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Jochebed's resistance in Exodus 1-2

A theological analysis and its implications for religious freedom

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Abstract

This article presents Jochebed's defiance of Pharaoh in Exodus 1-2 as faith-based civil resistance and embodied worship, not merely maternal instinct. Her concealment of Moses is read within a wider 'conspiracy of life' involving Shiphrah, Puah, Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter, whose non-violent actions resist genocidal state power. The study argues that these women reveal the limits of political authority when law serves death rather than justice. Engaging with Romans 13, Acts 5:29, Thoreau, and Martin Luther King Jr., the article frames Jochebed as a witness to higher divine law, religious freedom, covenantal identity, human dignity, and faithful resistance under God's sovereignty.

Keywords

Resistance theory, civil disobedience, unjust law, social justice, nonviolence, higher law, conscientious objection, religious freedom.

1. Introduction

The opening chapters of the book of Exodus narrate a story of escalating oppression culminating in a state-sanctioned genocide. Yet within this ordeal of tyranny, the text also presents a powerful counter-narrative of resistance, orchestrated not by armies or political leaders but by a small group of women. In this article, I delineate how Jochebed's audacious resistance to Pharaoh's decree to murder all Hebrew male infants, meticulously detailed in Exodus 1-2, transcends mere maternal protectiveness. Rather, it embodies a profound act of worship and a theological statement against tyrannical state power, designed to save not only

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her people but her religion. Her actions, alongside those of the courageous Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah, exemplify a form of resistance rooted in divine moral law, providing a foundational biblical paradigm for faith-based civil disobedience (Boesak 2017:1-15).

In this article, I argue that Jochebed's quiet yet potent refusal to comply with an unjust law establishes a theological precedent for prioritising divine mandates over state authority with respect to religious freedom and identity. This exploration will demonstrate that such acts, often perceived as solely political, are deeply theological, revealing a form of worship that challenges state-sanctioned violence and advocates for the protection of vulnerable people and their faith. Jochebed's example illustrates, therefore, a critical intersection where personal faith translates into public action, thereby framing resistance as an essential component of worship when one is confronted by decrees that violate divine principles and religious freedom.

I will first establish the socio-historical context of Pharaonic oppression, analysing the systematic nature of the genocidal edict as a direct assault on Israel's covenantal identity and future, and will then examine the 'conspiracy of life,' the collective, multi-layered resistance enacted by Shiphrah, Puah, Jochebed, Miriam, and even Pharaoh's daughter, thus highlighting the strategic and theological dimensions of their defiance. By re-evaluating Jochebed's motivation, I move beyond a simplistic reading of maternal instinct to uncover a calculated, faith-driven strategy. Subsequently, I construct a robust theological framework for resistance by reconciling the apparent antinomy between Romans 13 and Acts 5:29 and connecting this biblical ethic to the philosophical traditions of Henry David Thoreau and Martin Luther King Jr. The core of the argument will focus on redefining worship not as a liturgical act but as ultimate allegiance to God, expressed through the moral imperative to confront injustice. Finally, I assert the enduring relevance of Jochebed's model for contemporary faith-based activism, arguing that her story provides a powerful blueprint for how individual courage can challenge systemic evil and catalyse movements for liberation, social transformation and religious freedom.

2. The crucible of oppression: Pharaonic edicts and Israelite identity

To grasp the significance and cleverness of Jochebed's defiance, we must understand the oppressive mechanisms of the Egyptian regime described in Exodus 1. The story doesn't depict random cruelty but a strategic, increasingly severe plan of dehumanisation and population control. The chapter begins with a new Pharaoh 'who did not know Joseph' (Ex. 1:8), a phrase indicating a conscious political and historical forgetfulness. This new ruler views the growing Israelite population not as a blessing or ally but as a threat both demographically and politically. Pharaoh's fear that Israelites might 'join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the

land' (Ex. 1:10) drives a systematic oppression aimed at suppressing their spirit and reducing their numbers (Jones 2017:157-165). As Nqwa (2022:14) notes:

> At the outset of Exodus, we encounter interlocution around Pharaoh's hypothetical but deeply harmful claims about the children of Israel: "Come let us deal shrewdly with them, or they may increase and, in event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land" (Ex. 1:10).

The oppression unfolds in three distinct phases. First, Pharaoh imposes forced labour, by setting taskmasters over the Israelites 'to afflict them with heavy burdens' (Ex. 1:11). This policy, as Mtshiselwa (2021:502-529) notes, was intended to physically weaken the population and exploit them for state projects. However, the strategy backfires: 'the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad' (Ex. 1:12). The failure of this initial plan leads to a sinister escalation as Pharaoh secretly commands the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill all male infants at birth. This move from economic exploitation to covert genocide marks a significant radicalisation of state policy by specifically targeting male infants – a strategy that Rosenstock (2023:1-23) identifies as a calculated attempt to dismantle Israelite kinship structures, cultural identity, and religion by eliminating males. Pharaoh thus aimed to force Hebrew women to assimilate through intermarriage, thereby diluting and eventually eradicating the Hebrew lineage and its covenantal claims.

Pharaoh's tyranny, as we meet it in Exodus 1, leaves no room for misunderstanding. The Egyptian taskmasters aimed to 'bend,' 'wear out anyone's strength,' 'break them down physically,' and 'crush' the Israelite slaves. Their goal was not only physical but also to 'crush their spirit to banish the very wish for liberty' (Keil and Delitzsch 1986:422). Pharaoh applied three means of oppression: forced labour, infanticide, and mass infanticide (Keil and Delitzsch 1986:422-426).

When the midwives' courageous disobedience thwarts this secret plot, Pharaoh's genocidal intent becomes public and all-encompassing by commanding 'all his people,' saying, 'Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live' (Ex. 1:22). This public decree turns the entire Egyptian populace into agents of the state's murderous policy, creating an environment of pervasive terror and surveillance. The Nile, a source of life for Egypt, is grotesquely repurposed as an instrument of death for the Hebrews. This genocidal edict is more than a political or military strategy; it is a profound theological assault as it directly challenges the covenantal promise made to Abraham that his descendants would become a great nation (Gen. 12:2). By seeking to annihilate the male line, Pharaoh positions himself in direct opposition to the

divine will, thereby transforming any act of resistance into an expression of unwavering faith in God's promises (Park 2020:27-45). It is within this perilous context, where obedience to the state means complicity in genocide and defiance carries the penalty of death, that the actions of Jochebed and the other women must be understood. Their resistance is not merely a struggle for survival but a theological battle for the future of a people and the integrity of God's covenant.

3. A conspiracy of life: The collective resistance of women

The narrative of resistance in Exodus 1-2 is not the story of a single hero but of a network of women whose collective actions form a 'conspiracy of life.' This resistance is multi-layered, strategic, and remarkably effective, operating within the private sphere to achieve public, redemptive outcomes. The defiance begins with the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who are the first to be confronted with Pharaoh's genocidal command. Their response establishes the ethical and theological foundation for all subsequent resistance in the narrative (Lapsey 2005:81-85).

3.1. The midwives' precedent: Strategic resistance and divine fear

The text explicitly states that the midwives 'feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them but let the male children live' (Ex. 1:17). Their 'fear of God' is not a passive emotion but an active ethical allegiance that supersedes their fear of Pharaoh. This act of civil resistance is the first and most direct challenge to the state's authority. When summoned by Pharaoh to account for their failure, they employ strategic deception by claiming that 'the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them' (Ex. 1:19; Lapsey 2005:88-89). This explanation is a masterstroke of subversive communication, as Tchamba (2025:1032-1045) observed; it not only provides a plausible excuse that saves their own and the infants' but also subtly mocks Egyptian prejudices. By portraying Hebrew women as possessing a vitality superior to their Egyptian counterparts, the midwives turn a stereotype of the 'other' on its head, using the oppressor's own worldview against him. Their actions, rooted in a sapiential wisdom that prioritises life, are divinely affirmed: 'So God dealt well with the midwives … and because the midwives feared God, he gave them families' (Exodus 1:20-21). This divine reward validates their defiance and their deception, establishing a biblical precedent that when human law mandates evil, resistance becomes a righteous, God-honouring act (Bøsterud 2021:1-9).

3.2. Jochebed and Miriam: Maternal defiance and strategic foresight

Jochebed's resistance builds upon the precedent set by the midwives. After Pharaoh's decree becomes public, the danger intensifies. Jochebed, a woman from

the house of Levi, gives birth to a son and, seeing 'that he was a fine child,' hides him for three months (Ex 2:2). When she can no longer conceal him, her faith and ingenuity converge in an audacious plan of hope. She constructs a 'basket of bulrushes,' seals it with bitumen and pitch, and places the child in it among the reeds by the river Nile (Ex. 2:3). This act is laden with theological symbolism. The Hebrew word for 'basket' (*tebah*) is the same word used for Noah's ark (Gen. 6-9), transforming this small vessel into a symbol of salvation and hope amidst a flood of state-sponsored death. Far from abandoning her son, Jochebed entrusts him to God's providence, placing him in the very river designated for his destruction, yet in a manner designed for his rescue.

This, however, was not a solitary act. The plan's success hinges on a network of female cooperation. Jochebed's daughter, Miriam, 'stood at a distance to know what would be done to him' (Ex. 2:4). Miriam's role is not passive observation but strategic surveillance. When Pharaoh's daughter discovers the crying infant, Miriam seizes the opportune moment. With remarkable courage and quick thinking, she approaches the princess and asks, 'Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?' (Ex. 2:7). This intervention is pivotal. It not only ensures the child's survival but masterfully arranges for him to be nursed and raised in his formative years by his own mother, Jochebed, under the protection and payment of the Egyptian state (Boesak 2017:1-15). As a result, Moses maintains a connection to his Hebrew heritage, a crucial element for his future role as liberator.

3.3. Pharaoh's daughter: Compassion across enemy lines

Pharaoh's daughter is arguably the most unexpected link in this chain of resistance. As part of the royal household, she is an agent of the very system committing genocide. Yet upon discovering the basket, she takes pity on him and correctly recognises him as 'one of the Hebrews' children' (Ex. 2:6). Despite knowing that she is disobeying her father's explicit orders, she chooses compassion over obedience. Her act of adopting Moses is a bold act of defiance (Quine 2021). She not only rescues him but also gives him his name, meaning 'to draw out,' highlighting his salvation from water. By bringing him into the royal court, she unknowingly provides him with the education, status, and skills that he will later use to challenge the Egyptian empire (Mikva 2014:143). The collective resistance of the women, midwives, mother, sister, and even the oppressor's daughter reveals a powerful, layered subversion against imperial machinery. It shows how divine liberation often arises from the brave, strategic, and compassionate acts of those who seem powerless (Mtshiselwa 2021:502-529).

4. Theological and philosophical frameworks of resistance

Jochebed's defiance, while historically situated, resonates with enduring theological and philosophical debates concerning the relationship between the individual, the state, and a higher moral law. Her actions and those of the midwives provide a foundational case study for what would later be articulated as faith-based civil resistance. To fully grasp the theological weight of their resistance, it is necessary to examine the scriptural principles governing obedience to authority and the ethical justification for dissent.

4.1. The biblical tension: Reconciling Romans 13 and Acts 5:29

Christian discussions about civil obedience have traditionally been influenced by the apparent conflict between two key New Testament passages. In Romans 13:1-2, Paul states, 'Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been established by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed.' This verse has frequently been cited to justify unconditional submission to the government. Conversely, when the Sanhedrin commanded the apostles to cease preaching, Peter and the apostles responded, 'We must obey God rather than men' (Acts 5:29). This statement clearly emphasises the precedence of divine authority over human laws when the two conflict.

Rather than viewing these passages as contradictory, a nuanced theological reading sees them as delineating the proper scope and limits of state authority. Romans 13 is not a blanket endorsement of tyranny. Paul's instruction is conditional, predicated on the assumption that the state is fulfilling its divinely appointed role as 'God's servant for your good' (Rom. 13:4), punishing wrongdoers and promoting order. As Ademiluka (2019:1-11) and Du Toit (2021:1-10) point out, when a state ceases to be a minister of justice and becomes an agent of evil, as Pharaoh's regime clearly did, it forfeits its claim to absolute obedience. In such cases, the principle of Acts 5:29 becomes the overriding ethical imperative. The 'fear of God' demonstrated by the midwives is a practical application of this principle. Their allegiance was to the Author of life, not to a ruler commanding death. Jochebed's actions flow from the same theological conviction. Her refusal to surrender her son was an act of obedience to the higher law of God that sanctifies life, making her disobedience to Pharaoh an act of profound faithfulness (Ademiluka 2019:1-11).

4.2. Philosophical lineages: From Thoreau to King

This biblical ethic of conscientious objection finds powerful echoes in modern philosophical traditions of nonviolent resistance. Henry David Thoreau, in his

essay 'Resistance to Civil Government,' argued that individuals have a moral duty to not participate in or enable injustice. He famously stated, 'Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward' (Thoreau 1849). Jochebed's actions are a powerful, ancient embodiment of this principle. She refused to resign her conscience to Pharaoh's genocidal law, prioritising her moral duty to protect life over her legal duty as a subject (Mohebkhodaee 2025:125-171). Her resistance, though private and clandestine, was a profound refusal to lend her hands to the state's evil, a core tenet of Thoreauvian disobedience.

Martin Luther King Jr. expanded on this foundation by integrating it with a deep Christian theological perspective. In his Letter from Birmingham Jail (1963), King clearly distinguished between just and unjust laws, stating, 'An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself. … An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law.' For King, civil disobedience was not just a right but a moral duty to 'arouse the conscience of the community.' He also referenced early Christian acts of defiance, such as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, as historical precedents. King (1963) argued:

> Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience. In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience.

Jochebed and the midwives fit perfectly within this lineage. Pharaoh's edict was a quintessential unjust law; it violated the eternal law of God regarding the sanctity of life and was discriminatorily applied to a minority group. Their nonviolent, faith-driven resistance was a direct challenge to this unjust law, undertaken not for personal gain but out of fidelity to a higher moral order (Ademiluka 2019:1-11; Luban 1989:2152-2224). Jochebed's act, therefore, is not an isolated incident of maternal desperation but stands in a long and venerable tradition of faith-based activism that asserts divine law as the ultimate standard of justice.

5. Jochebed's resistance as a paradigm of worship

Jochebed's act of resistance should be understood not merely as an ethical or political statement but as a profound act of worship. This requires redefining worship by moving beyond the confines of liturgical practice and ritual observance toward a more holistic understanding of it as the expression of one's ultimate allegiance. In a context where the state demands total obedience and commands acts that are antithetical to divine character, resistance in the name of God becomes the highest form of devotion.

5.1. Beyond liturgical practice: Worship as ultimate allegiance

The prophetic tradition in the Hebrew Bible consistently challenges the division between ritual and ethics (Groenewald 2019:1-10). Prophets such as Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah condemned the idea that proper worship could be compatible with social injustice. Amos particularly rejected superficial ritual practices, stating God's disdain: 'I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. … But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream' (Amos 5:21, 24). This critique underscores that genuine worship is deeply connected to ethical behaviour, especially justice for the vulnerable. Worship is not merely performing rites in the temple but a reflection of one's ultimate loyalty and who they serve in all aspects of life.

Jochebed's actions exemplify a holistic understanding of worship. Pharaoh's demand to kill Hebrew children positioned him as an ultimate authority, a pseudo-deity whose edicts determined life and death. Obedience to Pharaoh in this situation would have been idolatry, revering a human ruler who usurped divine power. Jochebed's refusal to obey symbolised her supreme loyalty. By protecting her son, she publicly declared that Yahweh, the God of the covenant and Life-Giver, was her true sovereign, not Pharaoh. Her act of defiance was an act of worship because it rightly prioritised God's command to value life over the state's order to destroy it. This reflects the theological principle that *lex orandi* (law of prayer), *lex credendi* (law of belief), and *lex vivendi* (law of living) are interconnected; what one believes and how one worships should manifest in how one lives (Plaatjies-van Huffel 2020:1-15).

5.2. Confronting unjust authority: A divine moral imperative

Jochebed's resistance was not an act of anarchy but a sacerdotal duty, a priestly act of preserving the sacredness of life in the face of a desecrating power. Thus, her actions can be seen as a 'sacramental protest,' in which faith is manifested not in words or songs but in a courageous, life-saving deed (Adamo 2019:1-8). She transformed a private, maternal decision into a public, theological statement

against the dehumanising logic of the empire (Boesak 2017:1-15). Her reverence for God compelled her to act, making her resistance a form of embodied worship.

Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives, defied the command of Pharaoh to kill the baby boys even as the Israelite women are on the birth stool. They became the symbol of resistance, standing in for the whole people of Israel. It is not just the people under imperial tyrannical rule who cannot stand tyranny, however; neither does God tolerate it. John Calvin made this point when building a framework for resistance against such conditions generally, stating in his commentary on Isaiah 14:7-8 that God, God self 'cannot endure tyrants and [God] listens in empathy to the secret groans of those who live under them' (Calvin 1981). Calvin continued:

> Here he shows how greatly tyrants are hated by the whole world. When they are dead or ruined, all men break forth into joy and express the feelings which they formerly entertained towards the tyrants, and which they dissembled through fear. Then do their hatred and spite burst forth, and not only do men make known their joy, but even the dumb creatures, as the Prophet, for the sake of amplification, adds the fir-trees and the cedars. As tyranny overturns everything, so when tyranny is done away, everything appears to be restored to its original condition.

This paradigm is reinforced by the actions of the midwives, whose 'fear of God' guided them to preserve life (Lapsey 2005:81-89). Their worship was not performed at an altar but in the birthing rooms of Goshen, where they chose allegiance to the Creator over the king's decree. This form of worship, active, risky, and life-affirming, challenges any piety that remains passive or silent in the face of injustice. It suggests that true devotion is measured not by the fervour of one's prayers alone but by courageous action when one is confronted with evil.

Jochebed's story, therefore, broadens the definition of worship to include the active and often perilous struggle for righteousness. It posits that in the crucible of oppression, the most authentic worship may be an act of holy disobedience, a testament to an unwavering commitment to divine justice over human tyranny (Boesak 2020:201-222). The next section will depict these four women's actions as architects of religious freedom.

6. A conspiracy of life, the architecture of religious freedom

6.1. Religious freedom as a theological category: Locating the Exodus narrative

The idea of religious freedom, often framed within modern international human rights, has origins that go back deep into theological and philosophical history, well

before the emergence of modern liberal democracy. Legal and religious scholars increasingly emphasise that understanding religious liberty requires examining its scriptural and theological foundations (Vilks et al. 2025:1-12; Witte 2007). This section demonstrates that the actions of Shiphrah, Puah, Jochebed, Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter serve not only as literary examples of civil resistance but also as early models for concepts such as conscience rights, religious freedom, and the right of faith communities to maintain their identity despite state coercion.

Religious freedom, in its fullest theological scope, involves three interconnected aspects: belief (the internal moral conscience), practice (the outward display of worship, rituals, and community activities), and communal identity (the right of a faith community to pass its beliefs through generations) (Perry 2014:121-141). Pharaoh's genocidal decree attacked all three aspects at once. By ordering the death of every Hebrew male infant, he aimed to disrupt the biological continuity of Israel's covenant community – the very means by which the Abrahamic faith was preserved across generations. As Konvitz (1978:1619-1639) notes, the ancient world understood that destroying a person's body was also a destruction of their spiritual essence. Pharaoh's order was thus more than demographic control; it was a theocratic assertion that his authority outweighed that of the God of Israel.

In this context, the women from Exodus 1-2 serve as early exemplars of religious liberty advocates. Their resistance was not just an instinctive act to protect the vulnerable but a deliberate, theologically grounded stance against the state's attempts to erase a religious community's future. Burnside (2010:243-266) highlights that the Exodus story sets a standard in which God's law serves as the highest limit on state authority, foreshadowing by many centuries the later ideas of higher-law theory[2] that support religious freedom. Below, I explore how each character's role in this story contributes to that theological tradition.

6.2. Shiphrah and Puah: The primacy of conscience and the right to refuse

The account of Shiphrah and Puah in Exodus 1:15-21 represents the earliest and most direct assertion in the biblical canon of what later natural-law and religious-liberty theorists would call the freedom of conscience – the right, and indeed the duty, to refuse compliance with a state command that violates the law of God (Konvitz 1978:1619-1639; Forji 2010:156-169). The text is unambiguous regarding their motivation: 'the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them' (Ex. 1:17). This 'fear of God' is not a private sentiment but an operative ethical category that functions as the supreme normative standard against which royal authority is measured and found wanting.

2 For an introduction to higher law and religious liberty, see Hall 2021.

John Witte Jr., in his magisterial study of the development of 'Law and Theology in the Western Legal Tradition' (Witte 2022), argues that the concept of conscientious objection, the right to refuse state commands on religious grounds, is grounded in the theological conviction that the individual conscience is accountable to a transcendent moral law that precedes and supersedes the positive law of any political community. The midwives embody precisely this conviction. Their refusal is not anarchic; they do not seek to overthrow Pharaoh's government. Rather, they act in the specific domain in which divine law and human law conflict, recognising, in a manner that anticipates Peter's declaration in Acts 5:29, that obedience to God constitutes the limit of obedience to the state.

The midwives' use of strategic deception when confronted by Pharaoh (Ex. 1:19) raises important questions for the theology of religious freedom. Tchamba (2025:1032-1045) has explored the ethical dimensions of this deception, noting that it represents a form of what contemporary philosophers call 'morally warranted dissimulation' – the use of misdirection to protect the innocent from an unjust authority. From the perspective of religious freedom, this episode is significant because it illustrates that the right of conscience does not operate in a vacuum: it must be exercised in conditions of asymmetrical power, where the conscientious objector is vulnerable to violent reprisal. The midwives' deception is therefore not a moral compromise but a pragmatic expression of the very freedom they were defending, the freedom to act in accordance with conscience even under conditions of extreme coercion (Forji 2010:156-169).

The divine affirmation of the midwives' conduct is theologically decisive. The text records that 'God dealt well with the midwives' and 'gave them families' (Ex. 1:20-21). This divine reward functions not merely as a narrative device but as a theological sanction of the principle that the freedom of conscience, when exercised in fidelity to divine law, is not merely permitted but divinely commended. Boesak (2017:1-15) reads this affirmation as evidence that the God of the Exodus honours the courage of those who resist imperial power in the name of life. For contemporary advocates of religious freedom, this divine validation constitutes a scriptural foundation for the argument that religious liberty is not a concession granted by the state but a right grounded in the nature and will of God (Witte 2007; 2010).

6.3. Jochebed: Protecting the covenantal community and the transmission of faith

Jochebed's role in shaping the theology of religious freedom goes beyond the right of individual conscience recognised by the midwives. Her actions highlight what scholars see as the communal aspect of religious liberty: the community's right

to sustain its faith identity over generations by passing down traditions, stories, and covenantal duties (Marshall 2000; Sanneh 2009). In Exodus 1-2, the attempt to kill male children directly threatened this communal aspect, the biological and cultural means through which Israel's covenantal identity was maintained.

Jochebed's construction of the ark of bulrushes (*tebah*) and her placement of the child Moses in the Nile must be read, in this light, as an act of communal religious preservation. The theological symbolism of the *tebah* has been widely noted in the scholarly literature: the use of the same Hebrew term for the basket of Moses and for Noah's ark (Gen. 6-9) deliberately invokes the typology of divine preservation against the waters of chaos and death (Mikva 2014:143). Less frequently noted, however, is the specifically religious-liberty dimension of this act. Indeed, Jochebed's assertion has profound implications for the theology of religious freedom.

According to Nolland (1994:26-31), one of the central theological claims of the Exodus narrative is that divine sovereignty is incompatible with the absolute sovereignty of any human political authority. Pharaoh's claim to determine who shall live and who shall die is presented throughout Exodus 1-2 as a usurpation of divine prerogative, a form of idolatry in which the state arrogates to itself attributes that belong to God alone. Jochebed's refusal to submit to this usurpation is therefore an act of theological resistance. It is a protest, conducted in the register of maternal love and faith, against the idolatrous conflation of state power with ultimate authority.

The downstream consequences of Jochebed's act are equally significant for the theology of religious freedom. The arrangement engineered by Miriam ensures not only that Moses survives, but that he is nursed and raised by his own mother in his formative years, thereby absorbing the faith tradition of his people before being educated in the wisdom of Egypt (Ex. 2:7-10; Boesak 2017:1-15). This outcome encapsulates a principle that contemporary international human rights instruments have articulated in legal terms: parents possess the right to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions (UN General Assembly 1966, Art. 18(4)). Jochebed, three millennia before this right was codified, enacted it at the cost of her own safety and security. Her action stands as a paradigmatic expression of the conviction that the religious education of children lies, in principle, beyond the reach of state coercion.

Di Berardino (2015:305-336) has argued that the history of Christianity demonstrates a recurring pattern in which the transmission of faith through mothers and the domestic sphere remains more resilient than institutional structures or hostile state power. Jochebed's story anticipates and exemplifies this pattern. Her act of faith was not performed in the private sphere, at home and along a river-

bank, yet its public consequences were incalculable. This observation has important implications for contemporary religious-freedom advocacy in contexts where formal religious institutions are suppressed. The domestic transmission of faith, embodied in Jochebed's example, represents a form of religious freedom that is simultaneously the most vulnerable to attack and the most difficult for the state to extinguish.

6.4. Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter: Solidarity, cross-boundary agency, and the social conditions of religious freedom

Religious freedom, as both a theological concept and a legal right, is not merely an individual or communal possession; it requires active cooperation by those who are not themselves members of the persecuted community (Adelman 2024:67-80). Miriam's strategic intervention and the compassionate transgression of Pharaoh's decree by his daughter represent two modalities of this essential social condition.

For the theology of religious freedom, the most significant aspect of Miriam's intervention is its character as intercession. She places herself in the precarious space between the imperial household and her own endangered family, using her quick wit and courage to engineer an outcome that neither power alone could have produced. This intercessory role anticipates what contemporary scholars of religious liberty call the 'mediating structures' argument, the claim that civil-society institutions and individual actors who stand between the individual and the state play an indispensable role in the realisation of religious freedom in practice (de Freitas 2024:1-30).

Pharaoh's daughter presents a more complex case. As a member of the royal household, she is formally an agent of the oppressive state, yet her response to the crying infant is compassionate and defiant. Dykstra (2002:148) has noted that her act of adoption transgresses not only her father's explicit command but also the ethnic and political boundaries that defined the imperial order. By naming the child and bringing him into the royal court, she simultaneously subverts the decree of death and creates the conditions for the liberation of Israel. Adelman (2024:67-80) reads this as a 'collusion of mothers' that cuts across the lines of power and ethnicity to enact a solidarity rooted in the recognition of shared humanity.

The theological significance of Pharaoh's daughter's action for the concept of religious freedom lies in its demonstration that the protection of religious minorities is not merely a duty of the persecuted community or its allies but can be enacted, even if partially and paradoxically, from within the structures of the oppressing power. This observation resonates with contemporary religious lib-

erty scholarship, which emphasises the role of 'insiders' in dominant social and political structures who choose to protect the religious freedom of the vulnerable (Solmski 2026). Pharaoh's daughter is, in this reading, an ancient exemplar of what today we would call an ally, one whose structural position within the oppressive system uniquely enables her to provide protection that others cannot.

Taken together, the actions of Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter illustrate a fundamental insight within the theology of religious freedom: the realisation of this freedom in conditions of oppression is always a social achievement, the product of a network of relationships, solidarities, and moral choices that transcend the boundaries of ethnicity, power, and self-interest (Nabergoj 2022:93-105). The 'conspiracy of life' described in this paper is not simply a story of resistance; it is a story about the social conditions under which religious freedom becomes practically possible.

6.5. Theological frameworks for religious freedom: From the Exodus narrative to contemporary discourse

The contribution of the Exodus narrative to the broader theological and philosophical tradition of religious freedom is not merely paradigmatic but constitutive. Several of the most important theological frameworks for religious liberty in the Western tradition draw explicitly on the Exodus story as a normative resource. This section traces three such frameworks – the higher-law tradition, the theology of conscience, and the covenantal model of political authority – and examines how the actions of the women of Exodus 1-2 illuminate and enrich each of these.

The higher-law tradition, which grounds the right of religious freedom in a transcendent moral order that supersedes the positive law of the state, has its most ancient biblical expression in the defiance exhibited by the Hebrew midwives and Jochebed. Konvitz (1978:1619-1639) traces the philosophical roots of this tradition through Jewish, Christian, and Greco-Roman thought, arguing that all three streams converge on the conviction that the authority of the state is limited by a higher moral law that the individual is obligated to obey when the two conflict. The Exodus narrative provides the biblical warrant for this conviction: the midwives' 'fear of God' acknowledges that divine law constitutes a moral limit on state authority that cannot be crossed without spiritual culpability. Forji (2010:156-169) extends this argument, noting that the distinction between just and unjust laws, which Martin Luther King Jr. would later articulate in terms drawn from Augustine and Aquinas, has its most concrete ancient expression in the story of women who chose to obey the law of life over the law of death.

The theology of conscience, which holds that the individual human conscience is the proximate locus of the awareness of divine moral law and therefore the

seat of religious freedom, is likewise illuminated by the Exodus narrative. Witte and Alexander (2010) and later Wilken (2019) trace the development of religious freedom from its biblical roots through the patristic tradition, the Reformation, and the modern period. They argue that the right of conscience is grounded in the *imago Dei*, the conviction that the human being, as image-bearer of God, possesses an inalienable dignity that the state may not violate. The midwives and Jochebed act out of precisely this sense of human dignity. Their fear of God is an internal moral awareness that makes compliance with Pharaoh's command not merely illegal by divine law but personally degrading. Their refusal is thus an assertion of their own dignity as moral agents made in the image of God, an assertion that anticipates the theological anthropology upon which later arguments for religious freedom would be built.

The covenantal model of political authority, which holds that the legitimacy of government is grounded in its fidelity to a covenant with God and that government forfeits its claim to obedience when it violates the terms of that covenant, is perhaps the most directly relevant framework for understanding the political theology implicit in the Exodus narrative. Lombaard, Benson, and Otto (2019:1-12) have argued that the post-secular turn in contemporary political theology requires a renewed engagement with the biblical and theological resources for thinking about the relationship between faith, society, and the state. Exodus 1-2 offers a particularly rich resource for this engagement. It presents a political order in which the state has usurped divine sovereignty, along with a set of actors who, by resisting that usurpation, enact the covenantal principle that God's authority transcends Pharaoh's.

The relevance of these theological frameworks to contemporary debates about religious freedom is considerable. In the contemporary global context, religious freedom is under pressure from a variety of state and non-state actors who, like Pharaoh, seek to subordinate the identity and practice of religious communities to the demands of political power. Jochebed's story, read through this lens, is not merely an ancient paradigm but a living theological resource for communities of faith who face analogous pressures in the present.

6.6. Contemporary implications: Religious freedom, human rights, and the Exodus paradigm

The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (UN General Assembly 1981) and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (UN General Assembly 1966) represent the most authoritative contemporary codifications of religious freedom as a human right. Article 18 of the ICCPR protects

freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to change one's religion or belief, as well as the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, and teaching. Article 18(4) specifically protects the rights of parents to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions (Buckingham 2024:53-66). The actions of Jochebed, Shiphrah, and Puah anticipate, in narrative form, the substantive content of each of these provisions.

Shiphrah and Puah's refusal to comply with Pharaoh's command enacts what Article 18(1) protects as the 'freedom to manifest one's religion or belief.' In their case, they live out their belief that the sanctity of life as ordained by God supersedes the king's death decree. Their defiance constitutes conscientious objection, a form of exercising religious freedom that is recognised, albeit with limitations, in international human rights law (Henrico 2019). Jochebed's act of hiding Moses and Miriam, arranging for his nursing by his own mother, enacts what Article 18(4) protects as the parental right to religious education – in this case, the right to transmit the faith tradition of Israel to the next generation in defiance of a state policy designed to extinguish that tradition. Moreover, the 'conspiracy of life' enacts what contemporary scholars call 'corporate religious freedom' (Clark and Durham 2015:256-287), the right of a religious community to maintain its collective identity, practices, and institutions (Witte 2000, 2007; Witte and Alexander 2010; Wilken 2019).

This intersectional reading is important for the theology of religious freedom because it resists the temptation to treat religious liberty as an isolated right, abstracted from the broader social conditions of justice and equality. The women of Exodus do not merely defend their right to worship; they defend a whole community's right to exist, flourish, and transmit its identity across generations amid radical vulnerability. Groenewald (2019), drawing on Amos 5:24, argues that the prophetic tradition consistently frames the pursuit of justice as inseparable from authentic worship; the women of Exodus enact this inseparability in their resistance to Pharaoh, making their story a paradigm for any theology of religious freedom that takes into account both the dignity of the human person and the demands of social justice.

Read through the lens of contemporary theology of religious freedom, the actions of Shiphrah, Puah, Jochebed, Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter constitute a multi-dimensional paradigm that anticipates and enriches the most important theological and philosophical frameworks for this fundamental right. Their 'conspiracy of life' asserts the primacy of conscience over state command, the right of a religious community to perpetuate its own identity, the necessity of cross-boundary solidarity for the realisation of religious free-

dom in conditions of oppression, and the inseparability of religious freedom from the broader demands of justice. These historic contributions provide a living theological resource for all who seek to articulate and defend the right of religious communities and individuals to live, worship, and transmit their faith in freedom.

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