

A Plan is Foiled, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr.
Exodus 1:8-10, 22-2:10 and Romans 12:1-8
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Can you imagine the arrogance of someone determining who should live and who should die? “Throw every Hebrew boy into the Nile,” said Pharaoh. “Let them drown.” This was incongruous with the meaning of “Nile,” which in Egyptian meant “the river of life.”

Circumstances for the Hebrews had changed dramatically since the days of Joseph the Hebrew alien who became ruler in Egypt. Under Joseph’s leadership, Hebrews had opportunity to work hard and prosper in Egypt. Circumstances changed because of fear. The Hebrews were multiplying and the new pharaoh thought they might join his enemies in battle against Egypt. “But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.”¹ People in power do not have to fear. If we rule fairly and justly, treat everyone equally, and not drive people into poverty, or make a buck at their expense, we do not need to fear an uprising.

Difficult situations can produce heroes. Oppression can produce leaders like Thomas Jefferson, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Luther King Jr. Adversity is the parent of success. We usually think of Moses as the hero of the Exodus, standing up to Pharaoh and leading the Hebrews to freedom. Think it again. We have a number of women who are the heroes of the Exodus. We will begin with two women, Shiphrah and Puah. They were Hebrew midwives, helping mothers in the birth process. Pharaoh ordered Shiphrah and Puah to kill all the sons who were born to Hebrew women. There was something special about these women. They were women of faith. The scripture says, “they feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them,”² and they let the boys live.

That is what faith is all about: knowing whom or what to fear. If we fear God, the God who loves us unconditionally, more than anything else, there is nothing else to fear! When Pharaoh called the women to him to question them, Shiphrah and Puah said, “The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before we get there.”³ These brave women would not participate in state-authorized killing. They are worthy examples to follow. Fear God, rather than kings, rulers, governments.

The book of Exodus is the story of a God who will prevail in spite of the arrogance and injustice of human leaders. The greatest event in Christian history is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The greatest event in Jewish history, and therefore the second greatest event in Christian history, is the Exodus. The Passover celebrates Exodus: the salvation of Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. Today’s story from Exodus brings the birth of the nation Israel closer to reality.

Many scholars have said that the word “Hebrew” is a derivative of the Amorite term “Khapiru” meaning “outcast.” Hebrews were a lower social class. They were a marginal people who had no social standing, owned no land, and endlessly disrupted ordered society. By this time in their history, the descendants of Jacob had been marginalized and oppressed.

There is something in the human spirit that yearns for freedom and equality, and wishes that human life not be harmed. It is a touch of the spirit of God. The Hebrew slaves who meant little

¹ Exodus 1:7 NRSV

² Exodus 1:17

³ Exodus 1:19

or nothing to the Egyptians, remembered who and whose they were. They remembered their genealogy and the promise made to them. They were descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The treasured past carries power. Black slaves in America meant nothing to their masters, but the slaves themselves proudly remembered their past. It was their stories, their songs, and their rituals that kept the spark of hope alive for them in the darkest days of slavery. The spark of hope is the most powerful force in the universe. Break a person's bones, and you may slow her down. If she has hope, she will continue on. Break a person's hope, and you have broken the person.

In the midst of adversity in Egypt, life went on. A man and a woman from the tribe of Levi married. The woman conceived and bore a son. It says this was a "fine" baby.⁴ The Hebrew word for "fine" is *tov*, an interesting word. It is the same word that God uttered when God had completed creation. God saw that everything was "tov" – good.⁵ Continuing in God's creation, this child was "tov" – good – fine! The mother hid this fine baby as long as she could, but at age three months, she had to do something to keep the baby from being killed, from being drowned in the Nile. She fashioned a boat out of reeds and bitumen, a tar-like substance. This little basket joins Noah's ark, Jonah's whale, and Peter's boat in the flotilla of God's salvation.

God's will will prevail, in spite of human arrogance and power. Pharaoh kept getting subverted by women. First it was Shiphrah and Puah, two poor Hebrew midwives. Now, it was his own daughter. She saw that this was a child of the Hebrew slaves who was hidden in the bulrushes along the banks of the Nile. She had compassion. Was it maternal instincts taking over? Was it adolescent rebellion? Was it a sensitivity to the underdog? Was it a sympathy with anyone who was so strongly determined that they would construct a boat of basket and tar to float a baby to freedom and life? Pharaoh's plan for elevating himself, for protecting his power, and for maintaining the system of slavery, was foiled by his own daughter and by God's hand. The name of that baby in the basket in the bulrushes was Moses.

This is the story of God's salvation. A savior is saved. Moses' mother must have told him the story of how he was saved from the Pharaoh's cruel decree. Just as miraculous as the finding of the baby by Pharaoh's daughter is the giving up of the baby by his mother. The baby was given up to God. Can we give up our children to God's service? Can we teach them that there are things more important in life than financial security?

This is the story of a different kind of power. Against the might of the leader of the dominant power of the world in that day, against pharaoh, and his armies, and his law, were arrayed a bunch of women—peasant women and a royal daughter. Their power, linked to God's will for salvation, turned out to be much greater than Pharaoh's power.

No one has power over you. If you keep close to God's power, you will be able to withstand the power that others would use to drive you down, to make you dependent upon them, to enslave you, or to oppress you. In God you are free.

The midwives and Moses' mother defied the political powers in their quest to preserve life. In so doing, Shiphrah, Puah, and Pharaoh's daughter are the first saviors in the book of Exodus, and they provide the model by which all future saviors, including Moses, will be judged.

⁴Exodus 2:2

⁵Genesis 1:31