

# *Women in Scripture*



*A Dictionary of  
Named and Unnamed Women in the  
Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books,  
and the New Testament*



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her husband were obviously people of relatively comfortable means; they were independent artisans, able to move frequently, and owned houses large enough to accommodate modest congregations.

Paul's comments in his letter to Rome reveal more about Prisca's work for the church. Prisca is mentioned before her husband, though both are described as his coworkers, a term Paul uses for associates actively engaged with him in missionary work (Rom 16:9, 21 — Urbanus and Timothy; 1 Cor 3:9 — Apollos; 2 Cor 8:23 — Titus; Phil 2:25 — Epaphroditus; 4:2-3 — Euodia, Syntyche, and Clement; 1 Thess 3:2 — Timothy; Philm v. 1 — Philenon, v. 24 — Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke). He also asserts that they both "risked their necks for my life" (Rom 16:4), an indication that they acted as patrons or benefactors of Paul at some point (perhaps in Ephesus; see 1 Cor 15:32), using their wealth and status — at some personal risk — to gain protection for the apostle when his life was endangered. He gives thanks to them for their work and affirms that "all the churches of the Gentiles" (Rom 16:4) join him in this. Though perhaps an exaggeration, these words indicate how widespread Prisca's influence was — whether through her missionary preaching, her generous patronage, or other forms of support.

Acts reports that Apollos, an early missionary remembered for his powerful and eloquent speech (Acts 18:24-28) and for his work in Corinth (1 Corinthians 3-4), received much of his instruction about Christ from Prisca and Aquila — and again Prisca is given prominence by being listed first. This account is not entirely reliable, but it does reflect an enduring memory in the early church that Prisca was an authoritative teacher who not only performed missionary work herself, but also helped train others.

Missionary couples were apparently relatively common in early churches (1 Cor 9:5), and our sources suggest that Prisca and Aquila were prominent among them. Moreover, they suggest that Prisca was the leader of the pair. Her work would have involved preaching, teaching, presiding over the church in her house, and serving as patron to

other believers. According to one legend, the fourth-century church, Saint Prisca, on the Aventine Hill in Rome was built on the site of her house church. It has also been suggested that Prisca was the author of the anonymous letter to the Hebrews. These legends cannot be confirmed, but they attest to the power of her memory in the early church.

JOUETTE M. BASSLER

SEE ALSO Part I: Phoebe.  
FOR FURTHER READING: D'Angelo, Mary Rose. "Hebrews."

Lampe, Peter. "Prisca."  
Richter Reimer, Ivoni. *Women in the Acts of the Apostles: A Feminist Liberation Perspective*.  
Schlesier Florenza, Elisabeth. "Missionaries, Apostles, Coworkers: Romans 16 and the Reconstruction of Women's Early Christian History."

## Puah

"girl" or "shining one" from Hebrew *py*, "to shine"; or "speaker" from Hebrew *ph*, "to cry out" (Exod 1:15-21)

The first chapter of Exodus relates that, as the Israelites in Egypt begin to proliferate following the death of Joseph, the Egyptian king seeks to curb the Israelite population lest its numbers threaten the security of Egypt in time of war. When enslavement of the Israelites fails to achieve Pharaoh's goal, he commands the Hebrew midwives, of whom only two are known by name — Shiphrāh and Puah — to kill at birth all the male Hebrews, but to permit the females to live. Since, however, the midwives stand in awe of God, they violate Pharaoh's command and permit the boys to live.

Called to account for failing to carry out Pharaoh's order, they report that the Hebrew women are more "vigorous" than Egyptian women and tend to deliver their babies before the arrival of the midwife. Convinced by the midwives' explanation, Pharaoh does not punish them. Their explanation is probably accepted because of a universal human tendency to dehumanize victims — especially

women — as a prelude to depriving them of basic civil rights, their reproductive freedom, their progeny, and ultimately their very lives.

The identity of the midwives is somewhat ambiguous. The Hebrew text of Exod 1:15 supports either the view that Puah and Shiphrath were "Hebrew midwives" or the view that they were "midwives to the Hebrews." The former is more likely because both names are Semitic, not Egyptian. Ancient Jewish commentators vary widely in their understanding of who these women were; some even propose that Puah was Moses' sister Miriam, and others suggest they were proselytes.

Whatever their identity, the fact that they are rewarded with progeny indicates that they may have been barren and especially that they were young enough to begin a family. The latter piece of information contests the supposition by some that midwives were typically older, perhaps post-menopausal, women. Such was indeed the case in ancient Greece — Athenian law specified that a midwife had to have herself given birth and be past childbearing age — but not everywhere in the ancient world.

Modern commentators have wondered how two midwives could have served a whole community, even if the figure of 600,000 people (given in Num 1:46) is not taken literally. The obvious answer is that the text does not claim that Shiphrath and Puah were the only midwives to serve the Hebrews, but rather were two among many. Why then were they singled out? The tale implies that they are mentioned because of their virtue in fearing God more than they feared Pharaoh. In the Hebrew Bible, the phrase "fear God" can mean "obey God's ethical imperatives" (see Lev 19:14; Job 28:28). It is noteworthy that Exod 1:1-2, in its highly schematic survey of Hebrew history from the descent of Jacob into Egypt until the birth of Moses, mentions by name only the midwives Shiphrath and Puah. The crucial role of the midwives in subverting Pharaoh's decree is, perhaps, reflected in the Talmudic attribution of the redemption from Egypt to the merit of the virtuous women of that generation.

It is not clear whether Shiphrath and Puah

worked together or alone. Ancient Egyptian pictorial art depicts midwives working in teams. Yet the other explicit biblical references to members of this profession (Gen 35:17; 38:28) each mention a single midwife.

The Hebrew term for "birth stool" in Exod 1:16, *ḥḥayim*, means literally "two stones." It refers to the primitive form of the birth stool, which was simply two bricks (or stones) placed under each of the buttocks of the woman in labor. Such birth stools are depicted in the later forms of the hieroglyphic symbol for "birth" and are referred to in ancient Egyptian folk sayings, such as "He left me like a woman on the bricks." Ancient Egyptian pictorial art shows that the two bricks were replaced by a chair with an opening in the middle (like a toilet seat) through which, with the help of gravity, the mother could push out her baby into the deft hands of the midwives.

MAYER I. GUBER

SEE ALSO Part I: Shiphrath; Part II: Midwife (Gen 35:17 etc.); Hebrew Women in Egypt (Exod 1:19, etc.)

FOR FURTHER READING: Exum, J. Cheryl. "Second Thoughts about Secondary Characters: Women in Exodus 1:8-2:10."

— "You Shall Let Every Daughter Live": A Study of Exodus 1:8-2:10.

Ghalounghi, Paul. *The House of Life*.

Paul, Shalom M. "Exodus 12: 'To Found a Family,' a Biblical and Akkadian Idiom."

## Rachel

"ewe," from Hebrew *rahēl*, "ewe"

RACHEL IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

(Gen 29-31; 35:35-46:21, 24-25; 46:19, 22, 25; 48:7;

Ruth 4:11; 1 Sam 10:2; Jer 31:12-21)

The younger daughter of Laban and wife of Jacob, Rachel is the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, who become two of the twelve tribes of Israel (Gen 35:24; 46:15-18). Her maid Bilhah is ancestor of two more (Gen 35:25; 46:23-24).

When Jacob goes to Mesopotamia to find a wife from his mother's family (the line of Terah), he

## Shemamah

Shemamah SEE Shemamah/Desolate, Jerusalem (Part III).

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of Shimeath and Shimrih may, then, reflect Chron-  
icles' mixed review of Joash's reign.

SEE ALSO Part II: Daughters of Lot (Gen 19:8, etc.);  
Daughters of Judah and Foreign Daughters/Wives  
(Ezra 9:2, etc.).  
CLAUDIA V. CAMP

## Shimeath/Shomer/Shimrih

meaning of Shimeath uncertain, perhaps from Hebrew *shm*, "to hear"

(2 Kgs 12:21; 2 Chr 24:26)

The two assassins (Jozacar and Jehozabad) of the  
Judean king Joash (c. 800 B.C.E.) are identified in  
the narratives of Kings and Chronicles by parental  
names as well as by their own. In 2 Kings, the male  
parent seems to be named. The parent of Jozacar  
(Zabad in 2 Chronicles) is called Shimeath, which is  
grammatically feminine, although such a construc-  
tion in a man's name is not unknown (compare  
Goliath). Shomer, the designation of Jehozabad's  
parent in 2 Kings, is a masculine form. In 2 Chron-  
icles, however, Shomer is changed to (the feminine)  
Shimrih. Also in Chronicles, nationalities are as-  
signed to the two women in feminine construc-  
tions: Shimeath is an Ammonitess and Shimrih is a  
Moabite. The possible fathers have become cer-  
tain mothers, and foreign ones at that! But why?

Strange women usually signify danger, espe-  
cially of apostasy, and Ezra 9:1, a likely source for  
the author of Chronicles, identifies Ammonites and  
Moabites among the foreign wives who must be  
divorced by the men of Ezra's community. This  
could, then, be a polemic against relationships with  
foreigners, especially women: only men of mixed  
ancestry would murder a king! On the other hand,  
2 Chr 24:25 states that King Joash was killed be-  
cause he ordered the murder of the son of the good  
priest Jehoiada (and this after beginning idol wor-  
ship himself). Moral evaluation is thus ambiguous  
at best; an ambiguity mirrored by the status of Am-  
monites and Moabites vis-à-vis Israel: excluded  
from "the assembly of the Lord" (Deut 23:3; but  
note the murderers' loyalty to the priestly family in  
2 Chr 24:25), they are also recognized as kin of Israel  
through the dubious ancestry of Lot's intercourse  
with his daughters (Lot is Abraham's nephew) (Gen  
19:30-38). This symbolically intermediary position

## Shiphrah

"beauty," from common Semitic root *špr*, "to be  
fair"

(Exod 1:15)

Shiphrah is one of the two named midwives who  
serve the Hebrew women in Egypt and who contra-  
vene Pharaoh's order to kill at birth all Hebrew  
males. The feminine proper name Shiphrah is also  
attested as the name of an Asiatic slave woman in  
an eighteenth-century B.C.E. papyrus from Egypt.

MAYEN I. GRUBER

SEE ALSO Part I: Puah; Part II: Midwife (Gen 35:17, etc.).  
FOR FURTHER READING: Albright, W. F. "Northwest-  
Semitic Names in a List of Egyptian Slaves from the  
18th Century B.C."

## Shomer

"guardian, steward," from Hebrew *šmr*, "to guard,  
keep"; masculine form of Shimrih

SEE Shimeath/Shomer/Shimrih (Part I).

## Shua

"independent, noble," from Hebrew *šūa*, "free"  
(1 Chr 7:32)

Shua is the daughter of Heber, who was a grandson  
of Asher, according to the genealogy in Chronicles.  
Heber fathered sons, Shua's brothers: Japhlet,  
Shomer, and Hotham. The biblical text records the  
descendants of the three sons but omits informa-

that the ancestor Jacob had more daughters in addition to his twelve or more sons (see Gen 46:5). All these children attempt to console him when he receives news suggesting that his preferred son, Joseph, is dead. The inclusion of daughters as well as sons in this glimpse of family sorrow preserves the notion of mourning as an occasion affecting all family members. At the same time, it may reflect the special role of women in funeral customs.

CAROL MEYERS

SEE ALSO Part II: Weeping Daughters (2 Sam 124); Mourning Women (Jer 9:17-22, etc.).

### GEN 38:2-5 Wife of Judah

SEE Bath-shua 1 (Part I).

### GEN 38:11 Tamar as a Widow

SEE Exod 22:22, etc. Widows (Part II).

### GEN 38:12 Wife of Judah

SEE Bath-shua 1 (Part I).

### GEN 38:15 Prostitute

SEE Lev 19:29, etc. Prostitute (Part II).

### GEN 38:21 Temple Prostitute

SEE Deut 23:17-18, etc. Temple Prostitute (Part II).

### GEN 38:22 Prostitute

SEE Lev 19:29, etc. Prostitute (Part II).

### GEN 38:28 Midwife

SEE Gen 35:17, etc. Midwife (Part II).

## GENESIS 39

### Wife of Potiphar

The attempted seduction by Potiphar's wife of her husband's Hebrew slave Joseph presents a theme common in narratives from the ancient eastern Mediterranean world: a powerful woman attempts to seduce a virtle young male. Joseph's response

highlights his ethical behavior and devotion to his deity. An Egyptian parallel appears in the first part of the XIX dynasty "Tale of Two Brothers," and other ancient Near Eastern parallels may be found in the Canaanite tale of Aqhat and in Ishar's attempt to marry Gilgamesh. Although the narrative threads of these tales are similar, once placed in context, each carries its own set of meanings (the Egyptian is patently multivalent).

Discussions of the Potiphar's wife episode generally revolve around the foreign woman and her evil actions, but in fact, she is pivotal — as the story is transmitted — to the survival of the Hebrews in a time of famine. As a result of her (mis)actions, Joseph demonstrates his loyalty to his god and the moral precepts of behavior inherent within those beliefs. Her behavior ultimately brings him to the notice of Pharaoh and a position of high authority through which he organizes food supplies in Egypt, the bread basket of the ancient world (compare Gen 12:10). Despite her attempt at seduction, this woman fills a positive narrative role; she initiates the story line that will bring the Hebrews to Egypt, thus setting the stage for the exodus — perhaps the most important event related in the Hebrew Bible.

Susan Tower Houtis

FOR FURTHER READING: Hollis, Susan Tower. *The Ancient Egyptian "Tale of Two Brothers": The Oldest Fairy Tale in the World*.

———. "The Woman in Ancient Examples of the Potiphar's Wife Motif, Kanu."

## GEN 46:7, 15

### Daughters and Granddaughters of Jacob

When Jacob leaves the land of Canaan to be reunited with his son Joseph, he takes his entire family with him, including his unnamed daughters and his unnamed granddaughters.

The mention of his female descendants anticipates the growth of the Israelites in Egypt (Exod 1:7) as well as the role of daughters in the continuation

of the prenatal Israelite story at the beginning of Exodus.

NAOMI STEINBERG

SEE ALSO Part II: Hebrew Female Babies in Egypt (Exod 1:16, etc.); Hebrew Women in Egypt (Exod 1:19, etc.).

#### GEN 46:10

### Cananite Mother of Shaul

The list of individuals who traveled to Egypt with Jacob is arranged according to the wives of Jacob. In the portion of the list of Leah's sons, there is mention of a Canaanite woman who bore a son named Shaul to Simeon. The same information is repeated in Exod 6:15. The lowly status of the tribe of Simeon, later to be absorbed into Judah, may reflect the fact that Simeon married a woman from outside the patrilineage descended from Terah.

NAOMI STEINBERG

#### GEN 46:15 Daughters of Jacob

SEE GEN 46:7, etc. Daughters and Granddaughters of Jacob (Part II).

#### EXOD 1:16, 22

### Hebrew Female Babies in Egypt

Apparently concerned with the burgeoning population of Hebrews in Egypt, Pharaoh issues an edict calling on the Hebrew midwives to kill male newborns but to let female infants live. This directive hardly makes sense historically: why would a king intent on using Hebrew laborers want to cut off his supply? On a literary level, however, it serves several purposes. It echoes the theme of males representing death and females representing life that is presented in the tale of Abraham and Sarah in Egypt (Gen 12:12 has Abraham say that the Egyptians will kill him but let Sarah live), thus providing continuity between the ancestral narratives of Genesis and the

deliverance tale in Exodus. The death of Hebrew male children also foreshadows the death of all Egyptian firstborns (Exod 11:5).

In addition, this directive positions the midwives as heroic figures who defy the king's edict; those who assist in bringing living beings into the world intensify that role by allowing the condemned male infants to live (Exod 2:17–18). Furthermore, God rewards the brave midwives with "houses" (probably large families), a word that in Hebrew is a pun on the word for "girl" (Hebrew "daughter") in Exod 1:16 and 22. The midwives are the first two in a series of twelve women who figure prominently in Exodus 1–2, allowing the twelve sons (that is, the twelve tribes) to survive.

CAROL MEYERS

SEE ALSO Part I: Leah; Shiphrah; Part II: Seven Daughters of the Priest of Midian (Exod 2:16–20).

FOR FURTHER READING: Siebert-Hommes, Jopie.

"But If She Be a Daughter . . . She May Live! Daughters' and 'Sons' in Exodus 1–2"

#### EXOD 1:19; 2:7

### Hebrew Women in Egypt

Two references to women at the beginning of the story of the exodus focus on aspects of childbirth and lactation. Women are prominent in this narrative—as givers of life. They perhaps prefigure the "birth" of Israel in the story that follows.

In his attempt to curb the growth of the Hebrew population, Pharaoh commands the midwives to kill at birth every boy, but to let the girls live. When the midwives are called to account for their failure to carry out the royal edict, they explain that the Hebrew women are "vigorous" (from the word *hayot*; Exod 1:19). This term is related to the word for "animal" and may suggest that Hebrew women gave birth with ease.

Regardless of the precise meaning of the adjective or noun in question, virtually all interpreters agree that the midwives' claim that Hebrew women typically give birth before the arrival of the midwife

is a means to avoid infanticide out of obedience to God and also to avoid incurring Pharaoh's wrath by putting the blame on the Hebrew women. In both cases, the women outsmart the authorities and contribute to the survival of their people.

The biological functions of the Hebrew women come to the fore again in the next sequence. Exod 2:4-8 reports that when Pharaoh's daughter discovers the infant Moses in a basket along the riverbank and identifies him as a Hebrew child, the baby's older sister offers to find a wet nurse from among the Hebrew women. The wet nurse provided by the cunning sister is none other than Moses' natural mother, who succeeds by this ruse not only in saving the life of the eventual liberator of the Hebrews, but also in getting the foolish Egyptian princess to pay Moses' mother, Jochebed, a wet nurse's wages. Again, women, representing all Hebrews held in servitude in Egypt, take part in a scheme to subvert authority and outwit the Pharaonic establishment, thus ensuring the survival and health of their future leader.

It is taken for granted by all the characters in the narrative of Exod 2:6-9 that, even when enslaved, the Hebrew women in Egypt continued to employ wet nurses. This rare use of wet nurses is a possible explanation for the unusual growth of the Israelite population, the supposed threat to Egyptian security that prompted Pharaoh to enslave the Hebrews (Exod 1:7-11). Natural nursing on demand, without supplemental food or liquid and without the use of a pacifier, leads to suspension of ovulation for as long as ten or even fifteen months. This lactational ovulation can be more effective than all other forms of birth control in reducing population growth. On the other hand, women who hand over their infants to wet nurses may become pregnant as early as six weeks after delivery, thus giving birth to up to five times the number of children they would bear if they were nursing their offspring themselves.

MAYER I. GRUBER

SEE ALSO Part I: Deborah 1; Jochebed, Miriam 1; Puah; Shiphrah; Part II: Midwife (Gen 35:17, etc.); Hebrew Female Babies in Egypt (Exod 1:16, etc.).

FOR FURTHER READING: Exum, J. Cheryl, "Second

Thoughts about Secondary Characters: Women in Exodus 1:8-2:10."

——, "You Shall Let Every Daughter Live: A Study of Exodus 1:8-2:10."

Gruber, Mayer I. "Breast-Feeding Practices in Biblical Israel and in Old Babylonian Mesopotamia."

#### EXOD 1:22

#### Hebrew Female Babies in Egypt

SEE EXOD 1:16, etc. Hebrew Female Babies in Egypt (Part II).

#### EXOD 2:5

#### Attendants of the Daughter of Pharaoh

When the daughter of Pharaoh bathes in the Nile and finds a basket containing the infant Moses, she is accompanied by female "attendants," who walk along the river. The Hebrew word for these attendants is *nē'ārōt*, which can mean "young women" in general as well as "maidservants" or "attendants," especially those of royalty (as the maids of King David's wife Abigail and of Queen Esther). The women with Pharaoh's daughter are surely her servants; one of them — her "maid" (Hebrew *amāh*) — is sent to fetch the basket in which Moses has been hidden.

CAROL MEYERS

SEE ALSO Part II: Maids of Rebekah (Gen 24:61); Maids of Abigail (1 Sam 25:42); Maids of Esther (Esth 2:9, etc.).

#### EXOD 2:5-10

#### Daughter of Pharaoh

Moved by compassion, Pharaoh's daughter takes an infant, whom she recognizes as a Hebrew baby, out of the Nile, defying her father's command to throw male babies into the river. She readily embraces the idea of engaging a Hebrew nurse and keeping the

child as her own. Sometime after the weaning (usually about three years after birth), "she took him as her son" (v. 10), perhaps a reference to some form of adoption. The unnamed princess gives her son an Egyptian name that she explains in relation to a Hebrew word, *madā*, meaning "to draw out." The name Moses thus both recalls the princess's deed and anticipates Moses' future as the one who draws Israel out of bondage.

SEE ALSO Part II: Daughter of Pharaoh (1 Kgs 3:1, etc.).  
FOR FURTHER READING: Ackerman, James S. "The Literary Context of the Moses Birth Story (Exodus 1-2)."

Exum, J. Cheryl. *Plotted, Shown, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women*.

### EXOD 2:7 Hebrew Women in Egypt

SEE EXOD 1:9, etc. Hebrew Women in Egypt (Part II).

## EXOD 2:16-20 Seven Daughters of the Priest of Midian

After killing an Egyptian official, Moses flees to the land of Midian, the desert territory, inhabited by nomads, that lay south and east of the land of Canaan. Resting there at a well, he meets seven daughters of a Midianite priest and helps them by warding off some shepherds who were interfering with their task of watering their father's flocks. The daughters are instructed to bring Moses home for a meal, and one of them — Zipporah — marries Moses.

The motif of women at a well, known also from the story of Rebekah (Gen 24:11, 13) and from an incident in one of the narratives about Saul (1 Sam 9:11), is probably drawn from the fact that, in the division of labor by gender in ancient Semitic societies, unmarried daughters were responsible for

fetching water. Here the well scene introduces seven women, together with the two midwives of Exodus 1, Pharaoh's daughter of Exodus 2, Jochbed (Moses' mother), and Miriam (Moses' sister), they constitute twelve women who figure prominently in the opening chapters of Exodus. Moses is the major figure of the Exodus story, but he would not have been able to carry out his role without those twelve women. As a group, they save Moses, who in turn saves the twelve tribes. Furthermore, as members of a priestly family, the Midianite daughters contribute to Moses' pedigree of sanctity (his mother Jochbed is from the priestly tribe of Levi) when he marries one of them.

SEE ALSO Part I: Jochbed; Zipporah; Part II: Maidens Going Out to Draw Water (1 Sam 9:11).

FOR FURTHER READING: Siebert-Hommes, Jopie. "But If She Be a Daughter . . . She May Live! 'Daughters' and 'Sons' in Exodus 1-2"

## EXOD 3:22 Daughters (and Sons) of Israelites in Egypt

The Israelite women and men in Egypt are told to procure jewelry and clothing from their Egyptian neighbors in anticipation of the exodus, their departure from servitude. The valuables are not to be transported in packages or bundles, but rather to be worn by the daughters and sons of the Israelites (Exod 3:22) in keeping with the custom of transient people to carry valuables on their persons. Just as both women and men collect the items that will ultimately provide the materials for building the wilderness tabernacle (so Exod 11:2), both female and male children participate in preserving those items until the journey out of Egypt is complete and the time for constructing a cultic center has arrived.

CAROL MEYERS