

LESSON ONE  
*Women at  
Moses' Birth:*  
TAKING ACTION TO  
HELP CHILDREN

**FOCAL TEXT**

Exodus 1:15—2:10

**BACKGROUND**

Exodus 1:1—2:10

**MAIN IDEA**

Women acted boldly and courageously to overcome the pharaoh's evil plans and help children, including a special child.

**QUESTION TO EXPLORE**

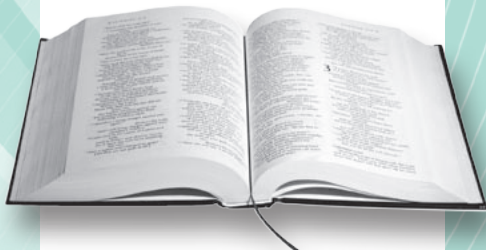
What will you do to help children?

**STUDY AIM**

To summarize the ways in which the women at Moses' birth acted to help children and to identify ways I will take action to help children

**QUICK READ**

God used not one but five women to save both a generation of children and one special child, Moses.



An old African proverb that has become well-known states, *It takes a village to raise a child*. The origin of this proverb is not certain, but we can find the concept as far back as Egypt in the second millennium when five women followed God's leadership and risked their lives to save Hebrew children. Two of these women were instrumental in saving perhaps thousands of babies. The other three worked together to save the life of one. All of them took part in God's plan to raise this one child into a man who would lead God's people out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land. His name was Moses.

## EXODUS 1:15–22

<sup>15</sup> The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, <sup>16</sup> "When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live." <sup>17</sup> The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. <sup>18</sup> Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, "Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?" <sup>19</sup> The midwives answered Pharaoh, "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive." <sup>20</sup> So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. <sup>21</sup> And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own. <sup>22</sup> Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: "Every boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live."

## EXODUS 2:1–10

<sup>1</sup> Now a man of the house of Levi married a Levite woman, <sup>2</sup> and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months. <sup>3</sup> But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. <sup>4</sup> His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him. <sup>5</sup> Then Pharaoh's

daughter went down to the Nile to bathe, and her attendants were walking along the river bank. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to get it. <sup>6</sup> She opened it and saw the baby. He was crying, and she felt sorry for him. "This is one of the Hebrew babies," she said. <sup>7</sup> Then his sister asked Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?" <sup>8</sup> "Yes, go," she answered. And the girl went and got the baby's mother. <sup>9</sup> Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you." So the woman took the baby and nursed him. <sup>10</sup> When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, "I drew him out of the water."

### A Mandate to Kill (1:15–22)

The Book of Exodus opens with Egypt struggling over population growth among the Hebrews: "The Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them" (Exodus 1:7).<sup>1</sup> The crisis was not one of space or economics. Rather, its political ramifications caused concern. This explosion of Israelites caused Pharaoh to shudder at the thought of possible alliances by the Hebrews with an enemy in case of war. He had to get on top of this problem quickly.

Pharaoh's first approach was to wear down the Israelites. He appointed ruthless taskmasters over them. These taskmasters imposed tasks intended to hurt the slaves rather than help the masters. But Pharaoh underestimated the survival instinct and national pride of these Hebrew slaves: "The more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites" (Exod. 1:12).

Pharaoh must have paced the floor at night thinking of a fail-proof plan to repress the growth of his slave populace. His first plan, to inflict pain, failed. His second was to reduce the birthrate of this ever-growing people group through infanticide. Little did he know, however, that he was about to draft two wise and courageous women to be his directors of death.

Midwives in biblical times served as *birth doctors*. Both Hebrew and Egyptian women alike gave birth on birthstools. Although there were probably different styles, a typical birthstool was composed of two stones on which the Hebrew women knelt to deliver their babies.<sup>2</sup> According to Ezekiel 16:4, a midwife's primary duty was to cut the umbilical cord, wash the infant, rub the baby with salt, and wrap it in cloths.

Pharaoh called in two midwives, who probably were the overseers of hundreds of midwives. When one considers the large number of Israelites, having only two midwives would have been unrealistic.

Puah and Shiphrah were Hebrew slaves themselves. Imagine how they must have felt when being called to appear before the most powerful man in the ancient world. They may have been nervous about their appearance before him, and they were likely horrified when given their command. Rather than bringing life into the world, they were directed to kill all male Hebrew babies at birth.

God intervened in this diabolical plan by placing two God-fearing women in the positions of lead midwives. Their minds must have raced with the realization of how many babies they were being mandated to kill. They knew they could not carry out Pharaoh's orders. Their higher authority was God. Overseeing the killing of babies was not an option. But what were their options? They knew their lives were at risk.

Their choice was brilliant. When the news came to Pharaoh that Hebrew baby boys were living, he called in Puah and Shiphrah and demanded an answer. They probably took advantage of a subject of

## PHARAOH

An ancient pharaoh (king) was not only an absolute monarch, but he was also the supreme commander of the armies, chief justice of the royal court, and high priest of the nation's religion. His absolute power may be seen in that justice was defined as *what Pharaoh loves* and wrongdoing as *what Pharaoh hates*.<sup>3</sup> Because the dates of the Exodus are uncertain, with scholars holding various positions, so is the identity of the pharaoh of this Scripture passage. Some believe Ramses II was the ruling pharaoh; some believe Amenhotep I or Thutmose III ruled.<sup>4</sup> An interesting note is that the pharaoh remains nameless, while the names of the two ordinary midwives are given to be remembered throughout all history.

which Pharaoh had neither knowledge nor experience: “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” (Exod. 1:19). However, the midwives were spared death by Pharaoh and rewarded by God with families of their own.

In seeming desperation, Pharaoh then declared the most evil plan of all: “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live” (1:22). Two women had shown remarkable courage. A generation of Israelites had been saved. But two additional courageous women were about to be called into action.

### A Plan to Save (2:1–4)

One might imagine the horror and heartbreak of Puah and Shiphrah upon learning of this desperate plan of Pharaoh. Risking their lives by lying to the king, they had saved hundreds, if not thousands, of baby boys. Now his new plan completely bypassed them. They could only protect the babies at birth. The cries of heartbroken mothers whose newborn sons were thrown into the Nile must have gone with them to their graves.

The women’s courage had not been in vain, however, for out of this generation of Hebrew babies, God would bring the one who would lead the Israelites out of Egypt. But Pharaoh had erected yet another hurdle that must first be crossed. A devoted and determined mother, along with her daughter, would serve as God’s agents in this victory.

No name is given for the mother of Moses in these verses, perhaps to emphasize the instincts and character of her motherhood rather than her personhood. In Exodus 6:20 and Numbers 26:59 she is named Jochebed. She came from the lineage of Levi’s tribe and had married her brother Kohath’s oldest son, Amram. Both of Moses’ parents came from a priestly tribe, which may be why they both still worshiped God when most Hebrews had defected to the idols of the Egyptians (Ezekiel 20:6–8).

Jochebed and Amram had three children: Miriam, Aaron, and Moses. God would use all three for his salvation plan for the Israelites. This is the first time we see the courage of Miriam, but it would not be the last. She would accompany Moses and Aaron through the Exodus and serve as a leader of women in praise and worship of God.

We are not privy to any word from God to Jochebed about her newborn son's future. God certainly had a history of prophesying to fathers or mothers about the upcoming greatness of their sons. Examples include Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 17:19), Rebekah and Jacob (Gen. 25:23), and later Mary and Jesus (Luke 1:28–32). Scripture does say, however, that when she “saw that he was a fine baby” (Exod. 2:2), she hid him for three months. As with the midwives, her life was on the line should her baby be discovered.

Finding it impossible to hide an infant any longer from the prying eyes and ears of the Egyptians, Jochebed crafted a papyrus basket in which to place her son. The same word for “basket” in this story is the word for *ark* in the salvation story of Noah. Ironically, she carried out Pharaoh's edict: she cast her baby into the Nile. But as with Noah's family, the ark basket would save her son.

Much is left to speculation in this story. We do not know whether Jochebed intended to place Moses where the Pharaoh's daughter came to bathe. She may have intended only to hide him in the bulrushes during the day and return him to her bosom at night. Her plan did not matter as much as God's plan. In God's plan, Moses would be educated in the court of the very pharaoh who originally ordered his death.

### A Son to Raise (2:5–10)

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The last character in the miraculous plan to save Moses was a daughter of Pharaoh. Little could Pharaoh's daughter have known what she would discover in her bathing spot that day. First she discovered the basket, perhaps because she heard the muffled cries of a baby emanating from it. She immediately recognized this baby as Hebrew and simultaneously must have realized the desperation of a loving mother. She probably put two and two together when a small girl suddenly appeared and offered to find the services of a nursemaid.

Courage begets courage. Perhaps Jochebed's courage inspired the same in this princess. To take a Hebrew child into the very court of this murderous pharaoh would require much courage.

Scripture does not tell us much about the transactions between this new adoptive mother and the birth mother. Much respect was required

## TWO MODELS

- Green Acres Baptist Church in Tyler, Texas, adopted a program, *Hope for 100*. The goal was to have one hundred children adopted or fostered by church members. Within eighteen months they had exceeded their goal.<sup>5</sup> What variation of such a plan could your church do?
- Second Baptist Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, has an Adoption/Orphan Care Group. One of their projects is to support the local Department of Human Services as they take in children for home placement. They furnish snacks, toys, and other items to help the children feel comfortable as they wait to be placed.<sup>6</sup>

on both sides. The weaning of Moses from his mother would have taken anywhere from two to seven years. By that time, even if Pharaoh saw him, he would likely have ignored the child.

### Lesson in Today's Life

The unborn and children of tender age cannot advocate for themselves. Neither can oppressed children of any age. They must have advocates.

All five of these women in Exodus took a stand for life. The midwives had the courage to advocate for unborn children of an entire nation. Jochebed, Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter advocated for the life of one small baby. Regardless of reasons for personal involvement, these women accepted the challenge.

Today we face similar challenges. They may confront us on an individual basis or under the umbrella of social justice. We cannot ignore the children who depend on us. They may belong to us or to an African woman in a small hut in Zimbabwe. They may be owned by a human slave traffic owner. Most importantly, they belong to God.

Puah, Shiphrah, Jochebed, Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter took actions to preserve life. Can we do any less?

## QUESTIONS

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1. Puah and Shiphrah literally outwitted the Pharaoh by what we might call *creative disobedience*. Is this ever justified? How might this concept be called for today in defending children?
2. What credentials for leading the Israelites out of Egypt do you see Moses had as a result of having both a Hebrew home and an Egyptian home? See Acts 7:17–22. Can you see God’s plan unfolding for this child?
3. The midwives and Moses’ mother and sister had faith in God. Based on her background, Pharaoh’s daughter probably did not. How and why would God use believers and unbelievers? How does God do that today?
4. If God convicted you to take one step today toward helping a helpless child (or children), what could you do?

## NOTES

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1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in lessons 1–4 are from the New Revised Standard Version.
2. Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 41.
3. Trent C. Butler, General Editor, *Holman Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), see “Pharaoh.”
4. David S. Dockery, General Editor, *Holman Bible Handbook* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1992), 144.
5. [www.hopefor100.org](http://www.hopefor100.org). Accessed 1/3/2011.
6. [www.2bclr.com](http://www.2bclr.com). Accessed 1/3/2011.