

Using Leverage in Obedience to God

Exodus 1:6-22

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⁶Then Joseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation. ⁷But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.

⁸Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” ¹¹Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. ¹²But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. ¹³The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, ¹⁴and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

¹⁵The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶“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.” ¹⁷But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. ¹⁸So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” ¹⁹The 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.” ²⁰So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. ²¹And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. ²²Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.”

Our biblical text for today is an ancient story, crafted at least 2,500 years ago but set in a timeline at least 3,200 years ago. The main characters are an unnamed king at the top of the nation, two lowly Hebrew midwives named Shiphrah and Puah, and a God who works in hidden yet detectable ways.¹

The story begins with the death of Joseph, a wily and gifted man who rose from slavery to become the king’s right-hand man in charge of important pieces of national policy (Genesis 39-41). Now Joseph has died, and the king whom Joseph had worked for has also died. The new king now on the throne had never known Joseph.

A new era in national life has therefore begun, and in this new era a startling demographic reality has started to emerge: the Hebrew people, who are immigrants from another part of the world, are having lots of babies. The Hebrews are so full of life and vitality that the man at the top of the nation takes notice—and he doesn’t like what he

¹ I’ve used some insights from Walter Brueggemann, “Exodus,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 690-698; and Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 26-36.

sees. Not only does he not like what he sees, but the demographic explosion scares him. “Look,” he exclaims to his fellow citizens, “the Hebrews are getting to be more numerous and more powerful than we are. Let’s come up with shrewd national policies to keep them in check, to make sure they don’t get too much power, to preserve and protect our privileged place in this nation” (cf. vs. 9-10). With that, the man at the top institutes a series of social and economic policies intended to keep the Hebrews in their place.

We can pause the story for a moment to notice the verbs used for each set of characters. Verbs for the Hebrews include:

- fruitful (v. 7)
- prolific (v. 7)
- multiplied (vs. 7, 20)
- grew exceedingly strong (v.7)
- filled the land (v. 7)
- became very strong (v. 20)

By contrast, verbs for the man at the top and his fellow citizens include:

- oppress (v. 11)
- dread (v. 12)
- ruthless (vs. 13, 14)
- imposed tasks (v. 13)
- made lives bitter (v. 14)

These contrasting verbs indicate just how full of life and vitality the Hebrew people are, and how scared and desperate the man at the top and his citizens feel. When the powerless grow in numbers, the powerful panic.

However, these national policies don’t have the intended result. The Hebrews simply keep having more babies.

Therefore the man in control tries a different approach. He keeps the oppressive labor laws in place but now adds a new law: he summons the Hebrew midwives, named Shiphrah and Puah, and orders them to kill all Hebrew boys as soon as they are born. The Hebrew girls can live, but kill the boys.

If we think about this from the standpoint of sound national policy, this new law makes no sense. The man in control and his nation rely on the Hebrews for cheap labor, to do the tasks that most citizens don't want to do. And now he wants to shrink that pool of cheap labor by killing off all the boys? If the boys are all killed, eventually there will be no more Hebrews. The pool of labor will vanish. So it seems the man in charge is becoming increasingly anxious, increasingly desperate. His thought processes are turning irrational.

At first glance it may appear that the man in the big house has all the power in this situation. He is, after all, the acknowledged ruler of the nation. The levers of government are in his hands. And his advisors defer to his plans and policies.

At first glance it may also appear that Shiphrah and Puah are powerless. After all, there are only two of them; they are women in a traditionally patriarchal society; and they have no social, economic, or educational status. Even so, they do hold in their hands one potent source of power. It is the power to say no, we will not cooperate with these plans and policies. We can choose to act in civil disobedience. We don't have to murder our Hebrew boys like the man in the capital says. After they're born, we can let them live. We have some leverage here that we can actually use.

Here we land on the central question this story poses for people of faith in any time or place: whom will we serve? From whom will we take our cues? Will we go along with the man at the top, or will we serve God? To be clear, there is no declaration of independence in this story. Instead this story is about a declaration of dependence on God. The Hebrew midwives do what they do because they trust God and depend on God. They have the same choice that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego will have later in Daniel 3 under similar circumstances in a different nation: whom will we serve? Will we serve the man at the top who deals in oppression and abuse and death, or the God who creates heaven and earth and life and vitality?

Shiphrah and Puah use their power of no. So effective is their refusal to cooperate with national policies that the man in the capital notices. He demands an explanation from the midwives: why are you disobeying me? In their reply, the midwives show

themselves to be wily and politically astute. “Well,” they say, “our Hebrew women are so vibrant, so vigorous, so full of life, that by the time we arrive the babies have already been born, and there’s nothing we can do” (cf. v. 19). We can call this shading the truth if we want to, or we could call it yet another testimony to the truth that this story reiterates again and again: the fact that in an adverse situation, the Hebrew community is teeming with life and vitality.

At this point God indirectly intervenes for the only time in this particular story. In other stories later in Exodus, God will intervene in national life in major and very public ways, but for now God’s intervention is muted. In verses 20-21, the text merely observes that God “dealt well with the midwives” and “gave them families.” They, like the Hebrews as a whole, continue to generate life.

In the final scene of this remarkable story, the man at the top turns even more desperate. We might say he shifts from irrational behavior to mentally unstable behavior. Nothing that he’s tried so far has worked out the way he wanted. The Hebrew people are still growing apace, thwarting him with their steady nos and threatening him with their relentless life. Perhaps in fury and frustration, he lashes out with a new law addressed not to the Hebrews, but to citizens of the nation: “I command you to throw every Hebrew boy into the river. Drown them all!” (cf. v. 22). If you keep reading the other stories that come after this one, you’ll see that the man supposedly in control will keep getting thwarted by still more women, including one of his own daughters. Men like Moses and Aaron will thwart him too. And eventually, the man in power will be thwarted by God, who will intervene decisively for the sake of the marginal. In the end, the man at the top will be humbled, his puny power shown to be no match for the power of God.

Perhaps this story causes us to muse about a world we might not want to engage—a world with a frightened man putatively in control, with abused workers, and with a people of faith who exercise their option to say no. I offer three possibilities to consider.

First, this story demonstrates that it’s entirely possible for a supposed champion of national order, who exercises political power at the top of a country, to become an agent

of chaos. Not every policy dressed in the clothes of national interest actually leads to that country's health and well-being.

Second, people of faith have more power than they might think. Their power lies in the leverage of refusal, the leverage of non-cooperation, the leverage of saying no.

Third, this story has no interest in saying no just to be cantankerous or partisan. For people who trust God, the reason for saying no always comes from a higher loyalty to God. When a conflict emerges between national politics and God's preferences, people of faith choose God's preferences. We might say that God has a preferential option for the poor, or a passion for shalom, or a love for mercy, or something else. Yet whatever language we choose to describe what God wants, we people of faith, rooted as we are in the identity of God, choose to follow God rather than the policies of those who deal in abuse, oppression, and murder.

In the end, God wins. That is the ultimate testimony of this story and indeed of the Bible as a whole. Though it may not look like it right now, the ways of God, supported by the people of God, will eventually prevail. Thanks be to God.