

A Historically Grounded Narrative Series

When Quiet Hands Defied a King

How two midwives feared God more than Pharaoh, and preserved a generation marked for destruction

A biblically faithful retelling rooted in Scripture, historical context, and careful theological clarity.

About this Account

This narrative is drawn directly from the biblical record and presented using widely recognized translations such as the ESV, NIV, NASB, and KJV. Cultural, geographical, and historical insights are included to deepen understanding while remaining faithful to the text.



Beginning — A Command Against the Helpless (Exodus 1:8–16)

The rise of a new ruler changes everything. In Egypt, Pharaoh comes to power, one who does not remember Joseph or the history that once connected Egypt to Israel (Exodus 1:8). What had been a relationship of provision becomes one of suspicion.

The Israelites have multiplied greatly (Exodus 1:7). Their growth, once a sign of blessing, is now perceived as a threat. Pharaoh speaks to his people with calculated concern: if war comes, these Hebrews might join Egypt's enemies and escape the land (Exodus 1:10). The fear is political, but the response becomes oppressive.

Forced labor is imposed.

Taskmasters are set over the Israelites to afflict them with heavy burdens, building store cities like Pithom and Rameses (Exodus 1:11). Yet the strategy fails. The more they are oppressed, the more they multiply (Exodus 1:12). What was meant to suppress instead intensifies their growth.

Oppression escalates into severity.

The Egyptians make the Israelites serve with rigor, embittering their lives with hard labor in brick and mortar (Exodus 1:13–14). But even this is not enough. Pharaoh shifts from controlling labor to controlling life itself.

He summons two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah (Exodus 1:15). Their role places them at the most vulnerable point in human life, the moment of birth. In ancient societies,

midwives were trusted figures, responsible not only for delivery but for the immediate care of mother and child.

Pharaoh gives them a direct command: when they assist Hebrew women in childbirth, if the child is a son, they are to kill him; if a daughter, she may live (Exodus 1:16).

The instruction is precise, and devastating.

It targets the future of the people. By eliminating male children, Pharaoh seeks to weaken Israel's growth and ensure long-term control. The method is deliberate: quiet, hidden, and difficult to trace. The act would take place in private spaces, far from public scrutiny, carried out by those entrusted with preserving life.

The tension is immediate.

Two women now stand between the authority of a king and the vulnerability of newborn children. Their position is not one of power, but of responsibility. They are not soldiers or leaders, they are caretakers. Yet the command placed upon them transforms their role into a point of decision with far-reaching consequence.

The beginning of the story is not marked by open resistance or public confrontation.

It begins with a command, issued from the highest authority, against those who cannot defend themselves.

Rising Conflict — Fear of God Over Fear of Pharaoh (Exodus 1:17–18)

The command has been given, but it is not carried out. In the quiet, unseen moments of childbirth, where no court official

stands to witness, a decision is made that directly opposes the will of Pharaoh.

“But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live” (Exodus 1:17).

The text identifies their motive clearly: they feared God.

This fear is not terror, but reverence, a recognition of divine authority that outweighs the authority of the king. In a culture where Pharaoh was often regarded as having divine status, this distinction is critical. The midwives do not simply choose compassion; they act out of allegiance to a higher moral and theological authority.

Their resistance is quiet, but it is deliberate.

They do not organize rebellion or publicly challenge Pharaoh’s decree. Instead, they continue their work as midwives, but refuse to carry out the command. In the hidden space of birth, they preserve life where they were ordered to end it.

This introduces real danger.

Pharaoh’s command is not a suggestion. Disobedience could result in severe punishment, death. The midwives’ actions place them in direct violation of royal authority. Yet their decision suggests that obedience to God requires action, even when that action remains unseen by others.

The effect of their choice becomes visible over time.

The Hebrew male children continue to live. The growth of the people is not halted. Pharaoh’s strategy begins to fail, not

because of widespread rebellion, but because two individuals refuse to comply.

Eventually, the discrepancy reaches the king.

Pharaoh summons the midwives and confronts them: “*Why have you done this, and let the male children live?*” (Exodus 1:18).

The private decision is now brought into public accountability.

The moment carries tension on multiple levels:

- **Authority vs. conscience:** The king’s command stands against their reverence for God.
- **Secrecy vs. exposure:** What was done quietly is now questioned openly.
- **Life vs. consequence:** Preserving the children has protected others, but now places the midwives themselves at risk.

They must respond.

The rising conflict is no longer about what they will do, it is about how they will answer for what they have already done.

Turning Point — A Dangerous Answer (Exodus 1:19)

The question has been asked, and the stakes are clear. Before Pharaoh, the highest authority in the land, Shiphrah and Puah must account for their actions.

They answer:

“Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them” (Exodus 1:19).

The response is brief, but it changes everything.

It deflects responsibility away from direct disobedience and reframes the situation as something beyond their control. The explanation suggests that by the time they arrive, the birth has already occurred, leaving no opportunity to carry out the command.

The moment is both strategic and complex.

- It protects the midwives from immediate punishment.
- It preserves their ability to continue their work.
- It allows the saving of future children to go on.

Yet it also raises an ethical tension within the narrative.

(Scholarly note: Interpretations differ. Some traditions understand this as a deliberate deception used to preserve life under unjust authority. Others suggest the statement may reflect partial truth, acknowledging the strength of Hebrew women while still functioning as a protective explanation. The biblical text itself does not explicitly evaluate the truthfulness of the statement; instead, it emphasizes the midwives' fear of God as the defining factor in their actions.)

What is clear is this:

Their answer satisfies Pharaoh.

The king does not immediately punish them or replace them. The system remains in place, but the immediate threat to the midwives is removed. More importantly, their position is preserved, allowing them to continue doing what they have already chosen: letting the children live.

This is the turning point of the narrative.

The conflict between divine reverence and royal authority reaches its peak, and the midwives respond in a way that secures both survival and continued resistance. What began as a hidden act of disobedience now becomes sustained defiance, carried forward not through confrontation, but through wisdom under pressure.

The outcome is not final resolution, but it shifts the direction of events.

Life continues where death was commanded.

Final Resolution — Life Preserved, Legacy Secured (Exodus 1:20–22)

The danger passes, but the consequences extend far beyond the moment. What began in secrecy now reveals its lasting effect.

“So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong” (Exodus 1:20).

The outcome is unmistakable.

The policy meant to weaken Israel fails. Despite oppression, despite targeted commands against their children, the people continue to increase. The quiet decisions made by Shiphrah and Puah contribute directly to this preservation. Their

actions do not merely save individual lives, they sustain a future generation.

The text then makes a specific connection:

“And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families” (Exodus 1:21).

This detail carries cultural and theological weight.

In the ancient Near Eastern world, family was a primary marker of blessing, stability, and legacy. For midwives, women whose lives were devoted to bringing forth others’ children, the gift of families of their own represents both honor and divine recognition. The narrative attributes this outcome not to their strategy, but to their fear of God.

(Scholarly note: Many interpreters emphasize that the text highlights motive over method. While the midwives’ response to Pharaoh is not directly evaluated, their reverence for God is explicitly affirmed as the reason for divine favor.)

Yet the resolution is not without escalation.

Pharaoh’s plan does not end, it expands. Unable to rely on the midwives alone, he issues a broader command to all his people: *“Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live”* (Exodus 1:22).

The threat intensifies.

What had been a controlled, private directive now becomes a public policy. The responsibility for violence is no longer limited to two individuals, it is distributed across the population. The conflict between power and life deepens.

And yet, something has already changed.

The pattern of resistance has been established.

Before this command spreads, before the next stage unfolds, there has already been preservation. Lives have been spared. The people have continued to grow. The system designed to eliminate them has been quietly undermined from within.

This sets the stage for what follows.

In the next chapter, a child will be born, Moses, whose life depends on the same kind of courage and defiance. The actions of the midwives become part of a larger movement of preservation that will lead to deliverance.

The resolution, then, holds two realities together:

- The immediate blessing and recognition of faithful action.
- The ongoing presence of danger and injustice.

The story does not end with the removal of oppression, but with the assurance that within it, life has been protected and the future has not been lost.

Quiet bravery has already altered the course of history.

Reflection — When Obedience Is Hidden but History Is Shaped

The story of Shiphrah and Puah is not marked by public speeches, recorded victories, or visible leadership. Their names appear briefly, their actions occur in private spaces, and yet their impact reaches far beyond what is immediately seen.

They stood at the most fragile threshold, between life and death, and chose to act according to what they believed was right before God.

What makes their story distinct is not only that they disobeyed Pharaoh, but how they did so. Their resistance was not loud or confrontational. It was consistent, deliberate, and carried out in moments where no one else was present to witness it. Their fear of God shaped their actions more than the fear of consequence shaped their restraint.

(Theological insight: Many traditions view this passage as an early example of moral resistance, where obedience to God justifies disobedience to unjust authority. The emphasis remains on reverence for God as the guiding principle rather than rebellion for its own sake.)

There is also a tension that remains unresolved in simple terms.

Their response to Pharaoh raises questions about truth, strategy, and survival. The text does not dwell on the ethics of their words; instead, it directs attention to the preservation of life and the posture of their hearts. This suggests that, in the narrative, the protection of the vulnerable and reverence for God are central, even when circumstances require difficult navigation.

Their actions demonstrate a pattern that appears throughout Scripture:

- God's purposes are often advanced through individuals who act quietly.

- Faithfulness is not always visible in the moment, but its effects accumulate over time.
- The preservation of life, even in small acts, contributes to outcomes far beyond immediate awareness.

The midwives did not know the full impact of their decision. They could not see the generations that would follow, or the role their actions would play in the survival of Israel. Yet their obedience became part of a larger story, one that would lead to deliverance, covenant renewal, and the formation of a nation.

Their courage was not measured by scale, but by consistency.

Question for Reflection:

When faced with moments where right and wrong are clear but recognition is absent, is the motivation to act shaped by who is watching, or by a deeper commitment to what is right, even when the outcome is uncertain and unseen?

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