

T.B.Maston Lecture.

Remembering what Matters: Ethics and Exodus 1 in the 21st Century¹

Thank you for the opportunity to deliver the T. B. Maston lecture tonight. At the outset I need to make it clear that I am not speaking as a T. B. Maston expert. Though Maston's influence as an ethicist was wide, and his many books and articles reached a diverse audience, his greatest impact has been amongst Southern Baptists. This is hardly surprising, given that in his 40 year plus tenure at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary he was the ethics professor for literally thousands of Southern Baptist pastors in training. Many went on to hold positions of significant influence amongst Southern Baptists – indeed, at one time four of the six presidents of Southern Baptist Seminaries were his former students.²

I have been active as a Baptist pastor in South Africa, New Zealand and now in Australia – where I serve as the principal of Vose Seminary (our denominational theological college) and Senior Pastor of Carey Community Baptist Church – so I have been influenced by the Southern Hemisphere rather than by Southern Baptists! For all that, many of Tom Maston's books are in the Vose library, where they are consulted by our staff and students.

From the perspective of an external observer, two aspects of Maston's work are particularly impressive. The first and most notable is that at a profoundly racist period in time, he found the courage to call for racial justice and reconciliation.³ In doing so he reminded the Christian community that it is called to transform its cultural setting, not to reflect it. No ethicist worthy the name avoids the pressing social issues of their age, and Maston was no exception to this. At a troubling time in history, he provided sound biblical and ethical counsel in his texts *Of One* (1946), *The Bible and Race* (1959), and *Segregation and Desegregation* (1959).

¹ This is the text of the T.B.Maston lecture delivered by Dr Brian Harris, principal of Vose Seminary, Perth, Australia, at Carson-Newman College, Tennessee on 4 April, 2011. You can contact the author at brian.harris@vose.wa.edu.au

² William Pinson, Russell Dilday, Milton Ferguson, and Randally Lolley.

³ Maston wrote three books on the subject: *Of One* (1946), *The Bible and Race* (1959), and *Segregation and Desegregation* (1959).

A second aspect which I admire is that he was able to combine a progressive social ethic with traditional evangelical orthodoxy. Sadly, many view the two as being incompatible, and consequently arrive at an ethic that is neither biblical nor progressive.⁴

Maston always began his ethical reflection with consideration of the biblical text's teaching on the issue at hand. Tonight I'd like to start in a compatible, but slightly different way. Rather than apply the Bible's teaching to a topic, I'd like us to focus on a particular biblical narrative, that found in Exodus 1, and to explore the many ways in which it may apply to us around three and a half thousand years later. If nothing else, the study establishes that perfect ethical solutions often prove elusive, and that those who proclaim certainty as to the path to follow are probably living in a world somewhat different to the real one. For all that, it concludes that if we remember what really matters – and in this study it is the saving of life – we are likely to spot the smile of God, even if our handling of some of the lesser issues doesn't meet the standards of theoretical ethical ideals.

I'm conscious that I speak at a time when many Christians have lost confidence that Christianity has made a positive contribution to the history of this planet. So many of our well intentioned programmes have had unfortunate unintended consequences, that we run the risk of being frightened into paralysis. While writers such as Alvin Schmidt speak glowingly of the constructive difference that Christianity has made,⁵ books such as Christopher Hitchens's *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* are finding a dramatically larger readership.⁶ Whether it be the Crusades, the linkage between the modern missionary movement and colonial expansion or the question of if religion is indeed the opiate of the masses, the press is consistently discouraging. Even our brighter moments are subject to critique. We recently celebrated the bicentennial of the abolition of slavery as a result of the effort and energy of William Wilberforce. Wilberforce's evangelical convictions are beyond dispute, and should indeed cheer and inspire all evangelicals. However, we cannot avoid the historical record which points out all too clearly that amongst Wilberforce's strongest critics were other Bible believing Christians. To imagine that Christians were uniformly opposed to slavery is ridiculously naive - a point that hardly needs to be made in this Southern context. In short, in spite of our best effort to be a force for good, our ethical legacy is muddled. Some good has undoubtedly been achieved, but then so has much that has been damaging.

⁴ While this false divide is certainly true in the current climate of many Southern Baptist churches, the tendency to separate these spheres predates contemporary Southern Baptist conflicts. See for example, David O. Moberg, *The Great Reversal: Evangelism Versus Social Concern* (London: Scripture Union, 1972).

⁵ Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

⁶ Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007).

In my own country of Australia, the modest remnant of Kevin Rudd's brief period as Prime Minister of Australia is likely to be his 2008 national apology to the Stolen Generations of Australia – those Australian children of Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander descent who were forcibly removed from their homes and communities in a programme commenced in 1869 and which lasted for a century. Ostensibly the programme was to protect abused, neglected and abandoned children, but in practice it resulted in unimaginable heartbreak. The decision as to what constituted neglect was made with the most myopic cultural bias and a great wrong was sanctioned by the law of the land. The apology was very long overdue, and it would be hard to find any serious commentator who would speak in support of this devastating programme. However, it would be true to say that many who cared for the children removed by this programme did so with the best of intentions – indeed, many were motivated to participate by their Christian convictions. I have personally spoken to some Baptist missionaries⁷ who fostered many such children, and who feel bewildered that the good they intended to do is now remembered with such derision. Truly, the ethical quest is complex and often has unintended consequences. It's why I find tonight's study of Exodus 1, so intriguing. It is a passage that records ethical decisions that are fraught with danger, and yet have a largely positive outcome.

In selecting a particular narrative on which to focus, I am flagging a conviction – that ethical reflection is best undertaken against a backdrop of real life. This is not to suggest that there are not principles to guide us. Let me very quickly and superficially recap some basic ethical theory to ensure we are all on the same page. While each ethicist might express it slightly differently, typically they try to establish 4 principles.

- 1) **Formal principles.** The formal axiom of ethical investigation is usually that we should seek the good. The formal principle gives no content to 'the good' nor how we will find it. It is simply the broad and formal statement of intent.
- 2) **The substantive principle.** Here we try to answer the question: What is the good? It could be the Aristotelian quest for happiness, or the Augustinian ideal of the love of God as the highest good, or the simple conviction, as per deontological ethicists, that we should always do our duty – however defined.
- 3) **Normative principles** state what we should normally and typically do to realize the substantive principle (for example, most ethicists would suggest that we should normally tell the truth). While the concept of normative principles is not inherently controversial, division arises when we try to move normative principles to the next level – that of prescriptive principles.

⁷ Names intentionally withheld.

- 4) **Prescriptive principles** state what must always be done. Of necessity, there should be few such principles, lest one too frequently encounter conflicting moral obligations, as one does in the Exodus 1 passage about the Hebrew midwives whose obligation to tell the truth conflicted with their obligation to save lives. In the light of this, some ethicists (and Joseph Fletcher is a name that readily springs to mind) suggests that there is only one enduring absolute that can be prescribed, and that is that in each and every situation one must do the most loving thing.⁸

Some ethicists have abandoned the quest for fixed principles to guide actions, and suggest that we focus simply on virtues which we should cultivate. In virtue ethics the focus is neither on rules nor consequences of behavior, but on the character of the moral agent. While virtuous people might embark upon misguided activities, acting in accord with virtue will usually result in virtuous outcomes.

Beyond these broad ethical frameworks, ethicists know that they invariably need to dig a little beneath the surface, lest they fail to distinguish between *prima facie* (on first appearance) duties and actual duties. Much of ethics involves grappling with what is the actual duty. To determine this, what better way than to study actual life situations? Case studies are the bread and butter of ethics, and in choosing this ancient narrative of the Hebrew midwives encounter with the Egyptian Pharaoh, I am expressing my conviction that Anton Boisen, founder of the clinical pastoral education movement, was correct when he urged that theological students study not only books, but also what he called, “the living human documents.”⁹ Boisen’s plea flowed from his own experience of mental illness, and his dismay at that time to discover the enormous gulf between theory and practice. His experience is salutary. We should remember that the Bible is not a theoretical text, but a transforming collection of one narrative after another recalling significant “God turned up” events. Most of the narratives (because they are narratives) are somewhat untidy, and fall short of what one might hypothesise would exist in an ideal world – but then such a world has not existed since Eden. These accounts continue to inform us because they are the stuff of life.

Let’s then quickly recap the events described in Exodus 1. A Pharaoh who knew not Joseph has come to power in Egypt. Instead of seeing in the Israelites allies and friends, he views them from the lens of threat and danger, and reduces them to slavery and forced labour. In spite of their dire

⁸ See both Fletcher’s work and the debate on his views between Fletcher and Montgomery. Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966); Joseph Fletcher and John Warwick Montgomery, *Situation Ethics* (Canadian Institute of LTPP, 1999).

⁹ Anton T. Boisen, *The Exploration of the Inner World: A Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1936), 10.

circumstances, the Hebrews continue to multiply, which simply fuels Pharaoh's paranoia of them. He decides that the best course of action is to kill all male Hebrew babies at birth, and instructs the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah to be the agents of execution. Aghast at this immoral instruction, they fail to implement it, and in due time are called to account for the continuing existence of male Hebrew babies. They fabricate an outrageous lie, suggesting that Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women, and that they give birth so quickly that the services of a midwife are not required. In what makes a fascinating study of the foolishness that flows from prejudice, Pharaoh is taken in by their deception. We are told that God is pleased with the actions of the midwives and rewards them with children of their own – a lofty reward at any time in history, but especially in the ancient world. Indeed, the reward is greater than this, for by inserting their names into the passage – Shiphrah and Puah lest you forget them – the author is ensuring that their names will be remembered forever. He does not extend the same courtesy to Pharaoh who remains simply as “Pharaoh who?” Clearly someone of his ilk does not have a name that is worthy to be remembered.

While the passage is undoubtedly complimentary towards the midwives, there are three fairly obvious criticisms that any responsible ethicist must offer.

- 1) First, the midwives were liars. Remember what they said. Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women - their babies are born so easily and swiftly. Was this incredible “porky” that they told the Pharaoh simply a “little white lie” to get them out of a tricky situation – something that in the larger picture was of very little consequence? One of the fathers of ethics, Immanuel Kant, would disagree. Kant is remembered for his concept of the categorical imperative. Kant argued that the moral rightness of an act lies in our willingness to universalise the rule of action which generated it. Because people are not stepping stones towards another goal, we have to view each step in our moral journey as an end in itself. For example, if we deceive someone on a journey to “a noble end” (as the midwives did), we forget that each step of the journey is an end in itself. What if everyone deceived everyone else while trying to accomplish some “noble end”? If we don't like the picture of the world which would result from universalising the steps we have taken, the principle we are operating from is likely to be flawed.

The late Baptist theologian Stanley Grenz summarises the one imperative underlying Kant's deontological theory as: “Always do the act that is motivated by the sincere belief that what you are doing is the right thing to do, right not merely for you but for anybody seeking to act

properly in any similar situation.”¹⁰ Put slightly differently, if one is to break a moral imperative, one has to ask what the consequences would be if everyone else acted in the same way.

We could of course argue that the midwives deceit should not be considered a lie because they were in the middle of a war – a fight for the survival of the Hebrews. Just as we don’t accuse a soccer player who acts as though he is about to swerve to the right, but at the last moment veers left, of being morally suspect, but to the contrary, commend him for his skill, so to the rules of the never pleasing game of war, are different to the rules of everyday life. One can never be candid with the enemy.

While not without merit – and probably part of the midwives own rationale for their behaviour, there is a significant flaw in this justification. Surely one of the requirements of a just war (presupposing any such category can ever really exist) is that it is openly declared. Pharaoh is clearly unaware that he faces an enemy in the midwives, and while we need feel no obligation to give him excessive sympathy, there is a niggling sense that this is a betrayal by some he had identified as friends and allies.

So does lying matter? Truth to tell, we already live in a world where we are uncertain as to the veracity of most statements we hear. While I’m not sure of American views on the topic, the average Australian considers the term “a truthful politician” to be an oxymoron, while body language experts train us to look out for deceit by checking to see if the speaker looks away from us, or covers their lips or brushes their nose.¹¹ It feels a little sad to live in a world where such skills are necessary. Is this the legacy of too quickly approving of the kind of deceit that the midwives engaged in?

- 2) The second, in my view, is even more serious, for not only were the Hebrew midwives liars, they reinforced the stereotype of the Hebrews as “other”. Given the expressive and dramatic nature of Hebrew culture, we can safely assume that they would have told their tale of Hebrew women with great gusto. Pharaoh probably delighted in every moment of it – and is likely to have chortled in delight as he heard how quickly Hebrew women gave birth –

¹⁰ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1997), 31.

¹¹ This according to an interview with body language specialist, David Alssema. Gregg Callaghan, "10 Questions - Body Language Expert David Alssema," *The Australian*, 2 April 2011.

so unlike Egyptian women who were delicate and refined and needed the assistance of a midwife... Those at the forefront of social change know how hazardous such stereotyping can be. Before the 'other' can be accepted, they must be seen not as "other", but as "one of us". Indeed, the "othering of the enemy" allows the perpetrators of violence to justify their actions. Pharaoh, if he had access to 21st century terminology, could have said to himself "I knew it. They are a genetic aberration. They don't even bear children in the same way as Egyptians. Clearly they are not really people, and therefore their lives are of no value." That this "othering" should occur so early in Israel's history is perhaps a sobering prelude to the more recent "othering" at the hands of Hitler's henchmen. Lest one think that "othering" is of little consequence, reflect for a while on the outcome of the Nazi holocaust and the reasons which were used to justify it. We might quickly gloss over the tale that these midwives told, but it had the potential to be extraordinarily damaging. That they communicated this stereotype to a Pharaoh who devised policy on the basis of his prejudices was potentially reckless.

- 3) Third, they were only partially successful stereotyping, liars. While in the short term their ingenious fabrication spared their life, and the lives of some Israelite boys, in the bigger picture, it was a failed strategy. As the midwives didn't kill the Hebrew boys at birth, Pharaoh organised for them to be drowned instead - and for that, no midwives were required. This was not the end of persecution for the Hebrews; it was simply the turning of the page as a new era, possibly worse than the previous one, emerged. True, there was a brief respite and some lives were saved, but it was a false dawn. The night was to get considerably darker.

For all this, we miss the point of the passage if we fail to observe Yahweh's clear satisfaction with the actions of Shiphrah and Puah. Their names are remembered and they are rewarded with children of their own. There was no greater reward in the ancient world. So what are we to make of the ethical dilemmas inherent in Exodus 1?

- 1) First we should note the obvious. Life is messy, but God is kind in the midst of it. Of course it is not enough to simply note this, we need to practice it in the grace we show towards those who have found themselves in difficult situations and have made "best we could think of at the time" decisions. Indeed, we need to be willing not just to show such grace towards others, but sometimes towards our own self, if we have been in situations which have been far more complex than we were able to manage.

- 2) Second, the ethical quest is often about finding the optimal path in real life circumstances. Ethics works its way out in the real world – not the classroom. This is not to devalue the classroom, but to acknowledge that it is a different arena to the one in which our ethical or virtuous living, finds its outlet. If what is worked out in the classroom finds no place in daily life, the work of the classroom is not complete.

- 3) Third, don't miss the hopefulness of this text. In terms of Jewish literature, Exodus 1 is a passage of great humour. The midwives pull a fast one over Pharaoh. Though Pharaoh seems all powerful, this shows him to be a bumbling buffoon, fooled by his own prejudice. If the Pharaoh can be tricked, there is hope. While they waited for the turning of the tide, they found some moments to chuckle amongst themselves. Sometimes laughter is all that oppressed communities can hope for. Sometimes it is the only reason they survive. The laughter would have had to last them a long time. It would be more than eighty years before Moses would lead them to freedom. Neither Shiphrah, nor Puah, nor any of their contemporaries would have been alive when that day finally dawned. A brief moment of laughter was all that they had. They needed to savour it deeply. It was a sign of hope to help keep them going. So to, let's not knock those who are unable to help communities find long term solutions to their problems, but who find ways to soften the problems with which those communities will continue to live for all too many years.

- 4) Fourth, for all the mistakes the midwives make - lying, stereotyping their own people and doing so for minimal success - they show that they remember what matters most; the saving of life. Put bluntly, in the ethical sphere they realised that saving life trumps truth telling. Given that they couldn't think of a way to do both, they showed a nuanced and valid set of priorities.

In more despairing moments, given the awful plight that was that of the Hebrews at this time, they might have wondered if these lives were worth sparing. I'm reminded of the haunting lines from the William Blake poem *Auguries of Innocence*: "Every morn and every night, some are born to sweet delight. Some are born to sweet delight. Some are born to endless night."¹² The Hebrew babies saved by these women would have spent their entire lives as slaves. Exodus 1 makes it abundantly clear that they were slaves treated with great

¹² In public domain.

cruelty. These were people born to endless night. Would it perhaps have been more humane to let them die at birth?

This is the T.B. Maston lecture, so it is as well at this point to remember something of T.B. Maston's personal story. As a result of an accident at birth, his first born son Thomas McDonald was unable to use his arms or legs and was unable to speak – though he had a very expressive face. Tom was born in 1925 and died in 1987 – not long before T.B. Maston himself died. He and his wife Essie Mae cared for Thomas McDonald for all his 60 plus years – always treating him as fully human, and not willing to have him institutionalized even when they were older and care was not easy. For T.B. Maston life was not only worth living if the circumstances were favourable. True humanity grows when the needs of the vulnerable are close to our own experience.

The reality was that the midwives had no way of knowing how long their current nightmare would continue. They lived in the hopefulness that God would ultimately act and create a better future for them and for their children. For that better future to dawn, they knew that each generation needed to survive. Though not in their lifetime, in the end, the day of liberation arrived, and a generation of Hebrews had managed to survive to seize it. Shiphrah and Puah can rightly claim some of the credit for the long term survival of the Hebrew people.

- 5) Fifth, don't overlook the fact that the two heroes in this passage are women. In an age in which we debate – often uncharitably – about the role of men and women, this passage reminds us that the call to genuine heroism is gender neutral. In this passage, it is two daring women who find the courage to do the right thing. Later it is an anxious, but no less courageous, male, Moses, who more directly challenges the next Pharaoh. The things that matter most, like being made in the image of God,¹³ and doing the right thing, have got nothing to do with gender. It is always tragic if we forget this.
- 6) While the risk of choosing a path of action is that there will be unintended and sometimes undesirable consequences, the greater risk is to do nothing – or simply to conform to the demands of the age. Whatever mistakes Shiphrah and Puah make, they are women of great courage and they stand out as hopeful signs of resistance to evil.

¹³ Genesis 1:27.

Ingeborg Bachmann has written a haunting poem which is quoted approvingly by Jürgen Moltmann in his discussion on the importance of hope.

The uniform of the day is patience
And its only decoration the pale star
of hope over its heart. . . .
It is awarded
for desertion,
for bravery in face of the friend,
for betraying all unworthy secrets
and the disregard of every command.¹⁴

These women found the courage to remain brave, in the face of the friend, to betray unworthy secrets and to disregard every command. Was it tidy – of course not. Did they do the right thing – of course they did!

In thinking through the implications of what I am saying, you might ask if I being too wishy washy. If we can never be sure that we are doing the right thing, why even bother to think about what constitutes the virtuous life? And isn't what I'm saying a little dangerous? Won't we let ourselves off the ethical hook too easily? After all, we can argue that the Crusaders operated from the best of intentions – and no doubt many of them did. Indeed, good intentions can sometimes be so seriously misguided that they frankly, are not enough. This is one of the key reasons why we need ethics – to transcend our well intentioned but often misguided whims. Ethics should give us something a little more concrete, a little more sure.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer opens his *Ethics* with the memorable statement, "The knowledge of good and evil seems to be the aim of all ethical reflection. The first task of Christian ethics is to invalidate this knowledge."¹⁵ Bonhoeffer goes on to remind us that the heart of original sin is the desire to know the difference between good and evil. Why is such a noble goal the beginning of sin? Simply because if we truly knew the difference between good and evil, we could act independently from God, with no need to listen to Him for the wisdom He alone brings. Such also was the sin of the tower of Babel. This misguided building project (which – given the limited engineering skills available at the time, was unlikely to have resulted in a tower of more than around 6 stories) was surely innocuous. True,

¹⁴ Quoted in Jürgen Moltmann, *The Experiment Hope*, trans., M. Douglas Meeks (London: SCM, 1975), 189-190.

¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans., Neville Horton Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 17.,

it shows a misguided sense of where heaven is (up there – but where is up there if you live down under in Australia, as I do?) – and it is not as though the tower would ever penetrate the dimensional barrier between this planet and the realm of God, but though it was never going to succeed, why was it seen as evil? The probable answer is that it was the attempt to reach heaven unaided thereby excluding God from the process and making God redundant.

Bonhoeffer's warning of the risk of excluding God from the ethical process should be heeded. While the desire to know the right ethical response in each situation is understandable, ultimately the Bible and history points to the futility of our efforts to package and label and draw tidy conclusions. Tentativeness and humility should, therefore, be key characteristics of the ethical quest. Tentativeness implies the willingness to examine and critique one's own assumptions and practices. It suggests hesitancy about drawing lines too firmly or inflexibly. It leads to a willingness to continue exploring and questioning. It allows the questions "why?" and "why not?"

The muddled ethical outcomes from 2000 years of church endeavour, should, rather than paralyse us into inactivity, lead to our embarking upon the ethical quest with a sense of absolute dependence upon God. Only God actually knows the outcome of our actions.

Indeed, this God knew that Hebrew boys not slaughtered at birth would be drowned – and so organised that one who was meant to be drowned, was rescued by Pharaoh's own daughter. This unlikely survivor would eventually lead God's people to freedom, and the land of promise. God writes straight with crooked lines, and we as aspiring ethicists can only commit our muddled efforts to Him. In His own way, and in His own time, he will announce that we have done what we could. Hopefully we will always remember what matters most – and perhaps, like Shiprah and Puah, our names will also be remembered.

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