and he said, “When you deliver the Hebrew women, and you look at the two stones, if it’s a boy then kill him, and if it’s a girl then she’ll live.	And the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other was named Puah.And he said, “When you deliver the Hebrew women and look on the birth-stool, if it is a boy, you shall put him to death, and if it is a girl, she may live.”

Fox:

Midwives of the Hebrews: the ambiguity of this phrase raises an ancient question: were they Hebrew or Egyptian? The names seem Semitic (and hence un-Egyptian); then, too, the use of “Hebrew” in the Bible usually occurs when a foreigner is talking about Israelites. Yet the women’s answer in v. 19 suggests that they are in fact Egyptians.

Supporting-stones: Some suggest that these were stools or other objects on which to support women in labor, while others see them as a reference to the testicles of the newborn males.

Friedman:

Hebrew midwives: The Hebrew may be read as “Hebrew midwives,” meaning that these two women are Israelites; or it may be “midwives of the Hebrew,” in which case one cannot know whether or not they themselves are Israelites. “Hebrew midwives” is more likely because the Israelites are never referred to as “the Hebrews” by the narrator in the Torah. It is a term used in quotation marks when speaking to foreigners (Gen 40:15; Ex. 5:3) or as an adjective in the fixed phrase “Hebrew slave.” Here, too, it may be such an adjectival usage. This is supported by the fact that these names are much more likely to be Semitic than Egyptian, implying that the midwives are Israelites.

The two stones: This is often understood to mean some sort of birthing stool made of two stones, but the more natural understanding here in the context of identifying boys is that the two stones refer to the testicles.

Alter:

The Hebrew midwives. “Hebrew” is regularly the designation of Israelites from a foreign perspective.

Shiphrah...Puah. The first name suggests “beauty,” the second name, as the Ugaritic texts indicate, might originally have meant “fragrant blossom” and hence “girl.” But since the root pa’ah can also mean “to murmur” or “to gurgle,” Rashi inventively suggests it is the sound a nurturing woman makes to soothe an infant. In any case, the introduction of just two heroic midwives reflects the way this entire narrative, in contrast to Genesis, has been stylized and simplified. Abraham ibn Ezra appears to grasp this principle of schematization when he proposes that Shiphrah and Puah in fact would have had to be supervisions of whole battalions of midwives.

Birth-stool. Literally, “double stones.” Although there is some debate about the meaning of the term, there are persuasive grounds to understand it as the double stone or brick structure that the childbearing woman gripped as she knelt, the standard position to give birth. There is an Egyptian magical papyrus that announces it is to be recited “over the two bricks of birthing.”

17. וַתִּירֹאנָה הַמִּיֻלְדֹת אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים וְלֹא עָשׂוּ כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהֵן מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וַתַּחֲיִינָה אֶת־הַיְלָדִים:

18. וַיִּקְרָא מֶלֶךְ־מִצְרַיִם לַמִּיֻלְדֹת וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶן מַדּוּעַ עָשִׂיתֶן הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה וַתַּחֲיִינָה אֶת־הַיְלָדִים:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?"	But the midwives held God in awe, and they did not do as the king of Egypt had spoken to them; they let the [male] children live. The king of Egypt called for the midwives and said to them: For-what-reason have you done this thing, and let the children live?	And the midwives feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had spoken to them, and they kept the boys alive. And the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing and kept the boys alive?"	And the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt had spoken to them, and they let the children live. And the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, "Why did you do this thing and let the children live?"

Fox:

Held...in awe. Trad. "feared." This may be a sound-play on "see" in v. 16: *va-yire'u* (held in awe) resembles *va-yir'u* ("saw")

19. וַתֹּאמְרֵן הַמִּיֻלְדֹת אֶל־פַּרְעֹה כִּי לֹא כַּנְּשִׂיִם הַמִּצְרַיִת הָעֵבְרִית כִּי־חַיֹּת הֵנָּה בְּטֹרֶם תָּבוֹא אֲלֵהֶן הַמִּיֻלְדֹת וַיִּלְדוּ:

The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth."	The midwives said to Pharaoh: Indeed, not like the Egyptian-women are the Hebrew-women, indeed, they are lively: before the midwife comes to them, they have given birth!	And the midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrews aren't like the Egyptian women, because they're animals! Before the midwife comes to them, they've given birth!"	And the midwives said to Pharaoh, "For not like the Egyptian women are the Hebrew women, for they are hardy. Before the midwife comes to them they give birth."
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Fox:

Lively: Another form of the Hebrew would be “animals,” and so B-R [Buber-Rosenzweig German translation] combined the two ideas in rendering the word as “lively-like-animals.”

Friedman:

They're animals! The vowels inserted in the Masoretic text would make this an adjective (“they’re lively”) but that form of the word does not occur anywhere else in the Bible. I think that it is more likely that the midwives are meant to be speaking in this negative way about the Israelite women in order to hide their own violation of the king’s order.

Alter:

For they are hardy. Hardy, *hayot*, is derived from the verb “to live,” which has just been used twice in connection with the newborn. (Hence the King James version’s “lively,” though in modern English that unfortunately suggests vivaciousness or bounciness.) The fact that *hayot* as a noun means “animals” may reinforce the strong connection between the Israelites and the procreation forces of the natural world: like animals, the Hebrew women need no midwife.

20. וַיִּטֵּב אֱלֹהִים לְמִילָדָת וַיִּרְבּ הָעָם וַיַּעֲצֻמוּ מְאֹד:

21. וַיְהִי כִּי־יִרְאוּ הַמִּילָדָת אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם בְּתִים:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly. And because the midwives feared God, He established households for them.	God dealt well with the midwives. And the people became many and grew exceedingly mighty [in number]. It was, since the midwives held God in awe, that he made them households.	And God was good to the midwives. And the people increased, and they became very powerful, and it was because the midwives feared God, and He made them households.	And God made it go well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and became very vast. And inasmuch as the midwives feared God, He made households for them.

Fox:

And the people. The order here seems confused. “And the people...” is perhaps out of place, although the thought is not inappropriate for the context.

Alter:

He made households for them. Although some have seen Pharaoh as the antecedent of “he,” God seems considerably more likely. The sense would then be that they were rewarded for their virtue with social standing, establishing their own families, or something of the sort.

22. וַיִּצְוּ פַרְעֹה לְכָל-עַמּוֹ לֵאמֹר כָּל-הַבֵּן הַיְלֹוד הַיִּזְרָה תִשְׁלִיכֶהוּ וְכָל-הַבַּת תִּחְיֶהוּ:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
Then Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, “Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.”	But Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying: Every son that is born, throw him into the Nile, but let every daughter live.	And Pharaoh commanded all of this people, saying, “Every son who is born: you shall throw him into the Nile. And every daughter you shall keep alive.”	And Pharaoh charged his whole people, saying, “Every boy that is born you shall fling into the Nile, and every girl you shall let live.”

Fox:

All his people: Specialists (the midwives) are not equal to the task of checking the Israelite population, and so the whole Egyptian population must be enlisted.

Friedman:

Pharaoh charged his whole people: Despairing of cooperation from the Hebrew midwives in his genocidal project, Pharaoh now enlists the entire Egyptian population in a search-and-destroy operation.

Every boy...you shall fling into the Nile, and every girl you shall let live. The schematic — as against historical or even historylike — character of the narrative is evident in this folktale antithetical summary. The idea is presumably that the people would be eradicated by cutting off all male progeny while the girls could be raised for the sexual exploitation and domestic service of the Egyptians, by whom they would of course be rapidly assimilated. Pharaoh’s scheme will again be frustrated, as the future liberator of the Hebrews will be placed (not flung) into the Nile and emerge eventually to cause grief to Egypt. There is also an echo here of Abram’s words to Sarai when they come down to Egypt, adumbrating the destiny of their descendents, during a famine: “they will kill me while you they will let live” (Genesis 12:12)