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Lo and Behold! (SPCK 1991)

Speaking of God (Triangle/SPCK 1992)

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Unsung Heroines: The Women of Exodus 1-4

Anyone familiar with the Bible has heard of Sarah. A great many people not familiar with it have still heard of Eve. Admittedly, Hagar may not be so well known, though she has received a great deal of attention from scholars in recent years, and long ago became a favourite subject of painters and artists who chose to illustrate biblical scenes. Shiphrah, Puah, and Zipporah, however, have a very long way to go before they become household names! They are the subject of this chapter, along with the mother and sister of Moses, a pharaoh's daughter with her female attendants, and the other six daughters of a Midianite priest called Reuel or Jethro (Zipporah is the seventh and becomes Moses' wife). Here, for the first time, we will meet some true heroines.

Setting the scene

(Exod. 1.1-14)

The Book of Genesis ends most movingly with reunion and reconciliation. Joseph is reunited with his brothers and then with his father, and though the brothers' fear of him returns once Jacob is dead, it quickly evaporates as their own pleas for forgiveness and Joseph's magnanimity and wisdom together create reconciliation. As Joseph prepares to die at the close he declares a promise. The whole family are now in Egypt, but Joseph assures them: 'God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land

that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob' (Gen. 50.24). The Book of Exodus describes that coming of God.

It begins on what might seem an optimistic note. After rehearsing the names of Jacob's sons (there is no mention of his daughters, though we know he had some¹) and passing on beyond their generation, it continues with: 'the Israelites were fruitful, they swarmed, they multiplied and grew exceedingly powerful, so that the land was filled with them' (Exod. 1.7). This is Genesis language, the language of the promises, and even more conspicuously the language of creation. In Genesis 1 God said, 'Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures' (v. 20), and to the human-kind, created in his image and likeness, he said, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth' (v. 28). Later he promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in heaven (15.5; 22.17), as the particles of dust on the earth (13.16), or those of the sand on the seashore (22.17), and become a 'powerful' nation (18.18). All seems to be going according to plan. His promises, together with the bright designs of his creation are finding fulfilment. There is only one snag. The descendants of Abraham are in the wrong place. The land promised to them is Canaan, and they are in Egypt.

Genesis 1.28, after speaking of humanity being fruitful and multiplying and filling the earth, continued with the words, 'and subdue it; and have dominion . . .'. The word it used for 'earth' is the same as the one for 'land' in Exodus 1.7. When he first gave his promises to Abraham, God declared, 'I will make of you a great nation . . . and make your name great' (Gen. 12.2). The Hebrew terms employed there suggested an independent nation state, with its own monarchy of fine renown,² and they were later reinforced by God's prediction in Genesis 18.18 that Abraham would become 'a great and powerful nation'. In echoing these passages so deliberately the narrator of Exodus has struck a note to alarm the hearts of the Egyptians. Will these descendants of Jacob subdue *their* land and have dominion over *them*? Will they set up their own king and become an independent nation in their midst? These are the questions which the narrator has begged for them. Now that we hear them too, the paranoia of the pharaoh becomes more understandable.

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal wisely with them, or they will increase and, in the event of

war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.' (1.8-10)

This pharaoh does not know Joseph. That makes all the difference. He does not know the man who rescued his own people, the Egyptians, from famine.³ He does not know the one who, in fact, if Genesis is to be believed, brought back the whole earth from the brink of death through his wisdom, foresight and efficiency (Gen. 41.57 tells us that 'all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine became severe throughout the world'.) Thus he does not know of the one who averted the greatest crisis for the world of the Genesis narrative since the Flood, and brought some fulfilment at long last to God's promise to Abraham that through him all the families of the earth would find blessing. He does not know the one who, according to Genesis 47.13-26, established for him the basis of his enormous wealth and power. He is ignorant of the man who could perceive the purposes of God underlying the events in Egypt, and knew what was going on.⁴ Not knowing all this, he is terrified, and finds it impossible to keep things in perspective.

'Look,' he says, 'the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we.' Such is the paranoia of the dictator or the absolute monarch. His claim is absurd on both its counts. And yet - and here we see the playfulness of this storyteller - his fear that the Israelites might join his enemies and fight against him and escape from the land will be fulfilled. He has got just one thing wrong. He should have spoken of an enemy, not enemies. The one who will 'fight' against the Egyptians and who will engineer the Israelites' escape will not be a foreign invader, but God.⁵

His terror finds a ready outlet in violence and oppression. The stories of the first half of Exodus are a delicious mixture of the plausible and the implausible. The reports that appear from time to time in our newspapers and on our television screens mean that the pharaoh's ploy and his reasons for it ring bells whose sound is alarmingly familiar. The Israelites are too numerous and their loyalty to the state cannot be counted upon. So the powers that be try to break their spirits and their backs with unremitting forced labour, and attempt to make their conditions so harsh that they will stop breeding so successfully. With an irony that has its own cruelty, the Egyptians set them to work building supply cities. When Joseph made plans for the storage of grain in advance of the coming famine,⁶ all benefited, both Egyptians and non-Egyptians. His storehouses were sources of life. Now the pharaoh's store-cities

are meant to spell death for the Israelites, who will, we can be quite sure, enjoy none of their bounty.

Yet the promise of God that the descendants of Abraham would become as many as the stars, or the particles of dust on the earth, or the grains of sand on the seashore, cannot be defeated so easily. 'The more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread . . .' (1.12). Alice LaFey aptly comments, 'What other sources of stimulation, pleasure, and human accomplishment did they have?' As so often happens, oppression ends up working against the oppressor, and produces the very opposite of what is intended. And as we might also have predicted, the violence and fear of the pharaoh and his minions turn out to be infectious, and the whole Egyptian people go down with the disease. We are told they come to regard the Israelites with a sickening dread and loathing (the Hebrew verb near the end of v. 12 can and probably does mean both things). Such racial hatred makes them more than willing allies of their king: 'The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labour. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them' (1.13-14). The Hebrew text is particularly striking. Five times in these two verses it uses a root which refers to slave labour, twice it ends a sentence with the word 'ruthlessness'. Thus, with the greatest skill and without any sensationalism, the narrator underlines the Israelites' plight.

He does not tell us directly of the outcome of this treatment. He maintains a poignant silence on the subject, and moves straight on to the pharaoh coming up with a second and much more drastic plan. We are left to conclude that his people's eager co-operation in his ploy has proved as fruitless as his own initiative, or else again has only made things worse. He now decides to go beyond slavery to genocide.

Shiphrah and Puah, heroines of the resistance

(Exod. 1.15-21)

Now the king of Egypt said to the midwives of the Hebrews, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah . . . (1.15). Thus we come to the first two of the women we are considering in this chapter. They are given no more introduction than that, but in several respects it is most remarkable.

Before we examine the features of verse 15 itself, we must make sure we pay sufficient heed to the point where it falls in the story. That place is already very dark, full of fear, cruel exploitation and violence. Already we have seen things get worse for the Israelites, and now we can expect them to get worse still. We have seen the Israelites put on the rack by the pharaoh. We have seen them being stretched more ruthlessly by his people. We can now expect there to be a further intensification of their pain and of the violence of their oppressors. Shipphrah and Puah could not enter the narrative at a more sinister moment.

Yet there is one more thing to remember about storytellers, and about those of the Old Testament in particular: they frequently take delight in leading their readers or hearers up the garden path. A development in a story may mark a continuation and intensification of what has gone before, or else it may represent a twist, a point where suddenly, without warning, things change course and are never quite the same again. Sometimes, in the more sophisticated stories, there is both a crescendo *and* a sudden change of key. The beginning of the Book of Exodus presents us with just such a story.

Before, however, we see how it proceeds, we must return to verse 15 itself, and the manner in which Shipphrah and Puah enter the narrative.

The first thing to notice about them is that they are both named. That is perhaps the most astonishing detail of all. They appear in a large narrative unit which has its beginning at the start of Exodus 1, and its ending at 14.31, after the dramatic crossing of the Sea of Reeds. It has a cast of untold millions. The main parts are played by God, Moses and two pharaohs. Aaron looks at first as though he might join their company, but ends up with nothing very much to do and very little to say. After him come a number of people who play bit-parts of varying importance, and then hordes of extras. Besides Shipphrah and Puah, there are, in order of appearance, a number of Egyptians in charge of the Israelite slave-gangs, Moses' father, his mother, his sister, the daughter of the first pharaoh (together with her female attendants), an Egyptian who is killed by Moses, a Hebrew man being beaten by that Egyptian, and two Hebrews fighting with one another. A pastoral interlude brings on stage a priest of Midian called Reuel (or Jethro, as he is called elsewhere in the unit, and beyond in Exod. 18), his seven daughters (among them Zipporah), a gang of nasty shepherds, and a son born to Zipporah and Moses named Gershom. Back in Egypt we are introduced to the elders of the Israelites, to more Egyptian

overseers, and to Israelite supervisors set in immediate control of the labourers, and then to 'the wise men and sorcerers', or 'magicians', of the second pharaoh's court, and to others of his advisers. The extras consist of all the countless Egyptians who join in the pharaohs' cruelty and who suffer from the plagues God sends on the land, the soldiers and chariot-drivers of the second pharaoh's army, the Israelite people, who themselves are enough to 'fill the land', and then vast numbers of animals and insects. There are the flocks belonging to Reuel or Jethro, those belonging to the shepherds who drive his daughters away from the well, the snakes which emerge from Moses' and Aaron's rods and their unfortunate Egyptian counterparts, the domestic animals of the Egyptians and the Israelites, the Egyptian war-horses, and finally the creatures responsible for four of the plagues, the frogs, the gnats, the flies, and the locusts. If we discount the list of the twelve sons of Jacob in the prologue to the narrative, and leave aside the genealogy in 6.14-25, then we discover that apart from God, who names himself, there are just seven characters who are named. Shipphrah and Puah are the first of them, and the rest are, again in order of appearance, Moses, Reuel or Jethro, Zipporah, Gershom, and Aaron. Particularly conspicuous by their absence from that list are the two pharaohs. They retain throughout the anonymity of the enemy, and, precisely because they are not identified, wear the garb of the archetypal tyrant, and belong to any age that recognizes it for what it is.

It is not simply their having names, nor even the initiatives they will take and the particular things they will do and say, that ensure that Shipphrah and Puah step out from the pages of the narrative as colourful individuals. The narrator has thrown the spotlight full on them by having only two of them. In an obvious sense that number is ridiculous. It is one of the story's more implausible details. No two women could begin to help with all the deliveries there must have been among the Israelites, and indeed their speech to the pharaoh suggests they might do duty among the Egyptian women also. For the storyteller, however, such implausibility was of no consequence. It is equally inconceivable that the midwives would have an audience, indeed *two* audiences, with the pharaoh himself, instead of with one of his relatively minor officials. After all, we do not find women of any kind anywhere else in Exodus walking the corridors of power as they do. But that did not matter either. The narrator was interested in composing a lively, compelling tale. There was much greater drama to be had in the midwives' meeting with the great pharaoh himself, and his readers (or might

it here be *her* readers? – we will return to that possibility at a later stage) would find it much easier to engage with them and identify with them if there were only two, and not a whole crowd of them filling the pharaoh's throne room.

Strangely, however, though the narrator takes so much trouble to flesh out these two characters, he or she does not make clear whether they were Hebrews or Egyptians. The Hebrew text is ambiguous, and could either mean they were midwives who were themselves Hebrews, or that they were women, presumably Egyptian, who served as midwives among the Hebrews. Ultimately the ambiguity cannot be resolved, and that means we will have to give two readings of this story, not just one.

We suggested that Shiprah and Puah come on stage at a most ominous moment in the action. Our worst fears are at once fulfilled, if not exceeded: 'The king of Egypt said to the midwives of the Hebrews . . . "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, keep an eye out for the stones;⁸ if it's a son, kill him; if it's a daughter, she shall live"' (1.16). The pharaoh's order is extremely abrupt, the language utterly stark in its horror. There is no courtesy about his speech, no attempt at diplomacy, nor could there be any. We are reminded of 'the massacre of the innocents' in Matthew's Gospel, of Herod's ordering all children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under to be killed (Matt. 2.16). Yet the pharaoh's command is even more terrible than that. Herod wishes to make sure one particular child called Jesus is dead, and though he does not care how many children die in the process, the scale of his slaughter is strictly limited. Furthermore, though Matthew does not explain who carried out Herod's orders, we can safely presume he used his own soldiers. This pharaoh's designs are much more ambitious than Herod's, and he chooses *midwives* to do his work. Shiprah's and Puah's role was to deliver, to help to bring to life, to lead out of pain into joy. The pharaoh commands them to become his agents of death.

It is not entirely clear what the pharaoh is trying to achieve. The scene does not introduce any new motives on his part, so we might assume that they are the same as led him to his policy of enslavement and forced labour. If they are, then he is cutting off his nose to spite his face. As Brevard Childs comments, 'Ordinarily a ruling nation, particularly in the Ancient Near East, would not think of destroying its labour supply.'⁹ Cheryl Exum exposes further layers of absurdity. She finds it incongruous enough that in his first play the pharaoh should be determined to reduce the Hebrew population, when apparently he needs the labour of their

males to build his store-cities. With regard to his second plan, she points out that it neither serves his immediate purposes (that is, if they are the same as they were before), 'nor represents the logical way to control overpopulation, which would be to kill females'.¹⁰

Yet violence has its own fascination, and dictators of this pharaoh's sort obey their own logic. Everett Fox's comment is a fair one, although it does not address all the points that have been made: 'The story does not describe a rational fear, but paranoia – paralleling the situation in Nazi Germany of the 1930s and 1940s, where Jews were blamed for various economic and political catastrophes not of their own making and were eliminated from a society that could have used their resources and manpower.'¹¹ He is right to remind us of the Holocaust here. His statement itself makes plain that the parallel between it and the events in Egypt is far from exact. Nevertheless, we do well to ponder on the fact that the people whose very identity is now bound up with memories of the Holocaust should in Exodus begin their history as the intended victims of genocide.

This new plan is much more drastic than the pharaoh's first one, and so represents an intensification of what has gone before. It also marks a new strategy, a change of direction on his part, for which the earlier measures did not prepare us. In that respect it is a twist in the course of the narrative. Yet the shift it contains is as nothing compared with the one provided by Shiprah's and Puah's reaction. 'But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live' (1.17). The language is as simple and straightforward as that of the pharaoh's command. The narrator does not underline their defiance or their heroism. But he does explain their motive: they 'feared God'. These two women are surrounded by fear. The narrative has already spoken of the fear of the pharaoh and his people. It will go on to tell us of the fear of the two Hebrews fighting with one another, when Moses intervenes; of Moses' own fear as he flees for his life from the pharaoh, and as he faces God and his terrifying demands at the Burning Bush; of the fear of the Israelite foremen as the tyranny of the second pharaoh threatens to destroy them and their people; of the fear of that pharaoh and his officials when plagues rain down upon them; and of the fear of the Israelites caught between the Sea of Reeds and the pursuing Egyptian army. Twice we are told in the course of their short scene that Shiprah and Puah 'feared' God. But their fear is unlike that of all the rest. It is different even from the fear that overcomes Moses at the Burning Bush, as we can see if we compare the results of the two. Moses'

fear is disabling, and runs counter to the declared purposes of God. It makes him squirm and wriggle and protest or raise objections to what God is asking of him. Indeed, no one in the entire Bible is so persistent in protesting against a divine commission as Moses is in that scene.¹² His fear and that of all the rest is sheer terror. The fear of Shiphrah and Puah is not that at all, but a sense of awe and the mark of where their loyalty lies. It does not turn them to flight or feeble protest, nor to accusation or violence. It enables them to defy the pharaoh *without fear*, and then, as we shall soon see, to confront him with astonishing bravado and make a fool out of him. Because of their fear of God, they owe the pharaoh no allegiance and they show him none. They refuse his hideous stratagems. They refuse to wear the uniform of his death squads underneath their midwives' garb. They do not tell him to his face that they will not do as he commands. Such overt disobedience would no doubt have cost them their lives, and he would simply have sought others to do his dirty work. They simply go away and carry on doing their work as they have always done it.

If, however, an oppressive regime such as the one in Egypt is to carry out its purposes, it must have clear lines of communication and an efficient network of informants. We are not told of these. We do not even hear of the pharaoh being informed. The pace of this narrative is too quick for such details. All we are told is that the midwives are summoned by the pharaoh to explain themselves. 'So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?"' (1.18). They now find themselves in the utmost danger. We may recall the case of an earlier pharaoh summoning Abram to explain why he had claimed Sarai was his sister. But that pharaoh turned out to be a just and honourable man. This one, we know already, is a merciless tyrant who is driven by paranoia.

Shiphrah and Puah, however, do not bat an eyelid: 'The midwives said to pharaoh, "But these Hebrews are not like Egyptian women. They are bursting with life! By the time the midwife gets to them they have given birth!"' (1.19). With these words, the only ones Shiphrah and Puah have to say, the audience ends. We do not hear directly of the pharaoh's response. The two women do very well out of it all, as we shall soon discover, while the pharaoh himself moves on to another plan of action which does not rely on any midwives for its execution, but instead demands the co-operation of 'all his people'. We must presume he believes the women's excuse, and allows them to go free. Otherwise their survival and his change of tack make no sense.

Again we recall the comment Claus Westermann made with regard to Abram's deception of the Egyptians and their pharaoh in Genesis 12: 'The ruse is the only weapon left for the powerless given over to the mighty.'¹³ In this particular case, according to Brevard Childs, the pharaoh is characterized as 'the wicked fool who is duped by the clever midwives',¹⁴ and later in his commentary he writes, 'the frail responses of two women have succeeded in outdoing the crass power of the tyrant'.¹⁵ Less soberly, Cheryl Exum remarks: 'They respond with a defense which would strain the gullibility of any pharaoh.'¹⁶

To their apt comments we would add an observation of our own. Surely the women's response amounts to a midwives' joke! In the past serious-minded commentators from Augustine to Calvin and beyond have worried themselves very silly about the women telling a transparent lie and then getting rewarded by God (as they do at the end of the scene).¹⁷ Some more recent commentators have not got the joke either, so that Brevard Childs is able to say, 'The response of the midwives is so clever as to have convinced not only Pharaoh, but a number of modern commentators who accept its veracity on face value.'¹⁸ Even such an astute critic as Carol Meyers can use this verse as evidence that Israelite women had easy deliveries!¹⁹

Surely we will misunderstand this passage if we do not catch its humour. Cheryl Exum hints at it, as we have just seen, but it is Jonathan Magonet who brings it out into the open. First he draws our attention to how the midwives speak of the mothers they attend: 'The Egyptians they mention are referred to as "women", the "Hebrews" are not dignified with such a title - they are not like our (refined) Egyptian ladies!' Next he comments on the unusual Hebrew word *hayot*, which the midwives apply to the Hebrew mothers, and to which we have given the rather free, but suitably vulgar translation, 'bursting with life'. *Hayot* is, he explains, 'an unusual form of the verb meaning "to be" or "to live"'. But the form in the Hebrew is almost identical with the word for 'animals', *hayot* . . . these women are so "animal-like", that before the midwife can get there, they have "dropped" the baby.²⁰

The midwives' response is a wonderful joke, and a clever one too. See how skilfully they appeal to the pharaoh's racial prejudice by comparing the Hebrew women so unfavourably with his own Egyptian women! See how they trade on his sexism by coming so close to calling those same Hebrew women 'animals'! Yet the best part of the joke lies in how it is received. It is a transparent lie - and the pharaoh, being a man, and therefore never having witnessed

the Hebrew women, or any other women for that matter, giving birth, believes it! There is no doubt that Shiphrah and Puah are to be counted among the clever female tricksters of the Bible. Genesis has furnished three of them before this in Rebekah, Rachel, and Tamar.²¹

Yet we would argue that Exodus 1.19 is not merely a joke, but a *midwives'* joke, precisely the sort of excuse such women might come up with. Now, if we are right, we might suppose that a sensitive, imaginative storyteller could identify sufficiently closely with these two women to put such words in their mouths. Yet would a man, living in a society where women in labour were attended only by women, be able to give us such a telling joke about such a subject as childbirth? We are left thinking this particular passage in Exodus 1 must have originated as a *midwives'* tale, that is a tale told not just about midwives but *by* midwives.²² George Coats thinks it bears the marks of having once circulated as an independent unit.²³ As far as the larger narrative is concerned, there can be little doubt that the author was a man. It concerns itself to such an extent with the worlds of power politics, the army, and the cult, which were almost exclusively the domains of men. But it is probable that here he has made use of a story that originated among women, and which was primarily designed for a female audience. Certainly we can imagine how readily Israelite women would have enjoyed it, and how quick they would have been to grasp its humour.

We can also observe that for the first time we find ourselves handling a story in which we cannot detect a male bias. It is not written from a distinctively male standpoint. If there is any bias to be discovered, it would seem to be a female one. Though honours were showered upon Hagar in the desert, particularly in Genesis 16, we were left with the suspicion that it was because there was no man on the scene and she was the parent or parent-to-be of a one-parent family. Here there is a man on stage, and yet the women are undoubtedly the heroines of the piece. Their fear of God, their astonishing fearlessness before the pharaoh, and the sheer effrontery of their deception are clearly being held up for our admiration. They are exemplary characters, as Eve, Sarah, even Hagar, never were.

This last point is borne out by the concluding verses of the scene: 'So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people became many and grew exceedingly powerful. And because the midwives feared God, he made them households' (1.20-1). Shiphrah and Puah's reward spills over to the Israelite people. The oppression of the

Israelites began in the first place because, in the pharaoh's view, they were too 'many' and too 'powerful' (1.9). All his violence, all the cruelty of the Egyptian people, have got them nowhere. They are back where they began. As for the Israelites and the promises and purposes of God, they are still on course. It is quite clear in this second scene who God and the Israelites have to thank for that. God shows his gratitude by 'making households' for them.

The phrase is an unusual one, and in this context not entirely clear. It is interesting to note, however, that we find it again in 2 Samuel 7.11, where the prophet Nathan proclaims to king David: 'The Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house.' With Shiphrah and Puah we cannot be sure whether their reward is families of their own (surely an apt one for women who have been engaged so courageously in helping to provide families for others), or whether they now attain the status and privilege of having their own households among the Israelites. Whichever is the case, the storyteller has employed the same words to describe their reward as the narrator of 2 Samuel will use in describing the establishment of the Davidic dynasty!

If the phrase is to be understood in our second way, then it means that effectively Shiphrah and Puah become members of the Israelite people, and we should think of them as having been Egyptians. This brings us back to the question of their racial origins, and the two readings of their story that the uncertainty invites.

If we think of them as Israelites, then, as Cheryl Exum points out,²⁴ we can compare them to Moses. Like him, they act as saviours of their own people, and, as he will do eventually, they fearlessly confront the pharaoh and all he stands for. As Israelites they emerge as heroines who might encourage future generations of their people to stand fast in the face of oppression, and remain loyal to their calling. Their story can then be told among those who are themselves the victims of systematic cruelty and carefully calculated violence, and bring them some rare and precious laughter.

If, however, we suppose they are Egyptians, then they join the illustrious company of those foreign women and men in the Bible who are represented as showing conspicuous faith and obedience. They join the pharaoh's daughter and her attendants of Exodus 2; Reuel or Jethro of chapters 2, 4 and 18; Balaam of Numbers 22-4 (though not the Balaam of 22.22-35, where he does not emerge well from a comparison with his ass!); Rahab the Jericho prostitute of Joshua 2 and 6; Ruth from Moab, the ancestress of David; Jael,

wife of Heber the Kenite, who appears in Judges 4 and is celebrated in the Song of Deborah in Judges 5; Uriah the Hittite of 2 Samuel 11; Naaman the Syrian of 2 Kings 5; the Syrophenician woman of Mark 7; the centurion at Capernaum in Matthew 8 or Luke 7; and the other centurion at the foot of the cross in Mark 15, Matthew 27 and Luke 24.

If they are Egyptians, then they have a sense of awe before the God of an obscure, enslaved people, and serve his purposes, while mocking their own pharaoh, who was himself counted as divine. They share nothing of the paranoia of their own people, and none of their brutality. By their resolutely choosing the side of life and refusing to become dealers in death, they put into sharper relief the horror of the Egyptian pogroms. They sit in silent judgement upon their own people and their king.

Whether Egyptian or Hebrew, they teach the Israelites of the narrative not to be afraid. That is a lesson they will find very hard to learn, and even Moses will not come to it easily.

A son is born

(Exod. 1.22-2.10)

But the opening part of the story of the Israelites in Egypt is not finished yet. Storytellers frequently work in threes, and so far we have had only two moves from the pharaoh. Each has ended in failure. We can expect another twist, a yet further intensification of his attempts to destroy the Israelites as a people. The narrator does not keep us waiting. '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 daughter live"' (1.22). Abandoning the services of human midwives, the pharaoh turns for help to a divine one. The Nile was celebrated as a god by the Egyptians, and was undoubtedly one of their chief sources of life, their midwife, we might say. So another bringer of life is to be used, by royal command, as a dealer in death. As Cheryl Exum so chillingly remarks, 'Exposure was in ancient times a common means of disposing of unwanted children.'²⁵ This time the pharaoh will make sure the plan succeeds. He issues the command to 'all his people', to those who have already been caught up in his fear, and have co-operated so readily in his persecution of the Israelites. As before, he is intent on killing only the male babies.

And that is Moses' cue. 'Now a man from the house of Levi went

and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son . . .' (2.1-2a). There is nothing unusual about the language here. The man takes the initiative, marries the woman of his choice, she conceives and bears a child. That is how marriage and procreation are described over and over again in Old Testament narratives. What is unusual, what is terrifying, is the timing of this particular son's birth. What should be an occasion for such joy is turned by the dark designs of the pharaoh into a nightmare.

We have returned with these opening words of Exodus 2 to a male-dominated world, where men take women to be their wives, and where particular note is taken of a birth of a *son* – we will soon learn that this male baby already has a sister, but we have heard nothing about her birth, nor will we be told anything about it in retrospect. And yet the little story that is just beginning will from now on be concerned entirely with women, except for the baby – but then he will not have anything to do beyond lying there, doing a little crying, and growing up.

This time none of the women are named. We will learn later, in the genealogy of chapter 6, that the child's mother is called Jochebed (and his father Amram – see 6.20), and eventually, when the drama of the escape from Egypt is over, that his sister's name is Miriam (15.20).²⁶ In our exploration of the passage we will respect its silences and leave them unnamed.

'The woman conceived and bore a son; and she saw him, that he was good, and hid him three months' (2.2). Exodus 1, near its beginning, picked up the language of the Genesis 1 creation poem. Now this second chapter does the same. 'And God saw the light, that it was good' (Gen. 1.4), here becomes, 'and she saw him, that he was good'. Just as the narrator earlier encouraged us to compare the birth of the Israelite people to the birth of the world, so now he wishes us to make a similar link between creation and the birth of Moses. In the New Testament Matthew will draw a line from creation to Jesus by beginning his Gospel with the words, 'The book of the *genesis* of Jesus Christ', and Luke will make the connection even clearer by tracing Jesus' descent back to Adam and thence to the Creator himself (see Luke 3.38).

Not content with referring us back to the acts of creation, the narrator of Exodus 2 also reminds us of the Flood: 'When she could hide him no longer she got an *ark*²⁷ of papyrus for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river' (2.3). So the child is set afloat on 'the waters of chaos', as Noah and his family were. He is hidden carefully among the reeds on the edge of what

should be the river of life, but which has become, by the pharaoh's decree, the appointed river of death. Just as in Genesis 6 we heard of the elaborate preparation of Noah's ark, so now we learn the details of the materials and construction of the ark for Moses.

All this is designed to focus our minds on the child. The narrator has not provided any annunciation scene, as he did for Ishmael, and the birth of the boy is not miraculous, as was Isaac's. Yet, by his references to creation and the Flood, he is indicating the momentous character of the events. He is, in effect, making the extraordinary claims that with the birth of Moses a new era in the history of the world has dawned, and that through him, as through Noah, God will bring about a dramatic act of salvation, and rescue his purposes from the dark waters of violence.

With Shiphrah and Puah's story we were able to wonder whether it might have originated as a story told by a woman for women to hear. Such speculations are not possible here. This passage is primarily about Moses. It is his infancy narrative, and can be compared with the Marthean or Lucan infancy narratives about Jesus. Nevertheless, within its bounds women take all the initiatives, and are responsible for all the action and all the talking.

It is typical of the story that his *mother* should come up with the plan of the little ark of papyrus and put it into effect. The child's father does not come into it at all. Indeed beyond the first verse he is not mentioned anywhere in the story. He has gone and married a wife and enabled her to conceive a son. Beyond that the narrator is not interested in him.

It is not entirely clear, however, why Moses' mother should put him in the ark. When Hagar escapes to the desert with Ishmael, we fully understand why she abandons him to the shade of a bush. In Moses' case we know his mother cannot conceal him any longer, and we can indeed applaud her for being able to keep him a secret from the Egyptians for so long. Yet in consigning him to the waters of the Nile she is aping what her Egyptian enemies have been commanded to do. Perhaps that is precisely the point. Her desperate act is also another clever ruse. She does not wait for the Egyptians to find her child. She does their dirty work for them. She leaves him to the waters of the Nile. If summoned before the pharaoh, as Shiphrah and Puah were, she could argue that she has complied with his order already. She would not tell him, of course, about the basket, so carefully waterproofed and hidden! It seems she also belongs to the company of biblical female tricksters.

Care is taken not just to make the basket watertight and to conceal it, but also to guard it: 'His sister stood at a distance, to

see what would happen to him' (2.4). This is the first we have heard of her. How old she is, we cannot be sure. Many of our versions call her a 'girl' in verse 8, but the Hebrew term employed there suggests a sexually mature young woman. It is, for example, the same word as Isaiah uses in his famous saying, 'a young woman is with child and shall bear a son' (Isa. 7.14). Certainly events will prove she is old enough to act on her own initiative when necessary, and will reveal that she can be very clever and resourceful. For the moment all she can do, and we the readers of the story with her, is wait to see what happens.

For a long time now scholars have drawn parallels between this story and others which tell of how great heroes were exposed at birth, were rescued, and eventually came to great power. The Greek story of Oedipus comes quickly to mind, but more significant is the Babylonian legend about Sargon of Akkad, who was also set by his mother in a basket of rushes, sealed with bitumen, and put into a river.²⁸ But Sargon appears to be abandoned by his mother, as Oedipus is by his father. Moses, however, is not abandoned. This is not a story of the exposure of an infant in the sense that he is rejected by his parents and consigned to a premature death. The preparations of his mother and sister are acts of desperation, but they are also acts of love. They are the best they can do for the child in the pharaoh's cruel circumstances, and they continue to give him the care that is possible.

There is no certainty their ploy will work. Here we must make a conscious effort, if need be, to read this story as if we do not know what happens next. Then the risk the women are taking, and the danger in which the child finds himself, despite all their preparations, will become at once apparent. Alas, the story has been romanticized by writers and painters alike, and much of its suspense, danger and excitement has been drained out of it. In the process the courage of all the women involved has been devalued.

So, there is no certainty their ploy will work. We, the readers of the story, have been reminded by the narrator's careful choice of language of the creation and the Flood, and have thus been able to pick up hints that all may be well. But we enjoy an advantage over the child's mother and sister. They can only wait and see.

The worst happens: 'The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the Nile, while her attendants walked beside the river. She spotted the ark among the reeds, and she sent her maid, took it, opened it, and saw him, the child - a crying boy!' (2.5-6a). The Hebrew is written with superb economy and skill. With just a handful of words it describes the various stages of the discovery,

conjoins up the suspense of it, and conveys the surprise that greets the princess when finally she opens the lid of the basket.

But her surprise is not as great as ours, so long as we persist in reading the text as if for the first time, when we hear of her reaction. She is, after all, the daughter of the pharaoh. She is the daughter of the author of the policy of genocide. All the Egyptians we have heard about so far in the book of Exodus have been willing parties to the persecution. We have heard nothing to make us think this princess and her maids will be any different. Indeed, with them coming from the palace, we can surely expect them to be particularly decisive and ruthless in their disposal of the child. Unless, of course, they think he is Egyptian. But the princess does not. She immediately recognizes him as one of the Hebrew children.

But before her words of recognition are spoken, the narrator inserts what in the Hebrew are just two more. They are the ones that contain the surprise, and on them the whole story turns: 'and she took pity on him' (2.6b). The word for 'took pity' does not occur anywhere else in Exodus, yet it can hardly fail to remind us of God's response to the suffering and cries of his people: 'The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God knew' (2.23b-4). Twice we have seen God intervene to rescue Sarah from a pharaoh and from the king of Gerar. We have seen him come to Hagar's aid in the desert, and save her and Ishmael from death. We have heard how he stayed Abraham's hand at the last moment, and delivered Isaac from sacrifice on the mountain in the land of Moriah. The central theme of the first half of the book of Exodus is his being stirred into acts of salvation by the plight of his people, whether in Egypt or the wilderness of Sinai. Here on the bank of the Nile, he needs no intervention. He can rely instead on the resourcefulness of Moses' mother and sister, and on the compassion of an enemy princess.

In two respects God's response to his people is less remarkable than the princess's reaction to finding Moses. We were unnerved and surprised by God's siding with Sarah and Abraham in Genesis 21, but partly because it was so untypical of him. God spends so much of his time and energy in the Old Testament fighting oppression and delivering the oppressed, or calling for their deliverance. It is not too much to say he has a passion for such work. In that regard, then, we cannot be surprised when he meets

Moses in the blaze of a burning bush and reveals his plans to bring his people out of Egypt into the land of promise. However, we can be surprised, on the basis of what Exodus has told us so far, when the pharaoh's own daughter meets Moses with immediate compassion.

Second, the narrator reminds us, when he first tells us of God's becoming aware of the suffering of his people in 2.23-4, that he is under obligation to help them. He gave their ancestors promises, promises of land, independence, prosperity, blessing. He promised he would be with them and keep them wherever they went. He made a covenant with them, which bound him together with them for ever, and which amounted to a solemn assurance that his promises would be fulfilled. Pharaoh's daughter is under no obligation to rescue Moses. Quite the reverse. As one of her father's people, she is under obligation to see that the child is killed.

Up to this point the crisis for the child and his family has been deepening. The story has been sliding into ever greater danger, and getting ever closer to death. Now, with the princess's compassion, it turns upwards towards life and security. In its new mood it even has time for a joke:

'This must be one of the Hebrews' children,' she said. Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, 'Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?' Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Yes.' So the young woman went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.' So the woman took the child and nursed it. (2.6b-9)

This is as good as the midwives' excuse to the pharaoh!

By accepting the invitation to provide the child with a wet-nurse, the princess accepts responsibility for him and so adopts him into the royal family as her son. She will soon confirm her action by giving him his name. Whether or not she would have taken such a drastic step without the child's sister prompting her, we cannot tell. See how clever the sister is in her choice of words! She presents her plan as though she is doing the princess a favour! Yet still we do not know what the princess would have done without her. All we do know is that the sister plays a key role in turning her immediate feelings for the child into action, in turning compassion into deliverance.

Her adopting the child amounts to treachery. Let us be quite clear about that. Too often this story, and this point in it in particular, is overlaid by a sentimentality that prevents us from appreciating what the princess is doing. She is defying the pharaoh, as Shiprah and Puah did. Unlike them, she is defying her own father, but still she does it with the same impudence that they showed. Not content with saving this Hebrew child from drowning, she brings him into the palace as her own son, and there brings him up right under the tyrant's nose, and keeps him there for years!

Yet she is an Egyptian. For all her astonishing pity and her great courage, she still belongs to the enemy. The storyteller cannot help making gentle fun of her. She is tricked by the child's sister (yet another trickster!) into hiring – into *hiring!* – the child's own mother as his wet nurse. Now she has two Hebrews in the palace, and is *paying* one of them to be there, giving her wages to nurse her own child!

And she is not found out. 'When the child grew up, she [i.e., his mother] brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water"' (2.10). The deceit has held. The princess's slave-women, who found the child with her, have not talked. They too have played their part in his deliverance, and thereby in the salvation of the Israelite people and the fulfilment of the promises of God. The story has so little to say about them. There is very little they actually do, and they have nothing to say. Yet without their taking part in the conspiracy, without their maintaining their loyalty to their mistress in the face of the demands of their king, all would have been lost. They are heroines also, but scarcely a note of their song has been sung.

The name the princess gives the child has its own sweet irony. It is a genuine Egyptian name, but it sounds like a Hebrew verb meaning 'to draw out'. As the princess herself explains, Moses is named Moses because he is 'drawn out' of the water. However, if we wish to be precise, then the word 'Moses' sounds as though it means not one who is drawn out, but one who draws out.²⁹ It is not that the princess has made an understandable mistake in her Hebrew – after all, she is an Egyptian – nor that the storyteller has got in a muddle. The narrators of the Old Testament tend not to be so pedantic as we can be over matters such as this, and the meaning and derivation of names was not approached in the scientific manner of the modern etymologist. Rather, what the princess does, all unwitting, is give the child a name that is prophetic. He will indeed be instrumental in drawing his people

out of Egypt. She cannot know it, but the name she chooses underlines her treachery, and gives us a hint of its consequences.

This story of the women's rescue of Moses marks the last appearance of the pharaoh's plans for genocide. Moses will soon be fleeing the country, and the narrator follows him into the land of Midian. While he is there the pharaoh dies. His successor continues the oppression, but takes up where the first pharaoh and his people left off in the middle of chapter 1, when the Israelites were being put to building the supply cities. Now the people are no longer given straw with which to make their bricks. They have to collect that first, but without decreasing their output (see 5.6–9). This, of course, is cruel enough, but it represents a large step backwards from the 'solutions' to the Israelite problem proposed in the second part of chapter 1.

Quite why the genocide plan should be abandoned is left unclear. It is possible to argue that the story of Shiprah and Puah, where the plan is first introduced, is told primarily to provide the background for the birth of Moses.³⁰ One can then go on to suggest that once Moses is safely delivered, the genocide plan has served its purpose as far as the larger narrative is concerned, and so is put aside. That may well be so, but it remains the case that on each of the two occasions we do hear of it, it is frustrated by the courage and resourcefulness of women. Shiprah and Puah would seem to trick the pharaoh into thinking his first ploy of getting them to kill the male babies at birth is unworkable. They would seem on this occasion to have wielded considerable political power. It is harder for us to think that the women of 2.1–10 can have altered the plans to throw the babies into the Nile through their covert deliverance of just one of them. Nevertheless, they have saved the one who, from the point of view of the narrative, matters most. They have saved the one God will use as the deliverer of his people. For the purposes of the plot of the story, they have effectively seen the genocide plan off, and ensured it will not be heard of again. Within the not entirely plausible world of the story, they, like Shiprah and Puah before them, are the ones who exercise power in Egypt.

Zipporah: 'merely one nubile daughter out of seven'

(Exod. 2.15b–22)

Zipporah, the final subject of our investigations in this chapter, does not come into her own until late in Exodus 4, but we must

still look briefly at the passage in the second half of Exodus 2 where she makes her first entrance.

The scene is set in the land of Midian, by which is probably meant the area of the Negeb desert to the south of Canaan.³¹ Moses is there because in Egypt he killed an Egyptian he saw beating one of his fellow Hebrews, and the pharaoh got to hear of it and was out for his blood. In Midian he finds himself beside a well. Such places have in Genesis already proved happy hunting grounds for men in search of wives (see 24.10–27 and 29.1–12). This one, also, will fulfil its promise.

At first it seems it will vastly exceed its promise. Moses is met at the well not just by one marriageable woman, but by seven! They are the daughters of Reuel, or Jethro, 'the priest of Midian'. Seven is a number which in the Old Testament often suggests completeness. Whether he has any sons, we are not told, but certainly Reuel's quiver of daughters is full!

They have come to the well to water his flocks. They perform the doubtless arduous task of drawing the water and filling the troughs, when some very unpleasant shepherds appear on the scene and drive them away. At that point Moses, who has, it would seem, been sitting idly by, watching the women toiling away, intervenes. He came to the rescue of the Hebrew being beaten by the Egyptian. So now he comes single-handedly to the aid of the defenceless women. He drives off the shepherds (at least that is the most obvious way to understand the text), and draws some more water – it seems he has not forced the shepherds to leave before their animals have finished the water drawn by the women – and refills the troughs. He does so in double quick time, for despite the delay caused by the gang of shepherds, the women get back home earlier than usual. Their animals, too, seem to have drunk the water drawn by Moses much more quickly than normal!

Reuel is surprised to see them back so soon, and learns about the 'Egyptian' who helped them. After that things develop with considerable rapidity.

He said to his daughters, 'So where is he? Why did you leave the man? Invite him to break bread.' Moses agreed to settle down with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah in marriage. She bore a son, and he named him Gershom; for he said, 'I have been an alien residing in a foreign land.' (2.20–2)

This is decidedly not a woman's story. The tale of Shiphrah and Puah could be described as that, and women dominated the story

of Moses' birth and rescue, and were its heroines. Though still dealing with a folk-tale whose details are a mixture of the plausible and the implausible, and which, like the midwives' story, contains clear elements of humour, we have come as far away from those earlier passages as Midian is from Egypt.

We have here several stereotypes that are clearly the product of a male mind. The women are weak and cannot defend themselves. They need to be rescued by a man. They are silly and impetuous and forget to show their deliverer the respect and the gratitude due to him. They go rushing back to their father with their flocks at a run to tell him the news, leaving poor Moses back at the well, hungry, with nowhere to go. Reuel has to remind them of their responsibilities. Furthermore, when Moses settles down with the family, it seems Reuel gives him Zipporah as a thank-you present for the help he gave her and her sisters. When her child is born, it is Moses, not she, who names him, and the name he gives him is not Midianite, but a pun on two Hebrew words, whose literal meaning is 'an alien there'. What Zipporah thinks about it all, we do not know. In fact, what *Moses* thinks about the match, we are not told either. The opportunities the storyteller has for creating a love story to match the one about Rachel and Jacob in Genesis 29 are not taken. As George Coats has demonstrated, he is more interested in establishing the relationship between Reuel/Jethro and Moses than in exploring that between Moses and Zipporah.³² Robert Alter's comment is also important: 'Any presentation that would give more weight to Zipporah than merely one nubile daughter out of seven would throw the episode off balance, for her independent character and her relationship with Moses will play no significant role in the subsequent narrative.'³³ Exactly. Zipporah is 'merely one nubile daughter out of seven'. The male control of the passage and its detail is kept very tight, and the larger narrative, whose interest will lie almost entirely with the public sphere and the business of men, will spare her only the space of three verses for her to show what she is made of.

Before we come to that little passage, however, there remains one more point to be made about the scene in Midian, and, surprisingly, it is one we might regard as being in the women's favour. Their rescue from the shepherds foreshadows the deliverance of the Israelites from the Egyptians, in which, of course, Moses will again play a major part. The parallel is obvious enough, but becomes even clearer when we recall that 'shepherd' was commonly used in the ancient Near East as a royal title, and appears as such in the Old Testament.³⁴ So the real shepherds by

the well in Midian remind us of the particularly unpleasant 'shepherd' king who awaits Moses back in Egypt. Furthermore, when they rush home to their father, the women tell him, 'An Egyptian man rescued us from the hand of the shepherds' (2.19). The Hebrew verb they use for 'rescued' is one that Jethro will use himself once the Israelites have escaped and got across the Sea of Reeds. When Moses meets him and gives him the news, he will declare: 'Blessed be the Lord, who has *rescued* you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh' (18.10). If, therefore, in our scene beside the well, the shepherds play the part of the pharaoh, and Moses plays himself and God, then clearly the women play the people of Israel. Their significance turns out to be greater than we might have guessed, and a passage which seems at first sight to do them so little justice, ends up paying them a great honour.

Yet another woman saves the day

(Exod. 4.24-6)

The passage we are about to examine is one of the strangest and most obscure in the entire Bible. It describes an incident that takes place as Moses and Zipporah and Gershom are on their way from Midian to Egypt. Moses has received from God his great commission to bring Israel out of Egypt. With considerable difficulty he has accepted it. He has gone to Jethro (as he is now called), and asked his permission to go back. His father-in-law, with a grace the pharaoh will never show, has told him to 'Go in peace' (4.18: the verb 'go' is singular: Jethro does not, in the text, bid farewell to his daughter or grandson). Finally, just before their departure, God has given Moses a most terrible threat to carry with him. He has predicted that the pharaoh will stubbornly resist any demand to release the Israelites, and he has told him that when the time comes, he is to play his trump card: 'Then you shall say to Pharaoh, "Thus says the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son. I said to you, 'Let my son go that he may worship me.' But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your firstborn son"' (4.22-3). Ominous enough, to be sure. Yet nothing can prepare us for what happens next. God apparently goes berserk.

On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the Lord met him and tried to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched his feet with it, and

said, 'Truly you are a blood-bridegroom to me!' So he let him alone. At that time she said 'blood-bridegroom' in reference to circumcision. (4.24-6)³⁵

The only other biblical passage like this occurs in Genesis 32.22-32, where Jacob is attacked by God as he is crossing the river Jabbok at night. Behind both stories lie dark tales of spirits or demons who attack travellers by night and try to kill them.³⁶ Yet in the Genesis passage the storyteller has taken such rough, primitive material, and fashioned it into something remarkably sophisticated and profound. Here in Exodus the narrator has done hardly any shaping at all. The story is left an ugly, bewildering fragment, of which it is very hard to make any sense. Indeed, some commentators have such difficulty with it that they wonder whether the author of the larger narrative, who inherited the tale and included it in his work, fully understood it himself.³⁷

The passage poses a large number of questions which cannot be answered with any certainty: Why does God suddenly mount this attack? Who is he attacking, Moses, or Gershom, the son? How does Zipporah immediately know what to do? What exactly does she do? Whose 'feet' does she touch (the NRSV and some other versions tell us it was Moses', but the Hebrew simply has 'his feet')? What are we to understand by 'feet'? Are we to take the word literally, or remember that it is frequently used in the Old Testament as a euphemism for the genitals? Who is Zipporah calling a 'blood-bridegroom', and what does that extremely obscure phrase mean? What does all this have to do with the history of the rite of circumcision, and with the way it was practised in ancient Israel?

It is not for us to tackle these questions, some of which are in any case unanswerable. Gratefully, we will leave them to the commentators.³⁸ All we will do is make some observations or ask some further questions about what the passage makes clear about Zipporah.

First, it is plain she performs a circumcision. This is remarkable in itself. The Old Testament has surprisingly little to say about circumcision, but in its two most detailed treatments of the subject it is men who administer the rite, Abraham in Genesis 17 and Joshua in Joshua 5. Zipporah is the only woman recorded in the Bible to have performed it. She does so, we should notice, with the proper implement. When God instructs Joshua to circumcise the Israelite males after they have crossed the Jordan and entered Canaan, he tells him to make flint knives (see Josh. 5.2).

Athalya Brenner compares Zipporah to a male witch-doctor or holy man.³⁹ In her view it is Moses who is under attack, and Zipporah manages to save him by offering the 'god-demon'⁴⁰ a part of his body instead of the whole. By that token, her action belongs to a realm of magic which was a familiar part of the ancient world, and which still remains in force in some contemporary societies, although it has left relatively few marks upon the documents of the Old Testament.

More significant, perhaps, is Claus Westermann's remark: 'At an early stage circumcision was, in many places, understood as a kind of sacrifice in which the shedding of blood was important.'⁴¹ Twice the word blood occurs in our passage. Nowhere else in the Old Testament is circumcision explicitly associated with the shedding of blood. Such observations would seem to lie behind the fascinating suggestion which Drorah O'Donnell Setel makes in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, that Zipporah may, like her father, have had the status of a priest.⁴² In the end, alas, we have to leave her question hanging in the air, for the passage remains too obscure, but we can emphasize that, despite its apparent spontaneity, Zipporah's act is clearly of a ritual kind; that it conforms to established rules, such as the one prescribing the use of a flint knife; and that, with the emphasis on the shedding of blood, it appears to have been understood as a type of sacrifice. To be able to say that much is extraordinary. For, as Drorah Setel tells us,⁴³ we possess no other evidence from anywhere in the ancient Near East that women performed acts of blood sacrifice.

Second, it is plain that Zipporah averts a great danger. We cannot be entirely sure who is attacked, but we can be quite certain that without Zipporah's resourcefulness, without her knowing exactly what to do, her lack of panic when they are ambushed by this God, and her steady hand in performing the delicate operation on her son, then either Moses or Gershom would have been killed. If it is Moses who is threatened, and the larger context and the immediate one do suggest that much more easily,⁴⁴ then Zipporah's prompt action could hardly be more significant, for then she saves the one who will play the central role in God's deliverance of his people, and who has already been commissioned to do so. If it is Moses, then Zipporah can be compared to God himself as he appears in Genesis 22 on the mountain in the land of Moriah. For there, we will recall, his intervention at the critical moment saved from death the one on whom so much depended for the furthering of his purposes and for the fulfilment of his promises to his people. In that story God himself was responsible for the danger Isaac

found himself in, just as here he is the one who poses or embodies the threat to the travellers.

No just deserts

(Exod. 18.1-9; 15.1-21)

Zipporah has emerged from our discussion of this tiny, dark passage as possibly one of the most significant women in the Bible. How tragic then that she should be virtually written out of the story when she makes her third and final appearance in the narrative. In Exodus 18.2 we learn that at some point Moses sent her with their (by then) two sons back to Jethro to escape the horrors of Egypt. The crossing of the Sea is over, and now, as the Israelites approach Sinai, Jethro gets to hear of what has taken place and travels to meet Moses, and bring Zipporah and their sons back to him. The passage continues with this: 'He sent word to Moses, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you, with your wife and her two sons." Moses went out to meet his father-in-law; he bowed down and kissed him; each asked after the other's welfare, and they went into the tent' (18.6-7). As we remarked when looking at the story of Moses and Zipporah's first meeting, the narrator was more interested in the relationship between him and Reuel, as he was then called, than in any love he might feel for Zipporah or she for him. Yet, in chapter 2, though she did not emerge from the page as an individual, with feelings and words of her own, Zipporah did, together with her sisters, play a major role in the action and the speech. Here the narrator and her husband and father proceed as if she were not there. They have other things on their minds, such as the giving of due praise to God for his deliverance of his people, the offering of sacrifices, and the sorting out of the legal system. All that they regard as men's work, and neither Zipporah nor her sons have any part to play. There is not even time to speak of Moses embracing them, or kissing them and asking them how they are. Zipporah is given no chance to weep tears of joy and enquire about the plagues and the crossing of the Sea and how her husband has been bearing up under the strain. She is given no chance to do anything, she who once circumcised her son, and most probably saved her husband from death, and rescued the promises of God from destruction.

Her fate is not so different from that of Moses' sister. If indeed the sister who played such a vital role in his rescue from the Nile

is the Miriam of later passages, then she, too, does not receive her just deserts. Immediately after the crossing of the Sea, the narrator inserts a long song of triumph, and introduces it with the words, 'Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord' (15.1). After it is finished we read:

Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them:

'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.' (15.20-1)

The very first word of her song is slightly different from the one that begins the one Moses and the people have already sung: 'I will sing' (one word in the Hebrew) becomes 'Sing'. Otherwise Miriam's song is a precise quotation of the opening lines of the earlier poem. The conclusion to be drawn from that seems quite clear. Miriam was the composer of the larger song, but a later hand has ascribed it to her brother. The Song of Miriam has been turned into The Song of Moses, and Miriam has become in the process a musician who can do no more than pick up her brother's words and sing them as a refrain. She deserves, instead, to be reinstated along with Deborah, the composer of the war song in Judges 5, as one of the important minor poets of the Old Testament.⁴⁵

A question of initiative

There is one last question we wish to consider before we move on to Hannah, and that concerns the matter of initiative. When we introduced Shiphran and Pual, we remarked on how few people are given names in the first half of the Book of Exodus. Now we have come towards the end of our discussion, it is time to emphasize how few initiatives the human figures of those same chapters are allowed to take, and briefly to examine, or re-examine, the initiatives that are taken, to see what consequences they yield. (We speak of the *human* figures only. God, of course, is at the centre of the drama, plays by far the most significant part, and, apart from those occasions when he responds to Moses' pleas for some of the plagues to cease, he acts entirely on his own initiative.

His part in things would fill a chapter of a book by itself, and must remain outside the bounds of our own discussions.)

The first pharaoh of the oppression is represented throughout as acting on his own initiative, but those initiatives get him and his people nowhere. They run clean counter to the declared purposes of God, of course, but they are frustrated, on the surface of the text at least, not as a result of his intervention, but in the first instance by forces left unidentified, in the second by Shiphran and Pual, and in the third by Moses' mother and sister and by the king's own daughter and her female slaves. In the end all this pharaoh can do is give orders, and eventually die, leaving behind him a legacy of an Egyptian people brutalized by fear, racial hatred and persistent violence.

The second pharaoh has a much larger part to play, and is a much more complex figure. He is, indeed, three figures in one. The least obvious one, because it tends to be hidden beneath the other two, is that of the tyrant, the cruel dictator, who enjoys his own brutality, who only reacts to suffering when he is himself party to it, and who, through his senseless clinging to power, brings his land, his people, their livestock, and finally his army to utter ruin. He becomes estranged from the religious establishment, when his wise men and magicians can bear the onslaught of the plagues no longer, and increasingly isolated from his political advisers. In all this he reveals his true colours. He is, as they say, his own man. But he has only the power to destroy.

The second figure within the body of this pharaoh is the negotiator, the one who tries to keep control over events by making carefully judged concessions in the face of the persistent demands of Moses and Aaron, and who goes a remarkably long way towards coming to terms with reality, particularly the reality of the God he is up against. 'Who is the Lord, that I should heed him . . . ?' is his opening shot (5.2). After the frogs of the second plague have got into his own palace, into his bedroom and into his bed, he pleads with Moses and Aaron, 'Pray to the Lord . . .' (8.8). From there he moves on to, 'This time I have sinned, the Lord is in the right' (9.27; see also 10.16), and his last words to Moses conclude him speaking for himself, we see part at least of his mind, even if the reality he has glimpsed turns out to be too much for him to bear, and even if he is not the master of himself that he would like to suppose.

For the third figure contained in this pharaoh, and the one that dominates the other two, and controls the events of the story, is

that of God's puppet, jerking to his tune, dancing his grotesque, almost interminable dance of death. Even his insane obduracy is not his own, for at every turn God 'hardens his heart'.⁴⁶ This pharaoh is God's plaything. He does not know his own powerlessness, and will never know it, until, with the rest of his army, he is lying drowned on the shore of the Sea of Reeds.

Two pharaohs are balanced in the narrative by two brothers. Aaron, though he is, according to 6.20, the elder of the two, and though much is promised of him, takes not a single initiative in the entire narrative. He simply does what his God or his brother tell him. He is quite overshadowed by Moses.

Yet, once the plagues begin, even Moses has surprisingly little to do and hardly any initiative to take. The plagues are God's doing, not his. The text makes that abundantly clear. He negotiates with the pharaoh for the Israelites' release on God's instructions. Even when he calls upon God to bring a plague to an end, as he does with the frogs, the flies, the hail, and the locusts, and has God doing his bidding, he is responding to the anguished pleas of the pharaoh. Only when his people are trapped between the Sea of Reeds and the pursuing Egyptian army, and he tries to banish their fear, does he speak entirely for himself, without the prompting of another: 'Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today' (14.13). If in these chapters we look for a Moses who acts on his own initiative, then we must look back to the early stages, when he is starting out on his career. We must recall his murder of the Egyptian bully, his attempt to stop two of his fellow Hebrews fighting, his drawing water for Reuel's daughters, his five protests to the commission God gives him at the Burning Bush, and finally his passionate prayer of protest,⁴⁷ when the pharaoh has given the screw of oppression another turn, and the Israelite supervisors have brought to Moses their bitter and hopeless anger. 'O Lord, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me? Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has mistreated this people, and you have done nothing at all to deliver your people' (5.22-3). But where do all these initiatives get him, and what effect do they have on the plot?

The magnificent plain speaking of his prayer leads immediately to God's second great speech to him, in which he assures him that he will come to his people's rescue, and after that the plagues, the means of that deliverance, or at least its prelude, get under way.

But of the rest, we do not have such positive things to say. The murder of the Egyptian results first in suspicion on the part of one

of the two Hebrews he catches fighting: 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?' (2.14). That is all the gratitude he gets for intervening in their quarrel. The longer term results of the murder are a little work for the Egyptian secret police, a death threat from the pharaoh, and for Moses himself fear and flight to Midian. It achieves nothing but one Egyptian corpse in the sand, momentary relief presumably for the unfortunate Hebrew being beaten at the time – though we notice the text does not point that out – and Moses' removal from the main action. His intervention at the well in Midian saves the backs of the women and satisfies the thirst of their animals and gets him a wife and son, as well as an exemplary father-in-law. Such things are not to be sneezed at, but God has more things up his sleeve for him than a happy family. As Charles Isbell says, 'Thrashing some country shepherds [if that is what he does] . . . is one thing, but the *real* bully is still safely far away, still belching forth orders of death, still enslaving the "brothers" with whom Moses had once felt such solidarity.'⁴⁸

God remembers his people back in Egypt. Moses does not. He returns there, not because memories come flooding back and old loyalties prove their strength, but because God searches him out at the Burning Bush and drags him back by the ear. He declares his credentials, tells Moses of what he has seen and heard in Egypt, talks eloquently and repeatedly of deliverance, predicts ultimate success, and promises Moses the star role in the proceedings. And five times, as we have mentioned already, Moses protests. His protests, of course, get him nowhere. All they do is make God lose patience with him and send him packing.

Of the minor male characters in these chapters, Reuel or Jethro is most worthy of consideration. He provides Moses with a refuge, a wife, and a job, and later in chapter 4 he gives him his blessing when he asks for permission to return to Egypt. His first cluster of initiatives might be said to retard the plot, since they encourage Moses to settle down in what for God and the Israelites is the wrong place. But the second, with that 'Go in peace' so readily given, sets things once more on course.

Of all the initiatives taken by human beings in Exodus 1-14, it is those of the women, however, that display the greatest courage, invite our keenest admiration, and have the most powerful influence on events. But for the midwives, the women involved in Moses' rescue, and Zipporah, the larger story might conceivably have come to a dead stop. Shiprah and Puah and the women of 2.1-10 together succeed in defeating the policy of genocide, and save

Moses from drowning. Zipporah averts some rather more obscure danger, but can probably be said to save Moses from death, just as he is on the brink of putting God's purposes of redemption into effect. By the terms of the plot, without these women the forces of evil might have triumphed. Most certainly, without them the subsequent story would have been very different, and its God might have had to begin a search for another Moses, if not another people.

5

Hannah: How the Feeble Gird on Strength!

(1 Samuel 1.1-2.10; 2.18-21)

The Books of Samuel are primarily concerned with the lives of three men, Samuel, Saul, and David. It is possible to say that they are really to do with just one man, with David, for Samuel comes to prepare the way for him, while the account of the reign of Saul very soon becomes the story of David's own rise to power. David appears on the stage of the narrative in 1 Samuel 16, and after that is part of the action, or not far from it, until 2 Samuel has run its course.

The First Book of Samuel deals with the establishment of monarchy among the tribes of Israel, and the Second charts the final stages in David's rise to power, and the course of his reign in Jerusalem. Both books, then, focus on Israel's public life, on struggles for political and military power. Their concern is with worlds in which men were dominant. Yet still Jo Ann Hackett can justifiably describe them as 'a gold mine for readers interested in women in ancient Israel'.¹ Some of the Bible's most lively, most compelling stories about women are to be found in their pages. Our last two chapters will draw on their material.

The story of Bathsheba is not told until David is on the throne in Jerusalem. Upon it his larger story will pivot. It will mark the turning-point in his long career, the place where his rise becomes his decline. Hannah, on the other hand, appears right at the start of it all, when David is but a twinkle in the narrator's eye. Her story provides the beginning of this great chapter in Israel's story, just as Eve's began the whole work, and Shiphrah and Puah and the women of Exodus 2 presided over the accounts of Israel's