

Power, Courage, and Blessing

Exodus 1:8-2:10

The story in the book of Exodus may at first seem a strange text to modern Christians ears.

What does it have to do with us and the living of our Christian lives?

But let me invite you to pay close attention to this story with me.

As we get to know the characters that populate this narrative,

and it may begin to sound more familiar – even, possibly, too familiar
to modern ears.

The book of Exodus opens by telling us how good God has been
to the people of Israel.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and their offspring have been blessed.

Joseph, the son of Jacob, in a roundabout journey

has paved the way for his family to find refuge in Egypt
and be saved from the famine that has struck the land.

Because of Joseph's status in the Empire, his family will enjoy security with abundance.

Verse 7 attests to their blessing:

*The Israelites were fruitful and prolific;
they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong,
so that the land was filled with them.*

It is a picture of well-being, with great expectations for the future.

We are unprepared, therefore, for the shock of verse 8:

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.

“...a new king with a short memory!”^{si}

And this new king abandons the policies and commitments of his predecessors,

and Joseph's family quickly falls out of the royal favor.

In the book of Exodus, this new king – who remains unnamed – is the first to speak.

Unlike the book of Genesis, in which the first words are from the mouth of God,
bringing forth light and darkness, day and night, earth and heaven,
In Exodus the first words are spoken are from the mouth of an Egyptian king
to protect and expand the power of the empire.

The king is worried. And he says (first words spoken in the book):
*Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we.
Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and,
in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us
and escape from the land.*

It is interesting that the king does not fear defeat, but that the Israelites might escape.
The king's anxiety about loosing the cheap labor of the Israelites
moves him to establish a new policy – a policy of forced labor.
The new imperial policy is described twice as *oppressive*, and twice as *ruthless*.
The newly enslaved Israelites are put to work building storehouses
to support the economy of the empire,
to enhance the power of their oppressors.

*But, says Exodus, the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread,
so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.*

Something, or someone, is at work in this community of slaves
something or someone who has the power to bless the community
even as they bear the agonizing yoke of a ruthless Empire.

Now the king – who is still not named – is really nervous,
and in his anxiety he implements a policy of genocide
against the Hebrew slaves.

He commands the Hebrew midwives to kill all the boy babies of the Hebrew women
immediately upon their birth.

Notice the change in the language:

No longer does the text speak about Israelites, but about Hebrews.

This change to the term “the Hebrews” is an intentional one.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann points out that

the word “Hebrews” was derived from a name used throughout the ancient Middle East and “refers to *any group of marginal people who have no social standing own no land, and who endlessly disrupt ordered society.*

They may function variously as mercenaries, as state slaves, or as terrorists, depending on governmental policies and the state of the economy.

They are ‘low-class folk’ who are feared, excluded, or despised.

It is the common assumption of scholars that the biblical “Hebrews”

are a part of this lower social class of *hapiru* who are known in nonbiblical texts.”ⁱⁱ

In modern times, we find this class of people in a variety of places:

In cities, they sleep under bridges and on park benches.

In rural areas, they wandering from town to town, canvassing churches for gas and food money.

In Guatemala City, they live on the municipal garbage dump scrounging for a meal.

And, perhaps most poignantly today, they are the land-less and oppressed Palestinians, whose homes have been occupied, ransacked, bombed, and otherwise demolished by – irony of ironies – the *more* powerful Israelis.

But Hebrews – or *hapiru* – are a courageous and resilient population,

in part, because they have nothing left to lose,

but also because they know that God has the final power of blessing.

The Hebrew midwives feared God, thus they refuse to participate in this genocide,

even though it has been sanctioned by the policies of the state.

It seems that the motivations that work for a property-holding,

income-producing, future-oriented citizen of the Empire

have little meaning for a land-less, low-class Hebrew.

So the Hebrew midwives ignore the king's order,

and they make up some story about the vigorous Hebrew women
birthing their babies too quickly
so that the midwives are not able to get there in time.
*So God dealt well with the midwives,
and the people multiplied and became very strong.*

The king then issues another decree – this time to all the citizens of the Empire:

*Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile,
but you shall let every girl live.*

The anxious policies of the state have become not only diabolical, but irrational.

Now the scope of the narrative narrows a bit.

We focus in on a man in the house of Levi,
who married a Levite woman.

In the first part of the story we saw courage in the Hebrew midwives who defied the king,
and the Hebrew mothers whose determination to give life could not be restrained,

Now we see courage in a particular young Hebrew girl who watches over her baby brother
as he floats down the Nile in a basket,

into the bathing pool of Pharaoh's daughter.

And because of the courage of his shrewd, quick-thinking sister,

the boy is sent back by the princess to be raised by his own mother.

Quite a story,

in which two decrees of an angry king
go head-to-head with a couple of Hebrew midwives,
a Hebrew mother, and a Hebrew girl.

Should be an easy match match.

Should be as simple as dropping a smart-bomb into a refugee camp.

But there is a power at work here that the Empire doesn't take into reckoning.

A power on behalf of the poor and the oppressed.

A power that makes a way for the have-nots to claim a blessing.

A power for life, and for liberation. A power that will lead Hebrews to an Exodus.

So from the very beginning of our – the church’s story –
affairs of state are brought to the forefront.

It is a story about political economy, about state policy,
about oppressor and oppressed,
about an elite class who control the means of production
and build their wealth upon the bent backs of the powerless.

This story, which stands at the center of both the Jewish and Christian traditions,
is anything but purely spiritual.

It is a story about *this* world, in all of its messy political reality;
and about a God who enters the fray
to bless and to save
and to overcome the worst evils human beings can generate.

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It has been a little too convenient, through the years,
for the church to ignore the nature of this story –
that it is about politics, economics, and social structures.

It has been easier for us to spiritualize the Exodus, speaking only of inner bondage to sin,
and liberation from the spiritual power of sin.

One example of this tendency should suffice:

Dr. Henry Thornwell was a theologian of the Southern branch of the Presbyterian Church
in the years leading up to the Civil War.

Dr. Thornwell was an advocate of the Southern church’s official stance
that the Christian Gospel was a spiritual gospel,
that the church’s mission was to save souls,
that the issues of the political world, the economic world, the world of social systems,

was not the concern of the church,
and, therefore, that the church was not called to take any strong stand
for or against the institution of slavery.

History has not looked too kindly on the Southern church's attempt to escape
from the implications of its own story in the book of Exodus,
a story of forced labor, monopoly power, class conflict,
and a God who liberates the poor and the oppressed
and gives them a privileged status in a new kingdom.

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Today, it is easier for us to stand in judgment of our forbears who were blinded by self-interest
and failed to hear the prophetic voice of the Bible speaking to their own situation.

It is more difficult to examine where we – in our own day, our own context -
may be joined in an unholy alliance, or wrapped up in an oppressive system,
or blindly supportive of a policy that oppresses the “have-nots” in our world.

Consider this analysis by an observer of the Middle East situation today:

Our nation has “inflicted a devastating economic siege and periodic bombings on Iraq
in the name of enforcing United Nations Security Council resolutions.

A former Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, said on global television
that 500,000 dead Iraqi children were
“worth it to enforce the resolutions.”

“At the same time, the state of Israel stands in open...defiance
of more than 60 U.N. Security Council resolutions.

It is able to do so because the United States refuses to allow
any enforcement actions to be taken against Israel.’ⁱⁱⁱ

You don't have to be a supporter of terrorism to see why so many Arabs hate our foreign policy.

And you don't have to think too hard about the story of the Exodus
to see how modern day Israel (with the support of the American super-power)
now finds itself on the top-side
of the have/have-not conflict.

The modern state of Israel, and the modern church when it supports the Israeli war machine,
both stand under the judgment of our shared ancient story
about God's unflinching concern for people suffering at the margins of the Empire.

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In closing today, I don't have any easy answers for American Christians
about how to sort out these issues that come with being both
a citizen of God's kingdom
and at the same time a citizen of an earthly super-power.

Simply to say that there is no easy marriage
between the cross that stands at the front of our sanctuary
and the American flag that flies on our lawn.

The steps in between cross and flag make for a precarious walk.

But at the end of the day,
we place our trust in the one who was born into jeopardy
and endlessly hounded by the political and military maneuvering
of an anxious Empire.

Of course, the child Jesus escapes a state-sanctioned massacre,
just as the child Moses escaped.

And Jesus lives long enough to show us a more excellent way
the way of God's self-giving love, the way of God's justice.

But Jesus escapes only to face the persistent power of the Empire again
in the state execution of Good Friday.

But through the suffering of this Hebrew, through his powerlessness, through his humiliation,
God's will for life overcomes the death doled out by the powerful.

May we find in our Hebrew Savior,
a renewed hope, to give us the courage of the Hebrew women,
who fear God more than powerful men,
and may we learn to live as if we truly believe
that God's power for life can be trusted to the very end.
Amen.

ⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *Exodus*, New Interpreter's Bible, Volume I, p. 694. I am indebted to Brueggemann's writings and lectures for much of my social and rhetorical analysis of the Exodus text.

ⁱⁱ Brueggemann, p. 695.

ⁱⁱⁱ Charlie Reese, from article on www.reese.king-online.com.