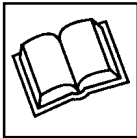


No wonder that an old brother, who is now dead, asleep waiting for Christ, once said the following words (they perhaps stretch the imagination a little, but they are worth thinking about): “Can you imagine what the ascension would be like, as Jesus entered into heaven after

his resurrection to meet his Father?—the outstretched hands of the Father welcoming the Son, the thunderous applause of the angelic host around the throne!”.

What a wonderful man the Lord Jesus Christ was!



Exposition

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The Exodus

A commentary on Exodus 1–15

B. The scene is set—Exodus 1 (Part 2)

Mark Vincent

In the previous issue it was pointed out in the introduction to Exodus 1 that it deals with three topics. The first two were covered in the [previous issue](#), and the third is below.

The format of the commentary

The narrative has been broken down into several **major sections**, of a chapter or two each; some of these will be covered in one month, others will take longer. An **Introduction** is provided for each of these major sections, which sets out the major events and themes dealt with in those chapters.

Each major section is broken into **sub-sections** or **episodes** (these are typically between five and twenty verses each). For each the **AV text** is followed by a **Comment**, which draws out the major lessons and items of interest from the text. The AV text also contains **Footnotes**, in which additional ‘one-off’ points are made for those wanting to work through Exodus more slowly.

The Hebrew midwives

1:15 And the king of Egypt spake to the Hebrew¹ midwives,² of which the name of the one was Shiprah, and the name of the other Puah:³

1:16 And he said, When ye do the office of a midwife to the Hebrew women, and see

them upon the stools;⁴ if it be a son, then ye shall kill him: but if it be a daughter, then she shall live.

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

1:18 And the king of Egypt called for the midwives, and said unto them, Why have ye done this thing, and have saved the men children alive?

1:19 And the midwives said unto Pharaoh, Because the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women; for they are lively, and are delivered ere the midwives come in unto them.

1:20 Therefore God dealt well with the midwives: and the people multiplied, and waxed very mighty.⁵

1:21 And it came to pass, because the midwives feared God, that He made them houses.⁶

1:22 And Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, Every son that is born ye shall cast into the river, and every daughter ye shall save alive.

Comment

Pharaoh, not content with the slave labour he has inflicted on the Israelites, is desperate for a

more drastic measure. His horrifying plan to eliminate all male Hebrew children seems to have been a covert operation at first. From the midwives' response in verse 19 we may infer that their task was to kill the babies surreptitiously, perhaps pretending it to be an accident. Not only would the growth of the Israelites be subdued, in process of time there would also be extra females to go round for the Egyptians. Or so Pharaoh thought.

In fact, the Israelites continued to grow unhindered, at least for a time; note verse 20—the third passage charting their prodigious growth rate—and all because of the actions of two midwives. This is expressed with particular poignancy in verse 17; the midwives feared God, not the king of Egypt. That one sentence says so much about their faith; in worldly terms they had everything to lose by answering him in the plucky way that they did, but their trust in God outweighed such fear. The exhortation in verse 17 is plain; God works through small and great to achieve His purpose. The midwives' fear of God was such that they did what was right and chose to disobey Pharaoh.

They even mocked him into the bargain! There seems to be more than a touch of irony in verse 19; what a snub to Pharaoh and Egyptian prowess to answer in this manner! It was a huge put-down: 'How can you kill something which so evidently *lives*? The Israelite children are *lively*—you can't stop them thriving, even if you try, for God is on their side! The Israelites are growing so fast the children are born before we even arrive on the scene!'. The Egyptian children are another matter entirely, however (by implication they are associated with death and not with life; so it will turn out as the plagues draw to their climax later in the account).

One cannot fight against God. The only way to interact with God is to work with Him, not in opposition. God took care of the midwives and provided for them because they trusted in Him and sought to do what was right. He "made them houses", which I take to mean that He blessed them with families of their own (see note 6). Those women who had spent their lives helping other women bear children were now blessed with the wonder of childbirth themselves.

One of the most remarkable aspects of this account is the parallels with Herod's massacre of the infants and the birth of Jesus. The children of Israel were in bondage in both occasions (literally and symbolically), but God was about to

deliver them through the birth of a special child who would escape even the cruel plottings of the despot. Even the 'final solution' attempt to entirely eliminate all newborn children would not thwart the plan of God, for the great deliverer (Moses prefiguring the Lord Jesus) would survive. Moses flees from Egypt to Midian, Jesus goes in the opposite direction; but Egypt is involved in both cases. Both have to wait for the death of the evil king before they can return to accomplish the work God has appointed them.

In Genesis God decreed that women would bring forth children in sorrow, and yet in that very act of giving birth there lay so much hope—hope that one day the promised seed would come. A parallel can be detected in Exodus. Think of the heartache that would have accompanied childbirth once Pharaoh's revised policy of casting male babies into the river had been made public! Yet it was in these tragic circumstances that Moses would be born, and with him the wonderful hope of God's deliverance. It is no surprise to see the same principles at work at the birth of Jesus, and to find Paul's reference to salvation through childbearing in 1 Timothy 2:15.

In conclusion, though, we must return to the story. Despite the tremendous stand taken by the midwives, Pharaoh quickly scaled up his plan by a public policy of casting males into the river, as we have said. But in doing so he signed his own people's death warrant. For would not the Pharaoh's horses and riders one day be cast into the sea by God, just as the Israelite babies had been cast into the river? God is more than a match for Pharaoh. His powers of destruction are infinitely more effective. And so, fortunately for us, are His powers of salvation.

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1. **v. 15 Hebrew.** This is the first occurrence of the word 'Hebrew' to designate the Israelites in the book of Exodus, but its first Biblical appearance is in Genesis 14:13. The precise meaning of the term is uncertain, but here are some possibilities: (1) It is connected with Eber, great-great-grandson of Noah; (2) It is derived from 'eber, 'beyond', and was used to refer to those from beyond the Euphrates (including Ur); (3) Also taking the derivation from 'eber, meaning 'beyond', others have suggested the term refers to Abraham's religious nonconformism—he was set *over against* the people amongst whom

- he dwelt, he was different from them, on the other side. None of these seems totally convincing, but they are perhaps more likely than the explanation that the term relates to the tribe 'apiru which is found in a number of Near Eastern texts.
2. **v. 15 Hebrew midwives.** Interpreters have argued whether the midwives were Hebrew in nationality or Egyptian midwives to the Hebrews. There are arguments both ways, though I think the former is more likely since the names can be explained on Hebrew etymologies. Ultimately it is of little consequence (note that the English phrase 'Hebrew midwives' is similarly ambiguous). Presumably there were more than two midwives for the whole of the nation; these women must have been their chiefs or representatives.
 3. **v. 15 Shiphrah and Puah.** It is fascinating that we are given the names of the two midwives, but not the name of the powerful monarch. Both Shiphrah and Puah appear to derive from roots connected with the ideas of 'glistening' and 'brightness'. One is reminded of Daniel 12:3: "And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever".
 4. **v. 16 stools.** This word literally means 'two stones' (the same word is used to denote the potter's wheel). It was apparently the practice for mothers to give birth by sitting on two stools with a gap between them (compare Genesis 30:3; 50:23, and Job 3:12, which mention giving birth on someone's *knees*, involving a similar process).
 5. **v. 20 multiplied, and waxed very mighty.** Two more expressions, repeated from verse 7, to emphasise the point that was originally made there. There was no holding back the growth of the Israelites. God's people cannot be held in by men if God wishes them to grow. In the three verses 7, 12 and 20 a total of six different expressions are used to recount the proliferation of the Israelites (the word 'grew' in verse 12 is different from the five expressions of verse 7; the other expressions in verses 12 and 20 are repeated from verse 7).
 6. **v. 21 He made them houses.** What is meant by this phrase? Discounting the less likely options first, it has been suggested that the 'he' here could refer to Pharaoh, the verse stating that Pharaoh put the midwives under state control. While a possible reading, it does not seem the most natural.

Another possibility is that God provided them with literal houses. Did the midwives not have houses before? And why should this detail be there, even if they did not?

More likely is that the term 'house' should be translated more loosely but quite acceptably as 'households' (by implication, families). Thus, in a play on their occupation of midwifery, God gave children to those women who had spent all their lives helping others to have children!

Indexes available

A *Testimony* subject index prepared by Brother Brian Armour of Queensland, Australia, is available for the period 1981-2000 at the following website:

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