

How the midwives Shiphrah and Puah mock the violence of empire

## They use Pharaoh's tools to dismantle oppression.

by [Kat Armas](#) in the [June 30, 2021](#) issue



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When I first picked up a copy of Miguel De La Torre's *The Quest for the Cuban Christ* as a seminarian, I was looking forward to reading about Jesus and my foremothers and forefathers. Needless to say, my excitement quickly dissipated when I read the first page: "Women were raped. Children were disemboweled. Men fell prey to the invaders' swords."

The story of *mi gente* involves the story of the native Cubans—the Taínos—being invaded and tortured by Spain. Worse, it involves Spain using their imported "Christ" to justify the greed for gold and glory. Spain exploited and oppressed the so-called heathens they encountered in the name of this "Christ," who supported the ethnocide and genocide of the Taínos as well as the forced transportation of hundreds of thousands of enslaved African people to the island.

Ethnocide, genocide, slavery, and forced relocation in the name of Christianity aren't unique to Cuban history; they describe the histories of Native people across the globe. For centuries, scripture has been used and misused to justify such atrocities.

Although the Bible has been used as a weapon of destruction in many ways, it's also important to acknowledge that throughout the centuries, marginalized people have found themselves within the narrative too—often claiming the Bible's reality as their own and thus exceeding the bounds of imperial exegesis. Reading De La Torre kindled in me a desire to approach scripture from the perspective of *los humildes*—the colonized, the marginalized, the survivors of violence.

The midwives in Exodus are spiritual leaders and healers akin to Indigenous *curanderas*.

I began with Exodus. Moses takes center stage in the first chapter of Exodus as the child who escapes Pharaoh's order to kill all of the Hebrew sons, thanks in large part to his *hermana* Miriam and his *mamá* Jochebed. But before that, Moses is saved by two other women: Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives who make the brave and dangerous decision to set the scene for liberation.

Exodus 1 follows Joseph's death in Egypt. The patriarchal narratives of Genesis 12-50 conclude with the descendants of Israel living comfortably in Egypt as a large family group. Israel's political and economic fortunes were secure until the death of Joseph, who had been appointed by Pharaoh as governor. After his death, the fate of the descendants of Israel hangs in the balance.

By the time Exodus begins, many years have passed and the family has grown into a large nation—whose people are now held as slaves in Egypt, the ruling empire of the Levant. The area that the Israelites are settled in is the well-watered eastern section of the Nile Delta, called Goshen. Because of its proximity to Asia and because two major routes between Egypt and Syria-Palestine passed through it, Goshen served as a haven for Asiatic immigrants and a gateway through which travelers, traders, and invaders passed on their way to Egypt. This made the area strategically important for the security of Egypt. So Pharaoh is prompted to put pressure on the Israelites living there.

The Israelites remain in Goshen long after the famine that drove them out of Canaan is over. Perhaps they remain there out of comfort, giving themselves an opportunity to prosper, multiply, and form a coherent society, preserving their identity through

the memory of their ancestors, the patriarchs and matriarchs, and their covenant relationship with God.

Marginalized people have often found themselves within the biblical narrative.

Concerned by Israel's growth, Pharaoh puts a decree in place to curb Israelite reproduction, first by forced labor. However, the text says, "the more they were oppressed, the more they grew and spread, so much so that the Egyptians started to look at the Israelites with disgust and dread" (Exod. 1:12).

Up until this point, only the men are mentioned in the story. But the duty of producing healthy children (whom Pharaoh worries will take over) falls to the women. Women are the ones who carry children to term, deliver them, and raise them to adulthood. In the ancient world, this was no small feat, as infant mortality was extremely high. Perhaps for the Israelites this was due in part to the fact that women were expected to engage in forced labor while also bearing and raising children—not unlike the expectation placed on Black women who were enslaved in the American South.

"The king's logic is not unsound," writes Old Testament scholar Jacqueline Lapsley. She points out the depth of irony found in this part of the story: despite being forced to engage in hard labor, the women are able to not only maintain but increase the number of healthy children they carry to term and raise to adulthood. "In every other case the conditions of hard labor and poverty would tend to a decrease in infant survival rates. But these people, and specifically these women, defy the logic of suffering and death by 'exploding' with children (v. 12)."

Pharaoh thinks men pose a threat to his power, but he overlooks the real threat.

Killing them with forced labor doesn't work. So Pharaoh decides to try getting rid of the infant sons by asking the midwives to be the ones to kill them. We might wonder, Why the midwives? Pharaoh's army could easily carry out his request. Does he hope to trick the Hebrew people into thinking all these infant deaths are stillbirths? Perhaps a plague or judgment from their God?

Pharaoh thinks men pose a threat to his power, but he overlooks the real threat: God is using the women to set the scene for liberation. Enslaved to patriarchal ideology, Pharaoh disregards the women's power and character. But scripture does not. In fact, the narrator of the exodus story shows us how the women begin to take action.

The story reveals with pointed irony the fallacy of the patriarchal lie that men are more valuable than women. When Pharaoh decrees twice that the girls shall live (Exod. 1:16, 22), he is intensifying the very power—namely, the women’s power—that will eventually lead to his undoing.

In the ancient Near East, midwives typically had two types of tasks. They first performed the physical duties involved in childbirth, which included preparing any necessary equipment and, of course, delivering the child. But midwives played spiritual and healing roles too. In fact, midwifery was often understood as a religious vocation in the ancient world. Not only did a midwife comfort the mother, she prompted magical or religious protection over the woman and her infant by performing rituals, such as placing ointment on the child and rubbing the child with salt.

These were seen as sacred acts. The embodied wisdom of the midwives in Exodus comes together with their faith in God to bring forth new life into the world. The text tells us that because the midwives fear God, they don’t do what the king of Egypt has told them to do.

We often talk about the midwives in passing, as if they are nothing more than women who disobey Pharaoh. But history proves they are more than that. These midwives are ancient keepers of wisdom, our ancestral *abuelitas* who carried *medicina* in their hands. And they are women who love God. Their faith—lived out through their roles as spiritual healers and cocreators, *co-madres* of new life—prompts them to engage in civil disobedience to enact justice, not unlike many courageous *mujeres* throughout history.

Shiphrah and Puah are spiritual leaders and healers akin to *curanderas*. In traditional Indigenous culture—as well as many Latine cultures today—*curanderas* are people who have a spiritual wisdom to cure everyday ailments using food, herbs, and prayers. *Curanderas* take a holistic approach to wellness, generally believing that disease is caused by social, psychological, physical, environmental, and spiritual factors. These traditional forms of healing are often demonized in Western culture, but *curanderas* are very similar to the ancient midwives blessed by God.

Instead of killing the Hebrew boys as instructed, the midwives let them live—an audacious move. And there’s something unique about their plan. In Exodus 1:18, Pharaoh finds out what they’re doing and asks them, “Why have you done this? Why

have you let the boys live?”

The midwives answer, “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive” (v. 19). However, scholars argue that the word *hayot* in this verse is softened too much when it’s translated as “vigorous,” “strong,” or “lively,” as it usually is. The literal translation is closer to “brutish, animalistic, unrefined.”

Hebrew scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky advocates for “animals” as the proper translation, arguing that the midwives certainly would not compliment the Hebrews as compared to Egyptian women. Instead, knowing that Pharaoh sees Israel as other, they make an ethnic slur belittling these so-called others. In this way, they demonstrate to Pharaoh that they are not in favor of the Hebrews, essentially causing him to fall for their trick.

Thus, it might be that the midwives are not just disobeying Pharaoh but using his own cultural bias against him, essentially using the tools of empire to deconstruct empire—a common tactic in anti-imperial rhetoric. In postcolonial theory, *mimicry* refers to the act of taking on the colonizer’s politics or attitudes as a form of mockery.

The courage of these two midwives in defying Pharaoh is motivated by the fact that they fear God more than they fear Pharaoh. The fear of God is associated with courage and *sabiduría* to act carefully among oppressing powers and to resist them—in ways not used by those with access to coercive authority.

Womanist biblical scholar Renita Weems notes that the midwives’ deceit is a conventional weapon of the powerless—especially women in the Hebrew scriptures—against those in power. Shiphrah and Puah use “the weapon of deception where the ‘truth’ is not defined by the powerful but becomes the priority of the underclass to interpret and shape according to their own reality.”

Pharaoh is unsuccessful in his attempt to exterminate God’s people because he underestimates the tenacity and creative power of the midwives. The humor in their answer to him is compounded by God’s response. Because the midwives fear God and thereby disobey Pharaoh, God rewards them by making them very successful and granting them families of their own. More successful midwives means that fewer children die at birth, and as a result, Israel grows even more numerous. “They are the mothers of a revolution waged by women,” writes womanist scholar Wilda

Gafney. “They likely enlisted untold numbers of birthing-women and expectant mothers in their resistance movement.”

Ultimately, the midwives’ resistance sets the stage for others, including Moses’ mother, Jochebed, to resist the violence of Pharaoh’s empire. In this way, they act as midwives in more ways than one. They birth resistance in the narrative’s other *mujeres*.

What fascinates me about this story (and many others in scripture) is how God blesses civil disobedience and acts of deceit. The midwives’ disobedience to the king awards them divine favor: “because the midwives respected God, God gave them households of their own” (Exod. 1:21). Becoming a trickster, as it is typically called in folklore, is not an anomaly in scripture. In fact, many women in the Bible and in our society who experience violence and other forms of oppression are forced to find a new kind of wisdom to ensure their survival.

In one of his later books, *Embracing Hopelessness*, De La Torre writes that desperate people sometimes must engage in “ethical praxis of *jodiendo*.” In Spanish, *joder* is a vulgar word used in informal conversation—a word most of our *abuelitas* probably wouldn’t want us to utter. Essentially, it means “screw it” or to “screw with” the system. What De La Torre describes is an ethics that screws with the prevailing power structures to create instability within structures of oppression.

Reading scripture critically allows us to see the divine *joderon* in characters like Shiphrah and Puah, who are blessed by God because of their ability to *sobrevivir*. As De La Torre puts it,

*joderones* become tricksters who lie to reveal truth. They lie, cheat, joke, and deceive to unmask deeper truths obscured by the dominant culture’s moralists. Such liberative praxis may be dismissed as immoral by the dominant culture; still, tricksters remain ethical, operating in a realm beyond good and evil, beyond what society defines as right or wrong. *Joderones* are consummate survivors, serving as exemplars for the disenfranchised in need of surviving the reality of disenfranchisement.

Shiphrah and Puah remind us that even in adversity and oppression, women are capable of *jodiendo* their way into more desirable positions.

Meeting Pharaoh's violence with deceit, the Hebrew midwives—like so many women after them—act as divine *joderones* by working in society to uncover its inconsistencies, inequalities, and injustices. Paradoxically, while they deceive, they also tell the truth. By exposing the deficiencies of what is and offering an opportunity to see what could be, they advance justice for the whole community—and they are blessed by God because of it.

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