

On Defying the King

Thirty-four centuries would pass between the biblical account that follows and when Florence Nightingale reshaped nursing, as based in science, education, and clinical expertise. There is no sense, then, in which we might regard Shiphrah and Puah as nurses. Still, they are the closest thing in the Bible to nurse-midwives. For this, and other reasons, let us embrace them as our own. Their story is remarkable:

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives ... Shiphrah and Puah, "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife

comes to them." So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families (Exodus 1:15-21, NRSV).

A plain reading of the text does not reveal the millennia of rabbis, Torah scholars, and Christian theologians quibbling over this text. For example, the Hebrew is ambiguous as

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it can legitimately be read "the Hebrew midwives," meaning that the midwives were Hebrew. Or it can be read as the "midwives to the Hebrews," implying that they were not Hebrew women.

Then there is the issue of lying: The midwives lied to the Egyptian ruler. Or did they? Some commentators argue that they lied, and that all lying is wrong. Others waffled. Well, yes, they lied, but here is why it isn't really lying. Still others argue they did not lie at all. In his history of how this passage has been interpreted, biblical scholar Childs (1974) writes:

The dominant exegetical question of [chapter] 1 focused on the response of the midwives.

Had the midwives lied and then been rewarded by God for it? Augustine first treated the Exodus passage ... in his treatise on lying, concluding that lying is never justified. The midwives were rewarded because of their benevolence toward Israel, not because of their deceit. Gregory also argues that the midwives' lying was reprehensible and diverted their true reward of eternal life into a mere earthly recompense. This Exodus passage became the classic passage for all later medieval discussions of lying and is treated by Aquinas, Peter Martyr, and others. ... Calvin argued ... that the lying of the midwives was reprehensible and displeasing to God. Notwithstanding, since no action is free of sin, God rewarded their good works even if mixed with impurity. Luther ... sought to see in the chapter a model for Christian living under the pressures of persecution. He tended to justify the midwives' lying which was directed to aid rather than injure. ... Protestant commentators ... denied that the midwives had ever lied (pp. 23-24).

However, the only way to claim that there was no lie is to assert that there was a difference between Egyptian and Hebrew women in labor and delivery. Cole (1973) writes, "We are not told whether the midwives were lying, or whether the quick delivery of 'Hebrew' babies was a biological fact" (p. 62). He is right: Scripture does not say "and then the midwives lied to the king..." but he does imply that there

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could, factually, be a difference in childbirth with Hebrew neonates being delivered more rapidly. So desperately do some commentators want to exonerate the midwives of lying that Stuart (2006) writes,

Was it a lie that God then rewarded (v. 20)? In other words, were they telling the truth to claim that the Egyptian women were slow to deliver children and the Israelite women fast, ... before the midwives could get to them while the other group, like all other known groups, experienced a normally long labor for many hours before delivery? ... To some extent the answer hinges on the meaning of [the Hebrew words] “vigorous” and ... “robust” (i.e., both essentially translations that suggest the difference was physiological) but perhaps best translated as “more active” or “more involved” (i.e., suggesting that the difference was sociological). ... In other words, the midwives’ reply may well testify ... to a cultural difference in the way Israelite women chose to have their babies as opposed to how Egyptian women did. ... It is possible that at the time of the exodus, Egyptian women ... took a minimal role in delivering their own children. They may well have mainly lain back with their eyes closed during and perhaps immediately after childbirth and let midwives do all the rest. ... By contrast, it may well have been the practice in Israel for women to play an active role in the delivery of their own children. The role assigned to midwives may have been minimal ... (pp. 80–81).

To repeat, the wealthy Egyptian women “may well have mainly lain

back with their eyes closed during and perhaps immediately after childbirth and let midwives do all the rest.” To this, nurses can only respond, “????!!! Of course the midwives lied! Anyone who has seen childbirth would know the absurdity of lying back, eyes closed, with the midwife doing the work.

Yes, they lied. No, God did not tell them to lie. What did God think of their lie? The perseveration on whether the midwives lied, and if so how to finesse it, utterly misses the point. The midwives defied the king and saved the Hebrew people from genocide. The midwives did what was right in God’s sight; they rescued the people. That is the proper focus.

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Think of it: Two women, midwives, immigrants, slaves, lowest of the social rungs, receive a direct order from the most powerful person in the nation, the king. He ordered that the women kill all male Hebrew neonates. The midwives know they must not, yet to defy the king meant death. Does this sound familiar? Nurses, in a subordinate position, are told to do what is wrong, knowing what is right to do, and obstructed from doing it? This situation is rife with issues of moral distress, moral resilience, moral courage.

So, the lowly midwives defied the king and lied, thereby saving lives. How is it that they had the courage to do this? The passage says that they “feared God.” Recognize that in this period the Hebrews had an oral

tradition, but no Scriptures. In fact, there was not even a word for *religion*! Faith so thoroughly suffused life that it was not a separate domain but a whole way of being in the world. Stuart notes,

“Feared God” does not imply “believed in the true God, the God of Israel.” It also does not carry the connotation of the New Testament language in which “feared God” had come to mean “was a Gentile convert to Judaism.” In the [five books of Moses] “fear God” tends to mean “to be honest, faithful, trustworthy, upright, and, above all, religious.” ... Israelites certainly did not yet have what we would call “scriptural” knowledge, but they did understand that right and wrong are not human inventions but part of a divinely created order. ... the fear of God is the most important orienting truth available in the world. (p. 79)

The fear of God induced the midwives to risk their lives, to act with moral courage and resilience, to lie to the king, to do what was right. Might they have lost their lives? Possibly. Might a nurse today lose a job? Possibly. Even so, “the fear of God is the most important orienting truth available in the world.”

There is no recommendation here to lie to power. The charge is for any nurse who would defy the king, any “king,” to stay grounded in the faith community for its support, prayer, counsel, and interpretation of scriptural guidance; to stay grounded in Scripture and prayer; and above all, to fear God. 

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