

Life Has Her Own Authority

August 27, 2017 CMCL Sermon by Jonathan Sauder

Texts: Exodus 1:8-21, Romans 12:1-3

The story of the midwives to the Hebrews in Exodus 1 depicts two women risking the wrath of the Pharaoh by practicing civil disobedience on behalf of the vulnerable. They chose to deliberately break the highest law of the land, the explicit command of the Pharaoh, because the law was designed to break people. And not just any people. This law was designed to affect only immigrant aliens. People who had failed to melt sufficiently into the melting pot of Egypt's cultural imperialism. Perhaps these people had an accent? Perhaps they were valued for their ethnic food and hated for their ethnicity? At any rate, they were seen as *different*. In Genesis 47, we read that Joseph's Pharaoh, years before, had inquired after their occupation and learned that they were the kind of people who live with animals(!). He had then suggested that they make themselves useful by caring for his livestock. He did not suggest that they live in the villages of ethnic Egyptians. He suggested rural segregation. By the time the book of Exodus opens, the Hebrews were needed for backbreaking and dirty jobs that Egyptians didn't feel "called" to do. It appears that Egyptians had life-enhancing vocations, or "callings," while Hebrews had life-shortening *jobs*. This arrangement is commonly referred to as "civilization." Cultures that do not grind up the poor in order to produce the fine flour of leisure for the rich are thought of as backwards and "underdeveloped" cultures. Insufficient grinding of the peasants results in insufficient leisure for the pursuit of the arts: the art of ostentatious architecture, the art of preemptive war.

Egypt was certainly not underdeveloped at this time, and the Pharaoh of Exodus 1 understood the economics of civilization. Perhaps he even wanted to MEGA, "Make Egypt Great Again!" At any rate, he felt that Egypt's greatness would be lost if its immigrant community were allowed to prosper. And therefore, he did his best to make the Egyptian dream a Hebrew nightmare (review verses 8 – 14). One commentator says that "Pharaoh's paranoia is ludicrous, yet sinister. Demagogues often credit weak minorities with vast powers."¹ Ancient Egyptian sources indicate that the Pharaohs tried to maintain tight control over immigration and emigration.²

The Jewish scholar Nahum Sarna says that in verse 15, the Hebrew text can be legitimately read either as "Hebrew midwives" or as "midwives to the Hebrews." So, who are the midwives? The Greek translation of Hebrew scriptures, the Septuagint, presents them as Egyptians. So does the First Century historian Josephus. As Egyptians, they demonstrated that God could protect God's people by employing

¹ William H.C. Propp, Anchor Bible: Exodus 1-18, Doubleday, 1999, page 131.

² *Ibid.*

God-fearing neighbors. Most rabbinic Jews of later centuries, though, thought of them as Hebrews. As Hebrews, they could be revered as national heroes of liberation. I tend to think of them as being Egyptian, myself, as the Pharaoh assumed they could be counted on to defend civilization against its underlings. But, at any rate, their courage is more important than their background.

Long before Moses and Aaron stood in Pharaoh's court to plead the cause of the Hebrews, these women were summoned there to explain why they had treasonously jeopardized Homeland Security. Womanist theologian Renita Weems points out that "The Egyptians assume that the Hebrews are different from themselves and as such are to be dreaded. That same assumption of difference allows the Pharaoh to believe the midwives' report."³ Verse 7 said that the Hebrews "swarmed and multiplied." From the Torah's perspective, this is a straightforward obedience to the command to "be fruitful and multiply," found in Genesis 1:28. From the perspective of Egyptian civilization, Pharaoh's cultural imperialism, this marked the Israelites as a lower class of humans, one degree closer to the animals they lived with. As Weems recognizes, the midwives were quite familiar with this profound prejudice. And they took advantage of it. A more complete rendering of the phrase "they are vigorous" in verse 19 includes the connotation that "they are like animals" in their ability to give birth rapidly. Weems does not find this at all plausible biologically,⁴ but helps us to see how brilliant it is rhetorically. The midwives' claim about the Hebrew birthing process saved the lives of countless babies only because it precisely matched the Pharaoh's racism. I agree with Weems' argument here and would only add that I am suspicious that Pharaoh was sure that he was not a racist. I suspect that he was just a champion of "Egyptian Family Values." Weems concludes that "For his fear, the Pharaoh is outwitted. For their fears, the midwives are rewarded."⁵

In verse 17 the midwives are said to be motivated by fear of the Deity (*Elohim*, in Hebrew) to compromise Pharaoh's sense of national security by giving illegal sanctuary to the offspring of immigrants. Weems does not investigate the nature of this fear, but feminist scholar Esther Schor takes a closer look at it. She reads the double mention of this fear of God in verses 17 and 21 as the narrator's subtle way of calling to mind the story of the *Akedah*, Abraham's binding of Isaac. In Genesis 22:12, an angel tells Abraham not to sacrifice Isaac because "now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." Esther Schor says "In Exodus 1:17, however, the narrator detects the fear of God in the midwives' *refusal to sacrifice* the sons of Israel on the . . . altar of the

³ Renita Weems, "The Hebrew Women Are Not Like the Egyptian Women: The Ideology of Race, Gender and Sexual Reproduction in Exodus 1," *Semeia*, 1992, Volume 59:25-34, page 30.

⁴ Weems, page 33.

⁵ Weems, page 30.

birthstool. This initial echo of the akedah can only be ironic, for it demands that we contrast the midwives' act of refusal with that of Abraham's acquiescence. The midwives' 'fear' in Exodus 1:17 is laced with contempt, for it discerns in the Pharaoh's grim request a shadow cast by God's own testing of Abraham. The midwives' 'fear,' then, is not 'of God' generally, but specifically of the fierce God of the akedah story, a God who would test a parent's faith with a fearful demand to sacrifice a child. At a risk clearly more dire than that which faced Abraham, the midwives decide to 'let the boys live' . . . [still quoting from Esther Schor] . . . As we return to the second iteration of 'fear' [in Exodus 1:21], both repetition and difference can be unriddled as revision. For with the repetition of 'fear,' the narrator audaciously wills God to approve and sanction the midwives' act. Using the only leverage possible over God – narrative itself – the narrator has God ratify [the narrator's] own revisionary theology."⁶

Now I know that quote is quite a mouthful. Schor cooked it up while at Princeton University and I'm afraid that she didn't serve it in what can be called "bite size pieces." So, I didn't read it presuming that you would digest it all immediately. I may have only understood crumbs of it myself. But here's some of what I tasted when I chewed on that exegetical mouthful. I tasted some of the same food for thought, or, food for thought and courage, that I tasted when a few years ago here at CMCL, Pastor Susan dramatically ended a sermon on the near sacrifice of Isaac, the so-called Akedah, by saying something that I recall sounding like this: She warned us that there may be points of decision in our lives when we feel such immense pressure from inside and outside to do a particular thing, that we equate that pressure with the voice of God. And in that moment, she said, when we are sure that God is requiring some awful thing of us, we must have the courage, unlike Abraham, to say NO.

That sermon ending has given me much food for thought and courage in the years since then. Because, you see, like Pastor Susan and the midwives to the Hebrews, I grew up in a culture whose center of gravity is the image of a He-God. We all live in a world held together by human reverence for violent power. Whoever monopolizes power is called a "sovereign." Whatever the sovereign says is called "law." Acts of mercy that violate the security of the sovereign state are called "illegal." We are convinced that the sovereign is sovereign because we believe God put him in office. We think God is sovereign because "He" has the power of death at his disposal. In my teens, I learned that feminists call this human reverence for deadly power "patriarchy." I thought that feminists were merely irreverent. I

⁶ Esther Schor, "Saviors and Liars: The Midwives of Exodus 1," pages 21-45 in *From the Margins 1: Women of the Hebrew Bible and Their Afterlives*, edited by Hawkins and Stahlberg, Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009, page 41.

didn't call it "patriarchy." I feared God as much as I could. I was genuinely afraid of God. I didn't call it a cultural system of patriarchy, I called it "reality."

If I am to have any chance to escape the soul-crippling fear of a Nobodaddy in the sky, who somehow sovereignly wills all the horrors that happen in the world, all the decrees of all the American Pharaohs, I desperately need to have women pastors in my life. Because, you see, unlike Pastor Susan and the midwives, I have not been told by my culture since I was a toddler that the Deity's *godness* is gendered opposite from my gender. I have, instead, been told that my *goodness* is analogous to "His" *godness*. Women, on the other hand, regardless of how careful their own woman-affirming parents may be, are told loudly and harshly by society at large that *their* goodness is feminine, and that it has no business challenging or critiquing the godlike masculine goodnesses of economic dominance, ecological predation, and legalized violence. When I exercise my white male privilege to advance past others, I am perpetuating a system that I was led to believe was designed by God. Oppressed women,⁷ by contrast, have only to stand in their strength, in their god-given goodness, and they are in immediate violation of the moral order of a patriarchal society where things like compassion for foreign babies must not be allowed to make the economy burp or hiccup. He-god himself is with us, we men frequently believe, and we can only afford to help other unfortunates after we have violently secured our own financial and military dominance at the expense of foreign competitors.

Don't misunderstand me. Women are not automatically heroes. Most women find it easier to rent a space in a patriarchal society and to play out the roles that are scripted for them than to own their own space outside of the spirituality of fear and to discover unscripted roles. Nobody likes to be called a witch or an Anabaptist (and those two were burned at Christian stakes for similar reasons, at some points in history). Don't misunderstand me. Men are not automatically villains. But we men often find it very difficult to detect the inhumane character of the violent scripts we are given because we equate our kind of power, the power of ownership and coercion of others, with God's kind of power. For as long as we think that God is a benevolent dictator, we feel sure that our own church and family dictatorships are benevolent.

To keep my soul humane, and not crippled by reverence for an inhumane god (if I am in a theistic mode) or by reverence for a nonhuman overlord like "technological progress" or "civilization" (if

⁷ It is important to notice that not all women are equally oppressed, and that many are highly accomplished oppressors themselves. All humans live at the intersections of various forms of psychological, economic, and other oppressions. No party is innocent. But this reality should not be allowed to throw shade on the pervasiveness of male privilege funded by a culture of androcentric assumptions.

I were in an atheist mode) I need to keep coming back to teachers like Esther Schor and Susan Gascho-Cooke. Not because their gender gives them some moral high ground or spiritual superiority over me. But because it gives them what is called “critical distance” from many of the ideas that I call “reality.”

When I benefit from oppression, it doesn't feel oppressive at all to me. When others say “ouch,” I say “Huh, that's funny! I didn't feel anything.” If it's my brother-in-law saying “ouch” because he hit his thumb with a hammer while nailing shingles to a roof, I can see the hammer. And I can say, “Oh, now I see why he's in pain. He hit himself with a hammer.” It doesn't cost me anything to acknowledge that reality, even if I can't feel the pain of it. But when a transgendered friend or a person of color says “ouch” when my everyday way of “just being me” hurts them, it is more costly for me to acknowledge that reality. To do so, I have to change how I think about who I am and about how I benefit from distorted social power. It's much easier for me to say things like “Awww, why doesn't she stop hitting herself with an imaginary hammer?” Or, “He should just try harder to find a better job.” Or, “She should just keep wearing dresses! I don't understand why *those kinds of people* keep complaining about false problems that don't really exist and making up stories about phantom pain! I think they are out to threaten my way of life!” And I do not experience these cruel reactions of mine as racism or any similar prejudice. Oh no! I was raised to renounce racism and prejudice! But I have learned, by growing up as a conservative Christian in America's culture wars, to practice this sort of scornful insulation of my privilege from other people's pain. Disciplined practice in this kind of scorn is the only hope White America has of maintaining what we choose to call “Biblical Family Values.”

So, in order to stop harming others by living out my inherited “values,” I need to listen to others. Not because they are better than I am, but because I can become fully human only by renouncing the dehumanizing scorn that animates my soul in ways I am not yet even aware of. In this connection, another mouthful that I keep chewing over was dished up by Muriel Rukeyser some years ago: “What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open.”

Romans 12 tells us not to be conformed to this world. I think this will still be a relevant text in a post-theistic society, if that ever arrives. Most atheists and theists have this in common: they consider power to be the source of authority. Whether they use religious words like God and Providence, or secular words like Reason, Civilization, or “Being On the Right Side of History,” most humans are still drowning in soul-deep awe of Deadly Power. And whosoever has the power to do the most harm is said to have “authority.” Be not conformed to this kind of a world, folks! But be ye transformed by the reformatting of your minds. Feel with the children, cry with the babies, and be as resourceful as those midwives. No rationale, secular or sacred, has the authority to command you to diminish your own or

another's life. Life has her own authority. There is no He-God behind the stage pulling the strings to control her. Stand in your strength, not your fear.

If I were in a position analogous to those midwives today, if I were told by a corporate overlord to make a few clicks on a computer screen to direct funds away from lifesaving medical research and toward securing the retirement pensions of all us employees instead, would I have the ability to detect *false* authority when I hear it? Is my conscience so securely tied around the equation of power with authority that I would not recognize the *genuine* authority of the sick and dying over my financial health?

Elites have the leisure to debate little questions like "Does God exist?" But the people who are actually nurturing the world and bearing the weight of its pain are often too busy with actually *being* God to their neighbors to be able to find enough leisure time to authorize their healing work with sophisticated theology or with secular theory.

Prime Ministers and Presidents, both women and men, feel called, as we say it, to "play God," deciding, each month, each year, each electoral cycle, which sectors of humanity to sacrifice for the economic appetite of others. But God herself has never "played God" in this way and has no sense of membership or privilege in such a world. God is present, instead, with the witches and heretics at the margins of humanity. God lives in the stressed-out bureaucrats who choose with the ancient midwives to break laws rather than to break people.

There will be no thunderous voice from the sky applauding you when you choose mercy over sacrifice in your decisions and your friendships, this week, my friends. Nor any soul-soothing secular theory that can justify every anguished choice you make. Life has her own authority.