‘AND THEY FEARED GOD’: EXPLORING FERTILITY, BIRTH, AND THE FEAR OF GOD THROUGH THE MIDWIVES OF EXODUS 1

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**INTRODUCTION**

Birth is an event that all people have been involved with in some way. Every culture has their own unique traditions and folklores surrounding it. Many women also experience it firsthand. It is one of the first physical events involving humanity in scripture, and is repeated throughout the Bible in a physical as well as spiritual manner. While fertility, conception, and birth may seem like personal and human ideas, the Lord’s direct involvement in all of these events is evident throughout the Hebrew Bible in many scenarios. In several narratives, God is shown to open and close women’s wombs upon their request, according to his prophecy, as a blessing, or as a curse. A common thread throughout women’s fertility journeys is the intense desire to take part in birth and conceive a child. Women like Sarah, Hannah, and Rachel interceded and acted to achieve their birth.

Two midwives compose a fundamental story regarding birth in Exodus 1. This narrative contains many social and political implications. The narrative accentuates the eagerness of women to do anything to protect their right to birth and the rights of others. Through the midwives, the pattern of being tested, passing the test due to the fear of God, and receiving a blessing becomes apparent. When tested by Pharaoh and by God, the midwives without yet having received the law, pass the test and provide an illustration to all of Israel. The midwives and their powerful actions create implications for the true meaning of the fear of the Lord. The blessing that the midwives received was poignantly the very thing they aimed to protect thus adding to the cultural and political irony of the text. While birth is common throughout personal narratives in scripture, the metaphorical side of Birth, particularly pertaining to God and the cross, completes the picture of the midwives’ intensity in their decision and act of defending the babies and birthing women. Birth in all of its powerful bellowing and panting holds prevailing nuances that ideologically affect all birthing women. God’s passion for birth is matched by two women, Shiphrah and Puah, which is unprecedented and never recurring, making Exodus 1 a powerful tool in the instruction on the fear of God, the motif of testing, and the innate value in birth.

**THE LORD’S INVOLVEMENT WITH BIRTH**

**The First Birth**

Birth is one of the first events in Scripture and it is an idea recurrent in words of encouragement, law, and narrative throughout the Bible.[[1]](#footnote-2) Pain experienced during birth is used as a metaphor in several settings in Isaiah, the “fruit of the womb” is portrayed as a blessing throughout the Psalms, and many guidelines are given regarding the birth in Leviticus. There are pieces of extrabiblical literature that also honor conception and birth such as Egyptian mythopoetic texts about Khnum who was said to “mold and shape each human being at conception upon his wheel.”[[2]](#footnote-3) However, the physical act of birth through the physical bodies of women “has been awarded very limited space” throughout much of human record and Hebrew literature.[[3]](#footnote-4) The birth discourses in Scripture are often reduced to a single formula: “she conceived and gave birth” (e.g. Gen 4:1, 4:17, 21:2, 30:17, 30:23 and 38:3; I Sam 2:21; Is 8:3; Hos 1:8, and elsewhere).[[4]](#footnote-5) This exact phrasing is used 34 times throughout Scripture excluding many other occurrences with slightly different wording. Despite the restricted space and limited description, Scripture makes it clear in several ways that God is active in every step of birth.

A recurring theme throughout the book of Genesis is “the attempt and failure of human effort in obtaining a blessing that only God can give” which is often seen through attempts to have children.[[5]](#footnote-6) In the beginning, God figuratively “birthed” Adam from the ground and Eve from Adam. Literally, Eve gave birth to Cain in Genesis 4, which is the first documented traditional birth in Scripture which shifted birth from being fabricated to reproductive. The Lord instructed Adam and Eve to participate in the act of conception and birth by being fruitful and multiplying. The act of conceiving a child is made known in Genesis 4 through Adam, “knowing his wife Eve.” While this phrase seems like it only involved humanity, Eve acknowledges that she created a man with the Lord.[[6]](#footnote-7) Specifically, she says קנ’ת’ א’שׁ את־’הוה or “I have created a man equally with the Lord.”[[7]](#footnote-8) In this phrase Eve appears as if she is reveling in his birth. Interestingly, the text does not say that Adam “knew” eve prior to birthing Abel. The passage also says that Eve “again” bore Abel leading some, such as Josephus, to believe that Cain and Abel are twins which would make the first birth not exclusively Cain.[[8]](#footnote-9) Some interpret Cain’s name to originate from the word קנהmeaning “to acquire” emphasizing the acquisition from the Lord rather than the creation of Cain.[[9]](#footnote-10) Since the beginning, even an act that seems utterly human and only officially requiring two people, has involved the Lord. The Lord’s association makes birth a divine act resulting in a blessing that only the Lord could provide. The product of Adam and Eve’s sexual interactions, resulted in a supernatural birth and fulfillment of God’s commandment to be fruitful and multiply.

**Barrenness and Birth**

God’s involvement in conception, birth, and fertility, is seen throughout several passages in the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew Bible presents fertility as a gift and blessing from God and most pregnancies were said to occur when the Lord “remembers” and “opens their wombs.” One eminent example of barrenness, faithfulness, and the Lord’s association to conception is found in the story of Hannah. Hannah, whose name means “gracious” or “favor,” is the wife of Zophim who belong to Jacob’s lineage.[[10]](#footnote-11) Rather uncommon to many women portrayed in Scripture, Hannah appears to have relatively unblemished character and is shown to be noble and a benediction. Despite having a husband and home, Hannah had a strong desire to bear a child which became agony, grief, and a burden that she carried with her. While unclear as to the motivations, the Lord’s involvement in Hannah’s barrenness is revealed in 1 Samuel 1:6 where the Lord “had closed Hannah’s womb” (1Sam 1:6). While, childless, Hannah was never prayer-less. Hannah constantly bargained with God, took her silent supplications to the Lord, and pleaded her innocence with the objective of conceiving a child. Ultimately, the Lord granted her petition and gave her Samuel whose name suitably means “asked of the Lord” (1 Sam 1:20). The fulfillment of Hannah’s intense desire exhibits the Lord’s longing to move on behalf of women desiring to conceive and his commitment to the process. Hannah, along with other women with fertility issues in the Hebrew Bible, strongly believed that the Lord was the one responsible for the creation of life and children and was the sole being able to “convert a woman into a mother.”[[11]](#footnote-12)

Like Hannah, Rebekah the wife of Isaac, was “fair to look upon” and renowned for her manner, tact, great energy, and faith.[[12]](#footnote-13) Motherhood arrived to Rebekah later in life. Resembling Hannah, Rebekah recognized God’s promise to give her a child and she recognized that the Abrahamic covenant could not be broken. In a society where polygamy was commonplace (Gen 4:19-25), Isaac was not shown to have taken any other wives or handmaids so the decedents to fulfill the covenant had to have come from Rebekah. Unlike most tales of barren women in Scripture such as Rachel, Hannah, and Sarah pleading and interceding to the Lord directly, in Rebekah’s case, Isaac interceded on her behalf and prayed for the Lord to grant them a child. It was upon receiving this petition that the Lord “granted his prayer” and Rebekah conceived. The years of waiting revealed that the Lord has his own timeline for the fulfillment of purpose and for the answering of prayers. God’s participation in fertility and the journey to birth is present through the stories of Hannah, Rachel, and others. A common theme in these stories is the Lord’s timing being significantly different from the timing of those desiring to partake in the sacred act of having a child. The report of a women’s barrenness can also often be a harbinger of the impending birth of a leader. Core mothers of Israel, Sarah, Rachel, and Rebekah, as well as Elizabeth in the gospels, were all barren and had their wombs opened by the Lord. These women would go on to conceive the foundational patriarchs of Israel and a central forerunner for the Christian faith. Each of these women’s bareness served a greater theological purpose that the Lord’s involvement made clear. God’s involvement with wombs appears to intensify the tension surrounding barrenness and the divine promise of a child.

**Rachel and the Teraphim**

Another common aspect of narratives where women are unable to conceive is their effort to achieve fertility by any means necessary. All of the instances of barrenness discussed previously contain elements of this intense desire to have a child and corresponding actions including prayer and fasting. However, a prominent and unusual example is in the story of Rachel, Jacob, and the Teraphim. The passage in Genesis 31 is the conclusion to a long history of family strife. In Genesis 29, Laban, the patriarch of the complex family and the father of Rachel and Leah, tricked Jacob into working for him to marry his daughter. Instead Laban gave Jacob the daughter he did not desire to be with and had him work for the other daughter Rachel yet. Due to the discord and complicated situation, the Lord tells Jacob to return to the “land of his ancestors” (Gen. 31:17). Before Jacob could flee with his wife and belongings, a confrontation took place after the “sons of Laban” and Laban accused Jacob of stealing his father’s Teraphim.

The תרפים, like the ones that caused the tumult between Laban and Jacob, are mentioned 15 times throughout the Old Testament. Translated as idols, gods, or household gods, the תרפים served as cultic accoutrements. They were also used for divination, acquiring oracles, fertility, and were viewed as signs of authority (Judg. 16:5, 1 Sam. 15:22, 2 Kgs 23:24).[[13]](#footnote-14) It is alleged that the household gods were worshiped by members of a household and protected the family in return.[[14]](#footnote-15) Some commentators suggest that they were images of ancestors that individuals are intended to consult.[[15]](#footnote-16) Regardless of their exact depictions, it is evident that the תרפים were regarded as able to foresee the future and benefited the worshiper in some aspect of their life.[[16]](#footnote-17) While briefly mentioned, the תרפים recognizably play an essential role in the lives of Laban and Rachel throughout the narrative of Genesis 31.

Ancient commentaries and traditional historians offer several explanations to the reasoning behind Rachel’s theft. Josephus supposed that Rachel stole the idols to acquire pardon from her father in the event that their family was discovered.[[17]](#footnote-18) Rashi and Ibn Ezra propose that Rachel’s intent in stealing the idols was to prevent her father from practicing idolatry and from consulting the gods to find the whereabouts of Rachel’s family. The two most general possibilities commonly drawn from Rachel’s act of stealing the idols are that Rachel disapproved of her father’s idol worship or that Rachel herself was an idol worshipper.[[18]](#footnote-19) While these suppositions are the most universally received, there is no evidence in Scripture to propose that Rachel disapproved of idol worship. I suppose an alternative motive in Rachel’s action of taking the idols: maintaining her fertility.

Barrenness was and still is severely stigmatizing. Without modern scientific and medical advances, a divine cause, punishment, or curse, would be the inevitable thoughts surrounding persisting infertility. Rachel’s infertility caused her grief and great distress throughout her storyline in Genesis. This was particularly evident in Genesis 30 where Rachel equaled not having children to death. When Jacob hears her “sinful utterance,” he responds, “Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?”, implying and acknowledging God’s place in the situation.[[19]](#footnote-20) In Genesis 29:31, God’s involvement in Rachel’s fertility is evident in the statement, “he opened her (Leah’s) womb but Rachel was barren.” While the text does not explicitly state that God closed Rachel’s womb, it implies that God has the power to open a womb and chose not to grant Rachel that license at that time. However, despite Rachel’s actions, God “remembered Rachel” and opened her womb at the conclusion of Genesis 30. Several of Rachel’s actions previous to and even after bearing her son imply that she was eager for children and not completely satisfied with solely having her son. Although conceiving and bearing a child is what Rachel wanted, there are reasons to believe that Rachel was not fully satisfied. One of which is her son Joseph’s name which means “may the Lord add to me another son.” This meaning strongly implies her discontent with what God has provided her (Gen 30:24). I think that Rachel ultimately believed the idols would aid her infertility which led to her theft. Her dissatisfaction, I believe, was the driving force that led her to place her trust in idols for her fertility rather than the Lord. Regardless of Rachel’s mistakes and frustration, her strong desire to have children is an admirable characteristic common to many women in the Hebrew Bible and beyond. It is commonly argued that women and children did not have legal standing and therefore would have been “considered antithetical to the ancient images of the property-holding male head of the household.”[[20]](#footnote-21) In addition to emotional hardship, not conceiving and bearing children was a “threat to communal survival.”[[21]](#footnote-22) Rachel’s willingness to exhaust all of her resources to experience giving birth and becoming a mother show the significance that this status had for women.

**PROTECTING BIRTH: THE MIDWIVES IN EXODUS**

**Structure, History, and Setting**

The women of Exodus 1 display a relentless desire, similar to Rachel’s, to participate in the world of birth and contain great passion for protecting women’s desire to become mothers. Like with the rest of the Torah, including Rachel’s discourses, most modern scholarship agrees that the book of Exodus was composed from one or more writers or compilers that wrote “several earlier written versions of the same events.”[[22]](#footnote-23) The central principles of Judaism found in Exodus all center around the covenant established between God, the Jewish people, and the fear of God (Exod 20:20). Exodus begins by listing the names of the sons of Israel and states that Jacob was in Egypt. The passage explains that although Jacob and his brothers and that generation died, the Israelites were growing in number. In retaliation, Pharaoh determined to enslave and oppress the Israelites to gain control over them so that they would not fight against or leave Egypt. The chapter is presented in three sections. In the first segment in Exodus 1:8-14, Pharaoh has the Egyptians place more of a burden on the Hebrews. However, even with the added oppression, the thrive and increase in number. Second, the midwives are instructed to kill Hebrew male babies (Exod 1:15-22).[[23]](#footnote-24) In the third and final section, Pharaoh turns to the people for assistance and commands them to turn all male babies over to the Nile (Exod 1:22-2:10).

The failure of Pharaoh’s plan of overpowering the Israelites by force and the desperation for him to accomplish his efforts is made apparent by the shift to a murderous plot in v. 15. In this verse, Pharaoh summons two midwives whose cooperation is “essential to Pharaoh’s plan B.”[[24]](#footnote-25) Pharaoh commands the women to kill any baby boys that they are helping deliver. This plan would theoretically “eliminate potential Israelite military power” and subdue Pharaoh’s fear, leaving him in control.[[25]](#footnote-26) The connection between masculinity and fertility within the Hebrew Bible presents itself in a number of ways, one being that the juxtaposition of the two ideas determines the value and security of the future. Pharaoh was fearful for the future which the fertility of the Hebrews would bring.

The rather short story with two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, in vv. 15-21 contains much political discourse, prodigious irony, ethnic tension, and testing. These aspects of the text will be discussed and examined primarily with the interpretation that the women were themselves Hebrew. The midwives are preceded by the oppression of the Israelites and Pharaoh’s frustration with how numerous and powerful they grew (Exod 1:9). Shiphrah and Puah and their fruitful story is regrettably proceeded by the second attempt by the king do subdue and stifle the growth of the Israelites.[[26]](#footnote-27) Still, the Hebrew Bible begins with women who “act courageously, defy oppression” and who are resourceful with the goal of defending birth.[[27]](#footnote-28) The female powered rebellion continues on throughout Exodus and the phrase “fear of God” is awarded and extended to both genders from Exodus 1 onwards.

**The Ethnic Dilemma**

Before examining the actions of the midwives that Pharaoh intended to utilize in his plot to suppress the Hebrews, the midwives must be identified more than simply by name. The first information about Shiphrah and Puah that must be acquired is their occupation and the exact scope of practice of midwives during the time in which they lived. Midwifery has inevitably been an occupation as long as there have been births. A midwifes’ role includes prenatal care, birth assistance, and perinatal care. The occupation of midwifery typically consists of more intimate relationships between patients and providers than physician led care. There are varying methods within the midwifery style of care as well as many cultural variables. There are several mentions of midwifery in ancient Egyptian literature and art from the Old Kingdom and within the Sixth Dynasty tomb chapel, designating it as “an occupation of some importance” within the time and culture that the story of Shiphrah and Puah took place.[[28]](#footnote-29) To fully understand the nuances of the inclusion of the midwives in Exodus, it is beneficial to know what culture they come from and practice.

There are many ethnic discrepancies in the Exodus 1 which are the subject of much debate and controversy. The midwives summoned by Pharaoh in v. 15, Shiphrah and Puah, are titled “Hebrew” in most Biblical translations. They are not only called Hebrew but are also provided with “perfectly good Northwest-Semitic names of women from the first half of the second millennium.”[[29]](#footnote-30) It is notable that while Exodus contains great discourse surrounding infamous Biblical “heroes,” “the first individual Israelites mentioned in the narrative are women.”[[30]](#footnote-31) The occupation of midwifery was one of the few professions open to women and seems to have been “a prestigious profession in ancient Egypt.”[[31]](#footnote-32) There is no explanation as to why the Pharaoh contacted these women or how chose Shiphrah and Puah specifically. Ibn Ezra supposes that the two women were the overseers of all of the practicing midwives in the area who were held accountable to the medical authorities for all of the women practicing under them.[[32]](#footnote-33) It is a rather absurd thought that only two midwives were responsible for the care of the wives of the approximate 600,000 Israelite men in Egypt.[[33]](#footnote-34) However, the text does not explicitly state anything regarding the women’s occupations besides their titles. Perhaps if the women were in fact Hebrew, summoning them was a calculated method of frightening them and expecting the fear to spread throughout the community through them. However, there is some debate as to whether this means that the women were Hebrew or whether they were Egyptian midwives to the Hebrew women. Hebrew texts tend to understand the women as Hebrew while “in the Greek and Latin versions, they are understood to be midwives to the Hebrews.”[[34]](#footnote-35) Determining whether the midwives were Egyptian or Hebrew is described as “one of the most nettling ambiguities of the text.”[[35]](#footnote-36)

The description of the women is that they are למ’לדת העבר’תwhich can be translated as “Hebrew midwives” or “midwives to the Hebrews.” One translation implies that the women are themselves Hebrew, and one that they are Egyptians servicing Hebrew women. This discrepancy is the source of the debate surrounding the women’s nationality. The midrash and other traditions recognize the midwives as Hebrew women and suppose that this interpretation is more appropriate for the inevitable birth that leads to the redemption of Israel. While the origin of עבר’ is unknown, the first documented usage in the Torah is in Genesis 14:13 and is directed towards Abraham.[[36]](#footnote-37) While there are many opinions on the origin of this title, each supposition comes with a considerable number of objections. Regardless, the word carries with it many implications and is often the designation “of Israelites from a foreign perspective.”[[37]](#footnote-38) The inseparable preposition,ל , is prefixed directly to ,למ’לדת which is in the Piel participle form. In the two other instances this verb is used in Exodus 1, it is translated as “for the midwives” in v. 18, and “to the midwives” in v. 20. All three occurrences are in the Piel participle form. When used in the Piel infinitive form in other instances’לד , is translated as “to help give birth” and “midwife.”[[38]](#footnote-39) In all other occurrences of the Piel form, there is no occasion where ’לד is followed by העבר’תor any other ethnicity/designation.[[39]](#footnote-40) The Piel form is the only instance in which ’לד or מ’לדת is translated as “midwife.” The preposition, ל (to, for) is attached to ’לד indicating that the midwives are “for” or “to” the עבר’. However, the definite article before העבר’ת denotes the addition of the word “the” in English in front of Hebrew.

Since there are no other instances comparable to Exodus 1:15, the exact translation is difficult to acquire or determine. Ancient readers and listeners may have known “what we cannot now recover with certainty.”[[40]](#footnote-41) Nonetheless, I am inclined to believe that with the inclusion of the definite article, העבר’ת, is properly translated as “The Hebrew” and למ’לדת as “to the midwives.” Considering the grammatical structure of Hebrew in which the word following the preposition is the object of the preposition, “The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives” is how I choose to interpret the first part of Exodus 1:15. The relationship between two nouns in Biblical Hebrew is usually expressed “by means of the genitive construction,” a relationship which English consistently expresses with the word “of.”[[41]](#footnote-42) The genitive noun modifies the preceding noun or adjective and the typical identifying characteristic of genitive nouns is the presence of the construct form. In the instance of construct, the preposition ל would be translated “of” or “to.” In Exodus 1:15, the ethnicity עבר’ is used as an adjective to describe ’לד. In the Septuagint and Vulgate, “Hebrew” is in the construct state while in the Masoretic Text and most Hebrew versions, “Hebrew” points to an attributive adjective. In most instances that outdate the Septuagint and Vulgate, ו’אמר מלך מצר’ם למ’לדת is not in construct and does not require the addition of the English “of” or “to” in the translation. Effectively, the preposition ל could alter העבר’ת in a different manner than it would if either noun was in construct. The most notable fact within Exodus 1:15 is that the ethnicity, Hebrew, frequently acts as an adjective within the text. I think that because the nouns are not in construct form within most texts, העבר’ת acts as an attributive adjective modifying the nounלמ’לדת thus supporting the argument for the translation “to the Hebrew midwives” as opposed to “midwives to the Hebrews.”

Conversely, some strongly suggest that the women were Egyptian. Jacqeline Lapsly argues that this would make one of the central themes of the text, crossing ethnic boundaries, even stronger.[[42]](#footnote-43) The women are often assumed to have been “supervisors of whole battalions of midwives” or the best in their field since they were specifically chosen to enact Pharaoh’s plots.[[43]](#footnote-44) Likewise, the image of an Egyptian princess resisting the murderous intentions of her father by compassionately saving a baby boy in Exodus 2:6 serves as an example of Egyptian women desiring to protect birth and babies. This interpretation is found in the Septuagint, Josephus, Judah he-Hasid, and Abravanel.[[44]](#footnote-45) All of these sources determine that interpreting the midwives as “righteous Gentiles” emphasizes and more closely aligns with the theme of fearing the Lord. Josephus is particularly adamant that the midwives were Egyptian supposing that Pharaoh could not have trusted Hebrew women to perform such a barbarous act against their own people especially people whose lives they are dedicated to serving.[[45]](#footnote-46) Contrastingly, it is possible that the Hebrew women would not have entrusted Egyptian midwives as easily with the sacred gift of birth and the responsibility of protecting their health and the health of their babies. Also, while the profession might have been held to a high esteem, by nature midwifery is messy. It seems improbable that Egyptian midwives would bare the dirty and extremely difficult portions of birth for a population that they seemed to have prejudice against. It is evident that the Egyptian government as an entity has a vendetta against the entire Hebrew population. The close ties between the midwifery model of care and the government would most likely be especially harrowing if the midwives were reporting to an Egyptian government and were themselves also Egyptian. Even if one must interpret the midwife’s ethnicity as being Egyptian, it is important to recognize that they are acting as Hebrews with their service, decision, and fundamental fear of the Lord that will further be discussed. If the midwives are Hebrew, they would more seamlessly fit the texture of the scope of the cannon.

**The Decision**

Regardless of who the midwives are and what nationality they belong to, their belief in God is superior to “any orders a Pharaoh could give.”[[46]](#footnote-47) Unequivocally, the most poignant aspect of the midwives’ story is their relationship with the Lord. Shiphrah and Puah not only defied the Pharaoh’s order to kill the baby boys, but they also worked directly in opposition byה’לד’ם את־ותח’’ו or helping the male children live suggesting an effort to help the babies avoid the dangers of birth. If the midwives were solely absent from the births they were supposed to attend, that would not have relieved them from their sovereign instruction as they still would have had the information and resources available to them to accomplish the tasks set before them by Pharaoh.[[47]](#footnote-48) Shiphrah and Puah “defy the king’s order, which violates natural mortality, and allow the children to live.”[[48]](#footnote-49)

The midwives’ refusal to kill the baby boys is a rebellious act of heroism which is followed in Scripture by more female rebellion and Hebrew and Egyptian cooperation to accomplish the insurrection (Exod 2, 15, & 34). Another biblical narrative comprised of such resourceful women is difficult to find. Some scholars argue that the especially positive light that Shiphrah and Puah are painted in is intended to communicate the presence of a reward for women who “support the objectives of a patriarchal society,” stay within their domestic spheres, and take care of women and children. It is here where they can supposedly enact change and succeed. This is suggested since the story leads to a patriarchal destination: Moses.[[49]](#footnote-50) The midwives’ decision to disobey the command from the patriarchal and sovereign government emanates from their piety to their profession. Midwifery’s sole purpose is to assist in the creation of life and to protect the act of birth and its participants. The text does not make it clear whether or not the midwives attended the births of the Hebrew women they were responsible for. I think that both scenarios are plausible. The women could have potentially been telling Pharaoh the truth when they stated that the women, unlike Egyptian women, gave birth quickly in v. 16 and they genuinely did not make it to the births. Ambrose proposes that the women indeed gave birth before the arrival of the midwives because the “souls of the just do not wait upon branches of learning arranged according to kinds of knowledge, nor do they require assistance in parturition, but they bring forth their offspring spontaneously and anticipate the expected time.”[[50]](#footnote-51) Opposingly, I think that the most likely scenario considering the intimate and caring nature of the occupation of midwifery is that the midwives covertly attended the births and fulfilled their duty to the women and children in their care rather than Pharaoh.

**Political Crossroads**

The narrative surrounding the midwives displays the powerful idea of women in resistance and the political implications of such. The midwives were caught at a political crossroads in which either direction had potentially harmful outcomes. In examining Exodus 1 and the narrative including the midwives, Adrienne Rich poses the questions: “How have women given birth, who has helped them, and how, and why?”[[51]](#footnote-52) Rich also accurately expresses that these questions are not solely historical but political. Through reading ancient texts and participating in modern society, it is evident that birth has never been a neutral idea. In assembly with birth are issues of inheritance, sex, gender, and intervention in “matters of reproduction and fertility.”[[52]](#footnote-53) The midwives defied many norms and desired to actively change the “social and religious reality.”[[53]](#footnote-54) They are “social and spiritual activists” using all possible avenues to help birthing mothers and newborns.[[54]](#footnote-55) Faced with the conflict and social laws, the midwives’ insolence of the Egyptian despotism is the first recorded instance of “civil disobedience in defense of a moral imperative.”[[55]](#footnote-56)

In Exodus 1:19, the Midwives bravely return to Pharaoh knowing that the consequences for not obeying his decrees could be potentially fatal. The king summoned the midwives and asked for a report on their planned devastating change in occupation. However, when the women returned to the king, he was already aware that they did not fulfil the task and asked the women why they had let the boys live. Their answer was that the Hebrew women gave birth so quickly and efficiently that they were not able to attend the births. Most scholars and readers of the texts assume that the midwives were deceptive in their answer to the Pharaoh. The mechanics and validity of their deception are often analyzed and the political aspect is ignored. Nonetheless, the authority dynamics featuring a substantial power imbalance is often the center of the “literary presentation of deceptive women in the biblical narrative.”[[56]](#footnote-57)

The primary political feature of the passage in Exodus 1 is the literary absence of the women’s thoughts, speech, and actions. A typical strategy of traditional patriarchies has been “denying women access to language and depicting them as deceitful.”[[57]](#footnote-58) Oftentimes, the politically superior party is awarded the primary role within a narrative and the lesser party’s motivation is not explained. Such is the case with Rachel and the teraphim. While her motivations are unclear and her actions leave much room for interpretation, the text alone does not make readers aware of the “constraints of patriarchal” and political order “which in some ways offer deception as the only alternative for a mother interested in the welfare” of her child and family.[[58]](#footnote-59) The same idea applies to Shiphrah, Puah, and their political and patriarchal limits hindering their options in accomplishing their desired outcome of protecting the mothers and children. While the inclusion of the midwives’ story is significant, they are still only given a small portion of the book of Exodus, are not given a voice until v. 19. Even then they only say a total of 13 words in the original Hebrew text. The narrative with the midwives is unique in that the intent of their deception, their fear of God, is made clear and God rewarded the midwives for their deception. The political and ideological relationship between language and women presents itself in many passages throughout the Hebrew Bible including within Exodus 1.

**The Irony**

A significant feature in the language of Exodus 1:15 that is difficult to neglect is the distinguishable amount of irony and sarcasm within the narrative. Humor appears in a variety of forms which “serves various functions in the Hebrew Bible and is most often underlined with irony.”[[59]](#footnote-60) Although significant cultural differences make it uncertain whether Biblical humor can be fully understood, particularly in early Old Testament literature “we can correctly identify all the references” which were “intended as humorous.”[[60]](#footnote-61) While the instances of humor and irony can easily be recognized, within Exodus 1 and other passages, it is unlikely that modern readers of the writings “can understand the impact or the import of the humor on the intended audience.”[[61]](#footnote-62)

While attempting to recognize and interpret the irony within Exodus 1, one ironic and unusual occurrence within the passage is the women, Shiphrah and Puah, being named and the Pharaoh remaining unnamed. As is evident in many places in the Hebrew Bible, women often go unnamed or are defined by their relationship to their husbands or other men such as their fathers. The occurrence of the midwives being “conferred the dignity of names” foreshadows their heroic contributions to the narrative and their significance as the beginning of the female resistance in early Exodus. Another ironic aspect of the passage is how the king of all of Egypt “stoops to converse with two lowly Hebrew women in order to move his intentions forward.”[[62]](#footnote-63) The king had previously attempted to subdue the Israelites and failed. Even in his attempts to utilize the midwives in controlling the population, he fails. The match between Shiphrah and Puah and the entirety of Egypt appears to be unequal. The narrator of the passage begins with the king’s speech followed by the midwives’ response followed by another speech by the king and response of the midwives. This noticeable repetition leads readers to observe that “the entire Egyptian community is parallel to two Hebrew midwives.”[[63]](#footnote-64) Evidently due to the patriarchal society or Pharaoh’s own presuppositions regarding female strength and diligence, he does not appear to fear women. Pharaoh does not intend to kill the female babies, only the males, because he does not see them as a threat. However, the female midwives whom he also does not fear “are the ones who undo his plans.”[[64]](#footnote-65) I think that the aspects of irony are highlighted if one concludes that the women are Hebrew rather than Egyptian. The Egyptians’ fear of the Israelites leads to their demise while the Hebrew women’s fear of the Lord and their “creative disobedience” allows their success.[[65]](#footnote-66)

**Tricksterism**

Alongside the rebellion found through the Midwives’ decisions and actions within Exodus 1, there is also a significant indication of tricksterism within their responses and conduct. A prevailing pattern of female characterization throughout the Hebrew Bible is that of a deceiver or “female trickster.”[[66]](#footnote-67) Steinburg defines the expression as, “using deceptions when necessary to influence the course of events, to keep out of trouble with one in authority.”[[67]](#footnote-68) Although trickery has negative connotations in modern ethical thinking, within the text and throughout Genesis and Exodus specifically, it appears to be condoned in certain instances. In Rachel’s case and in the patriarchal society in which she lived, women were valued primarily for childbearing.[[68]](#footnote-69) Reflected in Rachel’s exclamation “Give me children, or I shall die,” if Rachel did not have children, she would have no life. When confronted with the threat of losing her life, perhaps the risk was not as great as the inability to bear children. (Gen 31:32). Despite the Lord’s provision of a child, Rachel was not satisfied with her circumstances and her position within her family. Rachel stated that she had the “way of women” to elude Laban’s search for his teraphim. It is unclear in the text as to whether Rachel’s trickery provided her with any comfort or her desired results. While the text does not state how the Lord viewed this act, he still gives her another child in Genesis 35. However, Rachel died in childbirth, a grim conclusion to her statement, “give me children, or I shall die!”

The midwives operating with trickery is preceded by Rachel and proceeded by the several women who played crucial roles in the survival and success of Moses.[[69]](#footnote-70) While the trickery of other women in the Hebrew Bible, like that of Rachel, is interpreted and disputed upon, the tricksterism of the Hebrew midwives is widely recognized. In light of the midwives’ pretense, Childs refers to Pharaoh as “the villainous fool tricked by artful midwives who themselves have a fear of God.”[[70]](#footnote-71) A characteristic of tricksters within literature is the “confusion of language” which in the midwives’ case involves the use of the unusual word, ח’ות.

The midwives’ trick of lying to Pharaoh allows an amusing reversal of power. However, the ethicality of the deception is debated primarily between early church fathers. Augustine poses the question of whether the women’s trickery was approved by God or if it was on their own account.[[71]](#footnote-72) After analyzing God’s response to the text, Augustine concludes that the midwives’ trickery is not an action that is to be praised, but rather pardoned.[[72]](#footnote-73) However, this position causes one to speculate as to whether the aversion to women acting in the ambivalent male conduct is present. Augustine reaches the determination that it was the mercy towards the people of God that was rewarded and not the deception.

**AND THEY FEARED GOD**

**יָרֵא**

One of the most profound statements in Exodus 1 regarding the midwives and their decision to disobey Pharaoh’s orders is .ות’ראן המ’לדת את־האלה’ם This phrase carries with it much cultural and religious significance. The expression is also a critical part of the foundation for the meaning and expression of the fear of the Lord. Moberly states that the fear of God is a “comprehensive and open-ended term, whose meaning can be extended and deepened according to context.”[[73]](#footnote-74) The midwives, within their context, are said to fear the Lord in v. 17 as an explanation for their decision to allow the children to live and in v. 20 as a reason for God’s involvement with their own fertility. The verb ות’ראן is from the root ’רא and is in the Qal consecutive imperfect form in v. 17. This is the sole occurrence of this exact verb tense. The instance in v. 21 ’ראוwhich is the more common Qal perfect, is also used in Joshua, 2 Kings, Psalm, and Jeremiah to either affirm someone’s fear of the Lord or to identify the lack thereof. This verb is translated elsewhere as “revered” and “were afraid.” In other instances, the verb is translated as “to be honored.”[[74]](#footnote-75) Despite the verb tense or the precise translation, the word suggests an action which “derives from fear, or awe, and not the emotion itself.”[[75]](#footnote-76)

More than the emotion or action of fear, the phrase “the midwives feared God” communicates a deep and rich trust in God. The midwives’ actions display a reverence for the Lord and his laws, without having had any tangible laws provided to them. The midwives, acting ethically without having received the law, were operating “according to a moral imperative” which was learned through “examination of both human experience and the process of nature.”[[76]](#footnote-77) The idea of the fear of God is highly prominent throughout wisdom literature. Wise people within Scripture are shown to have the ability to discern the natural order and common patterns of morality and are also able to adjust their lives and actions to be in harmony with it. Whether the women were Hebrew or Egyptian, it is notable that they were able to observe and put these ideals into action. Shiphrah and Puah serve as a precedent and example for all of Israel regarding obeying the Lord and his morals.

The midwives’ fear of God displays their recognition of morality, the importance for the reverence of God, and the sacred nature of human life. The women honored the fertility of the women they served and valued the preservation of the babies’ lives. This preservation took precedent over the murderous statute of the Pharaoh, the most powerful and presumably dangerous person in all of Egypt, and over their own lives. This first instance of civil disobedience, raises questions primarily among early church fathers concerning the morality of their lies or if they even lied. Regardless, their defiance resulting in the fear of God “functions as the ultimate restraint on evil and the supreme stimulus for good.”[[77]](#footnote-78)

**Abraham’s Test**

The establishment of the significance of fearing God is present in Genesis 22 and the story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham’s life as represented in Genesis 22 and elsewhere is commonly used in discussions of fundamental biblical issues, theology, and general morality. Genesis 22 is a unique point in Scripture where the “nature and meaning of the Bible as a whole is illuminated” with great clarity.[[78]](#footnote-79) Abraham is a prominent biblical figure whose ancestors form the twelve tribes of Israel and whose covenant with the Lord produces an enduring relationship with God. Chapter 22 of Genesis serves as the climax within the narrative surrounding Abraham and is the final encounter between the Lord and Abraham. This text focuses on Abraham and Sarah’s relationship with the Lord.

The journey to conceiving and bearing Isaac was not an easy or swift one. Sarah seemed, despite her barrenness, to be “not stirred by passions” and “independent of any emotional influence.”[[79]](#footnote-80) According to Chrysostom, Sarah’s nature “similar to that of the angels” was her way of passing her “test” that the Lord gave her regarding her infertility and the impediments preventing her from conceiving a child.[[80]](#footnote-81) Chrysostom also adheres to the belief that Sarah’s conception of Isaac serves the purpose of preparing believers for the coming virgin birth explaining:

There were then two impediments [for Sarah], both the

untimeliness of her age and the obsoleteness of nature, but in the

case of the Virgin there was only one hindrance, namely not

having participated in marriage. The barren one therefore

prepares the way for the virgin.

Through the text, we see Sarah’s faithful and gentle nature, her trust in the Lord, and her

blessing, Isaac.

The narrator of the story provides an overt guide to the meaning of the text by stating that, “God tested Abraham” by offering a sacrifice (Gen 22:1). A common interpretation of Genesis 22 regarding Abraham is that God wanted to test Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his only son Isaac to determine whether he had enough faith to serve as Israel’s leader. Interestingly, the word ’ראה is only used with a negative connotation prior to Genesis 22 where it is used positively by the Lord.[[81]](#footnote-82) According to Moberly, there are several key words within this narrative that demonstrate the agreement of the motifs, the fear of God and testing, which are נסה, ’ראה אלה’ם, and ראה. The first key word represents the central concept of the text and the second, along with נסה, presents the “purpose and goal of the test.”[[82]](#footnote-83) John Chrysostom affirms that despite the human method of conception of Isaac, his birth is miraculous and “affirms the point that procreation can only occur by God’s approval.”[[83]](#footnote-84) While male fertility is not as commonly discussed or acknowledged within Biblical narratives, it is in cases such as Abraham’s advanced age that it is present. The Lord had to move within Abraham and solve the issue with his infertility due to his age. While this is not the main premise of Abraham’s test, it displays the connection within the narrative, God’s presence, and faithfulness in fertility among men and women alike. Within Abraham’s narrative in Genesis 22, a formula of testing, the fear of God, and blessing seen throughout the Hebrew Bible is initiated. God initiates the formula with his test and Abraham solves it with his fear of God which becomes the principal term within the Hebrew Bible for faith as the proper response to God.

**Job**

Another well-known passage that includes the motif of testing is Job. The book of Job asks many “painful and unavoidable” questions regarding the character of God and human suffering through the trials and tests that Job experiences.[[84]](#footnote-85) While the “formula” is not as overt and the exact language of testing, the fear of God, and blessing is not used, it is included within the text and provides similar results. Like in Abraham’s story, Job is presented with a test to prove his loyalty and faithfulness to God. However, unlike the other instances of testing including the story of the midwives and Abraham, readers are given the insight that it is not God doing the testing but rather it is Satan acting with the Lord’s permission. Because Job was a blessed and wealthy man, the Satan supposed that if he took Job’s blessings away he would “curse you (God) to your face” (Job 1:11). While God spared Abraham’s blessing, his son Isaac, the Satan was legitimately permitted to take Job’s blessings. After losing many of his belongings and loved ones, Job interprets God’s attitude as a hostile one towards himself and all of creation which Job also believes has been “masked” by an “apparent tender concern” since his conception. These suppositions are evident in Job’s statement, “your hands are fashioned and made me; and now you turn about to destroy me” (Job 9:13). However, Job did not curse or rebuke God. Ultimately, the “tests” included taking all of Job’s property and children away from him. Each of his living creatures and his children were killed in various manners, but all the while “Job did not sin or charge God with his wrongdoing” (Job 1:22). Job recognizes God’s sovereignty and his ability to give and take away and even though Job had “no doubt he (God) will slay me” he chose to “defend my ways to his face” (Job 13:15). Like the midwives, Job made a decision that would potentially cause more pain and affliction to come to him. Because of his faithfulness to the Lord and the fear of God that he displayed, Job was given more blessings than he had previously. While Job was not rewarded with fertility, he was rewarded with seven children along with twofold of all of his other fortunes. While different scenarios entirely, Job’s results from passing his test and fearing God still maintain the idea of God’s presence in conception and creating new life.

**Ruth**

Yet another place in the Hebrew Bible where testing, the fear of God, and blessing are evident is in Ruth. However, the pattern within this text is significantly less overt. This story is typically characterized as a nice story of “loyalty and tragedy turned into triumph.”[[85]](#footnote-86) Like the midwives, Ruth defied numerous societal and cultural norms. Ruth and her sister in law Orpah had not conceived or bore children with their first husbands “yet the text does not name either women as barren.”[[86]](#footnote-87) While it is unclear through the text the reason that they did not conceive children, the “failure to provide an inheritance” represented “implicit male infertility in the ancient world.”[[87]](#footnote-88)

When Ruth’s husband passed away, she was instructed to return to her mother’s house by her mother in law, Naomi (Ruth 1:8). However, feeling a strong sense of allegiance to Naomi and her people, Ruth pledged to stay with her and live her life in accordance with Naomi’s (Ruth 1:16). While not explicitly stated, the “test” in Ruth appears to have come to pass after Ruth stayed with Naomi and the other widowed daughter-in-law did not. Ruth then married Boaz, Naomi’s relative, and is praised for marrying him rather than a younger man. Because of Ruth’s diligence in remaining loyal to Naomi which led to her marriage with Boaz, Ruth conceived a son, Obed.

Like the midwives, upon passing the testing period, and displaying the fear of the Lord, Ruth was awarded with fertility, conception, and the birth of her son. On Ruth’s behalf, Naomi blessed the Lord for not abandoning her daughter-in-law who had not abandoned her. Ruth is praised for her חסד which presents very similarly to the ’ראו האלה’ם from Exodus 1. The final chapter of Ruth ends with a genealogy that holds immense significance for the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the life of Jesus. Like the midwives’ actions led to the birth rescue of Moses, Ruth’s actions led to the lineage of David which would lead to the life of Jesus thus making an immensely significant impact on all of humanity.

Throughout Scripture it appears that testing produces the fear of God. Even when the specific language of “testing” and “fear of God” are absent, the principles are present. Considering the many other instances of correlation between the motifs of testing and the fear of God, the implications of the midwives’ test and their result must be more thoroughly considered. The Sages of Exodus Rabbah agree that the midwives did more “for the survival of the children than merely to ignore Pharaoh’s commannd and refrain from killing them.”[[88]](#footnote-89) The story of Shiphrah and Puah comes at an interesting time in the journey of the Hebrew people. Their narrative sits on the cusp of a lengthy expedition in which the Israelites would take part. Later in Exodus, the Israelites would face a great task which they would waste 40 years failing. The primary questions that the tradition of testing, the fear of God, and blessing present regard how this pattern informs what the fear of God is and the implications of this phrase being used in reference to the midwives. Shiphrah and Puah set the standard for Israel and what they were intended to produce through their testing period. The midwives did this without the law and without many predecessors.

**THE REWARD**

At the conclusion of the passage in Exodus 1, the midwives are rewarded for their actions in sparing the children’s lives and for their fear of the Lord. The Scripture states, “So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families” (Exod 1:20). The text states that the Hebrew people were able to grow multiply and become strong because of the midwives rebellious and protective actions. This positive outcome did not only result in blessings for the midwives but it also momentously affected all of Israel and helped to ensure its future. Individually, the midwives were rewarded with fertility: the very thing that the midwives were willing to sacrifice their lives for.[[89]](#footnote-90) The midwives knowingly put their own lives at risk, lives that God created, and were rewarded with life. God’s involvement in fertility, conception, and birth is once again made apparent in this profound yet ironic manner.

The reward of fertility is mentioned and given often throughout Scripture. In Psalm 127, the “fruit of the womb” is said to be “a reward.” Notably, in Psalm 128 a psalm of ascent, the psalmist states that a wife will be like a fruitful vine in which the children are the shoots. In the proceeding verse, the psalmist states, “this shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.” These two verses exhibiting synthetic parallelism communicate that, in this case, the “olive shoots” or children are a reward for the presence of the fear of the Lord. Isaiah depicts a quick and pain-free birth saying, “before she was in labor, she gave birth; before her pain came upon her she delivered a son.”[[90]](#footnote-91) Psalms 48 and 147 “take children as an image of hope and blessing beyond their birth, projecting a future for family and clan through them.”[[91]](#footnote-92)

While fertility was an urgent matter for many women in the Hebrew Bible, and the midwives inevitably desired to bare children, it was also a manner of the Lord securing a future for the midwives in an economic and financial sense. I think that women’s desire to bare children throughout the Bible, especially when unable to at first, is derived from “more than sentimentality” and is driven by love.[[92]](#footnote-93) There are more logistical and “pragmatic” reasons for women to want to have children and for God to bless women with them.[[93]](#footnote-94) The idea of motherhood for survival is evident in the practice of levirate marriages, like in Ruth, and the legality surrounding marriages which eventually results in security and offspring. The gift that the Lord provided the midwives with in Exodus 1:20 was one that would have impact on their status, their occupation, their welfare, and the future generations that would follow them.

**THE LABOR OF GOD**

One of the most curious instances of labor and birth in the Bible, one that also has profound impact, is when it is used to describe God. There are several instances where God’s actions give the illusion or draw analogies to labor and birth. In Isaiah 42:14 amidst a song of praise, the voice of the Lord states that “I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant.” These words paint a powerful image of a powerful God taking part in the powerful act that is birth. Prior to this statement, the text describes the Lord as a soldier and a warrior. Presenting mighty soldiers and women in labor in parallel gives insight to the value that the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, saw in birth and protecting the women taking part in the powerful act. The midwives were on the front lines and chose to protect their soldiers and defend birth. This picture was written in a portion of “Deutero-Isaiah.” This section was composed while a large amount of the population of Judah was exiled in Babylon. Jerusalem was militarily and politically defeated. Her people were living in foreign lands and did not have hope for their return. Isaiah 66 declares that God is the one who delivers babies by using the image of a midwife to refer to him. The illustration of God as a midwife displays God’s willingness to work, tend to, and protect his people like a midwife tends to her mothers. Later in this chapter, the Lord is also depicted as a nursing mother consoling and comforting Jerusalem.

One of the primary ideas that Isaiah communicates through his metaphors is not as simple as God as a mother but rather the importance and value of the groaning and breath that occurs during labor. The first verb that Isaiah uses to emphasize the sound of God’s breathing, פעה, which is typically translated as “cry out” or “groan.” Women often create mammalian, deep, guttural noises in labor particularly during transition. The next two verbs are נשׁם and שׁאף which emphasize the effort in God’s breath. Some suggest that Isaiah’s focus on God’s breath is to represent new creation by recreating the breath that led to the creation of Adam.[[94]](#footnote-95) Others suppose that it is tied to the Holy Spirit which comes from the Greek expression for breath. I think that more importantly, Isaiah’s metaphors highlight how crucial breath is to a woman in labor. Breathing signifies surrender during labor and a woman’s active participation in the event. Breath also helps a woman control the situation, the pain, and the surges of childbirth. God portrayed as a laboring mother and a midwife communicates his desire to participate in the lives of his people like the midwives. It also conveys his ultimate control of redemption where he “chooses to participate in the work of new creation with bellowing and panting.”[[95]](#footnote-96) This depiction of God as a powerful laboring mother is radical because of other instances of labor being used to feel pain and shame such as in Jeremiah 13. The image of birth being powerful emasculates the male audiences that view the female image as powerless, horrifying, and communicates the Lord’s passionate, vulnerable, and feminine characteristics.[[96]](#footnote-97)

John Chrysostom comments on Genesis 1-2 and the birth motifs within the text in correlation with 1 Corinthians 11:12 where Paul states, “for just as women came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God.” Regarding this passage, Chrysostom notes that:

Paul did not say, ‘from the woman‘ [ἐκ τῆς γυναικὸς], but again,

‘of the man’ [ἐκ τοῦ ἀνδρός]. For still this inviolate state [ἀκέραιον]

remains with the man. These are not the merits of the man, but of

God. Therefore he also adds, ‘but all things of God’ [ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ]’

(Hom. 1 Cor. 26.5; Field 1849–1862, 2.317–318).

Chrysostom’s attention to the prepositions within the text show that woman was made “from” or “out of man” while man is made “through the woman.”[[97]](#footnote-98) Chrysostom firmly believes that sterility, infertility, and barrenness are not “in any way a retribution for sins” considering the esteem and virtue of the people whom these things affected. Chrysostom also suggests, “the sterile wives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” are part of the “forthcoming virgin birth of Christ.”[[98]](#footnote-99) Mary’s fertility is unlike any others in Scripture seeing as her conception solely involved the Lord and did not take any human involvement. Mary’s fertility is mysterious and “cannot be understood in human terms” much like the nature of Christ.[[99]](#footnote-100) In medieval language, calling Jesus “mother” is frequently used and portrays Jesus as the continuation of the creation and birth narrative which began in Genesis “proceeded through the Son’s laboring mother.”[[100]](#footnote-101)

Another aspect of the tie between God and labor, is the agonizing “labor” that Jesus experienced on the cross. Like many occasions of birth within the Bible, the discussion of Christ as God’s labor is “lingered outside the major streams of Christian reflection on theology of the cross” but the discussion of spiritual birth certainly emerges from Scripture.[[101]](#footnote-102) While spiritual birth is not involving man and woman and is not the first instance of birth, it is the second and is considered a “birth from above.”[[102]](#footnote-103) This, the cross is the method of God’s labor to bring his children to birth. Regarding spiritual birth Teresa Okure states, “This birth is brought about by Jesus’s passion death and resurrection. Jesus gave birth to believers on the cross through his pierced side whence blood and water gushed out as happens to a woman’s womb when she gives birth to a child.”[[103]](#footnote-104) Specifically, the rebirth in John 3 aligns with the spiritual birth from the cross. Early church fathers adhere to this idea as seen in St. Anselm’s prayer saying:

You have died more than they, that they may labour to bear.

It is by your death that they have been born,

for if you had not been in labour,

you could not have been borne death;

and if you had not died, you would not have brought forth.

For, longing to bear sons into life,

you tasted of death,

and by dying you begot them.[[104]](#footnote-105)

Jesus’ death brings forth spiritual children with the same agony and labor pains that can take

place in a physical birth. Anselm specifically comments on Jesus’ willingness and desire to partake in this “labor” similar to the women discussed in this paper who yearned to participate in birth and labor. Also similar is the midwives desire to protect birth and the ones participating in the act.

Labor and the pain experienced during its undertaking are explicit. On the themes of labor, pain, and birth, Julian of Norwich reiterates:

But our true Mother Jesus, he alone bears us for joy and for our endless life, blessed may he be. So he carries us within him in love and travail, until the full time when he wanted to suffer the sharpest thorns and cruel pains that ever were or will be, and at last he died. And when he had finished, and had borne us so for bliss, still all this could not satisfy his wonderful love.[[105]](#footnote-106)

If one knows the messy and often graphic details of birth, one might question the intense desire that some feel to share in it as many, himself included, questioned Jesus’ intent and willingness to bear the cross. However, for most, it is not the act of birth that tends to be the driving desire to conceive, but rather the life, gift, and blessing of a child that comes afterwards.

Many view Jesus’ life and ministry as pregnancy, developing and carrying his spiritual children to term. Maternal views of Christ are found in the works of Irenaeus, Origen, Augustine, as well as John Chrysostom. While the labor of the cross was panging, it produced children and the reward, gift, and blessing of salvation. Thomas Bennett echoes this thought stating, “the sufferings of the cross produce life; we are the children, and Christ is the mother who dies to give us birth.”[[106]](#footnote-107) The cross and labor both merge joy and suffering in a manner which no other motifs or acts do. Juxtaposing the violence of the cross with birth metaphors creates an opportunity to see the cross as sacral and regenerating rather than solely violent and deadly. The labor metaphor has such power because of the sacred nature of the event. Bringing forth new life through birth makes it a seemingly less violent process and makes it reverent. Similarly, God turns the violent cross into a sacred experience by producing new life through it. Women in labor and Jesus on the cross are characterized by their generativity. This love for life that women share with Jesus “ought to norm Christian ethics.”[[107]](#footnote-108)

**CONCLUSION**

Birth, life, and death are themes closely interwoven throughout the Hebrew Bible and beyond. God’s participation in the process of conception, labor, and birth, all acts of creation, appear from the first recorded birth of Cain to the cross. Poetry, prophecy, and praise use birth as a motif in many instances in Scripture. The Lord appears to have a direct connection with the womb and often seems to open and close the wombs of women with intention and purpose. God’s ability to open and close wombs is recognized by barren women such as Rachel, Hannah, and Sarah who plead with God to allow them to experience birth and bare children. While Hannah and Sarah intercede for their children, Rachel who equates not being able to have children to death, resorts to stealing fertility idols to accomplish bearing a child. This intense passion to experience birth is echoed in the lives of women throughout Scripture and is embodied in the actions of the midwives Shiphrah and Puah in Exodus 1. Pharaoh enacts his first out of many attempts to subdue the growing population of Israelites in Egypt by sequestering Shiphrah and Puah. The king of all Egypt, who remains unnamed within the narrative, addresses two women and commands them to kill the Hebrew baby boys that they are responsible for. While there is great debate as to the ethnicity of the two midwives, I determined that they are Hebrew because of their Semitic names, the nature of the midwifery style of care, the verb tenses, gentilic adjectives, and the absence of the construct form in the original Hebrew text. Ultimately the fear of God enacted that sets a standard for the rest of Israel to follow.

Following the Pharaoh’s demand, the midwives actively save the babies and defend birth because of their fear of God. In a stark reversal of power, the women report back to Pharaoh that the Hebrew women gave birth too quickly which inhibited them from attending the births. I propose that the women still attended and assisted the births since they “let the boys live” thus intensifying the degree of their rebellion and dedication to their practice. Pharaoh remaining unnamed, stooping to use two Hebrew women to accomplish his vast plans, and the satirical response from the midwives portrays the irony within the narrative. The midwives’ decision to actively disobey their leadership could have cost them their occupation, the trust that they obviously shared with the government, and their lives. These are all things that they were willing to risk to defend birth.

After acting out their weighty decision which played into the tricksterism narrative surrounding women in the Hebrew Bible, the women were commended by God for their fear of the Lord. The kind of fear presented through Shiphrah and Puah communicated an unambiguous understanding of the value of life and honoring the Lord through it, and set a precedent for all of Israel even before the foundation and implementation of the law. The idea of the fear of God originating from testing, and resulting in blessings from the Lord reveals itself often throughout Scripture. I showed this formula, even when not explicitly stated, can be found in the story of Abraham, Job, and Ruth. All of these narratives also contain some correlation with the ideas of fertility and birth, and all result in the creation of new life.

Following the veins of sacrifice and creation of new life is the juxtaposition of the cross and labor. John Chrysostom and other scholars present the idea of the maternal nature of God, and the death of Jesus on the cross as the labor of God. While before the virgin birth, the world was barren and without hope. Through the immaculate conception of Jesus and his life, which is comparable to God’s “pregnancy,” and Jesus’ agonizing death on the cross, a new form of birth or rebirth is presented to humanity. Jesus’ “labor pains” gave birth to new spiritual life and was sacrificial like a mother’s labor. The comparison between God and labor is echoed throughout Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the Psalms. Uniting the cross and labor with their mutual generativity, sacrifice, and essential fear of God justifies the fiery and passionate rebellion of barren women in Scripture including the midwives Shiphrah and Puah.

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4. Gen 35:16-18 and 38:27-30 are exceptions to this rule. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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21. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Adele Berlin & Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Study Bible*, Second Edition, Oxford University Press, 2014, 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. The terms “Hebrew” and “Hebrews” rather than “Israelites” or other titles will be used throughout this paper aligning with the language used in the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
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25. Adele Berlin & Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Study Bible*, Second Edition, Oxford University Press, 2014, 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. While in Exodus 1:15-20 the people are referred to as “Hebrew” earlier on in the narrative they are titled the “Israelites” hence the shift in verbage. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
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29. John Durham I, Exodus, *Word Biblical Commentary 3*, Waco: Word Books, 1987, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Carol L. Meyers, *Exodus,* New Cambridge Bible Commentary, Cambridge University Press, 2005, 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
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44. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
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47. Scott Morschauser, “Potters’ Wheels and Pregnancies: A Note on Exodus 1:16,” 731. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
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49. Inbar Raveh, “‘They Let the Children Live’: The Midwives at a Political Crossroads,” 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
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60. Robert B. Lawton, “Irony in Early Exodus,” Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 97, no. 3 (1985): 414, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
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81. See Gen 3:10, 9:2, 15:1, 15:12, 18:15, 19:15, 19:30, 20:8, 20:11, 21:17. Notably, יִרְאָה is introduced to Abraham in 15:1 with the phrase “Fear not,” obviously instructing him not to fear. However, Abraham and Sarah in Gen 15:2 and 18:15 were “full of fear.” In Gen 20:11, Abraham recognizes the absence of the fear of God, but it is not until Abraham’s test that he has fear but the fear of the Lord. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
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89. This idea continues the motif of irony present throughout the passage but in a more serious manner that still displays God’s creativity. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
90. This description of birth points to and prophecies return from exile and onwards. There are many current theologians and midwives alike that suppose that pain-free and fear-free birth is a possibility and is experienced by many who believe that the curse which caused Eve and following generations to have pain in child-bearing no longer applies to women. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
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