

Violence and Civil Disobedience: Exodus 1

Introduction

In this module, we explore a passage from the Hebrew Bible in which “fear of God” leads some people to disobey violent orders.

Orientation to the Text

The book of Exodus is the second book of the Hebrew Bible, and continues a story that began in the book of Genesis. At the end of Genesis, the children of a man named Jacob come to dwell in the land of Egypt, traveling there as refugees to escape a famine in the land of Canaan. Jacob is also called “Israel” in the story, and his descendants are referred to as “the children of Israel” or “Israelites.” Sometimes the same people are also called “Hebrews” in the story.

At the beginning of Exodus, the narrator says that the Israelites have been dwelling freely in Egypt for a long time – particularly in a region known as Goshen – and have had children and multiplied in number, so that “the land was filled with them.”

As our passage begins, a new king of Egypt – or “Pharaoh” – has just come to power. A previous king of Egypt had welcomed the Israelites, but the new king takes a different attitude toward them. (Note: The king of Egypt is not an Israelite, and is not a worshipper of Israel’s God.)

Getting Familiar with the Text

Read the passage from Exodus printed on the next page. As you read, answer the following questions, which are designed to help you get familiar with the contents of the text.

1. According to the passage, why are the king of Egypt and other Egyptians concerned about the Israelites? What do the king and other Egyptians do as a result?
2. According to verse 17, why don’t the midwives carry out the king’s order? How does this differ from the explanation the midwives give the king in verse 19?

Exodus 1:8-22 (translation: New Revised Standard Version)

⁸ A new king arose over Egypt... 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.

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.”

Digging Deeper

After discussing questions 1-2 above, take some time to reflect more broadly on the following issues:

3. How do you feel about the explanation the midwives give the king in verse 19?
4. Why might a king in this situation order only Israelite *boys* to be killed, while allowing Israelite *girls* to live?
5. From the king’s perspective, the Israelites seem to represent a threat – threatening his ability to keep the country safe and secure. From the point of view of the Egyptians, could one argue that the midwives are “endangering public safety” by not obeying the king’s orders?
6. There are various ways one could read the king’s command to kill the Israelite boys. Is the main motivation for the command arbitrary hatred and prejudice against the Israelite refugees? Or is the king sincerely concerned about what will happen if Egypt is attacked by an invading army, and taking strategic steps to protect Egypt’s interests – just as many other rulers have done over the course of history? How would it affect your view of the passage to read it in these two different ways?

7. In what sorts of circumstances do you think it is appropriate or good for people who “fear God” to disobey rules set by their government?

Further Reading and Watching

- A contemporary reflection on the story of the midwives: Jonathan Sacks (2015), “On Not Obeying Immoral Orders,” 6 January [online]. Available at: rab-bisacks.org/obeying-immoral-orders-shemot-5775.
- Martin Luther King, Jr. talked about civil disobedience and just vs. unjust laws on *Meet the Press* on 28 March 1965. A video is available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAtsAwGreyE&t=547s.
- One of the most famous and earliest reflections on civil disobedience is Henry David Thoreau (1849), “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience.” Available at: www.gutenberg.org/files/71/71-h/71-h.htm.

Summary of Key Takeaways

- The book of Exodus includes a story in which midwives disobey orders from the king of Egypt to kill Israelite boys, because they “fear God.”
- Groups of refugee or immigrant heritage are sometimes seen or described as posing a threat to society, and treated harshly.
- Refusing to act in violent or oppressive ways against certain people may be viewed in some contexts as endangering the safety and security of others.
- Refusing on religious grounds to participate in violence can be socially controversial.
- In some contexts, people choose not to explain their real reasons for failing to follow commands.