

Delivered through the waters

## The Red Sea, the baptistery, and the birth canal

First Person

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Women tell birth stories. People celebrate birthdays, as do nations. The people of God, the Israelites, have several birth stories, several birthdays, but the most definitive, the one God insists on their celebrating, is Exodus—the mass exodus, the deliverance, the emergence of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, observed annually as Passover. “We were slaves, now we’re free, let’s eat,” my mother’s cousin Joe would say, nodding to the religious significance of the occasion before digging into beef brisket and noodle kugel. In contrast to that casual approach, my parents and our profoundly hospitable Orthodox Jewish friends, including a rabbi,

observed an elaborate, ritualized retelling of the birth story of my mother's people, of my people—the story in which God, the midwife, liberates suffering slaves from their bondage in *mitsrayim*, the Hebrew word for Egypt, which, as it happens, is related to the word for the pain of labor contractions.

Birth itself induces Pharaoh's hate and desire for domination when he notices that the Israelites in his land exceed Egyptians in number and power: their fertility is threatening. Yet in the upside-down logic of so many biblical narratives—*the last shall be first, blessed are the poor, when I am weak then I am strong*—increasingly ruthless Egyptian opposition only escalates Israel's expansion. Pharaoh revises his plans, directing his efforts at the fountainhead of Israelite abundance—their apparently astonishing fecundity, and the custodians of that fruitfulness: the midwives. *Kill every baby boy while the mother is yet on the birthstool. Collapse the moment of birth and the moment of death into one.*

Long before Moses grudgingly agrees to be God's assistant midwife in bringing Israel out of the protracted labor of their bondage, the midwives Shiphrah and Puah embody the courage and integrity that every midwifery manual I've ever come across—ancient, medieval, modern—cites as requirements of the profession. I imagine them with strong hands and a calm and cheerful demeanor, past childbearing age themselves, knowing eyes sparkling in sun-crinkled faces. Surely they knew that to defy the Pharaoh was to risk their own lives, but defy him they did, risk be damned. Their explanation, their honorable lie, is just what I would expect from a midwife: a nonchalant, self-effacing, and possibly feminist pronouncement on their clients' knack for giving birth speedily and easily. *Hebrew women are so vigorous they hardly need us; the babies are out by the time we can get there.* These unshrinking women are the midwives not just for individual Hebrew women. They are the midwives of the nation of Israel, uncomplicated both in their ardent commitment to the preservation of life that defines their profession and in their fear of God.

*Very well, Pharaoh says. Throw the boys in the Nile. Transform that water, that source of life and fertility, into a burial ground.* Then, of course, there is the brave mother hiding her baby boy in a vessel she fashions to shelter him: a basket—a little ark—of papyrus, bitumen, and pitch. She casts him among the reeds at the bank of the Nile while his sister, perhaps Miriam, brave soul, watches, waits, and arranges for her own mother, for the baby boy's own mother, to nurse him for wages until such time as the Pharaoh's daughter could raise him as her own, naming him Moses

because *I drew him out of the water*.

From the water of his possible death, his second mother draws him out: a second birth.

This story appears at the beginning of the book of Exodus and also encapsulates it. The story of God's deliverance of Israel is a birth story: God, the midwife, God, the mother, vigorously bearing Israel through Egypt, *mitsrayim*, labor pains, tunneling through the sea that could so easily overcome them, delivering them to dry land. "Narrow was the passageway through the Red Sea and narrow is the birth canal that stretches to allow the child out," as Tikva Frymer-Kensky puts it in her book of prayers and blessings for pregnant women, making explicit the suggestion that the passage through the Red Sea can be envisioned as a passage through a symbolic birth canal. And Miriam, Moses's sister, rejoices when they are delivered.

Take note: the people echoing God's deliverance, in this précis, this pithy preview, are women. They are midwives and mothers of a nation: matriarchs. They are the hands and feet and images of God, a mother God, a midwife God, braving suffering, moving strongly through the risk of death to the promise of life—of fruitful, flourishing life.

The deliverance of God's people is a birth story, and women are the midwives.

My husband, Tim, and I have lived in four different countries on three different continents and in three different U.S. states since our two sons were born, in 2005 and 2008. Aware of our peregrinations, people are often curious to hear my children talk about their travels—and not infrequently about their respective birthplaces. Aidan, our firstborn, was the fifth- or sixth-generation male Stone to be born in Shasta County, California, but Graeme was born in Scotland and has a Scottish birth certificate.

When asked, "Where were you born?" Graeme has sometimes replied, "In a bathtub." He pretends not to know what's really meant by the question, as he enjoys the laugh that this elicits.

The birth pool at Forth Park Maternity Hospital in Kirkcaldy was less like a bathtub and more like the baptistery in the church in Greenport, where I grew up. I pitied those poor paedobaptists (as we Baptists referred to them) who merely sprinkled water from fonts onto babies who wouldn't even remember. Our baptisms were

much more dramatic, usually involving adults telling exciting conversion stories in which the person about to be baptized recounted all sorts of thrilling but ultimately unfulfilling sins of which he or she had now repented before being immersed by my dad. Our baptistery was made for full-body dunking.

The baptistery was under the floor where my father stood to preach on ordinary Sundays, an arrangement not dissimilar to that for the Bedford Falls high school gymnasium in *It's a Wonderful Life*, into which Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed plunge unexpectedly while dancing the Charleston, all while misapprehending the shrieking of the crowd as approbation of their performance. The floor beneath the pulpit was flimsy. During a boring sermon I amused myself by imagining it giving way as in a dunk-the-clown carnival gag, accidentally rebaptizing my very surprised dad. I used to help him fill it and sometimes longed to take a dip in it myself after I'd learned to swim. But although we Baptists didn't believe in such a thing as holy water, to swim in a baptistery would've constituted some kind of sacrilege nonetheless.

I arrived at the hospital in Scotland laboring hard, contractions coming so close together that it took considerable time simply to move from the car to the front door. Sitting in the car, I breathed and hummed through one contraction, then got out of the car, walked several feet, and stopped to breathe and hum through another. I repeated this process several times, entered, repeated it several more, and finally made it to the midwifery unit. "Ach, but you're just a wee lass! We're gonna hafta let some water out o' the bearth pool!" the midwife greeted me cheerfully and led me into the assigned room where, in the shamelessness of labor, I stripped to the skin piece by piece, strewing my clothes about and staggering toward the pool. I lowered myself into the calm water of the rectangular birth pool so very like the baptistery of my Baptist childhood.

It is one thing to say that Jesus is the bread of life and another to put the bread the priest has consecrated and declared to be the body of Christ into your mouth and chew it. It is one thing to talk about the symbolism of water, so suggestive of both life and death, and to imagine grace and alleviation as a buoy and hope as an anchor through turbulent and painful times—and it is another to rock back and forth, creating literal ripples and swells that slosh and slap with the rhythm of your own body's rumbling, with the movement that comes both from you and through you, that is you and is not you, the child within you struggling to move through the waters of your womb, the you that cries out, both captain and captive on this

voyage, both dependent upon and grateful for the comfort offered by your traveling companions, yet aware also of being so nearly alone inside your skin.

I rocked and moaned, and as the time grew very near, I cried out or, more precisely, bellowed. When each swell subsided, I whispered apologies, conscious still of my surroundings and not wanting to be perceived as the “loud American” of British stereotypes. *Don't apologize, you brave lass, you're doing so well!* In childbirth, what appears to be weakness—hollering, for example—is simply the steam being given off by fiery strength.

Christians use the image of God as a warrior much more than they consider the image of God as a laboring woman. Whether they are looking to God as warrior as justification for wars (cultural or otherwise) or with an amalgam of discomfort and confusion, as in historic peace church traditions and certain progressive and mainline churches, it is not an unfamiliar image. But Christians across the spectrum of cultural, theological, and political points of view seem equally to neglect biblical images of God as a laboring woman.

These images seem relatively few when compared to the image of God as warrior; perhaps that explains the discrepancy, though I suspect a different cause—one deeply rooted in shame about women's bodies, vestigial theological misunderstandings about the nature of pain in childbirth (that is, believing that it is a curse), and the pervading sense that God, who is spirit, is somehow, in fact, more like a man, a man's man, than like a woman.

God as warrior doesn't do much for me, but I cherish the image of God as a laboring woman. The book of Isaiah joins the two images closely enough that I can imagine they share more in common than I might have suspected: the Lord goes forth like a warrior, stirring up fury, crying out, shouting, and showing himself mighty—and, in the next line, switches to the first person to speak as a laboring woman: *I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant.* Here God is a woman warrior, preparing to create something new. She is the creator of all that has come before, and, in the crisis and agony of labor, everything seems to be coming apart, undone, like the de-creation of the flood. She will level rough places, she will dry up the lakes, she will turn rivers into islands. This entails suffering, struggling, panting, bellowing, but she is making something new. Her pain is not destructive, it is not meaningless, it is productive. It is fruitful. It begets new life for the children she has begotten and will continue to beget: *Do not fear. I have redeemed you. I will call you by name. You are*

*mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. When you pass through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned.*

Isaiah speaks of God as a woman in labor, groaning to bring forth new life.

I was passing through those waters, through those rivers, and the fire had begun to burn, unquenched even by the waters. *No more!* I moaned. *God, please, no more.*

*You will meet your baby very soon,* the midwife whispered. I held Tim's arms, which, just above the surface of the water, held me. A student midwife, quietly observing from the corner, mouthed her encouragement—*almost there!*

Then he was there, this stranger, passing through the waters of my womb and the waters of the birthing pool, drawn out of the waters with my own hands. I gazed at his red, swollen face that, even with its squashed nose, looked, as had his brother's, strangely familiar. *It's you, of course. Here you are.* He squalled at the indignity and discomfort of his journey. "Hello, Graeme," Tim said. *Hello, Graeme,* I said.

*Do not fear. I have delivered you. I have called you by name, and you are mine. You have passed through those waters, and I was with you, and I am with you, and I will be with you.*

You cannot convince me that the birth pool was not in fact a baptistery, that the water from which he was taken was not holy water, that I, his mother, was not, by God's help, godlike in my deliverance, in guiding him through the waters of my womb, through the waters of his first baptism, that perilous voyage through the sea, and calling him by name.

In Judaism, a woman immerses herself in the *mikveh*—the ritual bath—after she gives birth, not because she is dirty, but because in giving life it is as if she has touched death.

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