

Puah

Scripture Reference: Exodus 1:15

Name Meaning: Child bearing or joy of parents.

Alarmed over the rapid increase of the population of Israelites in Egypt, Pharaoh ordered two Egyptian midwives to destroy all male children as soon as they were born (Exodus 1:15-20). He would never have employed Hebrew women to destroy the males of their own nation. The answer of the two named midwives, Puah and Shiprah, to Pharaoh's anger when he discovered that his cruel edict was not being carried out, implies that they were used to wait upon Egyptian women who only employed them in difficulty at childbirth (Exodus 1:19). Hebrew women seldom employed midwives for they were more "lively," or had far easier births than the Egyptians. Puah and Shiprah are Egyptian names. Aben Ezra, the ancient Jewish historian, says that these two women "were chiefs over all the midwives, who were more than 500." As superintendents of such a large staff to which they had been appointed by the Egyptian government, Pharaoh ordered them to carry out his terrible command just as he would give orders to any other of his officials. As it is likely that only the chief Hebrews could afford the service of midwives, probably the order of Pharaoh only applied to them. Although Egyptians by birth, it would seem as if they had embraced the Hebrew faith, for we are told that Puah and Shiprah "feared God" (Exodus 1:21).

Receiving the royal command to commit murder, these two loyal, vigorous, middleaged women were caught between two fires. Whom should they obey? The God of the Hebrews in whom they had come to believe, or the tyrannical king of Egypt? True to their conscience and honored calling they knew it would conflict with the divine command to kill, and so "saved the men children alive." Thus, they obeyed God rather than man, and in so doing brought upon their heads the rage of Pharaoh. Confronting his anger, Puah and Shiprah took refuge in a partial truth. They said that because Jewish women had easy deliveries, their children were born before they could reach them and assist the mothers in labor.

Cognizant as He was of the partial truth the two midwives told, God knew all about the crisis behind it, and commended Puah and Shiprah for their courage of faith. They had risked their lives for many Jewish infants. Such an act was meritorious in the eyes of the Lord, and He honorably rewarded them by building them houses.

Fausset suggests that the nature of such a reward consisted in the two midwives marrying Hebrews and becoming mothers in Israel (2 Samuel 7:11, 27). Puah and Shiprah are striking witnesses against the scandalous practice of abortion, which several nations have legalized.