

## **Biblical Bit Players: Shiphrah and Puah**

**Exodus 2:1-22**

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So you're watching a TV show or a movie, and a minor character has a line or two. You think, "Who is that guy? He looks really familiar. Didn't he have a role in—oh, what was the name of that movie...Or maybe he was in that show that was on a few years ago that starred that actress who used to do those commercials..." You know the feeling.

These are bit players, actors with only a line or two of dialogue, who make a brief appearance and then are gone. But a bit player can often play a pivotal role in the development of the story: for instance, in the classic film *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*, Jack Albertson plays a postal worker who directs all Santa Claus's mail to Kris Kringle, which leads to the court ruling that Santa Claus does exist.

For the next six weeks, we are going to be learning about some of the bit players of the Bible, minor characters who have a major impact in the great sweep of the story of God's people.

Today we meet our first bit players, two courageous and witty Hebrew women, who make their appearance in the opening chapter of Exodus. But first a little background to the story, because Exodus takes up right where the book of Genesis ends.

The last part of Genesis is the story of Joseph and his brothers (we'll meet one of those brothers later in this series). Joseph is the favored son of Jacob, so spoiled and indulged by his

father (you may remember his famous coat of many colors) that he is sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. He eventually ends up in Egypt, where he rises from slavery to a position of great power and importance in the court of Pharaoh. When famine sweeps across the land, Joseph's father, brothers, and their families take refuge in Egypt. Protected by Joseph, the Hebrews prosper in Egypt. This is where today's scripture begins:

**1 These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: 2 Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, 3 Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, 4 Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. 5 The total number of people born to Jacob was seventy. Joseph was already in Egypt. 6 Then Joseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation. 7 But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them**

All seems to be well with the Israelites, when suddenly things change. It's like a movie, when someone is happily going about their normal life, but we in the audience can see a murderous villain in the background who is stalking them. In Exodus, the murderous villain is the king of Egypt.

**8 Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. 9 He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. 10 Come, 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." 11 Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. 12 But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. 13 The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, 14 and 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**

This "new king who does not know Joseph" represents a dynastic shift from a regime that welcomed and sheltered the Israelites to one who was actively hostile. The king fears the growing power of these foreigners living in his country, so he forces them into slavery, but his

plan backfires. It seems as if the more the Hebrews are oppressed the more they grow. So the king comes up with a new, even more dire plan.

***15 The 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." 17 But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. 18 So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" 19 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." 20 So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. 21 And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. 22 Then 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 bit actors Shiphrah and Puah now play their brief but telling roles. Having failed to work the Israelites to death, the king decides to take more direct action. He summons the Hebrew midwives and commands them to kill all the male children. But they defy the king—and they defy him in a way that is incredibly brave and smart and well, just plain sassy.

When the king complains that Shiphrah and Puah are allowing the boys to live, they reply, “Gee, it’s not our fault that the Hebrew women are strong and vigorous, unlike wimpy Egyptian women, and just pop their babies out before we can even get there.”

You have to love these courageous, faithful, and smart-mouthed women, who can defy the most powerful man on the face of the earth and get in a dig at Egyptians in the same sentence. The writer of Exodus gets in his own dig at the Egyptians as well. Often in biblical stories, we don’t know the woman’s name. She is simply someone’s wife or daughter or widow. But in this story, the writer gives us the names of these obscure Hebrew midwives,

but NOT the name of the king of Egypt. In fact, he not only refuses to name the king, he doesn't even dignify him with the title Pharaoh. He is simply, anonymously, the king of Egypt. But the seemingly unimportant midwives are immortalized forever for their faith and courage.

I think Shiphrah and Puah are amazingly wonderful role models. My daughter should give thanks that she was born before I really became familiar with their story, because her name might have been Shiphrah Puah Jensen instead of Erica Brooke Jensen.

Just think—without Shiphrah and Puah, there would have been no Moses. Without Moses, no exodus from Egypt. Without the Exodus, no chosen people, no nation of Israel, no King David, no Bethlehem, no Jerusalem, no Joseph and Mary, no Jesus. We could argue that on the decision of these two women hangs the whole of salvation history. Yet they left no great writings, they weren't inspiring leaders, they didn't organize a movement or command an army. They just refused to bow down to evil. They played their small but important role—and then disappeared.

Tomorrow we observe Martin Luther King Day. King was, of course, one of the great leaders of our time—a genuine hero. He stood up against those who perpetuated the vicious oppression of African Americans, the Pharaohs of his day. Pharaohs like Bull Connor of Birmingham, who directed the use of fire hoses and police attack dogs against peaceful demonstrators, including children. Robert Chambliss, who planted the bomb in a Birmingham church that killed four little girls. Governor George Wallace, who proudly declared, "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever." Edgar Ray Killen, who planned

and directed the murder of three civil rights workers. The Ku Klux Klan who carried on a systematic reign of terror against black citizens that included the murder of an estimated 3500 and intimidation or injury of hundreds of thousands more.

Martin Luther King Jr. was a charismatic, visionary leader whom we rightly remember for his remarkable accomplishment in helping to change our nation forever for the better. But this year, I'd like for us to remember not just King, but all those who courageously followed him—the Shiphrahs and Puahs of the civil rights movement. The ones who weren't the leaders, but whose quiet, steadfast courage broke down ugly wall of segregation. Like those who marched behind King into Selma, Alabama—600 of them were attacked by police with billy clubs and tear gas. Two days later they were back, their numbers having grown to 2500. Turned back at the Edmund Pettis Bridge, they came back a third time. Let us honor those who refused to yield when Bull Connor unleashed his attack dogs. Who organized carpools or walked during the 13-month long Montgomery Bus Boycott. Who were a part of the sit-ins at segregated lunch counters, who signed up voters, the ones who signed up to vote despite threats and intimidation. The hundreds of thousands who like modern day Shiphrah and Puah had the courage to stand against the evil abuse of power by the Pharaohs of their day.

Great leaders like Martin Luther King (or Moses) are rare. But great leaders need great followers—brave, courageous, faithful followers who are willing to stand up for right, and stand against injustice and tyranny. It is likely that no one here this morning will ever get a monument erected to them or a holiday named after them, but we can stand for right. It may

mean making sure that when we vote, we don't vote primarily based on self-interest, but for the candidate who is committed to helping the least among us. It may mean carrying a sign in a demonstration or working to change laws and policies we think are harming children and other defenseless groups. It may mean going on a mission trip to help those most in need.

What Shiphrah and Puah teach us is that none of us are too powerless or too unimportant to make a difference. There's an African proverb that says if you think you are too small to make a difference, try spending the night in a closed room with a mosquito. We all have something to contribute, and in the great, ongoing struggle between good and evil, none of us can sit on the sidelines.