“In Pain She Shall Bear”:
In Conversation with Eve’s Maternal Pain

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In honor of my mother

In memory of hers

You bore your children in pain and raised them with joy.

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Chapter 1

Eve's Maternal Pain in Conversation

Do you not know you are each an Eve?[1]

Despite centuries of interpreters' universalizing Eve as a means of speaking about women, the actual conversations in which she is invoked are limited in scope. Lived experience of embodied maternal pain and child loss is a crucial "gap" to fill in readings of Genesis 3-4. Eve's experiences with her reproductive health and child loss appear in 3:16, 3:20, 4:1-2, and 4:25. Women's experiences with our own reproductive health have shown that far from being limited to the moment of childbirth, embodied maternal pain can extend to all aspects of women's reproductive health.

The scope of maternal pain in this project is necessarily limited.[2] In my exploration of maternal pain, I focus specifically on embodied experiences of maternal pain—that is,

[1] Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women* (Thelwall, 14).

[2] Broadly speaking, I envision the term "maternal pain" as encompassing any of the following: physical and emotional aspects of female reproductive health; identity, imposed on or assumed by persons identifying and/or presenting as women, in relation to their

what occurs in some women's bodies as a result of various aspects of their reproductive health.[3] These include menstruation, conditions causing infertility, conception, pregnancy, and child loss, as well as the sustenance of young children through breastfeeding. Intermingled with such pains are maternal grief and loss. Within the Hebrew Bible, grief and loss may be experienced in response to loss of children to death or estrangement, pregnancy loss, or the loss of the potential to have children.[4]

Experiences of embodied maternal pain are evident, in various ways, throughout the Hebrew Bible, in texts from across ancient Western Asia, and in the lives of subsequent interpreters of Eve—despite the fact that for many interpretive communities, theological

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in/ability and/or choice to give birth or terminate a pregnancy; as well as child loss, both after birth, and before birth when viewed as such by the mother. Though many of the sources in this work will assume heteronormative gender roles and reproduction, my definition of "maternal" does not. It may apply, for example, to trans men who have a hysterectomy and/or oophorectomy, and those who do not, as well as to trans women, whether or not they have reconstructive surgery. Nevertheless, I recognize the limits of the language of both "maternal pain" and "women's reproductive health," which I will refer to throughout. Rather than narrowly define these categories, it is my intent to spark conversations which will broaden the scope of each.

[3] Though in this project I do not deal directly with issues of identity in relation to motherhood, attention to embodied aspects of maternal pain should inform such conversations.

[4] These and related issues lead to feelings of grief or loss by some, but by no means all who experience them. I do not intend by listing these possible sources of grief and loss to imply that all persons do or should respond to them in a particular way.

interpretations of Eve exist apart from conversations about embodied maternal pain. Instead, they have been historically limited to matters of sin and gender (in)equality. I highlight the pains women can experience in their bodies due to their reproductive health in an effort to bring to the reader's consciousness human costs of the religiopolitical maneuvering that often frames references to maternal pains.[5] It will be my contention in the final chapter that we attend to the vast array of experiences of persons in relation to what I have here defined as maternal pain; and that alleviation of maternal pain requires a complex set of responses that reflect such diversity of experiences.

History of Interpretation of Eve in Genesis 3-4

Sustained commentary on the logical implications of Gen 3:16 as borne out in women's reproductive health—beyond the event of childbirth itself—is lacking.[6] Dominant

[5] While I do not raise matters of existential pain, such as matters of identity vis-à-vis cultural concepts of "motherhood," attention to certain embodied pains will be informative to such discussions.

[6] This may be observed among modern commentaries on Genesis, which in their notes on 3:16a either ignore painful, embodied aspects of women's reproductive health or are limit their comments to the event of childbirth. Those in the latter group include Joan E. Cook, *Genesis* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 13; Edwin Good, *Genesis 1-11: Tales of the Earliest World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 41; and Susan Ann Brayford, *Genesis* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 241-45.

interpretations of Eve across the centuries have focused on issues of gender (in)equality and, for Christian interpreters, the doctrine of original sin.[7] Eve has been so fully subsumed into these conversations that her potential to raise other issues has largely been lost. First and second wave feminist biblical scholars' work on Genesis was also similarly restricted by these dominant streams of thought, busied with rebuttals to the dominance of denigrative interpretations of Eve.

Gender (In)equality and Sin

Before moving on to the ways in which Eve has been talked about as a mother, we may situate such readings within broader, dominant, interpretive traditions out of which many arose. Multiple monographs have been written on interpretations of Eve, particularly within Christian traditions in which the garden narratives hold theological prominence.[8] On

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[7] For an introduction, see Mark S. Smith, *The Genesis of Good and Evil: The Fall(out) and Original Sin in the Bible*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2019). For a compilation of primary texts on Eve and Adam, consult Kristen E. Kvam, Linda S. Schearing, and Valarie H. Ziegler, eds. *Eve & Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1999). See also Gerard P. Luttikhuizen, ed., *Eve's Children: The Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

[8] Amanda Benckhuysen, *The Gospel According to Eve: A History of Women's Interpretation* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019); Michael E. Stone, *Adam and Eve*

the whole, interpreters of Eve in Genesis 3-4 have discussed her in conversations about sin and/or gender (in)equality. These include arguments for and against restrictions on women's roles and rights in society, as well as discussions over the nature and origin of sin, and whether women share the greater blame for it. Here I will summarize the trajectories of interpretation of Eve that have shown their dominance among interpreters of Eve as mother, including those arguing for aspects of gender equality.

The list of interpreters who have used Eve to support gender inequality is long, but among its most vituperative is the infamous accusation against women by second-century Christian Tertullian, to which I alluded in the opening of the chapter:

> And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are

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in the Armenian Tradition: Fifth through Seventh Centuries (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2013); Christfried Böttrich, et. al., eds., *Adam und Eva in Judentum, Christentum, und Islam* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011); Kathleen M. Crowther, *Adam and Eve in the Protestant Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Hanneke Reuling, *After Eden: Church Fathers and Rabbis on Gen 3:16-21* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Philip C. Almond, *Adam and Eve in Seventeenth Century Thought*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Kristen E. Kvam, Linda S. Schearing, and Valarie H. Ziegler, eds., *Eve & Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). See also references to Eve in Marion Taylor, ed., *Handbook on Women Biblical Interpreters: A Historical and Biographical Guide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012); and Tamar Kadari, "Eve: Midrash and Aggadah," *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, 20 March 2009, Jewish Women's Archive, https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/eve-midrash-and-aggadah.

> the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed God's image, man. On account of your desert—that is, death—even the Son of God had to die.[9]

Though not necessarily writing with the same tone, many early male Christian interpreters repeated the sentiment that women were inferior to men. Ambrose of Milan, writing in the fourth century, argued that women were morally inferior to men,[10] that Eve was to blame for adding to God's command in Gen 3:3, and for causing Adam to eat the fruit, and that a woman's place was in the home. Augustine of Hippo claimed that women were created specifically for procreation, basing his argument in part on his assumption that men made better companions for men. Therefore, Eve could not have been created to serve as Adam's companion but to produce children for him.[11] Moving into the Middle Ages, Peter Comestor's depiction of Eve's head on the serpent is a less than subtle commentary on his negative view of Eve, offering a visual representation of the sentiments avowed by

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[9] Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women* (Thelwall, 14). Elsewhere in his writings, Tertullian alternately blamed only Adam or both Adam and Eve for the negative effects of what occurred in the garden. See F. Forester Church, "Sex and Salvation in Tertullian," *HTR* 68 (1975): 85-88 (cited in Benckhuysen, *The Gospel According to Eve*, n.11).

[10] Ambrose of Milan, "Paradise," in *Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel*, (Savage, 12.56.334-37).

[11] Augustine of Hippo, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, vol. 2 (Taylor, 9.3, 5, 7)

Tertullian centuries earlier.[12] For his part, Thomas Aquinas described women as "defective and misbegotten," the weaker sex to men's more rational nature,[13] and cast the greater blame for the fall on Eve and her great pride.[14]

Though their work carried less lasting influence within western Christianity than that of their male contemporaries, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine, women interpreters Faltonia Betitia Proba and Aelia Eudocia Augusta espoused similar views. Proba argued in *Cento Virgilianus* that sin and all its consequences originated with Eve, even going so far as to state that god was physically male, and that the divine image was not present in Eve.[15] Eudocia compared Eve to Clytemnestra, who murdered her own husband, and stated that those who are in hell are there because of Eve.[16]

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[12] Peter Comestor*, The Scholastic History. Petri Comestoris scholastic historia: liber Genesis*, ed. Agneta Sylwan, Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Medievalis (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005).

[13] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 4 vols, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947), 1.92.1.1, reply obj. 1-2.

[14] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2.163.4.

[15] Benckhuysen, *The Gospel According to Eve,* 120, 264.

[16] Aelia Eudocia Augusta, in Mark D. Usher, Homeric Stitchings: The Homeric Centos of the Empress Eudocia (Lanham, MD: Rowman &Littlefield, 1998), 13-15.

Other interpreters asking about questions of sin, its blame, and the relative worth of men and women arrived at different conclusions. Basil of Caesarea,[17] John Chrysostom,[18] and Gregory the Great[19] spoke of the shared rationality of humans, in contrast to the animals; however, in his description of the woman's interaction with the serpent, Chrysostom backed away from any true affirmations of equality.[20] Lombard, whose sentiments would be echoed by Aquinas, argued that woman was created as man's companion—neither lord nor slave—, but nevertheless made less than generous comments on women's intellectual capacities in comparison to men's.[21] Similarly, Hildegard of Bingen argued with Basil that women fully bore the image of god, but nevertheless argued that women were subordinate to men by nature.[22]

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[17] Basil of Caesarea, *Hexameron 10 and 11*. Basile de Césarée, Sur l'origine de l'homme, trans. and ed. Alexis Smets and Michel van Esbroeck, Sources chrétiennes 160 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1970)

[18] John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 1-17*, 15.11. Nevertheless, Chrysostom described the purpose of her capabilities as to make a good companion for the man. He made no such comments about the man's ability to offer companionship for the woman.

[19] Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, 21.22-24.

[20] John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 1-17*, 16.6, 9, 11.

[21] Peter Lombard, *Sentences,* II.18.2.

[22] See Rosemary Radford Reuther, Women and Redemption: A Theological History, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 72.

The first task in exegeting Eve's character in Genesis in support of women's rights was to argue against an interpretation of divinely sanctioned patriarchy that had contributed to centuries of subjugation of women. Christine de Pizan argued that women fully bear the image of God and, similarly to Lombard and Aquinas, that Adam should love and not dominate Eve.[23] She argued further that the characters of Eve and Adam should not be representative of all men and women, but as individuals.[24] Thus, women were not to be held accountable for Eve's sin.[25]

An even more robust defense of Eve was to come from Isotta Nogarola, in a debate with Ludovico Foscarini. Within their dialogue, Nogarola and Foscarini debate over positions taken by earlier influential works, including those of Ambrose, Gregory the Great, Peter Lombard, and especially Augustine.[26] Being herself educated by a humanist tutor, Nogarola nevertheless granted the argument that Eve was the weaker being, but did so to

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[23] Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 1.9.2.

[24] Christine de Pizan, *Letter of the God of Love*, (Fenster, 596-604).

[25] Christine de Pizan, *Letter of the God of Love,* (Fenster, 193-96, 649).

[26] Isotta Nogarola and Ludovico Foscarini, *Dialogue on Adam and Eve* 28, in *Complete Writings: Letterbook, Dialogue on Adam and Eve, Orations*, ed. and trans. Margaret L. King and Kiana Robin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 148-58.

argue that on that basis, Eve could not be equally responsible for sin.[27] Both the necessity and rhetorical nature of Nogarola's argument is illustrative of the dominance of readings of Eve that placed in her the middle of conversations about sin and gender (in)equality. As Marion Taylor has observed,

> This issue of the responsibility for original sin could not have been more important. Eve's role as the temptress who corrupted Adam and thus brought condemnation on all later generations was the central argument of the Western misogynist tradition: woman's essential malevolence was here displayed, and she could never be free of its burden.[28]

Indeed, similar arguments would be addressed by first and second wave feminists centuries later. Sojourner Truth, in her 1851 speech to the Ohio Women's Rights Convention, used a subversive interpretation of Eve's blame to argue for women's right to vote, quipping,

> If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they are asking to do it, the men better let them.[29]

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[27] Isotta Nogarola, *Dialogue on Adam and Eve,* (King and Robin, 146). Benckhuysen has observed that "by the end, it is evident that Nogarola's primary goal is not so much to defend Eve, but to deconstruct the gender ideology of the day." Benckhuysen, *The Gospel According to Eve,* 131.

[28] Marion Taylor, *Handbook on Women Biblical Interpreters*, 389.

[29] Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a Woman," quoted in Bell Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 216. Truth would go on to reference

Four decades later, commentators in *The Women's Bible*, edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, stressed the similitude of male and female at creation in Gen 1:26-28; 2:21-25.[30] Recognizing Gen 3-4 as a second creation narrative, Stanton and contributing author Lillie Devereux Blake, celebrated the character and conduct of Eve as one who values and seeks after wisdom.[31] Yet, Stanton's well-documented racist rhetoric throughout her writings and speeches reveals a limited vision in her thought for the true equality and worth of all women.[32] Phyllis Trible's landmark interpretation of Gen 2-3 in *God and the Rhetoric of*

Mary's maternity among her arguments as well, stating, "That little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with him." Truth, "Ain't I a Woman," (Hooks, 216).

[30] Elizabeth Cady Stanton, ed., *The Woman's Bible: A Classic Feminist Perspective* (vol. 1; New York: The European Publishing Company, 1895; repr., Mineola, NY: Dover, 2002), 14-22. Ellen Battelle Dietrick rebutted the second creation account, in which she reads a requirement that "woman obey their husbands in marriage," in favor of the first. It must be noted that her argument is built on anti-Semitism, in that she writes disparagingly of a later editor as "some Jew" who "manipulated" the first creation account into the second. Stanton, *The Woman's Bible*, 18.

[31] Stanton, *The Woman's Bible*, 24, 26.

[32] See, for example, Michele Mitchell, "Lower Orders: Racial Hierarchies, and Rights Rhetoric: Evolutionary Echoes in Elizabeth Cady Stanton's Thought during the Late 1860s," in *Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Feminist as Thinker: A Reader in Documents and Essays*, ed. Ellen Carol DuBois and Richard Cándida Smith (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 128-51, and discussion and bibliography in Jen McDoneld, "White Suffragist

Sexuality brought with it a level of literary and linguistic sophistication far surpassing that which the contributors to *The Woman's Bible* were able to attain. She too pointed out flaws in the assumptions that the first woman was created subordinate to the man, such as her conclusion that in Adam's recognition of Eve as "woman" and himself as "man," "differentiation, then, implies neither derivation nor subordination."[33]

Trible then followed the pattern among Christian exegetes by regarding the eating of the fruit as the moment when the trajectory of the narrative changes. The story of Eve's subjugation which follows could then be interpreted as "human sexuality in disarray."[34] Though Trible avoids language of "the fall," her interpretation allows Christian interpreters for whom Genesis 3 is foundational to a doctrine of original sin to themselves interpret the subjugation of woman as evidence of a fallen state which is not to be upheld but overcome.

Thus, the history of denigrative interpretations of Eve in Genesis 3-4 has necessitated such interpretive work on Eve in direct conversation with matters of sin and gender in(equality). In the pursuit of gender equity, critiques will rightly be levied at

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Dis/Entitlement: The Revolution and the Rhetoric of Racism," *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 30.2 (2013): 243–64.

[33] Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 101.

[34] Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 133.

aspects of each of these interpretations, but the necessary exegetical groundwork has been laid, and re-laid, for centuries. Yet, the dominance of historic readings of Eve comes not only with their broad-scale acceptance as legitimate, but also insofar as they limit the interpretive conversation to begin with. As will be seen, even among interpreters who do highlight Eve's experience as mother, discussions of sin and gender (in)equality predominate.

Eve as Mother

When it comes to Eve as mother, much of the interpretive tradition has been located within the dominant conversations about Eve in Genesis 3-4, outlined above. Whether accepting, rejecting, or nuancing the attendant assumptions, the parameters of these received interpretations of Genesis 3-4 have set the conversation. While many interpretations have assumed Eve's role in sin, others have reacted against the impact of patriarchal structures on women's agency with regard to their role(s) in society. The latter have taken on the important work of outlining how maternal pain, broadly construed, results in part from societal inequity.

As outlined above, the assumption, particularly within early Christian interpretations of Eve, that Genesis 3-4 is primarily a narrative about sin, has been assumed by many, including women interpreters, who speak of Eve as mother. Hanneke Reuling has noted how the same has often been true with regard to interpretations of Gen 3:16 and 3:20:

> While interpreting the pains of childbirth as the difficulties to be confronted by the virtuous and the spiritually inclined, the Church Fathers do not read the text in its natural and daily context, but rather load it with spiritual significance. When they interpret verse 16 and also verse 20 literally, Christian sources always relate the text to the account of the first sin: either the process of reproduction has become painful because of sin, or procreation is the consequence of or compensation for mortality as such.[35]

Thus, maternal pain in glossed over in two ways. By "spiritualizing" Genesis 3-4, such readings shift focus away from women's actual experiences with motherhood, including

[35] Reuling, *After Eden*, 336. Reuling downplays the dominance of "a primordial fall" among early Christian interpreters of Genesis 3, arguing that their primary focus tended toward other meanings (334). However, the crucial point is not that all interpretations privileged the fall, but that when maternal pain was discussed, it was inevitably couched in conversations about sin. Of Jewish interpreters, Reuling also noted an emphasis on the penal nature of maternal pain: "However, as far as the midrash fully explores the painful reality of the female body, it testifies to an awareness of the dark side of corporeality. Apart from Genesis Rabbah, the rabbinic sources have little difficulty in defining woman's condition as a penal one, her body being struck by a manifold curse. In general, Christian and Jewish sources agree that procreation, as a consequence of sin, is something painful and burdensome." (Reuling, *After Eden*, 336).

maternal pain. These are insignificant in light of matters, such as sin, considered more spiritually relevant. In these readings, the reality of maternal pain may be entirely erased.

An example of this tendency is seen in Christian representations of the Virgin Mary as the new Eve. Mary, as the mother of Christ, regenerates the humanity whom Eve had doomed through her sin.[36] In Jerome's presentation of this theme, he presented Mary as the mother of life and Eve as the mother of death.[37] Even among some women interpreters who drew attention to Eve's suffering in Genesis 4, Eve's blame for sin controlled their reading. Sophia Ashton remarked on Eve's suffering as a mother who would witness her children's inheritance of the sin for which she was to blame.[38] These sentiments would appear also in Sarah Towne Martin's reflection on Eve's grief over Cain's murder of Abel.[39]

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[36] This line of interpretation began quite early within Christianity, appearing at least as early as Justin Martyr's second century *Dialogue with Trypho* 100 (Migne, *Patrologiae Graeca* 6.709-12), and found also in Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 5, 19 (Migne, *Patrologiae Graeca*, 7.1175-76), Tertullian of Carthage, *De Carne Christi*, (Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 2.828).

[37] Jerome, *Letters*, ed. Charles Christopher Mierow, Ancient Christian Writers 33 (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1962), 22.21.

[38] Sophia Ashton, *The Mothers of the Bible* (1855; Boston: J. E. Tilton, 1865), 11-12.

[39] Sarah Towne Martyn, *Women of the Bible* (1864; New York: American Tract Society, 1868), 20.

On the second count, maternal pain is acknowledged but is affirmed as the necessary or inevitable way of things. Thus, with few exceptions, the focus on matters of sin and gender (in)equality has generally corresponded with a lack of sustained engagement with actual experiences of embodied maternal pain. Most attention to Eve as mother, even among feminist interpreters, has attended to the constrictions of the social role of motherhood. Trible's comments on motherhood in Genesis 3-4, for example, note how Eve is expected to assume a role she has never witnessed, "intertwined with a position of inferiority and subordination."[40] In her comments on Gen 3:16, Stanton acknowledged the reality of some maternal pains, arguing that they could mostly be alleviated if patriarchal norms controlling women's activities were set aside:

> The curse pronounced on woman is inserted in an unfriendly spirit to justify her degradation and subjection to man. With obedience to the laws of health, diet, dress, and exercise, the period of maternity should be one of added vigor in both body and mind, a perfectly natural operation should not be attended with suffering. By the observance of physical and psychical laws the supposed curse can easily be transformed into a blessing. Some churchmen speak of maternity as a disability, and then chant the Magnificat in all their cathedrals round the globe.[41]

[40] Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 133-34.

[41] Stanton, *The Woman's Bible*, 25.

While Stanton's focus on the improvement of women's experiences of pregnancy is laudable, her commentary showed little patience for women who do not experience an easy pregnancy.

Conversations about the painful aspects of Eve as mother have either accepted Eve's role in sin, or focused on social constrictions placed upon women as mothers. The latter have raised the crucial point that aspects of maternal pain, broadly construed, result from societal inequalities based on gender. Lacking from these interpretations is a sustained focus on the pains women endure in our bodies as a result of our reproductive health. Yet, patriarchal dominance over women's bodies, identity, and social expectations of women as "mother," impact women's bodies, including reproductive health outcomes. It is with gratitude for the exegetical work that has come before that I turn to aspects of embodied maternal pain in Genesis 3-4.

Acknowledgment of Embodied Maternal Pain

Rashi's commentary on Genesis is among the few that directly acknowledge the wide-ranging nature of maternal pain indicated by Gen 3:16. His list of pains for 3:16a includes those of pregnancy, childbirth, and raising children. Rashi's inclusion of the pains

of pregnancy acknowledges that the embodied pains of birthing children extend well beyond the birth event itself. Rashi was also aware that the pains of raising a child included the embodied pains of breastfeeding—or choosing not to breastfeed one's child in favor of employing a wet nurse. Tractate Ketubot (59b, 61a) of the Babylonian Talmud deals with disagreements between a husband and wife concerning whether she would breastfeed her child. In the case that a woman wishes to breastfeed but her husband wishes otherwise, the decision falls to the woman because of the pain.[42] Rashi's commentary on the Talmud explains that such pain is caused by the fullness of milk in her breasts.[43] It is conceivable that Rashi was aware of such realities given his experience as a husband and father.[44]

To these pains, Rashi added a woman's embarrassment to act on her sexual desire.[45] While Rashi's comment is in reference to Gen 3:16b, both Genesis Rabbah and tractate Eruvim of the Babylonian Talmud list the pain of conception among their comments on

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[42] b. Ketub. 61a.

[43] Mayer I. Gruber, *The Motherhood of God and Other Studies* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 91.

[44] On Rashi's writings about women, see Avraham Grossman, "Rashi's Teachings Concerning Women" *Zion* 70.2 (2005):157-190.

[45] Rashi's commentary on Gen 3:16. In his thirteenth century commentary on Gen 3:16, Naḥmanides' would list pains quite similar to Rashi's: pains of pregnancy and childbirth, as well as a woman's sexual desire and status of servitude to her husband.

Gen 3:16a.[46] This distinction is significant in that it acknowledges that procreative sex necessary (at the time) for childbirth to occur, could be a physically painful experience for the woman. Pain experienced by women during sexual intercourse (dyspareunia) may result from a number of factors beyond lack of arousal.[47] Among these is one of the common causes of infertility, endometriosis, as well as childbirth.[48]

In this interpretive vein, Gen 3:16a may represent such common pregnancy symptoms as urinary frequency, fatigue, and back pain, as well as more serious and life-

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[46] While Genesis Rabbah lists the pain of conception, b. Eruv. 100b specifically mentions the rupture of the hymen, as does Avot de Rabbi Nathan. The afflictions upon Eve listed in chapter 14 of the Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer similarly includes menstruation and "tokens of virginity."

[47] For an accessible overview, see Anne Edwards and Michael L. Bowen, "Dyspareunia," *The Journal for Nurses in General Practice* 39.1 (2010): 26-30, and especially table 1.

[48] See discussion of endometriosis in chapter 2, in the section, "Curses of Breasts and Wombs." On post-natal dyspareunia, Natasha R. Alligood-Percoco, Kristen H., Kjerulff, and John T. Repke, "Risk Factors for Dyspareunia After First Childbirth," *Obstetrics & Gynecology* 128.3 (2016): 512-518. Though the present study will not focus on sexual violence, the pain of sexual intercourse may also refer to sexual assault and marital rape, particularly when read along with Gen 3:16b. On this potentiality, see, Caroline Blyth, "Lost in the 'Post': Rape Culture and Postfeminism in *Admen and Eve*," *BCT* 10.2 (2014): 6. One early gnostic text, the Secret Revelation of John, depicts a rape of Eve as the beginning of marital sex. Celene Lillie, *The Rape of Eve: The Transformation of Roman Ideology in Three Early Christian Retellings of Genesis* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 276.

threatening pregnancy complications.[49] Martin Luther in his *Commentary on Genesis* argued that Gen 3:16 should be read as referring to the whole experience of conception and birth:

> This same expression signifies by its implied meaning the whole of that time, "conception," during which the child is borne in the womb, which time is afflicted with great and various weaknesses, pains and diseases. The head, the stomach, the general health and the appetites are variously and greatly affected. And after the child is matured and the birth is at hand, the greatest sorrow of all is endured; and the child is not born without great peril even of life.[50]

In listing not only the risks of maternal and infant death but also several effects of pregnancy, Luther adds a level of specificity not found in the witnesses to maternal pain in rabbinic interpretations of Gen 3:16.[51] As with Rashi, Luther's marriage to Katarina von Bora would have brought him a level of first-hand experience of pregnancy.

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[49] For a list of common self-reported pregnancy symptoms, see for example Table 1 in Katie F. Foxcroft, Leonie K. Callaway, Nuala M. Byrne, et.al., "Development and Validation of a Pregnancy Symptoms Inventory," *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth* 13.3 (2013): n.p., doi:10.1186/1471-2393-13-3.

[50] Martin Luther, *Commentary on Genesis, Vol 1: Luther on Creation*, (Lenker) III.V.I.V.16.

[51] Given his lamentable rhetoric against Judaism and Jews throughout his writings, Luther may have similarly rejected Jewish interpretations of Gen 3:16, were he aware of them. Elsewhere in the commentary, Luther rejects a rabbinic interpretation of Gen 4:13, which he cites via Nicholas de Lyra. However, Nicholas de Lyra's Commentary on Genesis offers no such interpretation of Gen 3:16a, and Luther may have been ignorant of this strand of Jewish interpretation.

Concerning the raising of children as it relates to women's bodies, Elizabeth Clinton wrote in 17th c. England to advocate that women breastfeed their own children, against cultural pressure to employ a wet nurse. Among her objections to the practice were included negative health impacts on the children of those wet nurses expected to prioritize others' children above their own.[52] As a part of her exegetical argument, Clinton built on the notion of Eve as symbolic of all women. She commented that Eve must have nursed her own children, due to both "a true, natural affection" and the fact that there was no one else around to do it for her.[53] She then encouraged women to take up Eve's example in assuming "the sorrows of conception, of breeding, of bringing forth and bringing up" children, in which she included breastfeeding.

These interpreters share direct or at least proximal experience with conception, pregnancy, childbirth, and the raising of children. Rashi's interpretation of Gen 3:16 and the rabbinic sources he follows provide the most expansive lists of conditions women may experience as painful as a result of their reproductive health. Still, the comments themselves

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[52] Elizabeth Clinton, *The Countesse of Lincolnes Nurserie* (Oxford: John Lichfield, 1622). I discuss Clinton's example further at the end of chapter 2 in the section "Rereading Genesis 3-4: Environments of Maternal Pain."

[53] Elizabeth Clinton, *The Countesse of Lincolnes Nurserie*, 7-8.

are brief and invite much deeper attention to women's various experiences of these conditions. Like Luther's focus on pregnancy, Clinton's commentary is significant to an investigation into Eve's maternal pain in that she focused her attention on a specific aspect of maternal pain. Her challenge to accepted practices regarding wet nurses is laudable. Nevertheless, her call to women to follow Eve in "obedience" in birthing and raising children remained within cultural expectations that women reproduce.[54] For his part, Luther counted the pains of pregnancy among theologically necessary bodily punishments after the fall.[55] Thus, both of these interpretations acknowledging specific aspects of maternal pain remained affected by dominant interpretations of Eve regarding sin and gender (in)equality. New readings of Genesis 3-4 are needed that acknowledge the wide-ranging scope of maternal pain and focus on women's experiences with conditions related to their reproductive health, without tying such conversations to notions of Eve's sinfulness.

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[54] Benckhuysen, *The Gospel According to Eve: A History of Women's Interpretation* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 104.

[55] Martin Luther, *Commentary on Genesis, Vol. 1: Luther on the Creation*, V.19a.

Reading Eve's Maternal Pain in Genesis 3-4

In contrast to the erasure of Eve's maternal aspect in most receptions, Clinton's, Luther's, and especially Rashi's commentaries on Gen 3:16a acknowledge maternal pain and its multiple impacts on the lives and reproductive health of women. The tradition of interpretation of Gen 3:16 of which Rashi is a part opens up the possibility of bringing to bear the multiple embodied pains women may experience in relationship to their reproductive health. Consequently, the event of childbirth is only the starting point for conversations about maternal pain. Menstruation, sexual intercourse, pregnancy, pregnancy loss, and rearing children are all experiences that may prove painful for women.

In what follows, I will offer an initial exegesis of Genesis 3-4 in which I will highlight references to what I have defined as maternal pain. Along the way, I will raise two related issues that will receive attention throughout much of this work: environmental concerns and child loss due to violence. In the chapters to follow, I will return to rereading Genesis 3-4 in light of the specific conversations about maternal pain in each chapter.

אֶל־הָאִשָּׁה אָמַר
הַרְבָּה אַרְבֶּה עִצְּבוֹנֵךְ וְהֵרֹנֵךְ בְּעֶצֶב תֵּלְדִי בָנִים
וְאֶל־אִישֵׁךְ תְּשׁוּקָתֵךְ וְהוּא יִמְשָׁל־בָּךְ׃

To the woman he said,
"I will greatly multiply your reproductive pain;[56] with pain you
will give birth to children.

[56] I have chosen "reproductive" as reflective of the broad range of aspects of women's reproductive health. For supporting interpretations recognizing a range of women's reproductive health pains, particularly within in rabbinic commentary, see note 42, above. Westermann interpreted this hendiadys as referring to "the pains that childbearing will bring you." Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John j. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 262. In this, he followed Speiser's commentary, though expanding Speiser's "pangs that result from your pregnancy." E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, Anchor Bible 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 24. For an extended treatment of Speiser's approach, see Tzvi Novick, "Pain and Production in Eden: Some Philological Reflections on Genesis iii 16." *VT* 58 (2008): 235-44. Novick suggests "the shaping of your conception," in reference to divine shaping of fetus during the gestational period, such as in Job 10:8 (241). Curley and Peterson prefer "sorrowful conceptions," including in their reading 3:16 reference to emotional anguish over infertility—difficulty in reaching conception. Christine Curley and Brian Peterson, "Eve's Curse Revisited: An Increase in 'Sorrowful Conceptions,'" *BBR* 26.2 (2016): 157-72. Each of these translations reflects aspects of a woman's reproductive health beyond the moment of conception. For a contrasting interpretation in which a woman's toil with general labor and with her pregnancies are two separate categories, see Carol L. Meyers, "Gender Roles and Genesis 3:16 Revisited," in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Carol L. Meyers and M. O'Conner (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 344.

Your urge[57] will be toward your man; he[58] will rule over you."

(Gen 3:16)[59]

וַיִּקְרָא הָאָדָם שֵׁם אִשְׁתּוֹ חַוָּה כִּי הִוא הָיְתָה אֵם כָּל־חָי׃

The man named his woman *Ḥavvāh*, because "She was mother of all living."

(Gen 3:20)

The astounding proclamations by the man in Gen 3:20 and the divine in 3:16 merit replies they do not receive.[60] We hear nothing of the woman's response to her new name and

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[57] The term תשוקה, often translated "desire," can but need not have a sexual connotation. A. A. Macintosh has argued via comparative Semitics that the term means "concern, preoccupation, (single-minded) devotion." A.A. Macintosh, "The Meaning of Hebrew תשוקה," *JSS* 61.2 (2016): 365, 385. The Septuagint version renders the term αποστροφη, "turning." On LXX Genesis, see Brayford, *Genesis*, 241. For a history of translations of the term in Gen 3:16, see Joel N. Lohr, "Sexual Desire? Eve, Genesis 3:16, and תשוקה," *JBL* 130.2 (2011): 227-46.

[58] Translating the *waw* at the beginning of the final phrase of 3:16 represents a significant interpretive choice, especially as it impacts theological statements about the divine's view of gender roles. "Your desire shall be for your husband, *but* he shall rule over you," allows for a reading in which the divine character acknowledges the incongruity of the two statements: that a woman would be drawn toward a man, but that he would use that relation to control her. At this stage of analysis, I have left the *waw* untranslated. For a reading which highlights the function of Gen 3:16 for men to control the sexuality of women who might be unwilling to face the risks of maternal mortality, see Carol Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 98-100.

[59] All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

[60] Mieke Bal argued that the naming of Eve in 3:20 demonstrated her domination by Adam, and that it left her "imprisoned in motherhood," and, within Christian tradition, was

imputed identity, nor the myriad ways in which she would experience pain due to her reproductive health. Between the two statements to the woman in Gen 3:16 and 3:20 are divine statements concerning the man and the land:

אֲרוּרָה הָאֲדָמָה בַּעֲבוּרֶךָ
בְּעִצָּבוֹן תֹּאכֲלֶנָּה כֹּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ

> "Cursed is the ground on account of you;
> with travail you will eat of it all the days of your life."
>
> (Gen 3:17b)

When placed in literary context with the divine speech to the man (Gen 3:17-19), the possibility arises that the woman's painful situation is impacted by the man's painful struggle to produce food from the land. Though communicating two discrete experiences of suffering, they present a common struggle for survival in which humans and environment are interdependent. Though the language of a direct curse is only applied to the serpent and the land (Gen 3:14, 17),[61] as I will demonstrate in chapters 2-3, the curse of the land potentially affects women's reproductive health outcomes.

"condemned to predict Mary" whose worth would also be attributed to her in relation to her motherhood. Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 128.

[61] So Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Continental Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994.), 261, 263.

The divine pronouncements about the two human characters are stated against the backdrop of the reality of their mortality. The ultimate end of mortality comes through forcefully in Gen 3:19b:

כִּי־עָפָר אַתָּה וְאֶל־עָפָר תָּשׁוּב

"You are soil, and to the soil you will return."[62]

(Gen 3:19b)

Faced with the reality that death is the inevitable end for all humans, the man turns to the woman for the way forward (Gen 3:20). This verse acknowledges the ability to produce more humans through childbirth as the means for humanity as a whole to stay one step ahead of death. Humanity will be saved through childbearing. And yet, in the act of childbearing, the woman herself risked death. Despite this note of hope for the survival of humanity, the proclamation is couched in reminders of death. Preceding it are brutal reminders of human mortality and agricultural scarcity, which may be overcome, but not erased, with successful maternal health outcomes.

Reminders of death immediately follow Gen 3:20, as the humans are clothed with animal skins—the first reference to the slaughter of animals. Though the linguistic evidence

[62] This line too acknowledges the interdependent cycle of life, with the decomposition of bodies into the soil.

is too limited to make sweeping claims, it is possible that in Gen 3:20, the woman is being styled as the mother of humans and animals.[63] The use of singular חַי as a substantive, "the living," is rare within the Hebrew Bible.[64] It only appears again in Genesis at the beginning and end of the flood narrative.[65] In both cases in the flood narrative, the phrase clearly encompasses animal and human life as clarified by both narrative detail and parallel references to "all flesh" (כָּל־בָּשָׂר) as the objects of destruction. The curse of the land with

[63] The precise nature of her role as such is not specified, but it would expand the role of mother beyond giving birth and caring for one's own young. Ascribed personal and social identity of "mother" or "parent" is beyond the scope of this work, but the role of a mother figure outside of giving birth or breastfeeding may also be found in the divine character Belet-ili ("mother of the gods") who restores fecundity of land, animals, and humans by tracking down Telipinu in the Hittite narrative CTH 324 (see discussion in chapter 2, in the section "Curses of breasts and wombs"). Abarbanel accepted the interpretation of Eve as mother of all living creatures, but used it to cast aspersions against her character, comparing it to her relationship with the snake. Her name, according to a midrash, is associated with *ḥiwya'*, the serpent, who caused humans to sin (Gen.Rab. 20.11). Tg. Onq., Tg. Yer., Saadiah, Ibn Ezra, and Radaq rejected the idea of Eve as mother to the animals.

[64] Gen 3:20; 6:19; 8:21; Isa 38:19; Ps 143:2; 145:16; Job 12:10; 28:21; 30:23. With the single exception of the poetic Isa 39:19, the substantive form חַי always appears in the phrase כָּל־חַי (or כָּל־הָחַי). Generally, when referring to living beings, the term is used in its plural form or as an adjective paired with terms such as נפש and בשר.

[65] Gen 6:19; 8:21. The version of the story in Gen 7 uses a different term (כָּל־הַיְקוּם) (v.4), paired with references to "all flesh with the breath of life" (v. 15, 21-22) and explicit reference to the destruction of humans and animals (v. 23).

waters from above and below bring about the destruction of all living flesh, human and animal alike.[66]

Her title as mother of everyone is immediately followed by a slaughter of animals used to clothe them. What does it mean for a human woman to be mother of the living, when she and her human companion are wearing hide? As was indicated in the words to the snake in Gen 3:14, the human-animal relationship is complicated by the propensity to kill one another. The death of and estrangement from those she mothers will continue in the Cain and Abel narrative in Gen 4:1-25. And yet despite these ever-present reminders of mortality and the painful precariousness of life, the woman's title as "mother of all living" is an unqualified, if tenuous, statement of hope.

The tragedy of Cain and Abel tells a story of parental grief, bringing 3:16 to pass. Eve has become pregnant and gives birth (4:1), and, in a multiplication of her pregnancy pains, gives birth again (v. 2). In the span of a few verses, the first human parents lose their

[66] Gen 7:11; 8:2, 21. See discussion in chapter 3, in the section "Blessings from above and below."

first two children to death and estrangement. Through her naming of Seth, the character of Eve writes her grief into the preceding story of the loss of Cain and Abel:[67]

> וַיֵּדַע אָדָם עוֹד אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ וַתֵּלֶד בֵּן וַתִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ שֵׁת כִּי שָׁת־לִי אֱלֹהִים
> זֶרַע אַחֵר תַּחַת הֶבֶל כִּי הָרָגוֹ קָיִן׃
>
> Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, saying, "God has appointed for me another offspring to succeed Abel, because Cain killed him."
>
> (Genesis 4:25)

The Hebrew term תחת may be informed by its function in two other passages where the term is applied to someone who assumes a role after his predecessor has died:

> וַיַּמְלֵךְ פַּרְעֹה נְכֹה אֶת־אֶלְיָקִים בֶּן־יֹאשִׁיָּהוּ תַּחַת יֹאשִׁיָּהוּ אָבִיו
>
> Pharaoh Neco made Eliakim son of Josiah king, succeeding his father Josiah.
>
> (2 Kgs 23:34a)

> וַיֵּשֶׁב שְׁלֹמֹה עַל־כִּסֵּא יְהוָה לְמֶלֶךְ תַּחַת־דָּוִיד אָבִיו
>
> Solomon sat on the thrown of YHWH to rule, succeeding his father David.
>
> (1 Chr 29:23)

[67] In the Samaritan Pentateuch, it is Adam who names Seth (ויקרא), and so parental grief comes through his voice instead of Eve's. I will argue in chapter 3 that the outpouring of grief in the character of Jacob at the end of Genesis is a counterpoint to the silence on fatherly grief in the Gen 4.

In both cases, a man has died and been replaced by his son and hereditary heir (i.e., his seed, although the term is not explicitly used in either verse.[68] Similarly, in Gen. 4:25, Seth fills the role of son after the death of his male relative.[69] But in the case of 2 Kgs 23:34a, the successor is said to replace not the previously ruling king, Jehoahaz, whom the people had chosen, but Josiah, denouncing the banished Jehoahaz's rightful claim to a line of succession. Eve's statement, then, conveys that Seth assumes the role of son, succeeding not the eldest son Cain, who has since been banished, but Abel. Even as she removes Cain from the line of succession, as it were, in the act of naming both Cain and Abel alongside Seth, Eve enshrines their both of their memories and her loss of them. Furthermore, her statement that she has conceived and borne Seth because Cain killed Abel, situates this further multiplication of her pregnancy pains within a context of human violence.

In summary, maternal pain is a significant issue within the narratives of Genesis 3-4. The pains of childbirth and female reproductive health are referenced explicitly in Gen 3:16,

[68] This is also the first time in Genesis the term for seed is used of human offspring; it would not appear again until Gen 15:3, in the words of Abraham.

[69] According to Eve, Seth fills the role of the younger brother, pointing forward to the preference for younger sons throughout Genesis. Through his actions and subsequent banishment, Cain has been removed from the equation. Thus, the genealogy in Gen 5 resumes with Seth.

as is the unequal balance of power between a woman and her male sexual partner within a patriarchal society. The naming of Eve in Gen 3:20 by the man introduces a woman's complex relationship to an expectation that she become "Mother." Almost immediately following Adam's proclamation, come the realities of mortality and of the tenuous relationship between humans, animals, and the land. With Eve's final words in Genesis, Gen 4:25 reframes the Cain and Abel narrative as one of child loss. Furthermore, it offers the possibility that maternal pain as referenced in Gen 3:16 is not limited to the event of childbirth, but to a whole host of experiences of maternal pain and loss.

Methodology and Approach

The literary manifestation of Eve in Genesis 3-4 joined a cross-cultural conversation about embodied maternal pain and loss. Despite this, the history of interpretation of Gen 3:16 demonstrates that Eve is often invoked without attention to maternal pain. Consequently, for some communities for whom Genesis has functioned and continues to function as scripture, the beneficial interpretive possibilities of a dialogue with Eve as mother go underutilized. The aim of this work, is to reignite biblical conversations about lived experiences of maternal pain, beginning with Eve.

The epistemological assumptions behind this project are rooted in reception theory as approached through a feminist lens. Reception theory having taken many expressions within biblical studies, I primarily follow the reception theory as laid out by Brennan Breed in his *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History*, which is itself largely dependent on Gilles Deleuze.[70] Breed's work lends itself well to the aim of ideological criticism, to expose and respond to dominant ideas. After situating my work within feminist approaches to maternal pain, I will present Breed's description of the "nomadic text" and its relationship to my approach to Genesis 3-4, and finally return to how my feminist lens necessitates a differing approach to Eve's maternal pain than that found in Breed's subsequent work in reception history.

Reception Theory through a Feminist Lens

My interest in Eve's narrative as one of maternal pain aligns with the goals and strategies of feminist biblical scholarship in that it values the experiences of women as sources for biblical interpretations and highlights ethical implications of biblical

[70] Brennan W. Breed, *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History* (Indiana University Press, 2014); Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

interpretations. I also follow established routes within feminist biblical scholarship in my choice and reading of texts: focusing on female characters, issues of women's reproductive health, and considering imagery of a female divine. An example of this three-fold approach may be seen in Rabbi Elyse Goldstein's *ReVisions: Seeing Torah Through a Feminist Lens*.[71]

In the first section of her work, "Women in the Torah," she reads stories of selected women in the text from her own perspective as a woman. Her focus on the impact of certain texts on women mirrors my own approach to reading texts about maternal pain. Because the primary question I bring to these texts is not, "What is the primary theme of this text," but "How does this text relate to the realities of maternal pain," my interaction with these texts produces new readings.[72] Part two of Goldstein's work focuses on an aspect of women's reproductive health, menstruation, and reflects on her own experience of a contextual response to it, the mikveh. My own focus on particular aspects of women's reproductive health is similarly guided by my own contextualized experiences. Though I will

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[71] Rabbi Elysee Goldstein, *ReVisions: Seeing Torah Through a Feminist Lens* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001).

[72] This includes, for example, her reading of the law against a man marrying his sister (Lev 18:18) from the perspective of its impact on women, who would be spared from the "aggravation" of such a situation. Goldstein, *Revisions*, 68-69.

not always name these experiences explicitly, they have at times guided my insights. These same experiences, along with my focus on experiences of maternal pain have impacted my engagement with maternal divine imagery.

Recently, scholars have turned to evidence of women's experiences of childbirth in ancient Western Asia. Carol Meyers has pulled from archaeological and ethnographic studies to stress the high maternal and infant mortality rates as well as the impacts of diet on women in relation to their reproductive health.[73] Outside of Meyers' work, recent scholarship on women's reproductive health in the Hebrew Bible has generally followed literary approaches. Claudia Bergmann and Amy Kalmanofsky have examined the rhetorical impact of childbirth in the Hebrew Bible, Bergman through cross-cultural conversation,[74]

[73] Carol Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*.

[74] Claudia D. Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis: Evidence from the Ancient Near East, the Hebrew Bible, and 1QH XI, 1-18* (New York: de Gruyter, 2008), and "Turning Birth into Theology: Traces of Ancient Obstetric Knowledge within Narratives of Difficult Childbirth in the Hebrew Bible," in *Children in the Bible and the Ancient World: Comparative and Historical Methods in Reading Ancient Children* (ed. Shawn W. Flynn; SHANE; London: Routledge, 2019).

and Kalmanofsky by applying theories of genre.[75] Jo Ann Scurlock,[76] Gary Beckman,[77] and Martin Stol[78] have added to the literature on childbirth and its dangers for women living in ancient Western Asia. Walter Farber's edition and translation of the Lamaštu corpus includes a large number of rituals and incantations aimed at the protection of pregnant women and infants.[79]

Each of these works are significant contributions to a conversation about maternal pain in the ancient world. Scurlock, Beckman, Stol, and Farber have contributed to our understanding of some of the realities women in the ancient world faced. Yet, Scurlock, Beckman, Stol, and Farber limit themselves to the ancient texts, which set the parameters of the conversation about women's reproductive health. How their work might be brought into conversation with Hebrew Bible passages is left to others. Meyers has also worked to

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[75] Amy Kalmanofsky, "Israel's Baby: The Horror of Childbirth in the Biblical Prophets," *BI* 16.1 (2008): 60-82.

[76] Jo Ann Scurlock. "Baby-snatching Demons, Restless Souls and the Dangers of Childbirth: Medio-Magical Means of Dealing with Some of the Perils of Motherhood in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Incognita* 2 (1991): 137-85.

[77] Gary Beckman, *Hittite Birth Rituals* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1983).

[78] Martin Stol (with a chapter by Frans A. M. Wiggermann), *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible* (Cuneiform Monographs 14; Leiden: Brill, 2000).

[79] Walter Farber, *Lamaštu: An Edition of the Canonical Series of Lamaštu Incantations and Rituals and Related Texts from the Second and First Millennia B.C.* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014).

establish a better understanding of women's health in ancient Western Asia, including, for example, dietary limitations that would impact her during menstruation and pregnancy.[80] Meyers, Bergman, and Kalmanofsky have shown how reading texts in light of knowledge of women's reproductive health can improve our readings; however, their strongest contribution is to understand meanings of texts, rather than their potential to impact reading communities.

A few possibilities immediately arise to expand upon such work in maternal pain. These works also focus overwhelmingly on the event of childbirth, leaving room to consider other aspects of women's reproductive health. To their work on collections of ancient texts, and, in Meyer's case, to ethnographic research, we may add the insights of recent research into women's reproductive health. Finally, I would add attention to the potential impact of these texts upon people's lives. My endpoint is not to establish what we know about maternal reproductive health in ancient Western Asia, nor to better understand the intended rhetorical power of Gen 3:16 in its ancient context. Though I have pursued these lines of inquiry, I do so with an eye to fresh conversations about maternal pain *in conversation with* these ancient witnesses.

[80] Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve,*

Toward the latter aim, I bring a readerly approach to cross-cultural encounters with ancient texts championed by Egyptologist Richard Parkinson:

> Direct experience of a physical environment can bring us a little closer to the experiential reality of even a distant, fictional poem. From this, I would suggest that in some ways the real issue of travel for modern Egyptologists is how we can travel ourselves, in terms of both imagination and actuality, beyond our own (often highly restrictive) institutional and intellectual frames. Such a journey will perhaps take us like the shipwrecked sailor to a place that we cannot entirely define, as we try to find a strategy with which to imagine the experiences of an ancient culture.[81]

The "journey" for scholars attempting to "imagine the experiences of an ancient culture" is determined by who embarks on the journey in the first place. Although a number of factors inevitably impact our limited readings, the gap in scholarly literature on Genesis 3-4 with regard to maternal pain exists in no small part because, historically, relatively few biblical scholars have identified as women.[82] That is not to say that male interpreters are incapable of caring about such issues; Rashi and Luther showed some concern on that front in their interpretations of Gen 3:16 that listed specific pains of women's reproductive health. Nor

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[81] Richard Parkinson, "'Now, voyager': a preface on the poetics of place," in *Current Research in Egyptology 2015: Proceedings of the Sixteenth Annual Symposium* (ed. C. Alvarez, et. al.; Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2016), 16.

[82] As of 2018, only 24.77% of the membership of the Society of Biblical Literature identified as women, 0.12% of respondents identified as transgender, and 75.11% as male. Society of Biblical Literature, *2019 SBL Membership Data* (January 2019), 8.

are sex and gender the sole determinants of readings. Yet, in a study on the *embodied* aspects of maternal pain, it is reasonable to assert that meaningful insights will be gleaned from readerly encounters in which the reader has herself experienced some aspect of maternal pain.

In order to better situate the methodological assumptions behind my approach to texts, I turn to Breed's approach reception theory in *Nomadic Text*. Breed blurs the boundaries between the idea of an "original text," and what have historically been called its "receptions" and "sources." This theory emphasizes the multiplicity of what a text can *do* within interpretive communities, rather than attempt to define the "essence" of what a text *is*.[83] The idea of an original text as distinctive from all subsequent receptions ignores both the nature of the process of producing biblical texts as well as the function of so-called receptions as "the" text within particular interpretive communities. Breed acknowledges that "borders," such as those placed between "biblical text" and "reception," "take on quite a central role in the constitution and maintenance of any identity, including the identity of a text or a field of scholarly inquiry."[84]

[83] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 117.

[84] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 119.

Channeling Deleuze, who in turn followed Spinoza,[85] Breed advocates that the reception historian lay aside notions of biblical texts as a static "object" whose essence may be determined, and consider instead its "capabilities" as "event or action."[86] Ultimately, it is "the powers of" a text that are of interest.[87] To illustrate this notion, Breed uses Deleuze's categories of "virtual" and "actual" meanings. The virtual encompasses every potential meaning of a text, while the actual has at one point been chosen. No single actual reading is "the reading," nor is it possible for all virtual (potential) meanings to be determined.[88]

Actual readings may differ significantly from one another. Using another image, Breed likens a text to a piece of fabric that may be stretched in multiple ways without tearing.[89] The potential meaning of a text is not, however, infinite, but is derived from a virtual "field of differential relations."[90] This "virtual multiplicity" is established by both the

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[85] Deleuze, *The Fold*, 20-22, and Baruch Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works* (Edited by Edwin Curley. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 127, as cited by Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 117-18.

[86] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 117. He settles on the term "objectile" or "objectile-text," "that must be studied as something for which movement and variation is a necessary quality and thus for whom any static identity is an always contingent predicate." (117).

[87] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 118.

[88] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 123.

[89] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 131.

[90] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 122.

relationship between linguistic elements of the text as well as the cultural system in which the text is read.[91] Thus, the potential powers of a text are revealed in the "particular interpretive meanings [that] are contingent productions of texts, contexts, and readers."[92]

In discussing the nature of the potentialities of a text within interpretive communities, Breed's primary focus remains with understanding the text's potential meaning. This may be seen in his summarizing description of the work of the biblical reception historian:

> In short, the biblical reception historian asks what a text can do. Here is the mandate: demonstrate the diversity of capacities, organize them according to the immanent potentialities actualized by various individuals and communities over time, and rewrite our understanding of the biblical text.[93]

Breed himself distinguishes his work from the readerly orientation of Stanley Fish and Michel Foucault in that his primary focus remains not on interpretive communities themselves but with the "objectile-text" whose capacities are revealed within various interpretive communities.[94] In the examples of biblical interpretation used throughout *Nomadic Text*, in addition to Breed's own reception history of Job 19:25-27, the focus of

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[91] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 122.

[92] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 118.

[93] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 141.

[94] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 119.

inquiry remains on collecting the realm of possible meanings that may be construed from a text. Ultimately, it is "a focus on the powers of the text, rather than on the conditions within which the text manifests those powers, [that] allows one to analyze a text's reception history."[95]

Breed's approach is helpful to this project on a few levels. The first is his attention to blurring the sometimes artificially constructed boundaries between an imagined "original" biblical text and its so-called "sources" and "receptions." Biblical Eve was already a literary manifestation of a conversation, not only about a primordial woman, but also about maternal pain, difficulty of food cultivation, human violence, and any number of other culturally-contingent ideas. Thus, we may look to other witnesses from across ancient Western Asia and the potential powers of these texts to be read in conversation with maternal pain. Within the virtual field of each text, I have identified and chosen to focus on elements of maternal pain. My attention to experiences of embodied maternal pain is a crucial component of my own contingent production of actualized readings.

Breed's acknowledgment of readings as contingent productions brings me to the second assumption of this work on Eve for which his theory is of use. The idea of "Eve"

[95] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 119.

exists in many discrete cultural contexts as a biblical idea determined by a number of synchronic and diachronic factors. This means that not only does each text relating to Eve or maternal pain have the potential to enrich the conversation on both ideas, but that each time a reader engages with a new text, they may return to familiar ones with new insights. The contingency of productions also means that the dialogical possibilities with Genesis 3-4 are constrained by the reader's imaginative limits of what may constitute both maternal pain and biblical Eve. This explains why the realm of possible interpretations of Eve's story in many reading communities would be limited by centuries of receptions focused on gender (in)equality and/or original sin.

This observation leads to one of the ways in which my approach will either depart from or go beyond Breed's approach to reception history. These differences primarily arise from my feminist lens. Breed's subsequent publications pertaining to reception history of biblical texts generally contain organization and summaries of a large swath of textual or iconographic examples.[96] Undoubtedly, these collections of biblical interpretations, along

[96] See Brennan W. Breed, "Reception of the Psalms: The Example of Psalm 91," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 297-312; Breed's sections on the "History of Daniel's Reception" in Carol A. Newsom and Brennan W. Breed, *Daniel: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014),

with Breed's analyses of them, have led many readers to new understandings of particular biblical texts.

Yet, there are limits to such an approach. It has proved insufficient to my emphasis on experiences of maternal pain to collect and analyze available receptions of Eve in Genesis 3-4. Collections that make up reception histories are limited to readings accessible to a particular scholar and exclude any number of readings that have been intentionally rejected or ignored by those in positions of power, or that lie outside the scholar's network. While historians may always work with the hope of encountering new (to ourselves) readings, many others have simply been lost to history.

Building on Breed's analogy, the text has not been allowed to stretch in certain ways—or has been made to snap back rather quickly—because it does not come to us unformed. After years of being hung on the same hanger, the garment comes with certain protrusions that cannot easily be undone. This makes moving away from dominant readings more difficult for some readers. I have attempted to show in this chapter the ways in which the fabric of Genesis 3:16 has so often been stretched. In chapter 4, I will return to

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and Brennan W. Breed, "Daniel's Four Kingdoms Schema: A History of Re-writing World History," *Int* 71.2 (2017): 178-89.

some of these delimiting forces. The bulk of the work, however, will be to demonstrate that the fabric is pliantly ready to be stretched in other ways. Throughout, I work with Breed's premise that *all* readings are contingent productions.

Thus, my work on Eve's maternal pain is driven by ideological concerns about the dominance of some readings over others. For me the "powers" of a text and what it can "do" extend beyond the possible "meanings" ascribed to it. To fully "rewrite our understandings of [a text]" involves rewriting our understanding of the impact(s) it has and whose interests it serves within and beyond interpretive communities. Within his writings on reception histories of apocalyptic texts, Breed has shed light on the uses of interpretations of images in Revelation and Daniel, wielded by some to legitimate power and others to subvert it. [97] The latter calls to mind Isotta Nogarola and Sojourner Truth's subversions of dominant ideas about Eve's sinfulness.[98] But what about the power of dominant reading traditions to crowd out other readings, or to determine the conditions in which these "new" readings may appear?

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[97] Breed, "History of Reception," in Newsom and Breed, *Daniel*, 85-97; Breed, "What Kind of World is Possible?" 256-58; and Breed, "Daniel's Four Kingdoms Schema," in its entirety, and especially in his concluding remarks to the reader about the ethical implications of two divergent ways the four kingdoms schema has been deployed (189).

[98] See discussion above, in the section "Gender (In)equality and Sin."

It may be helpful to return to Breed's fabric analogy for a moment. Some wearers, in trying on the garment of Genesis 3-4, find that it does not fit their body. Perhaps their received reading of it and the themes it is said to encompass do not connect with their life. Even more acutely, they may have experienced harmful effects of the reading. The ideological critic points out that the shape of the hanger was no accident. Someone chose the hanger, and the shape of the hanger molded the garment in a particular way before being passed on to another wearer. This wearer does not see the hanger, only the garment shaped by it. The impacts of this may be witnessed when interpretive communities present a reading of a text as the only authoritative, and therefore, correct, reading of a text. Functionally, the reading becomes the "text" in that community.

Such an occasion gave rise to this work. I was a part of a local interpretive community that met regularly to eat a meal, share the concerns of our lives, and study our scriptures, of which Genesis is a part. At the time, many of our concerns included matters of what I have termed maternal pain. We processed them before and after—but never during—our biblical study. During that same season, I was a part of a project promoting gender equity, in which I had been asked to use the first few chapters of Genesis as a teaching tool. It was then that I began to see that so much of Eve's story involved

reproductive health pains and loss. It was this experience that led me to hover over experiences of maternal pain in conversation with Genesis 3-4.

As much as I converse with texts in order to better understand the array of potential meanings of Genesis 3-4, understanding the biblical text is not my end goal. My interest in reading Genesis 3-4 in conversation with Eve's maternal pain stems from the relationship between readings of texts and people's lives. In this case, that includes potential conversations sparked about maternal pain as texts are placed in dialogue with one another and with interpreters' varied contingent circumstances, including my own.

Within this project, I will engage in various cultural conversations in order to explore ideas of Eve and maternal pain. In doing so, I assume that a reader's ideas about Eve and maternal pain are as malleable as they are contextually construed. Though presented in three discrete chapters on maternal pain in ancient Western Asia, in the Hebrew Bible, and in Jewish and Christian traditions, each engagement with a text re-informed my reading of the others. My perspective, though not explicitly engaged within the first two sections of this work, nonetheless consistently informs—and constrains—my insights as I encounter these ancient texts. In specific terms, I draw upon personal and relational knowledge of embodied aspects of women's reproductive health including: painful

menstruation and complications of hormonal fluctuations, physically painful aspects of infertility-causing conditions, embodied experiences of pregnancy loss, common pregnancy pains, childbirth itself, and pains of breastfeeding.[99] Each of these experiences are being negotiated within the constraints and biases of the United States healthcare system[100] and a rhetorical environment in which what happens in our bodies is subsumed into ideological posturing by politicians and religious leaders.[101] These ethical issues lie in the background of each of the conversations to follow, even where they are not fully developed. The present work is an effort to partly reclaim the conversation about our bodies by putting our experiences at the center of conversations about Eve.

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[99] The "personal and relational knowledge" that I bring with me in my readings of the text comes from my individual experiences as an employed white woman in the United States. Though my gender identity places me within a minority group of scholars in the SBL, my ethnicity does not. In fact, as of 2018, the U.S. membership of the SBL was even less diverse according to race and ethnicity than by gender, with over 85% of respondents of European or Caucasian descent. Society of Biblical Literature, *2019 SBL Membership Data*, 10. These numbers illustrate the limits of this particular "journey" through conversations about maternal pain.

[100] See the discussion in "Rereading Genesis 3-4: Environments of Maternal Pain" in chapter 2.

[101] I reflect on my general experiences with this in "Rereading Genesis 3-4 in Contexts of Erasure of Maternal Pain" in chapter 4.

Conversation Partners

My approach to the discussion of maternal pain is to offer a sustained conversation about embodied experiences of maternal pain in conversation with the character of Eve. Assumed in the conversations to follow is that the embodied pains of childbearing would have extended beyond the moment of childbirth.[102] Menstruation, sexual intercourse, miscarriage, and conditions causing infertility are all aspects of a woman's reproductive health that can cause extensive physical pain.[103] Throughout chapters 2 and 4 I will incorporate medical and economic studies on selected issues in women's reproductive health.[104] These studies will illustrate both the variety of ways in which maternal pain is experienced in women's bodies, as well as mapping some of the connections between

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[102] In this I follow and expand upon rabbinic Jewish interpretations of Gen 3:16a.

[103] Scholarship on interpretations of the trope of infertility in the Hebrew Bible (and the New Testament) may also benefit by placing interpretations of infertility in conversation with medical studies about conditions that commonly cause infertility and the comorbid symptoms women can experience alongside infertility.

[104] Mayer Gruber followed a similar approach in his chapter, "Breast-feeding Practices in Biblical Israel and in Old Babylonian Mesopotamia," in his 1992 book *The Motherhood of God and Other Studies,* 69-107. In his use of these studies, he primarily focused on the impacts of breastfeeding on fertility, and the length of time women would breastfeed, drawing conclusions about the number and frequency of women's pregnancies. Among his list of acknowledgements for the chapter is the influence of his wife, Judith Friedman Gruber, mother of five and "a certified counselor of the La Leche League" (70).

maternal pain and environmental factors.[105] Chapter 1 will contain my initial exegesis of Genesis 3-4 and its focus on maternal pain. In chapters 2-4, I will conclude with a rereading of one or more aspects of Genesis 3-4 in light of the conversations about maternal pain in that chapter.

The selection of texts on maternal pain is not exhaustive, but is representative of these conversations. In chapter 2, "Cross-Cultural Conversations: Maternal Pain in Ancient Western Asia," I will place my initial interpretation of maternal pain in Gen 3-4 in conversation with some of the most compelling references to maternal pain within the larger culture milieu out of which the characterization of biblical Eve arose. I will first focus attention on an incantation from the Lamaštu corpus of ritual incantations, offered as a reorienting of the self after miscarriage and/or stillbirth. The incantation offers an example of actual responses to maternal pain, which are minimal in Genesis 3-4.

In the latter half of chapter 2, I will highlight a pair of Northwest Semitic curses that, like Gen 3:16-20, place women's reproductive health outcomes alongside references to the environment and access to food. Both sets of curses include an extensive list of outcomes

[105] In this context, "environmental" may refer to natural phenomena as well as social systems.

which, taken together, would result in the annihilation of a people. In this section, I will consider how these seemingly discrete curses are interrelated, including how maternal pain can be impacted by environmental factors. In keeping with my focus on the embodied aspect of maternal pain, I will also highlight some of the ways these curses, if realized, would be experienced in the bodies of some women and their babies.

In chapter 3, "Intracultural Conversations: Maternal Pain in the Hebrew Bible," I consider a blessing of breasts and womb within Jacob's deathbed blessing of his sons near the end of Genesis (49:25). I place the blessing in conversation with the narratives of maternal pain and child loss in the Jacob cycle, in which issues of environmental instability and food access intersect with the lasting impact of grief over the death of Rachel in childbirth. Broadening the canonical conversation reveals an emphasis within the Hebrew Bible on the role of violence in maternal pain and child loss. I will conclude the chapter with a brief glimpse of the divine role in these conversations. Rereading Genesis 3-4 as a part of these intercultural conversations provokes questions about the potential for, and alleviation of, maternal pain in discrete contexts. Additionally, it raises difficult questions about portrayals of the divine's relationship to maternal pain.

I have outlined in the history of interpretation above, the common dissociation between maternal pain and interpretations of Eve. In chapter 4, "Contextual Conversations: Receptions of Eve and Maternal Pain," I focus on a few examples that are representative of these broader trends. These involve not only interpretations of Eve and other biblical characters, but also maternal images of the divine. The interpretation of Eve in the correspondence between Heloise and Abelard is but one example of a seeming amnesia about the significance of Eve's role as mother in Genesis 3-4. A curious exchange between them found at the end of the *Problemata Heloissae*, and the interpretation of Eve found therein, demonstrates the impact of personal as well as reception history on contextual interpretations of biblical texts and ideas.

Heloise and Abelard's personal story of suffering that followed an unplanned pregnancy plays as significantly into their interpretations of Eve as does their reliance on Augustine. They do not merely pass on interpretations that they have received; they invoke these received images as they fit into their ongoing dialogue about matters of personal and theological import to them—and to avoid those matters in their personal history that one or both of them would wish to ignore. Their example demonstrates that for maternal pain to become an accepted interpretive lens for Genesis 3-4 (and other biblical passages), many

interpretive communities will have to reckon with personal aversion to frank discussions about maternal pain.

Related to theological conversations about maternal pain is the matter of its relationship to the divine. In chapter 4, I consider the image of a breastfeeding divine as it appears in both Jewish and Christian traditions: in the Kabbalah, and in the writing of Anselm of Canterbury and Bernard of Clairvaux. As positive as these maternal images are, they too are limited by their lack of acknowledgement of the potential pains and frustrations of breastfeeding, some of which will be discussed in chapters 2 and 3.

In a third rereading of Genesis 3-4 in light of these contextual conversations, I will take a somewhat autobiographical turn. Building off my initial analysis of the divine role in the Hebrew Bible (chapter 3), I consider maternal imagery for the divine in light of the broader conversation about embodied maternal pains. Writing from my own contextual experiences, I will reflect on the potential benefits and limits of bringing knowledge of maternal pain into theological discussions of a maternal divine.

Taken together, each rereading of Genesis 3-4 fills in some of the interpretive gaps surrounding matters of maternal pain. Despite limiting the conversation to a few discrete examples, hovering over instances of maternal pain raises a number of conversation points

for interpreters. These include patriarchal dominance, civil violence, a number of environmental factors, and how maternal pain relates to the divine (and vice versa). Considering these selected issues moves us not only to better understanding Genesis 3-4 as a literary work, but also how to better respond to it with an ongoing conversation about maternal pain, its associated factors, and the potential for its alleviation.

Conclusion

My practice of hovering over experiences of maternal pain is not a disinterested reading. The most successful result of this work would be that it provokes others to hover over experiences of maternal pain and respond accordingly. Though ethical implications of paying attention to experiences of maternal pain are raised most specifically in the "Rereading Genesis 3-4" sections, the very act of the entirety of this work, in "hovering over" maternal pain is an intentional act to acknowledge the significance of such experiences within scholarly discourse.

What follows, then, is a journey through conversations with a nomadic text leading us to an exploration into maternal pain. The strategy throughout will be to "imagine the experiences of an ancient culture," not only to understand the texts, but also to better

understand ourselves. Given that no one reading of Eve or maternal pain can be exhaustive, I will focus on deep dives into illustrative texts. Thankfully, in this journey through conversations about maternal pain, there is "no origin and no endpoint…home is a process—the road itself."[106]

[106] Breed, Nomadic Text, 203.

Chapter 2

Cross-Cultural Conversations: Maternal Pain in Ancient Western Asia

for the infant child I have to weep expelled before its time
the mother is enveloped
in the dust of death
in the milk of death
her breasts are bathed
you will be mother
of all the living
you shall bear
in pain[107]

The curses on biblical Eve are a literary manifestation of cross-cultural traditions about maternal pain that had been going on for centuries across ancient Western Asia. I will begin my enquiry into maternal Eve in Genesis by exploring the textual traditions that bear witness to what had been, as it were, "in the air," in the region regarding women's

[107] The first line of the poem is spoken from the underworld by Ereshkigal in the "Descent of Ishtar," discussed below. Translation by Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (rev. ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 156. Lines 2-3 are from the translation by Wilfred G. Lambert, "A Middle Assyrian Medical Text" *Iraq* 31 (1969), 32, line 37. For lines 4-5, see Lamaštu I, 144 and Ug I, 5, translated by Walter Farber, *Lamaštu*, 157, 161. The remainder is my own reworking of Gen 3:16, 20.

reproductive health outcomes. I will focus on two bodies of material: the Lamaštu corpus, a collection of ritual incantations that represent a breadth of time and geographical location, and secondly, a set of Northwest Semitic inscriptions, the Sefîre treaty and the bilingual Tell Fekheriye statue inscription, that offers both geographical and temporal locality to Iron Age II Israel.[108]

The Lamaštu corpus contains collections of incantations with corresponding rituals intended to ward off the demon Lamaštu and the illness or death she brings.[109] Lamaštu's person, whether understood as an actual entity or a metaphorical description, manifests the terror of sudden infant death. Some incantations focus on her beastly qualities and nefarious purposes; others depict a tragic figure, bereft of family, who will never attain her deepest desires because her body cannot support human life. Instead, it bestows death, quite against her will.

In addition to this large corpus, two Iron Age inscriptions from the southwest Assyrian empire, the Sefîre treaty and the dedication on the Tell Fekheriye inscription,

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[108] For additional ancient Mesopotamian texts concerning women's and infant healthcare, see Jo Ann Scurlock, *Sourcebook for Ancient Mesopotamian Medicine.* (SBLWAW 36 ed. by Martin Stol; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 571-629.

[109] I will follow Farber's labeling system, including lineation.

invoke curses that leverage maternal pain and its direct impact on survival rates of women and children. Within these inscriptions, malnutrition and mastitis, according to the curses, prevent conception, carrying pregnancies to term, and the ability to breastfeed. Women's reproductive health outcomes intertwine with environmental factors such as drought, famine, and disease. An inhospitable environment leads to inhospitable breasts and womb, ultimately threatening the survival of a people.

Lamaštu Corpus

The expansive corpus of Lamaštu rituals, incantations, and amulets reveal responses to the pervasive threats against the health of childbearing women and their young children.[110] Lamaštu texts are extant from the third through the first millennia BCE. The ritual incantations were collected, ordered, and canonized through the Middle Babylonian period. Precise wording of incantations was standardized in the early first millennium. The pirsu recension, which includes three edited versions from Assurbanipal's library, even have

[110] Text, transcription, and translation: Farber, *Lamaštu*, *passim*, esp. 298-99. Translations of Lamaštu materials are my own unless otherwise noted.

standardized spelling. [111] Such evidence for a canonization process underscores the cultural significance of Lamaštu materials across ancient Western Asia. Provenanced materials are from Nippur, and Aššurbanipal's library in Nineveh, and Ugarit, as well as from Kültepe and Zincirli, Turkey.[112] That the incantations and rituals were produced and collated over millennia and along a broad geographical area indicates the pervasive nature of such threats to women and babies, and the activities intended to subvert them.

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[111] The *pirsu* recension comes from Assurbanipal's library (Nineveh), where Farber believes the canonical (re)ordering of the texts was created. This recension consists of three tablets in Neo-Assyrian script, four sets of which were found at Nineveh and appear to have been copied by one scribe from the same master copy. The only other *pirsu* recension we have comes from the Sultantepe library (Sargon's dynasty, Assyria); see Olaf Pedersén, *Archives and Libraries in the Ancient Near East 1500-300 B.C.* (Bethesda: CDL Press, 1998), 178-80. Tablets with the *tuppu* version come from Assur (Assyrian script, Tablet II), Babylon and Sippar (Tablet I), Uruk (Tablet II), and a tablet of unknown origin (Tablet I), excluding rituals. The recensions differ in rituals 7 and 8, which are not discussed here. The older *tuppu* recension (ordering) thus appears to have been more widely known than the later *pirsu* version (Farber, *Lamaš*tu, 21). Nils Heeßel has suggested that tablet VAT 10353 be dated to the Middle Bronze period, along with the other tablets found at that site. Farber argues for a New Bronze Age dating for the (exemplar) text for this version of Lamaštu, as the earliest likely "canonical" version of the text. Farber has argued that though not extant, a ritual tablet older than the *pirsu* versions existed at Assur based on a text list from tablet VAT 13723+. See Farber, *Lamaštu*, 16-21.

[112] Farber, *Lamaštu*, 8-9, and Jessie DeGrado and Matthew Richey, "An Aramaic-Inscribed Lamaštu Amulet from Zincirli" (*BASOR* 377 [2017]), *passim*.

There is also significant evidence that the Lamaštu rituals and incantations were influential across classes of society. Evidence of the performance of these ritual activities is supported by the existence of amulets that match the descriptions provided in the texts. Furthermore, some of these amulets are inscribed with pseudo-writing—an attempt at performing the activity of writing incantations by those who were illiterate. A few amulets intended to ward off Lamaštu, with their rudimentary drawings and pseudo-incantations, were clearly formed by unskilled artisans.[113] The pseudo-inscriptions offer strong material evidence that the preserved rituals and incantations were actually performed by everyday people, including those who were illiterate.

The amulets also indicate the ways in which the Lamaštu ritual incantations were used by persons for whom Sumerian and Akkadian were not their first language. The Lamaštu materials were written in Sumerian and Akkadian (Assyrian and Babylonian script).[114] The Lamaštu amulet with an Old Aramaic inscription from Zincirli provides an example in which the power of the incantation was not tied to its language of origin.[115]

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[113] Lamaštu amulet no. 71 rev., Lamaštu amulet no. 90 rev., Lamaštu amulet no. 91 rev., and Lamaštu amulet no. 92 rev. For photos of each, see, Farber, *Lamaštu*, 41, 65, 194-5.
[114] Farber, *Lamaštu*, 7-38.
[115] For a discussion of the linguistic features of the inscription, see DeGrado and Richey, "An Aramaic-Inscribed Lamaštu Amulet from Zincirli" 108-118. For a contrasting example,

Taken together, the corpus of texts and amulets show that people across the Assyrian and Babylonian empires over several centuries did what they could, through ritual actions with prayers, to ward off the tragedy of infant and maternal death.[116]

Maternal Pain Embodied in Lamaštu

The incantation Lamaštu RA 18: 163 rev. 13-29 (hereafter Lamaštu RA 18) contains most of the standard elements that are illustrative of the entire Lamaštu corpus.[117] These include ominous descriptions of Lamaštu's person, her entrance into the house, her stated intention toward the victim, divine opposition to her, and reference to ritual activity. The descriptive characteristics associated with the demonic figure of Lamaštu rhetorically invoke the terrors of maternal and infant mortality. Despite her desires to nurture human infants,

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in which the original language was preserved in a Babylonian script by a scribe from Ugarit whose occasional errors indicate his lack of fluency with it, see Farber, *Lamaštu*, 10. His interpretation of the scribal errors diverges from that of Daniel Arnaud, *Corpus des Textes de Bibliothèque de Ras Shamra-Ougarit (1936 – 2000) en Sumérien, Babylonien et Assyrien*. (AulOr Sup 23. Barcelona: Editorial Ausa, 2007), 10, 63-73.

[116] The incantations list Lamaštu as the cause of many maladies, including infant death.

[117] For a discussion of the recent history of this incantation and its duplicates, see Farber, *Lamaštu*, 35-36. This text has been compiled from three copies. For transliterations of each, see Farber, *Lamaštu*, 268-270.

her body will inevitably kill them. In this way, her literary manifestation in Lamaštu RA 18 poignantly places the life- and death-giving qualities at the site of a female body.

The opening to the incantation describes Lamaštu with a rhetorical force that heightens the terror of her menacing rage:

> *ÉN ezzet šamrat ilat namurrat*
> *u šī barbarat mārat Anu*
> *šēpāša Anzû qātāša luʾtu*
> *pan nēši dapini panūša šak*[*nū*]
> *ištu api īlâm-ma uššurat peressa buttuqā dīdāša*
> *kibis alpī illak kibis immeri iredde*
>
> She is fierce, violent, divine, of terrifying splendor.
> She is a wolf, the daughter of Anu.[118]
> Her feet are like an eagle's,[119] her hands stiff.[120]
> Her face is the face of a ferocious lion.
> She emerges from the marshes, her hair down, her undergarment cut off.
> She walks in the tracks of cattle, in the tracks of sheep she descends.
>
> Lamaštu RA 18, 1-6

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[118] This appellation, with the variation "Daughter-of-Anu-and-Antu," appears over three dozen times throughout the Lamaštu corpus. Two texts expand it into a short narrative of her fractured relationship with them: Lamaštu I, 111-113; OA_2, 7-15. Lamaštu/Dimme is referred to as Daughter-of-Anu and/or Antu in the following texts: Lamaštu I, 1, 11, 37, 100, 111, 117, 189, 192-193, 213, 220; II, 34, 92, 129, 136, 149, 152, 155, 160, 168, 180, 193; III, 69, 77, 79, 84, 86, 91, 93, 95, 96, 119; OA_2, 7, 11, 10; OB_2, 1; Emar, 1; and SpTU, 13. "Daughter-of-Anu" and Lamaštu's Sumerian name Dimme are the most common names used for Lamaštu, particularly in incantations. See Farber, *Lamaštu*, 208.

[119] That is, "of Anzû."

[120] Or "decay." The term (*luʾtu*) calls to mind the stiffness of eagle's talons, and anticipates her destructive powers.

The texts vary as to the precise animal characteristics possessed by Lamaštu.[121] The most common are long teeth and claws. Amulets have been uncovered with illustrations of Lamaštu with similar features.[122] The image may be used to emphasize her animal-like qualities. Conversely, being nude from the waist down could indicate that she is either available for sexual intercourse (in order to procreate, as her desire for children will become clear in the lines to follow), or she is acting as a woman ready to give birth.[123]

The next line of the incantation allows for multiple meanings, based on interpretation of both the verb and the adverbial phrase:

[121] Paws, usually with claws or talons: Lamaštu I, 109, 141; II, 153; OB_2, 10. Dog teeth, face, head, or behind: Lamaštu I, 141; OB_2, 2-5; OB_4, 5, 7. She-wolf: Lamaštu III 90; FsB, 6. Donkey teeth: Lamaštu II, 36. Snake or venomous creature: Lamaštu I, 125-127; II, 24; Emar, 38; FsB, 5. Other animal-like descriptors: Lamaštu I, 114 (wings); II, 36 (lion's face), 37 (leopard spots on back); OB_4, 2 (she-goat), 3 (speckled back); FsB, 8 (hamster), 9 (cat), 10 (vole).

[122] On these amulets, Lamaštu is depicted with long claws (Lamaštu amulet no. 94 obv.), a lion's head (Lamaštu amulet no. 91 obv., Lamaštu amulet no. 92 obv., Lamaštu amulet no. 93 obv.), lion head with sharp teeth (Lamaštu amulet no. 9), with claws and a lion's (or dog's) head (Lamaštu amulet no. 67 obv.), long claws and double lion head (Lamaštu amulet no. 88 obv.), bird head (Lamaštu amulet no. 90 obv.), and bird head with claws (Lamaštu amulet no. 95 obv).

[123] In Gilgamesh I iv 16, the same garment (*dīdū*) is the last of three garments removed from a woman before sexual intercourse.

ina šīri u dāmi qātāša šaknā

Her hands are set upon flesh and blood.

Lamaštu RA 18, 7

Farber renders line 7 slightly differently: "Her hands are immersed in flesh and blood."[124] The verb *šaknā* renders both plausible. The poetry may be intentionally ambiguous. With Farber's translation, Lamaštu's terror reaches gruesome proportions, her talons ripping into flesh, splashing her hands with the blood of her victims. With this reading, there is no question as to her murderous intent. In my translation, she has set her sights on the human children she desires for herself and the women about to birth them.[125] Her talons press into human flesh, just short of piercing the skin. Her potential for destruction is obvious; the outcome is not yet assured.

Moving forward from the heightened pause, Lamaštu is now a snake, slipping surreptitiously into houses and beds. The repetition of š and ṣ subtly sound out her serpentine entrance:

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[124] Farber, *Lamaštu*, 299.

[125] This translation takes into account occasional use of the phrase "flesh and blood" (*šīri u dāmi*) to refer to humans, or even one's kin: AnSt 5 98:31, RA 70 117 Lii 17, and Lambert-Millard *Atra-Ḫasīs*, 58 I 210, 225.

apāniš irrub ṣerrāniš iḫallup
bīta irrub bīta uṣṣi

By the window she enters, by the door pivot she slips in.
She enters the house;[126] she leaves the house saying:
Lamaštu RA 18, 8-9

The door pivot within the Lamaštu corpus is a particularly vulnerable point of entry into the house where the infant resides. The perfunctory phrase *bīta irrub bīta uṣṣi* ("she enters the house, leaves the house") suggests that Lamaštu is slipping in and out quickly, perhaps even unnoticed.[127] Despite one's best efforts to obtain an easy birth and nurture a healthy baby, infant illness and death were pervasive and to some extent unpredictable. Shortly after childbirth, both mother and child remain vulnerable to fatal conditions that could strike—like Lamaštu—without warning. The conditions known today as sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) and eclampsia are illustrative of the speed with which the life of

[126] The word for house, *bīta*, can also indicate an entire estate or a single room. I believe the term throughout is intended to be fluid in meaning.

[127] The following texts describe Lamaštu as sneaky, able to move in and out of homes with ease: Lamaštu I, 132-134; II,18-19, 138, 166; OB_2, 6-8, 14; OB_3, 2, 13-14; SKS, 3-8. Outside the Lamaštu corpus, easy births are likened to a slithering snake: VAT 8869-3,4, and possibly CT 16 23 and the *Prayer to Ea, Šamaš, and Marduk* (4). See discussion in Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis*, 45-46. By the end of Lamaštu RA 18, Lamaštu's depiction is more anthropomorphic than serpentine. If, however, those invoking Lamaštu RA 18 imagine her in a snakelike form throughout, they could call to mind an easy birth as they visualize Lamaštu slipping out of the house.

mother or baby can be lost.[128] To preserve life, Lamaštu must be vigorously and vigilantly repelled.

On one level of meaning, *bīta* in these incantations refers to the physical structure of a home or bedroom, either at the time of birth, or shortly after, where infant and mother rest. An additional layer of meaning arises when these lines are heard within the cultural metaphor of the door as the woman's cervix.[129] The door symbolizes the forces that hold the fetus inside the womb. During a prolonged and therefore dangerous labor, prayers go out to "unlock the [door] bolt" that the baby may come out into the light:[130]

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[128] For general characteristics and a historical overview of these conditions, see Jhodie Duncan and Robert R. Duncan, eds., *SIDS Sudden Infant and Early Childhood Death: The Past, the Present and the Future* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2018), and Mandy J. Bell, "A Historical Overview of Preeclampsia-Eclampsia" *Journal of Obstetric, Gynecologic and Neonatal Nursing* 39.5 (2010): 510-18. The former is available as an open access online resource. I will discuss the role of race and socioeconomic status in maternal health outcomes and maternal mortality from eclampsia in the United States in chapters 4-5.

[129] Jo Ann Scurlock, "Baby-snatching Demons, Restless Souls and the Dangers of Childbirth: Medio-Magical Means of Dealing with Some of the Perils of Motherhood in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Incognita* 2 (1991), 142-43, and Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis*, 55-56.

[130] The moment of birth as a baby coming out of darkness into light appears in several texts: YBC 4603 II:9-10, and texts 40:10-13 and 39:16-20 in Walter Farber, *Schlaf, Kindchen, schlaf!: mesopotamische Baby-Beschwörungen und –Rituale* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989), 114. Darkness would have called to mind existence in the womb, and its inaccessibility to human intervention, but also the darkness of death. In the Descent of Ishtar, several lines after the underworld is described as a home without light, Ereshkigal

The woman in childbirth has pangs at delivery,
At delivery she has pangs, the babe is stuck fast,
The babe is stuck fast. The bolt is secure—to bring life to an end,
The door is made fast—against the suckling kid. . . .
The mother is enveloped in the dust of death.[131]

Ligabue, 33-37

She has spoken to the doorbolt, it is released.
"The lock is [fre]ed,
"The doors thrown wide,
"Let him strike [ ],
"Bring yourself out, there's a dear![132]

YOS XI, 86 (21-26)

Though causes of the delay are not mentioned in these texts, they could be the result of slow dilation of the cervix, a particularly large baby, small birth canal, or small pelvis in the woman.[133] Prolonged labor has been linked to higher rates of severe postpartum hemorrhage, which remains a leading cause of maternal death even with the onset of

decries her existence there. Her lamentations include witnessing all of the babies who have died descending from the land of the living. See tr. and notes by Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 154-62.

[131] Lambert's translation in *Iraq* 31. See also the translation of lines 33-36 by Scurlock, *Incognita*, 143.

[132] Translation by Scurlock, *Incognita*, 143.

[133] Slow dilation of the cervix, occurring in early labor, is less dangerous than prolonged labor in the active stage of pregnancy.

modern medicine.[134] The blocked door also appears in the canonical Lamaštu corpus. This incantation is describing how Lamaštu keeps track of who is pregnant and who is about to give birth:[135]

> Night after night, daybreak after daybreak, she [regularly]
> returns to a woman whose entrance (doors) are bloc[ked (from access?)].
> The Daughter-of-Anu counts the pregnant women daily,
> keeps following [behi]nd the ones about to give birth.
> She counts their months, marks their days on the wall.[136]
>
> Lamaštu I, 115-118

The "woman whose entrance doors are blocked" may be experiencing a prolonged labor, or she could be quite near the time to give birth when her cervix has not yet dilated.

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[134] See Lill Trine Nyfløt, et.al., "Duration of Labor and the Risk of Severe Postpartum Hemorrhage: A Case-Control Study" *PLOS ONE* 12.4 (2017), n.p., https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0175306.

[135] Surrounded by accounts of her terrifying persona, Lamaštu's counting comes across as sinister, stalking mother and baby. Similar behavior may be found in Lamaštu I: 5 (115-119), II: 8 (88-89), 12 (156), OB3 (5-6). Were the reader not primed by knowledge of the destruction Lamaštu's body inevitably brings, her behavior could be that of a parent eagerly awaiting the arrival of a child. Such a celebratory moment is captured in the Ugaritic narrative of the birth of Aqhat. Upon hearing the promise of a child, Danel eagerly counts down the months until Aqhat's birth with unrestrained, even child-like joy (*CAT* 1.17, column II, lines 43-45). See Simon Parker, ed., *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (SBLWAW 9. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 47.

[136] Farber's translation in *Lamaštu*, 155.

Returning to Lamaštu RA 18, Lamaštu's entry through the door pivot takes on an additional layer of meaning. The *bīta* becomes the womb of a woman whose cervix protects the enclosed baby until it is time for the child to see the light of life outside its mother's body. She sneaks into the woman's vagina, through the opening in the "door" to her uterus, which can no longer protect the babe within. Her hands are now immersed *in* the "flesh and blood" of the woman and set *on* the "flesh and blood" within.[137]

Lamaštu's ability to invade the woman's body expands the timing of her threat into early pregnancy. While the precise use of some incantations are left vague or cover a variety of maladies, others from the Lamaštu corpus are undeniably prayers for protection against child loss at or before birth. The Lamaštu incantation SpTU, for instance, is voiced by a woman who had experienced miscarriage(s) and/or stillbirth(s):[138]

ēri ul ušallim ūlid ul abni

"I conceived but didn't carry to term. I gave birth but didn't bring to life."
Lamaštu SpTU, 10a

[137] Again the interpretation is elastic. The phrase *ina šīri u dāmi* allows for both shades of meaning.

[138] Lamaštu SpTU is a Late Bronze age text from Uruk with fewer textual similarities to the canonical Lamaštu incantations. See Farber, Lamaštu, 335.

The rich shades of meaning behind the language of Lamaštu RA 18 allows it to speak in to a multitude of circumstances, including pregnancy. Having entered the "house," Lamaštu declares her intent in three parallel lines:[139]

> *bil(l)āni mārīkina lušēniq*
> *u mārātīkina luttarri*
> *ana pî mārātīkina luštakkan(a) tulâ*
>
> "Bring me your sons to breastfeed,
> and your daughters to rear,
> (bring me) to the mouth of your daughters to place my breast!"
>
> Lamaštu RA 18, 10-12

Here Lamaštu's desire to be a surrogate mother is introduced. She desires to take the children as her own, to nurture and care for them—not to endanger them. Alternatively, she may desire to simply be a wet nurse to these children, with the understanding she would eventually return them to their parents.[140] Lamaštu's destructive behavior is often an unintended consequence of her desires to mother rather than a nefarious plan.

Throughout the Lamaštu corpus, a desire to nurse children as her own is the impetus for her destructive activity. With repetitive sibilant sounds mimicking the hiss of a

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[139] Lines almost identical to Lamaštu RA 18, 10 and 12 appear in Lamaštu I, 121-122.
[140] These lines may rely on a biased suspicion of wet nurses. Within the Lamaštu corpus, wet nurses are referenced in Lamaštu I, 144-45, 157; II, 87b, 153b, 157-158; III, 136-37; Ug IV, 9-10; OB_3, 3-4, 11; Emar, 30, 33-34.

snake, the incantation in Lamaštu II, (153) states that Lamaštu's claws are "a snare net" and that:

> *ilappat libba ša ḫaršāti*
> *išallup šerrī ša tārâti*
> *ušenna/eq unamzaz u ittanaššiq*
>
> She lays hands on the womb(s) of women in labor,
> she pulls the babies from (the hold of) the nannies,
> suckles (them), sings (to them), and covers (them) with kisses.[141]
>
> Lamaštu II, 156-158

Lamaštu's tender nature in line 158 describes not violent terror, but nurture and affection. This activity offers no indication that Lamaštu intended to harm babies. Yet her intended affection is surrounded by reminders of Lamaštu's monstrous nature, in appearance and action:

> Her head is a lion's head, donkey's teeth are [her] teeth.
> Her lips are a gale and spread death.[142]
>
> Lamaštu II, 161-162

According to the incantation, the very features Lamaštu used to nourish and kiss, nipples and lips, both bring death. Despite her best intentions, she cannot help but channel death to the babies she attempts to nurture. Her very nature—with piercing claws, venomous

[141] Farber's translation, *Lamaštu*, 179.

[142] Ibid. 179.

breastmilk, and poisonous lips—ensure the death of any baby she touches. Additional incantations communicate the same:[143]

> "Bring me your sons— I want to suckle (them)!
> In the mouth of your daughters I want to place (my) breast."
> She holds in her hand fever, cold, chills (and) frost (as a) katimtu -net?.
> Her body is full of scorching flames.
> She spatters venom all over the place,
> she spatters venom quite suddenly.
> Snake's poison is her venom, scorpion's poison is her venom.
> ...
> In [mi]lk of death her bust is bathed.[144]
>
> Lamaštu I, 121-127, 144

The connection between Lamaštu's desire to breastfeed babies and her introductory depiction that strikes terror in all who hear it is clarified within the context of these incantations.

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[143] Lamaštu II, 139-140; Ug, 9; SKS, 9-10. The incantation in Lamaštu II, 153 may also refer to breastfeeding, although the translation of *kirimmu* as "bosom" is not certain: *rittaša alluḫappu kirimmaša mūtu* "Her paws are a snare net, her bosom (hold?) spells death." Lamaštu II, 87b appears to read "whoever she suckles drops (dead)" (*imaqqut lākûša*), but this half line is also uncertain. See Farber, *Rituale und Beschwörungen I* (TUAT; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1987), 89 n. 11. In Emar, 3-5, Lamaštu wishes to raise children, with no reference to breastfeeding.

[144] Tr. Farber, Lamaštu, 155.

That Lamaštu's body will inevitably destroy is further underscored by descriptions of her person as it affects non-human entities. These texts extend the metaphor of the destructive body in that everything Lamaštu touches withers or becomes dirty:

> [She is] cl[ad] in scorching heat, fever, cold, frost, (and) ice.[145]
> The root of the licorice tree, the seed(s) of the chaste tree,
> the fruit of the poplar, pride of the river meadow, she spoiled.
> By crossing a river, she makes it murky.
> By leaning against a wall, she smears (it) with mud.[146]
>
> Lamaštu I, 62-66

Lamaštu's terror-inducing qualities render her a powerful, awe-inspiring figure. Her violence is wrought not by noisy machinations or physical domination, but by touching, kissing, caressing, or passing by. Her will is not in question; she will inevitably contaminate humans and their realm. Her destructive nature is not a power but an uncontrollable force that works even against her desires, ensuring that she will remain ever alone.

The remainder of the incantation is focused with heading off Lamaštu at her point of entry and distracting her from her quest to possess a human child. Here the person reciting

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[145] This exact line appears also in Lamaštu III, 82 where it is one of several one-line incantations to be recited over a baby.

[146] Compare to her description in Lamaštu I, 181-186. Her propensity to soil whatever she touches is related in some texts to the fact that she lives or rests in dung-filled places. See Lamaštu I, 38-39; II, 121a-122.

the incantation invokes divine Ea, who instructs Lamaštu to (literally) let go of that which she cannot possess without destroying:[147]

> *išmēši-ma Ea abuša*
> *ammaki mārat Anu muttarrâta amēlūta talmadī-ma*
> *ammaki ina šīri u dāmi qātāki šaknā*
> *ammaki bīta terrubī bīta tuṣṣî*
>
> Ea her father heard her.
> "Instead of, daughter of Anu, ruling humanity, you should understand it.
> "Instead of setting your hands on flesh and blood,
> "Instead of entering the house, leaving the house,
>
> Lamaštu RA 18, 13-16

Ea deftly repeats exact phrases from the early section describing her activity, emphasizing the shift in the incantation from what has been to what will be: freedom from the threat to mother and child. In order to do so, Lamaštu must be separated from the house she has inhabited. Lamaštu must remove her hands—and her desires—from the flesh and blood of infants and their mothers.

The ritual activities for doing so include the making of salves, fumigations, amulets, and figurines.[148] Some involved making clay dog figurines and setting them at the home's

[147] Divine figures lament and/or declare they will stop Lamaštu's activities in Lamaštu II: 6 (7-8,22ff), 7 (39ff), 11 (141-150), 12 (167ff).

[148] Salves are referenced in Lamaštu I: 2 (32-36), 3 (61), II: 6 (28-30), 13 (210-211), 3 (64-68, 73, 76, 85?, 137). Fumigations: Lamaštu I: 3 (60), II: 6 (31-33), III (74-75, 103ff).

points of entry.[149] Others attempt to distract Lamaštu by providing her with traveling supplies and sending her off on a journey.[150] Ea's instructions to Lamaštu continue in this vein:

> *muḫrī ša tamkāri qannašu u ṣidīssu*
> *muḫrī ša nappāḫi semerī simat qātīki u šēpīki*
> *muḫrī ša kutimmi inṣabta simat uznīki*
> *muḫrī ša purkulli sāmta simat kišādiki*
> *muḫrī ša naggāri mulṭâ pilaqqa u kirissa sīmat qêki*
>
> "Accept from the merchant his silver and his travel provisions.
> "Accept from the metalworker bracelets befitting your hands and your feet.
> "Accept from the smith earrings befitting your ears.
> "Accept from the stone cutter carnelian befitting your neck."
> "Accept from the carpenter comb, spindle, and needle[151] befitting your thread. Lamaštu RA 18, 17-21

The nature of her provisions indicates something more than a simple journey. Indeed, they are part of the larger plan to distract Lamaštu from her desire for human flesh. Her "father" Ea urges her to put up her hair and adorn herself with jewelry evocative of wedding gifts

[149] Lamaštu I: 2 (25b), II: 7 (65, 68-83), 3 (12, 15-28, 138).
[150] Lamaštu I: 2 (15-16, 28), 3 (48-53), 5 (197, 221-23?), 6 (20-21), II: 7 (44ff), 8 (99-100), 11 (145-46), 12 (172-74), III (5-6 113-115, 122-125). Lamaštu OB2 (15) instructs her to go to the wilderness, without an accompanying ritual.
[151] The term here is *kirissu*, a metal pin that can also refer to a hair pin or garment pin, depending on the context.

with which a groom adorns his bride. For instance, in the love poetry of Nabu and Tashmetu, Nabu dresses his bride with earrings, bracelets, and carnelian.[152] To Nabu's playful inquiry as to why she is dressed this way, Tashmetu communicates her desire for sex. Hardly necessary for the journey itself, the spindle may be brought by a woman to her betrothed as a sign of marriage.[153]

Ea's list of travel provisions for "daughter" Lamaštu prepares her as if for marriage (and sexual intercourse). Whether the action is sincere or merely a ruse, Ea is attempting to give Lamaštu a new focus, a new means by which to acquire children. In this light, his advice to learn from humans (*amēlūta talmadī-ma*) may be an attempt to socialize her into the idea of marriage as a means of acquiring children. Ea's words introduce the possibility that Lamaštu may be able to have children of her own. The ending of the incantation reiterates such a hope:

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[152] Benjamin Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature.* (3d ed. Bethesda: CDL Press, 2005), 944-46.

[153] *TCL* 1 90:4 and Johannes Renger, "Untersuchungen zum Priesterum in der altbabylonischen Zeit," *ZA* 58 (1967): 161.

utammīki Anu abaki utammīki Antu ummaki
utammīki Ea bānû šumiki

I adjure you by Anu your father; I adjure you by Antu your mother
I adjure you by Ea, creator of your offspring.

Lamaštu RA 18, 22-23

In the final phrase, Ea is named *bānû šumiki*, more literally rendered "creator of your name." With the closing words of the incantation, the person invoking the incantation counsels Lamaštu that Ea is the one who can provide her with offspring. The power in the closing line is that it speaks not only to Lamaštu, but also to those reciting the incantation. Perhaps it was a reaffirmation that ultimately it was those in the divine realm who would make a name for the practitioners through offspring.

While stopping short of promising Lamaštu children, the incantation, if successful, has reoriented her to seek fulfillment of her desires apart from the woman's body and abode. The latter half of the incantation speaks to Lamaštu kindly. No mention is made of her monstrous nature, nor her deathly qualities. Ea addresses her as one could a human woman, setting off on the journey of marriage. Her journey mirrors that of the woman reciting the incantation, the act of which is one of renewing hope. As Lamaštu sets out on a new journey in search of biological children, so too does the praying woman re/start her

journey toward the same. Not with certainty, nor with a promised outcome in sight, but with the hope of one prepared to begin the journey again.

Iron II Northwest Semitic Curse Formulae

Within the Lamaštu corpus, the origins of infant death are depicted as fast-moving and unpredictable. While focusing on the metaphorical figure to illustrate difficult pregnancies, some of which resulted in infant and/or maternal death, the same texts also mention fevers, chills, and blocked wombs as signs that death was imminent. Beyond these signals of immediate and impending threat, the incantations give little to no insight into conditions likely to precede maternal pain. Additional witnesses from ancient Western Asia indicate some understanding of associated factors of maternal pain and its link to poor infant health outcomes. They range in tone from deep concern for the woman in a difficult labor to political games in which women's pain is collateral damage.

Curses of Breasts and Womb

The texts to follow emphasize the role of disorders of breast and womb, which are physically painful to the women experiencing them. Such conditions are listed alongside

environmental instability and resultant lack of agricultural productivity. In the curse formulae of the Northwest Semitic inscriptions from what was the southwest corner of the Assyrian empire, the eighth-century Aramaic Sefîre treaties[154] and the Tell Fekheriye inscription with an Aramaic/Assyrian inscription from Hadad-Yis'i, ruler of Gozan,[155] the suffering proclaimed upon female bodies serves to further their ultimate outcome: the annihilation of a people whose ruler has broken the treaty.

The first of the treaties recorded on the Sefîre steles is between rulers Matiʿʾilu of Arpad in northern Syria and the Mesopotamian Bir-Gaʾyah of an unknown kingdom, KTK. The list of curses, if fulfilled, would lead to the systematic obliteration of Matiʿʾilu's people. Neither humans nor animals would give birth. Those recently born would die from malnutrition. Famine and warfare would further wipe out the population. Without new births, the people would fail to repopulate. The Tell Fekheriye inscription also records curses toward any who would deface the statue. Among them are curses of malnutrition

[154] See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Aramaic Inscriptions of Sefire I and II," *JAOS* 81.3 (1961): 178-222. Discussion: Melissa Ramos, "A Northwest Semitic Curse Formula: The Sefire Treaty and Deuteronomy 28" *ZAW* 128.2 (2016): 205–220.

[155] The *editio princeps* is Ali Abou-Assaf, Peter Bordreuil, and Alan R. Millard, *La statue de Tell Fekherye et son inscription bilingue assyro-araméenne* (Paris: Éditions Rescherche sur les Civilisations, 1982).

affecting even breastfeeding young. Crucially, these inscriptions deepen the association of female bodies as conduits of life or death to vulnerable young. A people's destruction would be accomplished in large part via female bodies, human and animal alike. Women would not only witness infant death, they would passively participate in it.

The first curse preserved in the Sefîre treaty invokes a future in which sheep, and by extension other beings, can no longer conceive:[156]

[.....] שאת ואל תהרי

[Should seven rams mount] a ewe, may she not become pregnant;
Sefîre I A, 21a[157]

To comprehend the full ramifications of such a curse, we must consider its impacts on the bodies of those rendered infertile. Several physical conditions can lead to infertility, including those which are physically painful—sometimes excruciatingly so. Endometriosis, a condition found in 24-40% of women who seek treatment for infertility, is but one example.[158] Endometrial cells that normally grow in the lining of the uterus form outside

[156] It is likely, given the lacuna in the inscription, that the curse unleashed infertility on humans and other animals, as do the curses that follow.
[157] Text and lineation from Fitzmyer, "The Aramaic Inscriptions of Sefire I and II," 180.
[158] Roumiana S. Boneva, et. al., "Endometriosis as a Comorbid Condition in Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS): Secondary Analysis of Data From a CFS Case-Control Study," *Frontiers in Pediatrics* 7 (2019): 195. Another major cause of female infertility is polycystic

the womb, causing inflammation, cysts, and scar tissue, which sometimes adhere organs to one another. Effects of the disease vary among individuals, as it affects both physical structures in the pelvis and the central nervous system. Symptoms include chronic pelvic pain, debilitating menstrual cramps, bowel and urinary tract pain, pain with sexual intercourse, and comorbidities such as recurrent migraines, chronic fatigue, and mood disorders.[159]

Among women for whom infertility is linked with recurrent and chronic pain, Bir-Gaʾyah's curse of infertility, intended to punish a disloyal ruler, signaled not only loss of future progeny, but of a physically painful existence. Whether any of these women interpreted their conditions of infertility as a divine curse invoked by a foreign ruler, we cannot say from the inscriptions alone. But if she was aware of the threat, she would know as she writhed that her pain was a matter of political gamesmanship.

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ovary system (PCOS). Sometimes the cause remains unexplained (UI). See Nanette Santoro, et. al., "Fertility-related quality of life from two RCT cohorts with infertility: unexplained infertility and polycystic ovary syndrome," *Human Reproduction* 31.10 (2016): 2268-79.

[159] Boneva, "Endometriosis as a Comorbid Condition," 195, N. Sinaii, "High Rates of Autoimmune and Endocrine Disorders, Fibromyalgia, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and Atopic Diseases among Women with Endometriosis: A Survey Analysis," *Human Reproduction* 17 (2002): 2715–24, and J. W. Warren, et. al., "The Number of Existing Functional Somatic Syndromes (FSSs) Is an Important Risk Factor for New, Different FSSs," *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* 74 (2013): 12–17.

The same problem is indicated in the much older narrative from Hatti, CTH 324, the Telipinu Myth, which explains the origins of the lack of fertility of land, animals, humans, and deities. This text introduces famine as a key cause of death:[160]

> Telipinu too went away and removed grain, animal fecundity, luxuriance, growth, and abundance to the steppe, to the meadow. Telipinu too went into the moor and blended with the moor. Over him the *halenzu*-plant grew. Therefore barley (and) wheat no longer ripen. Cattle, sheep, and humans no longer become pregnant. And those (already) pregnant cannot give birth.
>
> The mountains and the trees dried up, so that the shoots do not come (forth). The pastures and the springs dried up, so that famine broke out in the land. Humans and gods are dying of hunger. The Great Sun God made a feast and invited the Thousand Gods. They ate but couldn't get enough; they drank but couldn't quench their thirst.[161]
>
> CTH 324 A I 10-20

The obvious correlation between the negative outcomes in this text is a lack of fecundity in land, animals, and humans. That human and animal infertility appear alongside that of the land reflects the correlation between famine and maternal and infant health outcomes.[162]

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[160] See Emmanuel Laroche, *Textes mythologiques hittites*, 29-50; translation in Harry A. Hoffner Jr, *Hittite Myths*, 14-20.

[161] Tr. Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*, 15.

[162] The effects of severe malnutrition on a population can have lasting effects on fertility. A 2013 study of women exposed in utero to China's 1959-1961 famine suggests that women who were exposed to famine in utero experienced increased sterility. Shige Song, "Assessing the Impact of 'in Utero' Exposure to Famine on Fecundity: Evidence from the 1959-61 Famine in China," *Population Studies* 67.3 (2013): 293-308.

When severely undernourished, female bodies can experience cessation of ovulation and menstruation and inability to carry a child to term.[163]

The next group of curses in the Sefîre treaty (I A 25-29a) focuses on preventing new life from surviving by destroying food sources through environmental forces and destructive creatures, such as hail and locusts. The closing to this section of curses reiterates the curse that all plant life be killed, and then concludes with a promise of total destruction of Matîʿel and his people, should the former break his part of the treaty with Bir-Gaʾyah. The closing of this set of curses (Sefîre I A 33b), the city not being remembered, would be the natural result of the previous curses coming to fruition. Famine would first harm the vulnerable such as young children, the sick, and the elderly. No new births, starvation of young children, and then the rest of society, would not leave anyone on the earth to make remembrance of their names. Even if the people avoided total annihilation by leaving for

[163] Y. Cai, and E. Wang, "Famine, Social Disruption, and Involuntary Fetal Loss: Evidence from Chinese Survey Data," *Demography* 42.2 (2005): 301-322, R. Mu and X. Zhang, "Why Does the Great Chinese Famine Affect the Male and Female Survivors Differently? Mortality Selection versus Son Preference," *Economics and Human Biology* 9.1 (2010): 92-105, Shige Song, "Mortality Consequences of the 1959-1961 Great Leap Forward Famine in China: Debilitation, Selection, and Mortality Crossovers," *Social Science & Medicine* 71.3 (2010): 551-58, and Fernando J. Roca Fraga, et. al., "Meta-Analysis of Lamb Birth Weight as Influenced by Pregnancy Nutrition of Multiparous Ewes," *Journal of Animal Science* 96.5 (2018): 1962-77.

areas with extra food storages, the curses would attain their goal of leaving the offending ruler without a people.

What is made clear throughout this curse formula is the mother's or wet nurse's crucial role in the perpetuation of society through breastfeeding. Losing plant-based food sources altogether would endanger the whole of the population. Infants up to six months should be somewhat shielded from the effects of famine, as these infants can receive full nutrition through breastfeeding.[164] Nursing women's performance through the sometimes excruciating pain of nursing would have been vital to the survival of infants and their people as a whole. While the first curse prohibited the birth of a new generation, the next step towards destruction in the Sefire treaty targets those newly born through a curse on efforts to breastfeed:

[164] Studies on the impact of malnutrition on breastfeeding, though limited, indicate that a woman's milk volume remains largely unaffected even by significant caloric deficiencies. When specific nutrients are low in a woman's diet, this deficiency may be passed on to the infant, though some elements of breastmilk may be drawn from the woman's reserves. See chapters 5-9 in: Institute of Medicine (U.S.) Subcommittee on Nutrition during Lactation, *Nutrition during Lactation* (Washington D.C.: National Academy Press, 1991), 80-212.

שבע [מהי]נקן ימשח[ן .....ו]
יהינקן עלים ואל ישבע ושבע ססיה יהינקן על ואל יש[בע ושבע]
שורה יהינקן עגל ואל ישבע ושבע שאן יהינקן אמר ו[אל יש]בע

> should seven [breastfeed]ing women rub oil on [their breasts and] nurse a boy, may he not be filled; should seven mares nurse a colt, may it not be fi[lled; should seven] cows nurse a calf, may it not be filled; should seven ewes nurse a lamb, [may it not be fi]lled;
>
> Sefîre I A,21b-23[165]

Women and animals alike are cursed with the inability to provide nourishment for their young, which would lead to infant malnutrition, starvation, and even death. The cursory pronouncements do not explain exactly why the young are left unsated. Possibilities include insufficient breastmilk, failure to latch on, and plugged ducts, or mastitis. The latter two conditions can be particularly painful for women. Gnawing from young gums can rub sensitive nipples raw, while mastitis causes pain at the site of inflamed breast tissue and can cause fevers and chills. In addition to its ritual uses, "rubbing oil" on one's nipples prior to breastfeeding, as referenced in Sefîre I A,21b, can help alleviate the pain of breastfeeding.[166]

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[165] Text from Fitzmyer, "The Aramaic Inscriptions of Sefire I and II," 180-81.

[166] I prefer "rubbing oil" to Ramos' translation of "anointing" (Ramos, "A Northwest Semitic Curse Formula," 209) to highlight the practical use of oil for breastfeeding. That at least some women also viewed the rubbing of oil on their nipples as imbued with ritual power is certainly plausible. See Barbara Böck, "'When You Perform the Ritual of "Rubbing"': on medicine and magic in ancient Mesopotamia," *JNES* 62.1 (2003): 1-16.

Quite similar language is used in the Tell Fekheriye inscription. According to its dedication, the statue is associated with flourishing, health, and long life. This formula of flourishing for oneself and one's descendants is contrasted with the curses of destruction upon any who efface the inscription. It begins with a curse that the gods would reject one's offerings of food or water, as seen in CTH 324. The text then frames insufficient breastfeeding with agricultural failure:

> and may he sow, but not harvest;
> and may he sow a thousand measures of barley,
> and may he take a fraction from it;
> and may one hundred ewes suckle a lamb, but it not be satisfied;
> and may one hundred cows suckle a calf, but it not be satisfied;
> and may one hundred women bake bread in an oven, but not fill it;
> and, may his men glean barley from a refuse pit, and eat,
> may plague, the staff of Nergal, not be cut off from his land.
>
> Fekheriye (Aramaic) 19-23[167]

As in the treaty between Bir-Gaʾyah and Matîʿel, the curse against the efficacy of breastfeeding is emphasized through stylistic means. The curse is repeated against lamb, calf, and human child. It is also widespread ("should one hundred…suckle…"), leading to

[167] Tr. Alan R. Millard and Pierre Bordreuil, "A Statue from Syria with Assyrian and Aramaic Inscriptions," *BA* 45.3 (1982): 138. Millard and Bordreuil provide a facisimile of the Aramaic inscription; for an edited text, see Herbert Donner and Wolfgang Röllig, *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften*, (vol. 1; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002), 2.

generational loss of human and the animals on which they rely. As the final line indicates, difficulty with breastfeeding is one of several outcomes of "plague."

Plugged ducts or a buildup of unexpressed milk in those whose infants fail to latch on or feed are expressed through narrative details in CTH 324:

> Mist seized the windows. Smoke [seized] the house. In the fireplace the logs were stifled. [At the altars] the gods were stifled. In the sheep pen the sheep were stifled. In the cattle barn the cattle were stifled. The mother sheep rejected her lamb. The cow rejected her calf.[168]
>
> CTH 324 A i (5-9)

The imagined women and animals in the previous two texts would attempt to breastfeed, though their efforts would be in vain. Here, the sheep and the cow refuse to breastfeed at all. Refusal or inability to nurse among cattle and sheep can stem from recent injury to the teat or udder, weakness from difficult labor, and disease such as mastitis (painful inflammation of the breast).[169] In such cases, refusal to breastfeed is a manifestation of the

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[168] Tr. Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*, 15. The end of the preserved text describes a reversal of this opening scene. With a release of mist, home, sheep pen, and barn, humans and animals care for their young once again (CTH 324 A iv 20-25). A concluding concern for the flourishing of king and queen serves as a reminder that, as with the Sefire treaty and the bilingual Tell Fekheriye statue, this piece of literature couches the broad-ranging difficulties of women's reproductive health within political power's concern for the continuance of their regime.

[169] Mariela E. Srednik, et. al., "First Isolation of a Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus Aureusfrom Bovinemastitis in Argentina," *Veterinary and Animal Science* 7 (2019): 1, and

pain and suffering of the mother. Difficult labor and disease can also lead to decreased milk production in sheep and cattle who still allow their young to feed.[170] The same conditions also explain why in the curses on Matîʿel in the Sefîre treaties, the young human, colt, cow, and lamb could not be sated. The curse of the inability to breastfeed is located in the female's breasts; the annihilation is accomplished in no small part through her pain.

The curses of the Sefîre treaty and the Tell Fekheriye inscription, though far from providing an exhaustive list of the causes of maternal pains, exhibit an awareness of the interconnectedness of women's bodies and the environment. Indeed, humans' survival is interdependent not only on other humans, but also on weather patterns, water sources, animals, and land. The Northwest Semitic curse formulae threaten not only inability to conceive new life, but also inability to breastfeed—at times resulting from the extreme pain

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S. J. Huntley, "A Cohort Study of the Associations Between Udder Conformation, Milk Somatic Cell Count, and Lamb Weight in Suckler Ewes," *Journal of Dairy Science* 95 (2012): 5001-2.

[170] Cathy M. Dwyer and Alistair B. Lawrence, "A Review of the Behavioural and Physiological Adaptations of Hill and Lowland Breeds of Sheep That Favour Lamb Survival," *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 92 (2005): 241-42, K. G. Haughey, "The Effect of Birth Injury to the Foetal Nervous System on the Survival and Feeding Behavior of Lambs," *Reviews in Rural Science* 4 (1980): 109–111, and Ishmael Festus Jaja, et. al., "Seasonal Prevalence, Body Condition Score and Risk Factors of Bovine Fasciolosis in South Africa," *Veterinary and Animal Science* 4 (2017): 1.

from breastfeeding. These losses, combined with crop failure, would lead to the obliteration of a people and the memory of their name. The association of maternal wellness with environmental stability plays out in narrative texts as well. Where drought, famine, blight, or plague exist, maternal pain is likely to follow. And when maternal pain is pervasive enough, life will cease altogether.

Hope for Improved Reproductive Outcomes

In light of these curses, it is worth turning briefly to expectations or hopes of positive reproductive health outcomes. The texts surveyed above primarily speak to the harmful effects of an unstable environment upon women's reproductive health. Where they do portray bountiful life they do so generally. It is left to the reader or hearer of the dedication to fill in the gaps in the text to recognize how this general desire for bountiful life, if effected, would play out for women and their reproductive health. It could involve, for example, plentiful lactation and pain free nursing, in addition to easily being able to conceive and have a straightforward pregnancy and birth.

A text that lists women's reproductive health as a sign of bounty is the Sumerian "Disputation between Summer and Winter" (CSL 5.3.3).[171] This lengthy text (318 lines) tells of a cosmic dispute between the two seasons. The specifics of the dispute and how it is resolved do not pertain to the present inquiry. It is the opening sixty lines that are of interest. The repetition of the terms for bounty and abundance—five times in the first ten lines—sets the stage. The first few lines offer some indication of what bounty includes. Listed first is the hearty growth of food sources such as legumes and wheat (line 6). Their growth would naturally result in population spread and longer lifespans for humans (lines 2, 8). All of this would be made possible by good regulating of the waters, leading to a stable environment for growing food (lines 7, 9-10).

With the scene set for bounty and abundance, the first activity to take place in the text is the birth of twins who will represent summer and winter in the remainder of the story. Their birth is described as easy on the mother, Hursag: so easy and painless that she "bore them as oil." In this scene, Hursag enjoyed freedom from the pain, danger, and lasting health effects that regularly accompany childbirth. If these lines (12-16) appeared

[171] "The Disputation between Summer and Winter," translated by Herman L. J. Vanstiphout (*COS* 1.183:584-588).

without the context of the opening lines, it might be fair to assign the ease of this birth to the special realm of the deities. Indeed, such a perfectly painless birth was unlikely to be expected to occur in reality. What is significant about this line in its context is that abundant human life includes painless and easy childbirth for women.

A different tone cuts through one of the most poignant references to maternal pain from ancient Western Asia, the Neo-Assyrian K.890, an Assyrian elegy for a woman dead in childbirth.[172] After an opening question to her, the elegy is told in the voice of a woman dying in childbirth. The woman begins by likening herself to a ship cast adrift. The context of the rest of the poem would suggest she feels particularly adrift from her husband.[173] She describes how happy she and her husband were, both as lovers, and then at the news that they would be having a child. She contrasts that happiness with the deadly onset of labor. She then laments being cut off—like a ship, adrift—from her lover who in turn cries out for her in lines 13-15.

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[172] To this point, only one copy exists. Erica Reiner has noted that the ship imagery appears in Sumerian texts, but there are otherwise few markers to help determine exact dating of the text. Erica Reiner, "First-Millennium Babylonian Literature" in *The Cambridge Ancient History* (ed. John Boardman et. al.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 312.
[173] Boat imagery is used in a similar fashion in Extispicy 1:6. See Bergmann, *Childbirth*, 52-53.

The primary grief of this elegy is notably over the separation of a married couple who deeply loved one another and of a woman from the life she valued:

> [All ...] those days I was with my husband,
> While I lived with him who was my lover,
> Death was creeping stealthily into my bedroom,
> It forced me from my house,
> It cut me off from my lover,
> It set my foot toward the land from which I shall not return.[174]
>
> K.890 (18-20)

Taken in sum, K.890 deals with maternal death as a tragedy for the woman and the husband she leaves behind. She is not merely valued by her husband as a vessel for the production of children and heirs, but as a lover who will be missed. Imagining the death from the dead woman's perspective shows a level of compassion for her as a person; not merely a potential mother. She voices her grief, the mutual love shared with her husband, and his grief over the loss of her person. While it remains likely that this text is the product of a male scribe, the perspective of the character of the woman is both compassionate and persuasive.

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[174] Tr. Benjamin Foster, *Before the Muses*, 949. See also the German translation by Karl Hecker in *Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments* (ed. Otto Kaiser, et. al., Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1982-), 780-81. For transliteration and English translation of lines 1-20, see Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis*, 12-13.

In the middle of the elegy, the woman describes how she had cried out to Belet-ili for help, but her petition appeared to go unanswered:

> With open hands I prayed to Bēlet-ilī: "You are the mother of the ones who give birth, save my life!" Hearing this Bēlet-ilī veiled her face.[175]
>
> K.890 (9-11)

The woman attributes to Belet-ili a measure of divine protection and empowerment of pregnant women, yet she is dying in spite of her prayers.[176] The woman illustrates the ineffectuality of her prayer with a description of a goddess who has withdrawn from her. Death has slipped like Lamaštu into her room, but Belet-ili remains remote and her prayer unanswered.

Muted expectations of conception, pregnancy, childbirth, and recovery from it are unsurprising given maternal and infant mortality rates prior to modern medicine. Famine and its threat heightened the vulnerability of women. Religiopolitical curses further condemned them to these fates. Yet elegy K.890 and the Lamaštu ritual incantations lift up a competing hope, that women could be free from their reproductive pains.

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[175] Tr. Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis*, 12.

[176] For a discussion of divine assistants at childbirth, see Bergmann, *Childbirth*, 35-43.

Rereading Genesis 3-4: Environments of Maternal Pain

In considering Eve's maternal aspect in Gen 3-4, we may consider not only the social role of mothering in various contexts, but also the negotiation of these issues alongside varied reproductive health pains. Eve's experiences of motherhood in Gen 3-4 are shrouded by the dangers and pains, indicated in 3:16, that were part and parcel of human procreation in ancient Western Asia. Interpretations of her experiences, from being named by the man in light of her maternal aspect (3:20), to having sexual intercourse and giving birth (4:1), and eventually losing two children to death and estrangement (4:25), are enriched by placing them in conversation with the pronouncement in 3:16-19 and reflecting on the multitude conditions and situations they can entail.

Placed in a larger cultural context, Eve's motherhood in Gen 3-4 becomes representative of a broader milieu of painful conditions, including those that result in infertility, pregnancy loss, and infant death. The curses, prayers, and incantations explored in this chapter, in particular the Lamaštu ritual incantations and Elegy K.890, poignantly situate death within female bodies, whether demon, human, or animal. The potential of their bodies to nourish life exposes them to a great deal of pain—in their breasts, in and around their wombs, and in the depths of their grief.

The cultural conversation out of which Gen 3:16 emerged bears witness to the basic principle that maternal pain is often associated with factors largely outside the control of those experiencing them. The broader corpus of material with which this text was in conversation reveals an understanding that the ability for humans to produce and raise children, and in doing so to maintain the existence of a community, was enhanced by environmental stability. Drought, famine, disease and blight appeared alongside infertility, non-viable pregnancies, insufficient and painful breastfeeding, and child loss. Furthermore, political-religious grasping for power as evident in the curses of Bir-Gaʾyah and Hadad-Yis'i, left the bodies of women and children as collateral damage.

In the same way, Eve's maternal health outcomes are bound up with the land and with the man who would "rule over her" (Gen 3:16b). Gen 3:16-21 places alongside one another maternal pain and a land that does not easily produce food. Moreover, the man who will apparently work the land will wield some sort of dominance over her (3:16b). Her fate is tied to his, his to hers, and theirs to a land that is cursed. None of them exists apart from these relationships.

Elizabeth Clinton, writing to upper class Englishwomen in the seventeenth century, argued that women should be able to decide to nurse their own children, in contrast to the

societal expectations of seventeenth-century England. Though Clinton's work is limited in both its audience and its aims, it illustrates the ways in which a patriarchal society and its expectations of women as sexual partners to their husbands directly impacted women and infants through the practices of breastfeeding.[177] Amanda Benckhuysen describes the situation to which Clinton alludes:

> Inadvertently, Clinton's work raises important questions about who has the right to make decisions about a woman's body. In the early modern period, the husband was granted complete authority over his wife, including over her body. He decided whether or not his wife would nurse their children or whether she would nurse the child of another. Often, husbands made wet-nursing arrangements between each other, exchanging money and goods over the sale of women's breasts.[178]

Added to these considerations, Clinton especially noted the financial burden on families outside the wealthiest to employ wet nurses, as well as the potential health effects on lower class children when priority was given to children their mothers were paid to breastfeed.[179]

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[177] Women were expected to have very large numbers of children, and breastfeeding was known to act as a contraceptive. Furthermore, sexual intercourse was thought to interfere with breastmilk. See Merry E. Wiesner, Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 87, and discussion in Amanda Benckhuysen, *The Gospel According to Eve: A History of Women's Interpretation* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 102.

[178] Benckhuysen, *The Gospel According to Eve*, 104.

[179] Elizabeth Clinton, *The Countesse of Lincolnes Nurserie*.

Clinton's example demonstrates the classism that patriarchal dominance involves alongside discrimination based on sex or gender. While it is common within published scholarship on Gen 3:16 to refer to the gender discrimination of patriarchy in societies throughout history, such critiques have rarely extended such critiques to the impacts of classism and racism on women and their bodies, and yet, "consideration of any one aspect of the triple oppression of women of color is insufficient to explain the pervasiveness of their social inequality."[180] Contemporary examples of the effects of patriarchy and its triple oppression are numerous, but a few examples from the United States will suffice to carry the point. Persons across the U.S. face a prohibitively expensive healthcare system tied primarily to employment, rising maternal mortality rates,[181] and a legacy of systemic racism

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[180] Denise A. Segura, "Chicanas and Triple Oppression in the Labor Force," (Paper presented at the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies Annual Conference, Austin, TX, 1 January 1984), 48. The term for the "triple oppression" of the experience of discrimination based on race, class, and sex and/or gender appeared first within Communist worker movements in the 1930s U.S. and was popularized by Claudia Jones' essay, "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman," *Political Affairs* 28 (1949): 51-67. On "double, triple, or multiple jeopardy," see Fundiswa A. Kobo, "A womanist Exposition of Pseudo-spirituality and the Cry of an Oppressed African Woman," *HTS Theologiese Studies* 74.1 (2018): n.p. DOI: http://dx.doi.org.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/10.4102/hts.v74i1.4896.

[181] Marian F. MacDorman, et. al., "Recent Increases in the U.S. Maternal Mortality Rate: Disentangling Trends from Measurement Issues," *Obstetrics & Gynecology* 128.3 (2016): 453.

borne out in racial disparities in maternal and infant mortality rates.[182] The pain of Gen 3:16b impacts, exacerbates, and sometimes directly causes the pains of 3:16a. The disparities due to race, class, and citizenship status extend beyond maternal and infant care to the raising of children. Three children died last year from the flu while in federal immigration custody. Meanwhile, U.S. Customs and Border Protection has refused to allow a group doctors to vaccinate children who remain in their custody.[183]

Halfway around the world, bush fires devastate forests, with reports of one billion animals lost, with fears of extinctions.[184] While some politicians and ecclesial leaders continue to deny the reality of climate change, researchers detail the vulnerability of children, particularly in developing nations, to climate change's impacts on agricultural

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[182] Michael R. Kramer, et. al., "Changing the Conversation: Applying a Health Equity Framework to Maternal Mortality Reviews," *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* 221.6 (2019): 609.e1-609.e9. See discussion and references in Russell S. Kirby, "The US Black-White Infant Mortality Gap: Marker of Deep Inequities," *American Journal of Public Health* 107.5 (2017): 644-5.

[183] Wendy Fry, "CBP Denies Access to Doctors Seeking Flu Vaccinations for Migrant Children," *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, December 9, 2019.

[184] Chris Dickman, interview by Patrick Winn, "1 Billion Animals Have Died in Australian Bushfires, Ecologist Estimates," 7 January 2020, https://www.kosu.org/post/1-billion-animals-have-died-australian-bushfires-ecologist-estimates. Dickman's estimate is based on methodologies from a previous report he co-authored: C. Johnson, et. al., *Impacts of Landclearing: The Impacts of the Approved Clearing of Native Vegetation on Australian Wildlife in New South Wales*, (WWF-Australia Report; Sydney: WWF-Australia, 2007).

yields.[185] Economists are recognizing long term economic outcomes of persons exposed to certain environmental factors in utero.[186] Almond and Currie note that more studies are needed on long-term effects of such studies, particularly with regard to policy.[187] Furthermore, recent surveys suggest that people in the U.S. and around the world are beginning to factor in climate change in their decisions not to have children.[188]

The role of the land in 3:17-19 emphasizes its necessity for the sustenance of human life. The next chapter will show that as with texts such as the Telipinu myth, references to the productivity of soil are interconnected with broader environmental factors, both meteorological and sociological. Contemporary interpreters of Gen 3:17-19 will need to consider the wide array of factors impacting the sustenance of human life within particular societies. In my own cultural context in the United States, this includes a history of

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[185] Rema Hanna and Paulina Oliva, "Implications of Climate Change for Children in Developing Countries," *The Future of Children* 26.1 (2016): 115-132.

[186] Douglas Almond and Janet Currie, "Killing Me Softly: The Fetal Origins Hypothesis." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 25.3 (2011): 154. See also the article in its entirety for a literature review and bibliography of the fetal origins hypothesis within both epidemiology (154-58) and economics (158-66).

[187] Almond and Currie, "Killing Me Softly," 167.

[188] Ted Scheinman, "In the Age of Climate Crisis, Childbearing Has Become a Fraught Question for Couples Around the Globe," BBC; October 1, 2019. https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20190920-the-couples-reconsidering-kids-because-of-climate-change.

systemic racism made evident in numerous ways, including loss of children to estrangement and death through both mass incarceration of black men and the killing of unarmed black people by police officers.[189] The stressors of being black in America have been shown to negatively impact health outcomes, including infant mortality.[190] The call for future research on the long-term impact of environmental factors in utero must include the physiological and economic impacts of systemic racism when experienced by pregnant women. With this in mind, modern interpreters may ask which Eves our policies allow to remain "mothers of the living" (Gen 3:20).

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[189] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. (New York City: The New Press, 2012), 59, cited in Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder, *When Momma Speaks: The Bible and Motherhood from a Womanist Perspective*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 59. See especially Buckhanon Crowder's chapter on Rizpah and the experience of maternal grief among African American women (52-62).

[190] Lisa Rosenthal and Marci Lobel, "Explaining Racial Disparities in Adverse Birth Outcomes: Unique Sources of Stress for Black American Women," *Social Science and Medicine* 72.6 (2011): 977-83. Anthropologist K. Jill Fleurit and sociologist T. S. Sunil also call for a biopsychosocial approach in their study "Reproductive habitus, psychosocial health, and birth weight variation in Mexican immigrant and Mexican American women in south Texas," *Social Science and Medicine* 138 (2015): 102-9. This approach is predicated on the idea that "social environments can act as stressors to influence psychosocial and psychological stress responses, including perceived social stress, pregnancy-related anxiety, and depression, known to correlate with low birth weight due to small-for-gestational-age infants or pre-term delivery" (103).

With such fraught themes brought to the fore, the limited responses by Eve (and Adam) to these experiences becomes a rather glaring gap. Eve says nothing to being named in relation to her assigned role as mother (3:20). Her sole, albeit striking, line in response to the process of conceiving, carrying, and bearing a child is the enigmatic, "I have acquired a man with the LORD!" (4:1); of the specifics of these experiences and their expected pain, we hear nothing. Despite three successful births, by 4:25 Eve is simultaneous recognizing the birth of Seth and her loss of Abel and Cain; Adam speaks nothing of his grief. In raising the themes of child loss and parental grief, interpreters, again, must fill in the gaps. Reading alongside the Lamaštu corpus and Elegy K 890 illuminates the potential pains and risks of pregnancy and childbirth that could otherwise be all too easily glossed over.

The next chapter will focus on the theme of maternal pain in the Hebrew Bible, broadening out from the first few chapters of Genesis. Much attention will be given to a blessing from Genesis that reflects a hopeful view of women's reproductive health outcomes. In order to contextualize the blessing, I will highlight passages that illustrate these themes: the vulnerability of women to reproductive health pains, the interconnectedness of maternal pain with the environment, and human violence as a factor in maternal pain.

Chapter 3

Intracultural Conversation: Maternal Pain in the Hebrew Bible

I am the one you have bereaved of children.
I am bereaved I am bereaved
by killing[191]

gather round and I will declare the way that it will be
the god of your father, your ezer, Shaddai
will bless you with
blessings from the skies above
blessings from the depths beneath
blessings of breasts and womb[192]

Like the
garden of Eden
is the land before them but
after them a desolate wilderness.[193]

Maternal pain is a concern represented throughout the Hebrew Bible corpus beyond the well-known narrative trope of barrenness overcome by divine intervention.[194] Maternal

[191] Adapted from Jacob's words in Gen 42:36; 43:14.

[192] Adapted from Jacob's speech in Gen 49:1, 25.

[193] Joel 2:3b. All biblical translations are my own.

[194] Recent examinations on the trope of barrenness include Janice Pearl Ewurama De-Whyte, *Wom(b)an: A Cultural-narrative Reading of the Hebrew Bible Barrenness Narratives*

pain appears in the Hebrew Bible as infertility, conception, miscarriage and stillbirth, difficult childbirth, maternal death, breastfeeding, child loss, and violence against pregnant women.[195] Multiple times throughout the Hebrew Bible, texts intertwine prospects for maternal and infant health with environmental factors, aligning with other texts from ancient Western Asia. Many of the passages in the Hebrew Bible concerning maternal pain are paired with threat of starvation from either environmental instability or siege warfare. A focus on the role of violence in maternal pain—especially siege warfare—is emphasized

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(Leiden: Brill, 2018); Candida Moss and Joel Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Hemchand Gossai, *Barrenness and Blessing: Abraham, Sarah, and the Journey of Faith* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2010); and Rachel Havrelock, "The Myth of Birthing the Hero: Heroic Barrenness in the Hebrew Bible," *BI* 16.2 (2008): 154-78.

[195] I find no basis for a conceptual distinction between miscarriage and stillbirth in the Hebrew Bible. The type of pregnancy loss must be determined by context, which is often unclear. Furthermore, when used as a general category, it often extends beyond reproductive loss to the slaying of one's children, young and old. The Hebrew term often used to indicate child loss is *škl*, usually translated "to be bereaved of." Marianne Grohmann's translation, "The bereavement/the sudden loss of—born or unborn—children," captures additional nuance of the usual semantic range of the term. Though most often referring to loss of children, and perhaps the potential to have them, the term is also used for loss of a spouse or persons in general. Most often women are subjects, but men, people groups, and even the land may be bereaved. Though usually referring to a death, child loss is occasionally attributed to estrangement. On this and other terms for pregnancy loss, see Marianne Grohmann, "Metaphors of Miscarriage in the Psalms," *VT* 69.2 (2019): 224 and *passim*, and John Makujina, "The Semantics of יצא in Exodus 21:22: Reassessing the Variables That Determine Meaning," *BBR* 23.3 (2013): 305-21.

throughout the Hebrew Bible. The first two portions of this chapter will focus on these themes: the respective—and at times interrelated—roles of environment and siege warfare on maternal health outcomes and child loss.

The tale of Eve's maternal pain and child loss hints at each of these themes, played out in a domestic setting. Her promise of toil and reproductive pains is immediately followed by a curse of a land reticent to give food (Gen 3:17-19). Her experience of child loss is two-fold, to both death and separation that result from an act of violence to which the land bore witness, soaking up the blood of the innocent slain (4:1-16, 25). Throughout these passages, the role of the divine character in Eve's experiences predominates. In the latter portion of the section, I will survey the divine role in maternal pain throughout the Hebrew Bible.

Environmental Factors in Maternal Pain

In order to provide some focus to the vast array of Hebrew Bible texts that could be explored for their connection with maternal pain,[196] I will structure the present discussion

[196] I have identified over one hundred different passages in the Hebrew Bible relating to maternal pain and child loss.

around the narratives of two families in Genesis. Where Eve's family narratives open the book of Genesis, those of Jacob's family—especially Joseph—dominate its end. In the penultimate chapter of Genesis, patriarch Jacob (Israel) declares from his deathbed the fate of his sons and their offspring. Jacob's blessing of Joseph in Gen 49:22-26 contains a clear, though oft overlooked, association between female bodies and the welfare of a people.[197] Thus the blessings of Genesis 49 and the curses of Genesis 3 frame the book of Genesis.[198] Together, their stories encapsulate the perils and possibilities of women's reproductive health as seen in Genesis and throughout the Hebrew Bible.[199]

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[197] For an extended treatment of Genesis 49, including a reference to Lamaštu iconography (pp. 303-304), see Michael J. Seufert, "Of Beasts and Men: A Study of Genesis 49 in light of Iconography, Metaphor, and Animal Studies," PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 2019.

[198] Joseph Blenkinsopp references a genealogical frame, anchored by the genealogies of these two families: "Genealogies form the exoskeleton of the entire book of Genesis covering a period...from Adam to Jacob's twelve sons (Gen 49:9)." Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Creation, Un-Creation, and Recreation: A Discursive Commentary on Genesis 1-11* (London: T&T Clark, 2011): 82.

[199] As in the previous chapter on texts from ancient Western Asia, I will focus on how these passages point to the literal bodies of women and their lived experiences with child loss and its threat and to related reproductive pains.

Blessings and Curses of Breasts and Womb

After opening the blessing of Joseph by depicting him as a fruitful vine, Jacob blesses his son with "blessings of breasts and womb" (49:25b). Rather poetically, he invokes the divine name *šadday* to bless the *šaddayim* (breasts).[200] Jacob's blessing is the inverse of the curses upon breasts and womb such as those described in the Sefîre treaty and Tell Fekherye inscription, with failure to conceive or carry pregnancies to term, insufficient breastfeeding, and threats to the lives of both mother and young child.[201] Jacob locates the blessings of fertility in female breasts and wombs, to be freed from the painful implications of infertility, dangerous pregnancies, and insufficient breastfeeding.

Several passages in the Hebrew Bible reference the importance of breastfeeding for infants' survival. Ps 22:10-11 [ET: 9-10] depends upon imagery of a newborn's security at the mother's breasts. Hannah offers the same to Samuel, refusing to return to Shiloh until she has weaned him off her breast (1 Sam 1:22-24). Job, lamenting his existence, wishes

[200] For an overview of proposals for the etymology of *šadday*, see Mathias Neumann, "(El) Šadday – A Plea for an Egyptian Derivation of the God and Its Name," *WO* 46.2 (2016): 245-49.

[201] Sefîre I A, 21a-23b; Tell Fekherye inscription (Aramaic) (Millard and Bordreuil, 138).

there had been "no breasts for me to suckle" (Job 3:12).[202] His comment notes the dependence of a newborn on breastmilk for nutrition and, whether or not he was aware of it, protection from disease. The poetry of Lam 4:3-4 contrasts parents who did not feed their children during the siege of Jerusalem with the basic level of care wild animals provide their young by breastfeeding. The prophet Hosea curses the breasts and wombs which sustained Ephraim. The passage in Hos 9:11-16 proclaims the annihilation of the people of Ephraim in a manner similar to the curses from the Sefîre treaty and Tell Fekherye inscription when the prophet asks YHWH to give Ephraim "a bereaving womb and dry breasts" (v. 14).

When read in conversation with his narrative experiences, Jacob's blessing of fruitfulness takes on a deeply personal tone. The character of Jacob in Genesis brings to such a blessing a wealth of personal experience with women's infertility, mother's involvement in the survival of their children, young and old, and the risks they face in childbirth.[203] Jacob himself is only born after his father Isaac prays for God to open

[202] In v.16, Job wishes he had been "like a hidden one, like a baby who does not see the light," reminiscent of the texts discussed on p. 12, note 25.

[203] Claudia Bergmann has noted that "The three most important and detailed childbirth narratives that deal with the individual experiences of mothers giving birth and the children being born are notably clustered in the narratives surrounding the family of Jacob, who is

Rebekah's womb after twenty married years without children (25:20-26). Jacob and his wife Rachel conceive their first child after years without issue, despite her expressed desire for biological children (30:1). Rachel celebrates God "opening her womb" by naming Joseph after her renewed hope that she might bear additional children (30:22-24).[204] Ultimately, Jacob loses his beloved Rachel in childbirth as she gives birth to their second son.[205] Their baby manages to survive without his mother, no doubt thanks to the efforts—and blessed breasts—of a wet nurse (35:16-30).[206]

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later renamed Israel." Claudia Bergmann, "Turning Birth into Theology: Traces of Ancient Obstetric Knowledge within Narratives of Difficult Childbirth in the Hebrew Bible," in *Children in the Bible and the Ancient World: Comparative and Historical Methods in Reading Ancient Children* (ed. Shawn W. Flynn; SHANE; London: Routledge, 2019).

[204] On the trope of God opening wombs in the Hebrew Bible, see Candida Moss and Joel Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*.

[205] Two chapters before Rachel dies in childbirth along a journey, Jacob speaks to Esau of the vulnerability of children and nursing sheep and cattle to an arduous journey: "if they are driven hard for one day, they will die" (Gen. 33:13b).

[206] On wet nurses in ancient Israel, see Gale Yee, "'Take This Child and Suckle It for Me': Wet Nurses and Resistance in Ancient Israel," *BTB* 39.4 (2009): 180-89. In addition to these experiences at the beginning and end of life, Rachel's menstrual period features heavily in Jacob's altercation with Laban in Gen 31:25. She uses it as an excuse not to rise from her camel, allowing her to hide the household gods she had taken from her father's household. The narrative does not make clear whether she was lying and taking advantage of her father's ignorance (or abhorrence) of menstruation, or simply making the most of her cycle. Any visible signs of a painful period, such as paleness, fatigue, or doubling over in pain, would have strengthened her claim that she could not make the effort to get off her camel.

These experiences, though spread out over decades of the character's long life, impact him significantly. Jacob's grief over Rachel's loss affects him until he joins her in death.[207] It heightens his love for and anxiety over their grown children, whose apparent loss he faces due to animal attack, familial violence, and famine, themes that will be explored throughout this chapter as threats to women and children (37:31-35; 42:1-46:30). Toward the end of his life, Jacob recalls Rachel's loss as he doubles Joseph's portion and promises fruitfulness to Jacob's grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh (48:7).[208] His blessing of breasts and womb in the following chapter of Genesis may be read as a response to these experiences. Placed in canonical conversation with passages on maternal pain throughout the Hebrew Bible, this biblical blessing offered on behalf of female bodies for their

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Laban's acquiescence could be a result of aversion to "the way of women," but it is equally plausible that she had a history of difficult periods of which her father was aware.

[207] Deprived of a burial in a family plot, Rachel is separated from her family in life and in death. The pillar Jacob erects at her grave hints at her enduring impact on the family's life. "Israel moves on" in the very next verse, but with a grief that will resurface in ways that shape the family saga. On the significance of the family plot in Hebrew Bible narratives, see Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, "From Womb to Tomb: The Israelite Family in Death as in Life," in *The Family in Life and Death: The Family in Ancient Israel; Sociological and Archaeological Perspectives* (ed. Patricia Dutcher-Walls; New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 127-28.

[208] Robert Alter interprets this activity as stemming from "a desire to compensate, symbolically and legally, for the additional sons she did not live to bear." Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: Norton, 1996), 288.

reproductive health speaks against the prophetic utterances, narratives, and lamentations of starkly different experiences.

Blessings from Above and Below

In light of the discussion on the associations between drought, malnutrition, and women's maternal health outcomes in the previous chapter, the poetic language immediately preceding the blessing of breasts and womb deserves attention. In it, Jacob declares that Shaddai (a homophone for "breasts") will bless Joseph with "blessings of the skies above, blessings of the watery depths below" (49:25aβ). Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, promise of blessings from above and below denotes the vastness or completeness of divine blessings, as well as the literal sky and watery depths as sources of necessary amounts of water to sustain—or destroy life.[209] In Ps 85:11 [Heb. 85:11], similar imagery is

[209] Seufert's analysis allows for an interpretation of animal and plant fertility in the blessing, but he says nothing of the reproductive health of women. See Seufert, "Of Beasts and Men," 298. Poetic imagery need not be limited to its most direct allusions; that the fertility blessing employs animal and plant imagery does not limit its effects to those subjects. Furthermore, when placed in canonical conversation with the narrative of Jacob, and in the voice of a character whose life has been so marked by (human) maternal pain, the blessing begs to be read as one of plant, animal, and human life. Jerry Hwang counts Deut 33:17 as one of several passages within Deuteronomy that refer to the human multiplication of Israel, echoing the report and promise of Deut 1:10-11. See Jerry Hwang, *Rhetoric of*

used to depict God's blessings of righteousness, faithfulness, and peace. The variation is that the Psalm describes a blessing sprouting up from the land, as opposed to bubbling forth from the watery deeps. The two images are not unconnected in the imagery of Genesis: in Gen 2:5, nothing had sprouted up from the land because the Lord God had yet to send rain. In Gen 3:18, it is thorns and thistles that sprout up from the cursed land.

The specific pairing of the sky with the deeps appears in only three passages: the flood narrative of Genesis 7-8, Jacob's blessing of Joseph in Genesis 49, and Moses' blessing of Joseph in Deuteronomy 33.[210] The deuteronomic blessings of the twelve tribes parallel those of Genesis in their general structure: proclaimed over the twelve tribes by the leader of Israel, and by Israel himself, immediately before the book's closing report of their

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Remembrance: An Investigation of the Fathers in Deuteronomy (Siphrut 8; University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 110. Richard Nelson reads Deut 33:17 as a reference to military security, and therefore to humans engaged in military activities. See Richard D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 387.

[210] Each of these texts appear near the end of a literary unit: the primeval history of Genesis 1-11, the book of Genesis, and the book of Deuteronomy (and consequently, the Torah as a whole). Further similarities between the blessings of Joseph in Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33 include bull imagery. See both Seufert, "Of Beasts and Men," 291, and Bruce Vawter, "The Canaanite Background of Genesis 49," *CBQ* 17 (1955), 7.

death.[211] The specific content of each of the twelve tribes varies considerably between the two sets of blessings; however, both offer extended blessings over Joseph which promise blessings from both the skies and the watery depths:

מֵאֵל אָבִיךָ וְיַעְזְרֶךָּ וְאֵל שַׁדַּי וִיבָרְכֶךָּ
בִּרְכֹת שָׁמַיִם מֵעָל בִּרְכֹת תְּהוֹם רֹבֶצֶת תָּחַת
בִּרְכֹת שָׁדַיִם וָרָחַם

May the god of your ancestors come to your aid
May El Shaddai bless you [with]
Blessings of the skies above
Blessings of the deep that lies below
Blessings of breasts and womb.

(Gen 49:25)

[211] Kent Sparks has argued for a shared the northern provenance of both blessings: Kent Sparks, "Genesis 49 and the Tribal List Tradition in Ancient Israel," *ZAW* 115 (2003): 327-47. Added to this are arguments for northern provenance and deuteronomistic editing of Hosea, with its curse of a "bereaving womb and dry breasts" against Ephraim in 9:14. For a discussion of arguments on the composition history of Hosea, see Brad E. Kelle, *Hosea 2: Metaphor and Rhetoric in Historical Perspective* (Academia Biblica 20; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 34 and note 37.

וּלְיוֹסֵף אָמַר
מְבֹרֶכֶת יְהוָה אַרְצוֹ מִמֶּגֶד שָׁמַיִם מִטָּל[212]
וּמִתְּהוֹם רֹבֶצֶת תָּחַת

To Joseph he said:
"Blessed by YHWH be your land
with opulence from the skies, with moisture,[213]
and from the deep that lies below."
(Deut 33:13)

The following verses of Moses's blessing promise agricultural success (33:14-16), while the closing lines show that the breasts and wombs of Joseph's line have been blessed:

וְהֵם רִבְבוֹת אֶפְרַיִם וְהֵם אַלְפֵי מְנַשֶּׁה

They are the myriads of Ephraim,
they are the thousands of Manasseh.[214]
(Deut 33:17c-d)

The fruitfulness of these tribes is in large part thanks to the blessing of the land in the form of rain and good water sources in v. 13.

[212] A few medieval manuscripts read מעל, harmonizing it with Gen 49:25.

[213] Commonly translated "dew," the term may refer to any moisture on the ground whose source was the sky, including a light overnight rain.

[214] They antecedent of "they" may be the two horns of the bull that Joseph is described as earlier in the verse. In this reading, Joseph's two horns, the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, are credited with military victories. See Hwang, *Rhetoric of Remembrance*, 110.

Returning to Genesis, the flood waters burst forth from "springs of the deeps" and the "windows of heaven," killing all human and animal life on the earth (7:11, 21-23). Conversely, God ends the deluge by closing the openings in the sky and stopping up the springs from the deeps (8:2). The destructive potential of waters from above and below is the fulfillment of a divine curse of the ground (*ʾădāmâ*) (8:21). Immediately following a promise to never curse the ground "on account of humanity" and an assurance of the regularity of the seasons, comes a divine blessing on Noah and his children to "be fruitful and multiply" (8:22-9:1). Despite using a different term for curse of the ground than in Gen 3:17 (*ʾărûrāâ*), the referent to human accountability is the same.[215] In light of these connections, the curse of the ground in Genesis 3 and the blessings from above and below in Genesis 49 indicate an amount of water that is neither too much nor too little for all life—plant, animal, and human—to flourish. Furthermore, they emphasize that the ground is site of a curse involving the whole environmental system, rather than being the sole recipient of the curses. Once the curse on the land is removed, so is the threat to those living upon it.

[215] Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994 [German orig.: 1984), 454-56.

Water Sources

As in the blessing (and curse) formulae discussed above, the blessing of water sources would contribute to positive maternal health outcomes, rendering the following blessing of breasts and womb more attainable. Several narratives from the Elijah and Elisha cycles illustrate this reality. In 2 Kgs 2:19-22, the prophet Elisha performs a ritual incantation in the name of YHWH and purifies a community's water source, of which the people report that "the water is bad and [so] the land bereaves" (2:19b).[216] After performing the ritual, he declares the water "healed" and that death and bereavement will no longer come from it (v. 21).[217] He makes no mention of the land. These two verses indicate, similar in their understanding to the flood narratives, that the "bereaving land" is a result of the bad water; once the water source is righted, the land will no longer bereave. Just as proper

[216] The piel participle *mĕ̲šakkālet* indicates that it is the land that bereaves (or a land that miscarries), as opposed to a "bereaved land," which would require a qal stem of *škl*.
[217] Though translations consistently use "miscarriage" for *mšklt* in verses 19 and 21, the semantic range of the term in this passage need not be limited to one particular aspect of reproductive loss. Furthermore, it may extend beyond birth to include the loss of infants and children.

nutrition is vital for infant health and maternal outcomes, so is access to clean water. This brief passage from Kings shows an understanding of that association.[218]

The same understanding lies behind two passages in Exodus. After wandering through the wilderness for three days without water, the people find "bitter" water that they cannot drink (15:22-24). Moses throws wood into the water and it becomes "sweet" (v. 25). A few chapters later, the people are told that in return for their worship, YHWH will bless their food and water (23:25a). They are further promised freedom from sickness, bereavement, and barrenness (vv. 25b-26a). As in 2 Kgs 2:19-22, the latter blessings are natural results of the first. Good sources of clean water and sufficient food would lead to better health outcomes, including women's reproductive health.[219] The blessing concludes with a blessing of long life, the culmination of the previous blessings: "I will fill the number of your days" (Exod 23:26b).

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[218] Elisha's role in eradicating bereavement by healing the water source near Jericho is juxtaposed by his murderous activity on the way from Jericho to Bethel that leads to the death by mauling of forty-two children (vv. 23-24). His curse against these children leads to the bereavement of scores of unnamed parents, not to mention the trauma of the surviving children who witnessed the bear attack. For a "childist" interpretation of this passage, see Julie Faith Parker, *Valuable and Vulnerable: Children in the Hebrew Bible, Especially the Elisha Cycle* (BJS 355; Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2013), 89-101.

[219] This passage likely extend to animals' reproductive health. The same is true for other passages speaking broadly of pregnancy and fruitfulness.

In 1 Kgs 17:1-16, a woman faces the imminent death of her son and herself due to her socioeconomic status as a widow who appears to be the sole provider for the household. The narrative opens with a claim by the prophet Elijah to King Ahab about control over rain: "As YHWH, the god of Israel lives, before whom I stood, there will not be in these years dew or rain except by my word" (v. 1b). When Elijah's source for drinking water dries up, YHWH sends him outside the land of Israel to Sidonian Zarephath, telling him, "dwell there, for I have commanded a woman, a widow there to provide for you" (v. 9b). As it happens, the widow and her son are starving.[220] Though not made explicit, their starvation may stem from the drought extending as far as Zarephath in Sidon, rendering them collateral damage of Elijah's power game. If this is the case, their status as widow and child within a patriarchal clan structure rendered them more vulnerable to years of drought than others in her community. Sometime after this episode, the widow's son falls ill to the point of death: "breath did not remain in him" (v. 17). It is not clear how much time had passed, but it is possible his illness stemmed from his weakened state due to severe malnutrition.

[220] The narrative does not indicate the age of the child, using only the term *bēn*, which is a relational term rather than one that indicates age. For an overview of the terms used for children in the Hebrew Bible, see Julie Faith Parker, "Children in the Hebrew Bible," *CBR* 17.2 (2019): 133-34.

Animals

The curse of bereavement and its converse blessings of health, productivity, and long life extend beyond human subjects to include livestock, the land, and its produce. Job laments that the cow of the wicked "delivers and does not miscarry (21:10).[221] In the prophecy of Malachi, YHWH states that if they bring full tithes to the Temple, then "the vine of the field will not be bereaved" by locusts (3:11). In the curses in Leviticus 26, humans are bereaved of livestock: "I will unleash among you animals of the field to bereave you, and they will cut down your livestock and make you few, and your roads will be deserted." (v. 22).[222] The message that wild animals will kill domesticated animals is clear enough, but the phrase "and make you few" suggests that the human population would diminish as well. The implication is that wild animals would attack humans as well as

[221] The following verses describe children playing and dancing.

[222] Grohmann acknowledges that animals, plants, and the land can "miscarry," that is, "experience miscarriage," but not that these entities can bereave others. See Grohmann, "Metaphors of Miscarriage," 224. Both meanings are represented by the Piel stem (Qal exclusively indicates that one has "been bereaved," or experienced loss). The semantic range of the Piel of *škl*, both experiencing and causing loss, raises the question of how miscarriage was perceived. In the case of the cow, for instance, the cow's progeny is a question of ownership. Job does not lament that wicked cows prosper but that the *wicked* prosper through their cow's easy birth experience. Were the cow to miscarry—or have a stillbirth, or give birth to a calf that would die soon afterward, all of which may be indicated by *škl*—she would bereave her owner of a calf.

livestock, and that the loss of livestock would lead to population decreases due to conditions such as malnutrition.[223]

The possibility of child loss due to animal attack plays a crucial role in Jacob's loss of a seventeen-year-old Joseph. In order to protect themselves from their father's wrath, his brothers smear Joseph's trademark garment with goat's blood. Taking it to Jacob, they allow him to draw the false conclusion that Joseph had been devoured by wild animals (Gen 37:31-33). The garment was symbolic for each involved in the encounter. For Jacob, it was a precious gift from a doting father to the beloved son of his dear and departed Rachel. For the brothers, it was a daily reminder of their father's favoritism for an obnoxious teen (37:3-5).[224] Though they had rid themselves of the boy, they could no more remove the specter of his memory than blood from the fibers of his robe. Jacob mourns for "many days," refusing to be comforted by "all" his sons and daughters (37:34). Here the voice of the narrator momentarily plays in to the deception by claiming that "all" Jacob's children consoled him, when Joseph was still quite alive. Jacob, however, rebukes the proposition that Joseph, in

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[223] In his commentary on Lev 26.22, Rashi interprets *škl* as a child loss from animal attacks.
[224] Victor Matthews rightly describes the brothers' stripping of Joseph's robe as a symbolic "reversal of the investiture ceremony in which his father clothed Jacob in his special robe," and divesting him of his privileged status. See Victor H. Matthews, "The Anthropology of Clothing in the Joseph Narrative," *JSOT* 65 (1995): 31.

death, is no longer one of his children: "No, I will go down to my son, mourning, to Sheol" (37:35b). Jacob's refusal to "move on" from this child loss drives Joseph's narrative arc to its emotional catharsis in Genesis 45.

The curse of animals who bereave also appears in Ezek 5:17: "I will send famine and wild animals against you and they will bereave you." There are not enough contextual clues to determine if "bereave" here is used in its broadest sense, or is to be understood more narrowly as child loss. While the antecedent of "they" in this verse could refer only to the animals, it more likely includes both animals and famine as the subjects who bereave. If this is the case, then we may draw on our knowledge of the array of ways famine "bereaves"—including, but not limited to, the death of children and inability to bring pregnancies to term.[225]

This interpretation is supported by the use of similar language in the promise of restoration to and of the land in Ezek 36:8-15. Speaking to the land, YHWH promises to till and care for it, settle a large population on it (rebuilding towns from their ruins), and to multiply humans and (domesticated) animals: "they shall increase and be fruitful" (v. 11).

[225] The curses in Ezek 14:12-21, which include famine, wild animals, the sword, and pestilence, are all directed to humans and (domesticated) animals. Compare also to 2 Kgs 2:19-22, discussed above.

Furthermore, YHWH declares that the land will no longer bereave "my people Israel." The same array of meanings are possible here as in Ezek 5:17. The following verses expand upon the notion of the land that bereaves:

כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה יַעַן אֹמְרִים לָכֶם אֹכֶלֶת אָדָם אָתְּי וּמְשַׁכֶּלֶת גּוֹיֵךְ הָיִית׃
לָכֵן אָדָם לֹא־תֹאכְלִי עוֹד וְגוֹיֵךְ לֹא תְכַשְׁלִי־עוֹד נְאֻם אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה׃

> Thus says the lord YHWH, "Because they say to you, 'You consume humanity and bereave your people,' humanity you will consume no longer, nor will you bereave[226] your people again," declares the lord YHWH.
>
> (Ezek 36:13-14)

While in other passages the connection between death and child loss with the environment is inferred through context, the language in these verses of Ezekiel specifically describe the land as having the power to bereave Israel. Here as elsewhere, the Piel of *škl* in this passage may be interpreted as an act of bereaving others as well as miscarriage. Divine care for the land protects it from miscarriage, which in turn prevents it from bereaving the people of their children, animals, and crops.[227]

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[226] Or "cause to stumble."

[227] Rejuvenation of the land after warfare is interconnected with human survival, but concern for the land should not be interpreted as unidirectional: only under consideration insofar as it benefits humans. See the discussion and bibliography in Brad E. Kelle, "Dealing with the Trauma of Defeat: The Rhetoric of the Devastation and Rejuvenation of Nature in Ezekiel," *JBL* 128.3 (2009): 469-90. For an earth-centered perspective of Ezekiel 36, see

The Land

The character of Jacob/Israel in Genesis shows firsthand the land's power to bereave one of children. Widespread famine brings Jacob's sons under the power of the one who controlled access to surplus food (41:45-42:5).[228] Joseph uses the control he now wields over his brothers to manipulate them into reuniting him with his full brother (42:6-43:30). Grief over the loss of Joseph keeps Jacob from allowing Benjamin to make the first trip to Egypt out of fear that harm will come to Jacob's last living memory of Rachel (42:4, 38). His concern that he will lose Benjamin "along the way" echoes the nature of the burial of his mother who had died giving birth to him (35:18-19). When he finally relents, he prays for the intervention of El Shaddai to return Benjamin and "your other brother," [229] with a final, unnecessary reminder of the depths of his grief: "As for me, when I am bereaved, I am bereaved" (43:14). The ultimate irony of Jacob's story of child loss is that the conditions

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Kalinda Rose Stevenson, "If Earth Could Speak: The Case of the Mountains against YHWH in Ezekiel 6; 35-36," in *Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets* (ed. Norman C. Habel; Earth Bible 4; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 158-71.

[228] As the famine stretches on, Joseph takes advantage of the people's desperation for food and buys up the land of Egypt on behalf of the Pharaoh.

[229] This particular phrasing is a clever use of dramatic irony. Jacob is speaking of Simeon, whom Joseph had kept with him the last time he sent his brothers north. The audience suspects that sending Benjamin will lead to the return of their "*other* brother" Joseph.

known to effect it—famine and the political structures taking advantage of it—are what lead to the restoration of the son he had thought was killed decades before.

Until the dramatic reversal of fortunes, it appears as though Jacob's family has suffered the full force of the painful realities set forth in Genesis 3-4. Rachel dies in the pain of childbirth (35:16-20; reflecting 3:16a), and her son is lost due to conflict with his brothers (37:31-35), an echo of the conflict between Cain and Abel (4:1-8, 25). When the ground fails to produce enough food (41:54b; 3:17b-19a), her family is subjected to the machinations of a male ruler to whom they have journeyed (42-44; 3:16b). Indeed, women's subjugation to patriarchal structures renders them more vulnerable to negative reproductive health outcomes and child loss in passages throughout the Hebrew Bible. Repeatedly, women and children are rendered more vulnerable to famine and violence because of their reduced socioeconomic status. The Joseph cycle demonstrates the multiple oppressions of patriarchal systems at play.

Siege Warfare and Maternal Pain

The association between maternal pain and starvation is not limited to the experience of drought, blight, or locusts. Pregnant women, mothers and children in the

Hebrew Bible are frequently caught up in power games between men and their armies.[230] The Joseph arc highlights how the curse of the land opens up vulnerability to those who control surplus, and to the ways in which they (often, foreign nations) take advantage of the desperation of starving people. In addition to the dangers of malnutrition, the curse of the ground leaves women and babies vulnerable to abuse of power by those—usually men—who wield societal and economic control over them.

The majority of Hebrew Bible texts that associate maternal pain with environmental instability also reference "the sword." A signature of the presentation of maternal pain and child loss in the Hebrew Bible is its frequent connection with human violence. In fact, starvation as a tactic of siege warfare accounts for the most graphically gruesome texts about maternal pain in the Hebrew Bible. Though we cannot ascertain the extent to which

[230] While the present analysis is focused primarily on pregnant women and mothers, these passages also reference warfare's effects on children and the elderly. For a comprehensive list of acts of violence against children in the Hebrew Bible, see Andreas Michel, *Gott und Gewalt gegen Kinder im Alten Testament* (FAT 37; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 31-65. See also Jason A. Riley, "Children and Warfare in the Hebrew Bible and the Iron Age II: Rhetoric and Reality in Textual, Iconographic, and Archaeological Sources," PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2018. See also the bibliography for childist interpretation in Julie Faith Parker, "Children in the Hebrew Bible," 148-57.

these graphic imaginations reflect lived experience, the specter of siege warfare looms over discussions of maternal pain in biblical texts.[231]

Many biblical texts list human violence and maternal pain amidst the curses detailed in the previous section, without further explanation. Sometimes their literary contexts, especially in the prophetic material, indicate that siege warfare waged against Jerusalem was the primary referent for "the sword." Other texts make the connection between maternal pain and siege warfare explicit. Child loss is the most common experience of maternal pain in these texts. It comes through physical violence, captivity, and starvation. These experiences lead to death of, estrangement from, and even cannibalization of one's own child.

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[231] On the rhetoric of childbirth as a metaphor for crisis in literature from ancient Western Asia and the Hebrew Bible, see Cynthia Chapman, *The Gendered Language of Warfare in the Israelite-Assyrian Encounter* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004); Claudia D. Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis: Evidence from the Ancient Near East, the Hebrew Bible, and 1QH XI, 1-18* (BZAW 382; New York: de Gruyter, 2008), and Amy Kalmanofsky, "Israel's Baby: The Horror of Childbirth in the Biblical Prophets," *BI* 16.1 (2008): 60-82.

Starvation

Just as the blessing of Joseph by Jacob in Genesis 49 can be read in light of the character's narrative arc, so too can the parallel blessing of Moses be illuminated by what comes before it. The curses of Deuteronomy 28 mirror the curse formulae of the northwest Semitic curses, placing threats of maternal suffering and child loss within the context of food deprivation and resultant malnutrition and disease.[232] The biblical curses further contextualize these curses by references to siege warfare. A foreign nation will come from afar to cause hunger and thirst, nakedness and utter deprivation (28:48-57). This enemy will "consume the fruit of your livestock and the fruit of the ground, until you have been destroyed" (28:51a). Furthermore, this destruction of agriculture and domestic animals will leave them without grain, wine, oil, new calves or flocks, "until it kills you" (28:51b). The following verses describe the failure of their "high and fortified walls" to protect them, and the depths to which deprivation will bring them (28:52-57).

The desperation caused by the foreign enemy leads to curses including parents withholding food from children, and mothers who secretly eat newborns and afterbirth:

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[232] Studies on the relationship between Deuteronomy 28 and Neo-Assyrian vassal treaties abound. See discussion and references in Melissa Ramos, "A Northwest Semitic Curse Formula: The Sefire Treaty and Deuteronomy 28," *ZAW* 128.2 (2016): 205-207.

“You will eat the fruit of your womb, the flesh of your sons and daughters whom YHWH your god gave you, besieged in the desperation[233] with which your enemy will oppress you” (28:53). The gruesome act is repeated in greater detail:

> הָרַכָּה בְךָ וְהָעֲנֻגָּה אֲשֶׁר לֹא־נִסְּתָה כַף־רַגְלָהּ הַצֵּג עַל־הָאָרֶץ מֵהִתְעַנֵּג וּמֵרֹךְ תֵּרַע עֵינָהּ בְּאִישׁ חֵיקָהּ וּבְבִנָהּ וּבְבִתָּהּ: וּבְשִׁלְיָתָהּ הַיּוֹצֵת מִבֵּין רַגְלֶיהָ וּבְבָנֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵד כִּי־תֹאכְלֵם בְּחֹסֶר־כֹּל בַּסֵּתֶר בְּמָצוֹר וּבְמָצוֹק אֲשֶׁר יָצִיק לְךָ אֹיִבְךָ בִּשְׁעָרֶיךָ:
>
> The woman among you who is gentle and delicate, who does not attempt to set the sole of her foot upon the earth because of her delicacy and refinement, will cast an evil eye on the man of her bosom, on her son and her daughter, on her placenta[234] which comes out from between her legs, and on her children that she bears, for she will consume them[235] in lack of anything else,[236] in secret, besieged in desperation with which your enemy will oppress you within your gates.
>
> (Deut 28:56-57)

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[233] Or “during the siege and desperation.” The same phrase appears in 28:56, below.

[234] The term, *šilyâ*, is a *hapax legomenon* in biblical Hebrew, but has cognates related to placenta in Rabbinic Hebrew, Aramaic, Akkadian, and Arabic. The Septuagint renders this word τὸ χόριον (placenta, or afterbirth).

[235] The antecedent could be placenta or newborn, the latter most likely based on context, most notably v. 53. See also Lam 4:10 where “compassionate women have boiled their children to become food for them during the destruction of [the daughter of] my people.” Conversely, the antecedent could be the entire list, including husband, son, and daughter, as they are all objects of her evil eye. Rashi translated the suffixed direct object plural pronoun as partitive.

[236] Compare the use of this phrase to describe a bountiful land in Deut 8:9: “you will not lack anything in it.”

Another text that foretells such gruesome behavior is Jer 19:9. Its curses include death by the sword, and not being given a burial, their dead bodies left to birds and wild animals. Furthermore, the people of Judah and Jerusalem are cursed to eat their children (sons and daughters) and their neighbors as a result of a siege.[237]

The laments over child loss in Lam 2:19-21; 4:3-4 and 4:9-10 also assume a context of siege warfare leading to starvation.[238] Lam 4:3-4 describes child starvation as a result of lack of resources. Humans are compared negatively to jackals who nurse their young (v. 3a). Lam 2:20 and Lam 4:9-10 specifically refer to starvation so severe that women ate their children. A narrative account of eating children out of desperation in a besieged city ravaged by famine appears in 2 Kgs 6:24-29. Two women make a pact to kill and eat each other's children to survive. They do so with one child, but then the mother of the surviving child refuses to give up her child. The expected repulsion to the haunting brevity, "we

[237] In Jer 15:3, curses include sword, dogs, birds, and wild animals. Interpreted in light of Jer 19:9, the latter three likely refers to their denial of a burial.

[238] Lam 5, though not referencing child loss specifically, continues references to famine. Deprivation of food and water supply are common throughout Mesopotamian laments of city destruction. F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep O Daughter Zion: A Study of the City-lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible* (BibOr 44; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1993), 103.

boiled my son and ate him," is narrated by the king's tearing his clothes, exposing the sackcloth he already wore in response to Samaria's dire state (v. 30).

These passages makes explicit a crucial connection that appears again and again in biblical texts referencing maternal pain: starvation and its threat. Starvation (or malnutrition) may result from drought or other environmental factors, or from siege warfare. Some Hebrew Bible texts make the referent clear; others do not. The narratives of child loss and its threat in Genesis, though occurring outside the context of siege warfare, set forth the same themes.[239] In Gen 3:16, the first woman is told she will bear children with anguished toil and that "her man" will rule over her; in 3:17-19, the ground is cursed to produce food only after similarly painful toil. Though her name given her by the man in the

[239] An example of these themes outside of Genesis is the story of Rizpah (and Merab) in 2 Samuel 21. Three years into a famine, David inquires of the divine and is told there is bloodguilt on Saul's house for killing the Gibeonites (v. 1). To avenge the deaths, the Gibeonites ask for seven of Saul's sons to be handed over that they may impale them (vv. 2-6). David selects two sons of Rizpah and five of Merab, and in keeping with the narrative tie between the bloodguilt and famine, the sons are put to death on the first day of the barley harvest (vv. 8-9). Rizpah spreads sackcloth on a rock and remains there, protecting the decomposing bodies from scavenging animals and birds (v. 10). Her activity either shames or inspires David to retrieve the bones of Saul and Jonathan and to bury them properly. Only then does the narrator report that God "heeded supplications for the land" (vv. 11-14). See Kozlova, *Maternal Grief in the Hebrew Bible*, 87-120.

next verse labels her "mother of all the living," she would soon become mother of the dead and estranged.

This first story of child loss recounts the violent death in which the ground is a key character. The killer, Cain, is a "worker of the ground" whose offering of the "fruit of the ground" finds no divine favor (4:2-5). Abel's innocent blood cries out "from the ground" which had "opened its mouth" to receive it (4:10-11). Cain is in turn cursed "from the ground," meaning that that when he "work[s] the ground," it will cease to produce sufficient yields (4:11-12). Finally, Cain's first objection to YHWH over his punishment is that "you have driven me out today from the face of the ground" (4:14a).

"Cut Down by the Sword"

In addition to the tactic of starvation, the brutal, interpersonal violence from an invading army is another common factor cited in Hebrew Bible references to maternal death and child loss.[240] The large section of curses in Deut 28:15-68, discussed above with regard to its environmental associations with maternal pain, also threatens death through the

[240] Several of these passages also reference loss of the elderly who would have been vulnerable to interpersonal violence, malnutrition, and related disease.

sword. The curse in vv. 25-26 speaks generally of being defeated by one's enemies and denied a burial. Deut 28:32 details the curse of witnessing one's children being given to another. Though the verse does not necessarily refer to warfare and exile,[241] the curse a few verses later does: "Sons and daughters you will beget, but they will not remain yours because they will go into captivity" (v. 41). As with Eve's loss of Cain and Abel, the threat of child loss in Deuteronomy 28 encompasses both the death of and estrangement from one's children. Read in light of these curses, Moses's blessing of fruitfulness in Deut 33:13-17 involves not only good health from a stable environment, but also avoiding gruesome violence within their homes from opposing fighting forces.

Where the curses of Deuteronomy 28 leave the manner of violence against children vague, several Hebrew Bible texts, both narratives and prophetic oracle, deploy the heightened language of "cutting down" to refer to infant or maternal death. The prophet Elisha foresees Hazael's violence to come upon the Israelites. He would "burn down their fortresses, kill their young men with the sword, dash their young children into pieces, and

[241] Another plausible interpretation would be the loss of children to debt slavery. Such an event is narrated in 2 Kgs 4:1-7. See Amy Kalmanofsky, "Women of God: Maternal Grief and Religious Response in 1 Kings 17 and 2 Kings 4," *JSOT* 36.1 (2011): 55-74, and Walter Brueggemann, "A Culture of Life and the Politics of Death," *JP* 29.2 (2006): 16-21.

cut up their pregnant women" (2 Kgs 8:12).[242] The same warfare tactic is reported several chapters later. The passage imputes Menahem, who had sacked Tiphshah and taken the throne in Samaria after they refused to let him in, with "cutting open all the pregnant women in it" (15:16). The prophetic text of Hosea reports that mothers and their children were dashed into pieces by Shalman in the battle against Beth-arbel. Later on in the text, the prophet claims that Samaria will undergo a similar fate:

בַּחֶרֶב יִפְּלוּ עֹלְלֵיהֶם יְרֻטָּשׁוּ וְהָרְיוֹתֶיו יְבֻקָּעוּ

They will fall by the sword;
their young children will be dashed into pieces
their pregnant women split in two
(Hos 14:1b [Eng. 13:16b])

Furthermore, in Nahum, an oracle against Nineveh in speaking of exile and captivity states "her babies were dashed into pieces at the head of every street" (Nah 3:10). Amos 1:13 states that YHWH will send the Ammonites into exile because they acted this way in Gilead, having "cut open pregnant women in Gilead in order to enlarge their territory." This

[242] The same phrase appears in Isa 13:16; Hos 10:14; 14:1 [Heb. 13:16]; Nah 3:10. Each clearly refers to the violent death of children. That the verb רטש refers to cutting comes from its context in Isa 13:16, where it appears between two other verbs for cutting, and Hos 14:1 [Heb. 13:16] where it parallels "cleaving" of mothers' bodies. The use of עֹלְלֵיהֶם, "their young children," precludes the possibility that this refers to the unborn in the wombs of the pregnant women.

activity located in the bodies of women is a graphically violent accomplishment of the curses of Sefîre, Tell Fekherye, and Deuteronomy 28, whose aim was also to obliterate a people and remembrance of their name.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain the extent to which the butchering of children and pregnant women was actually used as a warfare tactic. Where it appears in prophetic oracles, the image could be a form of exaggerated threat.[243] As with the grotesque depictions of Lamaštu, the rhetoric of horror heightens the severity of the threat.[244] In Jeremiah 9, death is personified as one who cuts down children outside:

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[243] Iconography in Sennacherib's Southwest Palace depicts violence against women following the defeat of Lachish. See Richard D. Barnett, Erika Bleibtreu, and Geoffrey Turner, *Sculptures from the Southwest Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh* (London: British Museum Press, 1998), pl. 338. Peter Dubovsky interprets scenes from room L of Ashurbanipal's North Palace as depicting Assyrian soldiers ripping open pregnant Arab women. See Peter Dubovsky, "Ripping Open Pregnant Arab Women: Reliefs in Room L of Ashurbanipal's North Palace," *Or* 78.3 (2009): 394-419.

[244] To further explore the rhetoric of horror in Jeremiah, see Amy Kalmanofsky, *Terror All Around: Horror, Monsters, and Theology in the Book of Jeremiah* (LHBOTS 390; New York: Clark, 2008). For an introduction to monster theory and biblical scholarship which includes a review of Kalmanofsky's work, see Brandon R. Grafius, "Text and Terror: Monster Theory and the Hebrew Bible," *CBR* 16.1 (2017): 34-49.

כִּי־עָלָה מָוֶת בְּחַלֹּנֵינוּ בָּא בְּאַרְמְנוֹתֵינוּ
לְהַכְרִית עוֹלָל מִחוּץ בַּחוּרִים מֵרְחֹבוֹת

"Death has come up into our windows,
has come into our fortresses
to cut down young children outside,
and young men in the squares"
(Jer 9:20 [Eng. 9:21])

The imagery in this passage reflects in a general way descriptions of Lamaštu as death personified, sneaking in through windows (or door pivot) and preying upon babies in the form of illness or sudden death.[245] Though the most obvious interpretation of "cutting down" in Jer 9:21 is of the literal sword, it is possible that "cutting down" is here also a metaphor for death which could come in many forms.

That this reference to child death appears within a song of lament brings the reference a step closer to actual experience of child loss:

[245] For a list of Lamaštu texts with both window and snake imagery, see discussion and notes in chapter 2.

כִּי־שָׁמַעְנָה נָשִׁים דְּבַר־יְהוָה וְתִקַּח אָזְנְכֶם דְּבַר־פִּיו
וְלַמֵּדְנָה בְנֽוֹתֵיכֶם נֶהִי וְאִשָּׁה רְעוּתָהּ קִינָה

Hear, women, the word of YHWH:
Let your ears receive the word of my mouth;
And teach your daughters a lament,
Teach one another a dirge.
(Jer 9:19 [Eng. 9:20])

These lines illustrate the rhetorical power of women lifting up their voices in communal lament over the loss of their children. Though none is as extensive as Jacob's, responses from women to their maternal pain do appear in the narratives of Genesis. As Rachel's life is about to be cut short in childbirth, her midwife tries to console her:

וַיְהִי בְהַקְשֹׁתָהּ בְּלִדְתָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ הַמְיַלֶּדֶת אַל־תִּירְאִי כִּי־גַם־זֶה לָךְ בֵּן

When she was in difficult labor, the midwife said to her, "Do not be afraid, for you will have another son."
(Gen 35:17b).[246]

[246] On the emotional support of the midwife in the Hebrew Bible, see Jennie R. Ebeling, *Women's Lives in Biblical Times* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 99-100. Menahem Blondheim and S. H. Blondheim have pointed out that the midwife's knowledge of the infant's sex during labor indicates a breech birth, which in turn explains the prolonged labor resulting in Rachel's death. Menahem Blondheim and S. H. Blondheim, "Obstetrical and Lexicographical Complications: The Birth of Benjamin and Death of Rachel," *JBQ* 27.1 (1999): 15-19.

Rachel mourns her own loss of life, and perhaps with it, her separation from the child she would never know outside her womb:

וַיְהִי בְּצֵאת נַפְשָׁהּ כִּי מֵתָה וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ בֶּן־אוֹנִי וְאָבִיו קָרָא־לוֹ בִנְיָמִין

> As her life was leaving her (for she was dying), she named him Ben-oni, but his father named him Benjamin.
>
> (Gen 35:18)

As is common with Hebrew narratives, Rachel's inner thoughts are ultimately left up to interpretation, allowing for a number of readings. Her primary emotion, for instance, could have been anger or disbelief that the additional child she had longed for resulted in her death. The naming of her child Ben-oni, which may be translated "Son-of-my-suffering" is the closest the reader comes to hearing her thoughts.[247] In naming the child Benjamin, Jacob retains a memory of the name she had chosen but ultimately overrules her dying

[247] Reflected in Tg. Neof.; Tg. Onq.; and Rashi on Gen 3:16.. Compare to Ps 7:15 and Job 15:35, in which the unrepentant and godless "conceive" (*hrh*) and "give birth to" (*yld*) *ʾāwen*. These images are paralleled with references to "lies" (*šāqer*) and "deceit" (*mirmāh*). Another possibility for a translation of Ben-oni is "Son-of-my-mourning." See Deut 26:14; Hos 9:4.

expression of her pain (35:18b). Her calamitous loss would remain imprinted on Jacob's memory, but not in the name of the child whose birth resulted in his mother's death.[248]

Whereas Jacob's grief is expressed repeatedly in his affection and care for his youngest sons, Adam is given not a word to express his reaction to the loss of his Abel and Cain. Eve, however, upholds their memory when she names Seth, "saying: 'God has appointed for me another seed instead of Abel, because Cain killed him'" (4:25b). Her language of "appointing another" male relation calls to mind the appointment of a new ruler after one has died.[249]

Even though from a canonical standpoint Genesis precedes siege warfare in the Hebrew Bible, the themes of child loss due to both violence and starvation exacerbated by socioeconomic constraints are strongly imprinted in its narratives. In Genesis 4, Eve loses Abel when his brother Cain kills him. Any possibility of reconciliation with her surviving son Cain is complicated by his newly acquired inability to provide for himself from working

[248] For a list of Hebrew Bible narratives in which mothers name their children, see Edward J. Bridge, "A Mother's Influence: Mothers Naming Children in the Hebrew Bible," *VT* 64.3 (2014): 389-400.

[249] The woman of Tekoa in 2 Samuel 14 acts like a woman mourning one son and trying to preserve the life of the other, the killer, who has fled those who would avenge his blood. Her charade is effective on the king, who is moved by her feigned parental grief. For a discussion of this passage, see Ekaterina Kozlova, *Maternal Grief*, 121-56.

the ground as he always had (vv. 11-12).[250] Jacob and Joseph are barely spared from violence at the hands of their brothers. Jacob draws his brother's ire by stealing their father's blessing—and therefore, Esau's inheritance. Rebekah manages to spare Jacob from fratricide by warning him to flee to the protection of her brother's home (27:41-45). Referencing the impending death of Isaac, she asks, "Why should I be bereaved of both of you on the same day?" (27:45b). Though it is Jacob's favoritism of Joseph that kindles his brothers' hatred, the youth does himself no favors by sharing dreams foretelling his rise to power over them (37:5-11). In between these tales, first Hagar's life is threatened, then that of her child Ishmael, when she is beaten and they are cast out of Abraham's protection into the wilderness (16:1-16; 21:8-21). They face the threat of starvation, thirst, and exposure, as well as possible vulnerability to wild animals or humans.[251] In Hagar's dual narratives, the

[250] Westermann noted two results of Cain's curse, that he could no longer farm and he was separated from community, but failed to acknowledge either the connection between the two curses, or the effects of Cain's curse on Eve (despite drawing parallels between this verse and Gen 3). Furthermore, despite a few eloquent remarks on Cain's lament as representative of human existence, Westermann saw only "jubilation" in Eve's remarks in Gen 4:25. See Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 306-309, 338.

[251] Hagar's experiences in Gen 16:1-6 also qualify as aspects of maternal pain, especially in light of Gen 3:16b. Her sexual activity is determined for her by the woman who owns her when she is used as a surrogate, and she is physically beaten after she gives birth. See chapter three, "Social-Role Surrogacy: Naming Black Women's Oppression," in Dolores S.

land receives no particular curse, nor are royal armies required to cut off resources; instead, environmental threats are a direct result of domestic abuse propagated by unequal social structures.

Where Adam is silent, Jacob makes his anguish known. Eve writes herself into the story of fratricide to remind us it is a story of child loss. Rebekah cries out on her deathbed mourning the fulfillment of Gen 3:16a. Jacob does not allow us to forget the memory of Rachel who cannot stand beside him to offer her own blessing upon her sons. Jacob takes up Adam's silence—and perhaps God's—and declares a fate for Joseph's line out of his own experiences with maternal and child loss. Genesis 49 can be read as a reversal of the conditions and curses of Genesis 3-4. Deuteronomy 33 offers some report of success and extends the blessing of fruitfulness forward. The Torah, of course, is not the entirety of the Hebrew Bible, as it opens up to a history in which the descendants of Jacob are both conquerors and conquered; and in which competing curses of bereaving womb and dry breasts are called down upon a people called Ephraim. Blessing and curse comingle in Genesis; which will dominate remains to be told.

Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist-God Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 54-74.

Divine Associations with Maternal Pain

The divine character proclaims the realities set forth in Genesis 3, and is given a great deal of credit for procreation by Eve in Genesis 4. That such things, both beautiful and horrific, are placed in the mouth of God has significant theological ramifications within communities that regard these texts as Scripture.[252] In light of positive associations of YHWH with maternal imagery in the Hebrew Bible, it is worth considering divine self-identification with maternal pain.[253] Here I will briefly consider the limits of depictions of a maternal divine in conversation with ideas of maternal pain in the Hebrew Bible.

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[252] Most, though not all, passages referencing maternal pain attribute it and its alleviation to YHWH. Maternal pain, usually in the form of child loss, is described as a punishment for Israel's or Judah's corporate rejection of YHWH, for foreign nations' cruel bloodshed, and occasionally for individual sin. A smaller number of texts specifically cite human behavior as the impetus for unleashing maternal pain. Others simply focus on environmental causes over which YHWH is ultimately responsible. Scholarly attempts at grappling with biblical imagery of divinely sanctioned violence against women and children, as well as the consequences of interpretations of such texts include: Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); and Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets*. (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

[253] For an exploration of the divine as a child in the Hebrew Bible, see Julie Faith Parker, "God as a Child in the Hebrew Bible? Playing with the Possibilities," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Children in the Bible and the Biblical World* (eds. Sharon Betsworth and Julie Faith Parker; London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2019), 155-77.

Rhetorical use of maternal pain in the Hebrew Bible is almost exclusively used to refer to humans (a people group, city, or male prophet). They parallel the feminization of besieged cities in Assyrian city-state laments. Prophetic texts often paint YHWH as suffering the emotional consequences of rejection of YHWH. In Deuteronomy 32, this divine-human relationship is depicted as a mother rejected by her children. In reference to worship of deities other than YHWH, the curses in chapter thirty-two open with YHWH's self-identification as a childbearing mother:

צוּר יְלָדְךָ תֶּשִׁי וַתִּשְׁכַּח אֵל מְחֹלְלֶךָ: וַיַּרְא יְהוָה וַיִּנְאָץ מִכַּעַס בָּנָיו וּבְנֹתָיו:
וַיֹּאמֶר אַסְתִּירָה פָנַי מֵהֶם אֶרְאֶה מָה אַחֲרִיתָם כִּי דוֹר תַּהְפֻּכֹת הֵמָּה בָּנִים לֹא־
אֵמֶן בָּם:

You neglected the rock that bore you;
You forgot the god who writhed you into existence.
YHWH saw and spurned,
out of anger, his sons and daughters.
(Deut 32:18-19)

Within its immediate literary context, this lines portrays YHWH as vulnerable to unreciprocated parental love. The rhetorical impact of the term "writhed" is to heighten empathy with the divine character who has known extreme pain. Whether YHWH was also vulnerable to maternal death in the metaphor is not stated, but opens up intriguing possibilities about the nature of risk YHWH claims to have assumed in establishing a

motherly relationship with this people. If this is the case, the term for writhing is used in this anthropomorphism of YHWH to connote added outrage: children callously rejecting the one who had spent herself in physical anguish, risking her life for the sake of their existence.

The only other text in the Hebrew Bible that likens YHWH to a woman who knows the pains of childbirth is Isa 42:14.[254] The context of this simile is YHWH's destructive rage poured out against YHWH's people. It functions as a parallel image to verse 13, in which YHWH is depicted as a warrior who shouts and prevails against his enemy.[255] YHWH has remained restrained for a long time (v. 14a), but will now let loose a fury of destruction on land, water sources, and people (v. 13, 15). The second half of verse 14, placed in the voice of YHWH, offers some difficulty in translation: "like one who bears I will moan, breathe hard, and pant together" (v. 14b). That the simile captures the physical exertion of

[254] In a third text, Isa 49:15, YHWH rebukes Zion's accusations of neglect by claiming a remembrance that surpasses even that of a mother and "her nursing baby…the child of her womb." Though the maternal imagery of a pregnant and nursing woman can include the pains of each, the divine figure does not so much assume the maternal image but claim to possess qualities surpassing it. Rhiannon Graybill takes the argument further: the maternal body in Isaiah 49 is the victim of gendered divine violence and "exists to be preyed upon." Rhiannon Graybill, "Yahweh as Maternal Vampire in Second Isaiah," *JFSR* 33.1 (2017): 10.

[255] See Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, "Like Warrior, Like Woman: Destruction and Deliverance in Isaiah 42:10-17," *CBQ* 49.4 (1987): 560-71.

childbearing is clear; whether the image depicts childbirth as painful is less obvious. This simile presents childbearing as a powerfully explosive event marked by turbulent motion and sound.[256]

Self-identification of the divine with the physical pain *women* experience in relation to their reproductive health is tenuous at best. Used of YHWH in Deuteronomy 32, the association is one of vulnerability to rejection by one's children. The simile comparing YHWH to a childbearing woman in Isaiah 42 depicts her as a powerful, active force, capable of unleashing destruction. Such powerful imagery is not paired with life-giving or restorative activity, but with victory in battle and drought. For this reason, comparisons of this depiction of the divine with the creative power of a woman who has just given birth may take the simile a step too far. Furthermore, that maternal pain is repeatedly proclaimed from the mouth of the divine suggest not divine identification with but overwhelming separation from the women who bore such pain.

Other imagery that offers the potential for divine associations with maternal pain is through divine associations with breastfeeding. In Psa 22:9-10 [ET 10-11], the psalmist

[256] Sarah Dille reads both metaphors, of the warrior and child bearer, as communicating the activity of YHWH versus the inactivity of "false gods." Dille, *Mixing Metaphors*, 45.

fashions YHWH as a midwife who ensures that they are secure upon their mother's breast. In Isaiah 49:15, YHWH responds to Zion's charge of abandonment by invoking the idea of a woman's care for the child she has borne and/or nurses. YHWH then claims a remembrance for Zion that surpasses that of such women. Though neither explicitly references painful aspects of breastfeeding, the Isaiah reference relies on knowledge of the exorbitant amount of time women may spend breastfeeding, while the psalm may indicate that not every infant is able to successfully breastfeed. Read in light of the above conversations on environmental instability and the threat of food deprivation, the images convey the vulnerability of YHWH's children and the constant attention required to sustain them. And though the divine does not make direct claims in these verses to the pains associated with breastfeeding, they may easily be read in to the metaphor.

Rereading Genesis 3-4: Violent Loss and Language of Blessing

The blessing of breasts and wombs in Gen 49:25 and the "curse" of Gen 3:16a stand on either side of narratives in which elements of maternal pain are all too present. Experiences of child loss and its threat (4:8-12, 25; 37:31-35; 42:1-46:30) and the risks and pains of childbirth (3:16; 35:16-20), mark the character of Jacob who voices the blessing on

his deathbed.[257] In the rereading of Gen 3-4 in light of cross-cultural conversations in chapter two, I emphasized the relationship between the forces necessary to sustain life, broadly speaking, and their impact on maternal health and birth outcomes. I argued that the interdependence of humans, animals, and the land whose curse effects the entire environmental system (Gen 3:16-20) are reflected in society's structures of imbalance that heighten the struggle for survival of some.

This canonical conversation about maternal pain, expanded to include passages from throughout the Hebrew Bible, similarly shows that women's reproductive health outcomes, borne out painfully on some women's bodies, are affected by environmental and societal structures. In the previous chapter on maternal pain in ancient Western Asia, I referred to modern studies on the negative impact on maternal and infant health of severe malnutrition. A number of texts within the Hebrew Bible also indicate an understanding of the impact of food deprivation upon a woman's ability to conceive, carry a pregnancy to term, successfully give birth, and breastfeed a child. Of particular emphasis within the

[257] Also alluded to in these chapters of Genesis, but outside the scope of the present work, include potential pains of menstruation (Gen 31:25), conditions causing infertility (25:20-26; 30:1), conception (by wives and slaves in 30:3-23), and breastfeeding (domestic animals in 33:13, wet nursing in 35:8 and implied by the death of Rachel and survival of infant Benjamin in 35:19).

Hebrew Bible is child loss and its threat from effects of starvation due to warfare, drought, or other environmental factors. In some cases, violence and lack of food appear alongside each other as stated or implied causes of child loss (Jer 15:1-9; Ezek 5:16-17; 14:12-21). Other passages unambiguously link maternal pain to starvation as a warfare tactic (Deut 28:56-57; 32:23-27; 2 Kgs 6:24-29; Jer 19:7-9; Lam 2:19-21; 4:3-4, 9-11).

The particular emphasis within the Hebrew Bible on maternal pain as a result of warfare, including starvation, offers interpretative possibilities to Gen 3-4. These chapters contain messages of caution and hope, mindful of the struggle of all life to survive and flourish, often at the expense of other forms of life. Given the recurrent link in the Hebrew Bible between maternal pain and violence, particularly through warfare, we might consider Gen 3-4 for its symbolic possibilities concerning maternal pain and violence.

As Eve has so often been read by interpreters as a symbolic referent for women universally, so too has Cain's deadly violence against Abel (Gen 4:8) been used by interpreters as symbolic of human violence generally.[258] Following a divine threat of

[258] Livorni Ernesto, "The First Murder: The Myth of Cain and Abel in Modern Poetry," *Annali d'Italianistica* 25 (2007): 409-434; Rein Nauta, "Cain and Abel: Violence, Shame and Jealously," *Pastoral Psychology* 58 (2009): 65-71. Cain and Abel are referenced in relation to the adjudication of capital cases in b. Sanh. 37a:11-12. In an interpretation by sixteenth century Dutch engraver Cornelius Cort, a lion sinks its teeth into a lamb behind Abel's

violence against any who would kill Cain (v. 15) comes rhetoric about an increase of human violence from the mouth of Cain's descendent Lamech (vv. 23-24).[259] In the aftermath of this preoccupation with the expansion of human violence in Gen 4, Eve is reported to have conceived and given birth to Seth. Though no timeframe is given within the text for the conception of Seth after the death of Abel, Eve's naming of him does link the two events thematically (v. 25).

The impacts of civil conflict on maternal and infant health has been the focus of recent studies from the field of economics on birth outcomes of pregnant women exposed to civil conflict.[260] They have found that exposure to civil conflict in the first four to five

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family who grieve over his body. Cornelius Cort, *Adam and Eve Lamenting the Death of Abel*, 1564, engraving, 13 ¼ x 17 (in.), Met Museum, New York City, U.S.A., https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/365819?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&when=A.D.+1400-1600&ao=on&ft=cain+and+abel&offset=0&rpp=20&pos=13.

[259] Rashi's commentary on Gen 4:22 states that Tubal-Cain's name refers to a "refinement" of Cain's work by the use of his craft as an iron worker to create weapons that would be used by those who would follow Cain's example of murder. See also Gen. Rab. 23:3.

[260] Hendrik Jürges and Franz G. Westermaier, "Conflict Intensity and Birth Outcomes – Evidence from the West Bank," *The B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis & Policy* 20.2 (2020): 1-8; Valentina Duque, "Early-Life Conditions and Child Development: Evidence from a Violent Conflict," *SSM - Population Health* 3 (2017): 121–31; Clement Quintana-Domeque and Pedro Ródenas-Serrano, "The Hidden Costs of Terrorism: The Effects on Health at Birth," *Journal of Health Economics* 56 (2017): 47–60; Martin Foureaux Koppensteiner and Marco Manacorda, "Violence and Birth Outcomes: Evidence from Homicides in Brazil,"

months of pregnancy leads to higher incidences of miscarriage.[261] Exposure within the first trimester also correlates with lower birth weight.[262] A common measure of birth outcomes, birth weight has been linked with increased neonatal and infant death, and, among those who do live into adulthood, long-term health consequences and decreased performance in measures of educational and economic outcomes.[263] These studies all align with the theory that maternal stress, or psychological stress experienced by a woman during pregnancy (especially the first trimester), has adverse effects on the fetus.[264]

Journal of Development Economics 119 (2016): 16–33; Christine Valente, "Civil Conflict, Gender-Specific Fetal Loss, and Selection: A New Test of the Trivers–Willard Hypothesis," *Journal of Health Economics* 39 (2015): 31–50; and Hani Mansour and Daniel I. Rees, "Armed Conflict and Birth Weight: Evidence from the al-Aqsa Intifada," *Journal of Development Economics* 99.1 (2012): 190–99. Civil conflict in these studies is measured by the number of fatalities occurring within geographic proximity of the pregnant woman's residence (Jürges and Westermaier, 1; Quintana-Domeque and Ródenas-Serrano, 8; Koppensteiner and Manacorda, 16).

[261] Valente, "Civil Conflict," 41. Valente's study also confirmed a higher rate of miscarriage of male fetuses than of female (41).

[262] Jürges and Westermaier, "Conflict Intensity and Birth Outcomes," 5; Quintana-Domeque and Ródenas-Serrano, "The Hidden Costs of Terrorism," 53; and Koppensteiner and Manacorda, "Violence and Birth Outcomes," 24.

[263] For an overview of the literature on the impacts of low birth rate, see Koppensteiner and Manacorda, "Violence and Birth Outcomes," 17-18.

[264] For a discussion and literature review on the potential biological mechanisms at play, see Koppensteiner and Manacorda, "Violence and Birth Outcomes," 18.

Thus, when we return to the multitude of passages in the Hebrew Bible linking maternal pain with violent conflict, we may include this knowledge in our readings: as maternal stress due to civil conflict impacts the health and wellbeing of the mother,[265] it also has the potential for long-term effects on the child born to her, or even pregnancy loss. Once again, we see how the negative impacts on infant health outcomes come to pass through conditions that negatively impact the mother's body as well. As "dry breasts and bereaving wombs" may be linked to environmental factors and conditions painful to the mother, so too may the "bereaving wombs" be directly impacted by civil violence.

The birth of Seth in the aftermath of the violent death of Abel takes on new meaning when read in conversation with accounts of maternal pain due to violence in the Hebrew Bible as well as the economic studies on birth outcomes and civil conflict. When read only in its immediate literary context, the story of child loss in Gen 4 is one of familial strife, and loss of adult children due to estrangement and death. Such themes offer readers significant

[265] 1 Sam 4:19-20 presents a maternal death as the pregnant woman known only in the text as Eli's daughter-in-law and the wife of Phineas experiences the shock of the report of the death of her husband, father-in-law, and the loss of the ark. She goes immediately into labor and dies following the birth of a son. This passages is illustrative of acute shock of civil violence on a pregnant woman, though it differs from the scenarios in the studies on fetal shock in that the shock occurs in the third trimester; thus the correlation with low birth weight would not apply.

opportunity for conversation. Broadening the conversation on these themes to include passages throughout the Hebrew Bible draws Genesis 4 into an even broader-reaching conversation on maternal pain, child loss, and the effects of violence.

Just as Cain and Abel's violent encounter has become symbolic for all manner of violent human encounters, so too may Seth's birth be read against the backdrop of violent conflict. He may become a symbol of those born in the aftermath of conflict. Given what we know now about impacts of fetal shocks, the figure of Seth has the potential to evoke memories saturated with both joy and grief. His birth takes on particular poignancy in light of the increased rates of miscarriage, especially of male fetuses, as a result of maternal stress due to civil conflict. As such, the figure of Seth in Gen 4:25 offers a multitude of interpretive possibilities as diverse as experiences of maternal pain and loss experienced by readers of Gen 4:25.

If Genesis 3-4 becomes representative of a variety of experiences of maternal pain and child loss, the blessings of breasts and womb in Gen 49 and Deut 33 might become representative of maternal and infant health and a lessening of related pains. For interpretative communities in which the language of curse is a familiar interpretation of Gen 3, the language of blessing may offer a meaningful counterpart. Nevertheless, the

limits of the blessing as spoken by patriarch Jacob must be acknowledged. Doing so not only respects the literary context of the blessing in Gen 49, but it also invites readers to consider the specific factors limiting maternal and infant health in their own societies.

Though these blessings, if realized, would result in the lessening of maternal pain, it does not follow that the one offering the blessing is concerned about alleviating pain as an end unto itself. Such blessings are easily read as self-serving attempts to grant the patriarch and his descendants what they need for future offspring: productive breasts and wombs. Jacob's potential concern for the wellbeing of women in their reproductive years, in light of his personal encounters with maternal pain and loss is a significant consideration. At the same time, such a generous reading of his blessing must be held in tension with his position within the patriarchal structure and its values. For example, in light of violence as a common cause of maternal pain throughout the Hebrew Bible, a blessing for the avoidance of maternal pain should include avoidance of city sieges and interpersonal violence. Yet, the immediate context of the blessings of Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33 suggest that military victory, rather than avoidance of violent conflict, is the goal. A vision of a blessing for all breasts and wombs will have to expand beyond the immediate literary contexts of Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33.

These limits extend to maternal imagery of the divine in the Hebrew Bible. Whereas the divine figure identifies with the maternal pains of childbirth and estrangement from children (Deut 32:18-19; Isa 42:14; 49:15), examples are couched in violent threats that will limit their usefulness for many interpreters. Furthermore, a canonical conversation about maternal pain serves to place maternal imagery of the divine alongside images of a divine figure that threatens maternal pain and child loss. In cases where the divine threat of maternal pain is followed by a promise of blessings, these blessings do not specifically include maternal health or the restoration of children to their mothers. Whereas prophetic texts are replete with images of divinely-sanctioned maternal pain, only one, Ezek 36:8-15, may be interpreted as a promise of maternal health free from child loss.[266]

In light of such limitations, engagement with these blessing passages is likely to raise questions in interpretive communities about divine perspectives on the alleviation of maternal pain. Unlike the blessings of Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33 or the scores of incantations in the Lamaštu material, Gen 3:16-20 offers no plea that the woman's fate be reversed, no requests for divine protections. A divine voice is heard, but it is one which

[266] In the surrounding context of this passage, the divine voice also uses menstruation as a simile for objectionable human behavior (v. 17).

establishes painful reproductive health as the order of things (alongside environmental instability and strife). The blessings of breasts and womb in Gen 49:25 offer the potential for a different reality than that proclaimed in Gen 3:16 and borne out throughout the intervening chapters of Genesis. The repeated experience of maternal pain throughout the Hebrew Bible suggests that the fulfillment of a blessing ever remains an open question.

The next chapter will shift to receptions of Eve, maternal pain, and a breastfeeding divine. The example of Heloise and Abelard, from their story of navigating personal tragedy after an unplanned pregnancy, to their interpretations of Eve and of Hannah's maternal pain, will illustrate that for many interpretative communities maternal pain is not held up as a theologically significant issue. Thus, Genesis 3-4 and other biblical passages are read in ways that ignore the maternal pain present in them. The correspondence of Heloise and Abelard will demonstrate that this erasure of maternal pain as a theologically significant issue stems from a number of factors. Following this analysis, I will conclude by taking up a few examples of a breastfeeding divine figure, in Christian and Jewish traditions, and the potential usefulness of the category of embodied maternal pain to deepen maternal imagery of the divine.

Chapter 4

Contextual Conversations: Erasure of Maternal Pain

the real problem with any dominant reading…is not simply that it is erroneous, but that

It is dominant.[267]

what does it mean when said of Hannah:
"she no longer appeared downcast"?

she showed from then on a happy face,
not a sad face or a teary one.[268]

In chapter 1, "Eve's Maternal Pain in Conversation," I argued that dominant readings of Eve in Genesis 3-4 have largely determined what Eve's story can be about. Within Christian receptions in particular, Eve's story was often caught up into conversations about original sin, gender roles, and the dangers of sexual activity. Her experience as a mother was subsumed into these conversations or ignored altogether. Luther's acknowledgement of

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[267] Alice Keefe, channeling Yvonne Sherwood (emphasis, spacing, and capitalization are mine). Alice Keefe, *Woman's Body and the Social Body in Hosea* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 140. Yvonne Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet: Hosea's Marriage in Literary-Theoretical Perspective*, JSOT Supp 212; Gender, Culture, and Theory 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996): 38.

[268] The thirty-second problem and solution of Heloise of Argenteuil and Peter Abelard in the *Problemata Heloissae*. Adapted from the translation by Elizabeth McNamer, *The Education of Heloise: Methods, Content and Purpose of Learning in the Twelfth Century* (Mediaeval Studies. Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 163.

the pains of pregnancy would not appear until the sixteenth century, and Elizabeth Clinton's writing on breastfeeding in the seventeenth century. The result is that within many interpretive communities, Eve's maternal pain has been downplayed or erased altogether. In this chapter, I will offer a deep analysis of select references to Eve, maternal pain, and the maternal divine in Jewish and Christian traditions of the High Middle Ages that are illustrative of that erasure.

The depiction of Eve in the response by medieval French philosopher Peter Abelard (1079-1142/4) to a question by his intellectual, romantic, and sexual partner, Heloise of Argenteuil (c. 1100-1163/4), in the *Problemata Heloissae* is illustrative of the common bifurcation between the idea of biblical Eve and maternal pain. The *Problemata* records forty-two questions from Heloise and the sisters of the Paraclete, of which she was abbess that arose from their biblical studies.[269] Abelard responds in his role as the scholar, but as with all of their correspondence, their personal history lies in the background.

A detailed analysis of the factors impacting interpreter's readings of Eve is often hampered by a lack of access to concrete information about the context out of which the

[269] In the opening of the *Problemata*, Heloise reminds Abelard that it was he who encouraged them to devote themselves to the study of scripture. Heloise of Argenteuil, *Problemata* (McNamer, 112).

interpretation arose. Abelard's solution to Heloise's final question in the *Problemata* is particularly useful to the current study in that: 1) Abelard quotes directly from influential interpreters from the early Christian era to support his claims; 2) we have information about the personal experiences of both Abelard and Heloise from their own words; and 3) the couple's personal story is a complex tale of sexual desire, an unplanned pregnancy, childbirth, violence, pain, and loss.

It will become clear that within their correspondence, Heloise and especially Abelard largely resist direct discussions of embodied maternal pain and child loss—in the Hebrew Bible and in their personal lives. Yet, around this same period, Jewish and Christian writers invoked maternal imagery for humans and the divine. The image of a maternal and breastfeeding divine appear in the writings of Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) and Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), and in the Sefer ha-Zohar, which appeared in the late thirteenth century, developing kabbalistic ideas from the previous century and from rabbinic traditions before that. As powerful as they are, these maternal divine images present an idealized view of maternal activities without reference to maternal pain. Having examined the limits of such metaphors of the maternal divine, I will conclude with a contextual, theological rereading of Genesis 3-4 in light of such portrayals of a maternal

divine. I will take an autobiographical turn in this final rereading of Genesis 3-4, reflecting from my own faith context on the erasure of maternal pain.

Eve and Maternal Pain for Heloise & Abelard

In this section, I will first present Abelard's and Heloise's interpretations of Eve in their correspondence, beginning with their curious exchange at the end of the *Problemata.*[270] After briefly situating them within broader trends of receptions of Eve on which they rely, I will place their interpretations of Eve in conversation with their personal history as revealed in their Personal Letters (1-6).[271] Considering the nature and function of their correspondence as a whole lends to richer insights into their respective readings of Eve

[270] Heloise of Argenteuil and Peter Abelard, *Problemata* (McNamer, 174-183).

[271] I follow Dronke's numbering of the letters, as it is repeated in most of the secondary literature I cite in this section. This ordering refers to Abelard's autobiographical letter, *Historia Calamitatum*, as Letter 1, with Heloise's initial response as Letter 2. See Peter Dronke, *Women Writers in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1984), 303, n. 5, and Juanita Feros Ruys, "Role-playing in the *Letters* of Heloise and Abelard," *Parergon* 11.1 (1993): 56, n. 18. Translations of the letters are by William Levitan, who follows a different numbering system, in Abelard and Heloise, *Abelard & Heloise: The Letters and Other Writings* (trans. William Levitan; Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007). See also the translation of Betty Radice, originally published in 1974, and later revised: Peter Abelard and Heloise, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Betty Radice* (rev. ed., New York: Penguin, 2003).

as impacted by their personal experiences as well as the theological and interpretative traditions from which they drew. Within the latter, Eve's maternal aspect is largely specious to theological interpretations of Genesis 3-4. Throughout their correspondence, we see a resistance, especially on the part of Abelard, to acknowledging maternal pain. This is the case despite the opportunities provided by both their personal experiences and the biblical examples of Eve's and Hannah's maternal pain.

Heloise & Abelard's Eve

The *Problemata* contains a series of questions ("problemata") stemming from the study of the scriptures by Heloise and her fellow sisters at the Paraclete, and corresponding answers ("solutions") from the community's founder, Abelard. The questions generally regard the literal or historical meaning of a particular passage. Abelard often responds in kind, though at times favoring an allegorical, Christological interpretation.[272] However, Heloise closes the correspondence with a theological question that departs from the previous forty-one in that she makes no direct reference to Scripture, leaving Abelard to

[272] On the preference of historical readings in the *Problemata* and their possible relation to Rashi's interpretations, see Constant J. Mews and Micah Perry, "Peter Abelard, Heloise and Jewish Biblical Exegesis in the Twelfth Century," *JEH* 62.1 (2011): 10, 13-15.

draw from whatever biblical passages he will: "We inquire whether anyone can sin in doing what the Lord has permitted or even commanded."[273] Heloise's question, among her shortest of the letter, appears to be one of generalities, given that it is posed without any qualifiers, scripture references, or pertinent examples.[274] Abelard, however, responds with a pointed, extensive argument for celibate marriage. It is within this response that Abelard references Eve.[275]

Before turning to the rhetorical import of this curious interplay, a summation of Abelard's argument, which relies heavily on Augustine, is in order. He begins with a Christocentric interpretation of passages of scripture that describe sexual intercourse between spouses in positive terms. Within the Scriptures set before the birth of Jesus, sexual intercourse was necessary for procreation so that God's people, from whom the Christ would come, might increase.[276] After the fall (the "first sin"), all people born of

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[273] Heloise of Argenteuil, *Problemata* (McNamer, 174).

[274] McNamer refers to Heloise's forty-second question as a "question of ethics" and concludes that it must have been of ongoing conversation. McNamer, *The Education of Heloise*, 98.

[275] Heloise's interpretation of Eve will be discussed below.

[276] Peter Abelard, *Problemata* (McNamer, 174-6). Abelard's Christocentric focus in this section is made evident in his reference to biblical figures from Abraham through the birth of John the Baptist. His utilitarian view of the Hebrew people also appears in his discussion of the canticle of Hannah, discussed below.

sexual intercourse possess evil and are in need of rebirth in Christ.[277] Indeed, Jesus chose to be born not of a sexual union, "so that even in this he might teach everyone that which is born of copulation is sinful flesh, since only that flesh which was not been born of it was not sinful."[278] Abelard declares that marriage is good for means of companionship, and further states that sexual intercourse within marriage—for procreation—is not a sin. However, engaging in sex for pleasure (and not procreation), a mortal sin for the unmarried, is still a venial sin for the married.[279] Abelard emphasizes that the indulgence allowed by Paul (1 Cor 7) and granted through marriage does not render good the activity of sex for the sake of pleasure:

> For copulation which is necessarily the cause of procreation is inculpable and that alone is matrimonial. That, however, which goes beyond that which is necessary, no longer serves reason but the libido.[280]

If procreation is not possible for the married couple, the best course is to be celibate. Abelard's argument for ascetic denial of sexual activity would in practice result in the avoidance of such maternal pains as caused by conception, pregnancy, childbirth, and the

[277] Peter Abelard, *Problemata* (McNamer, 183).
[278] Peter Abelard, *Problemata* (McNamer, 182).
[279] Peter Abelard, *Problemata* (McNamer, 180).
[280] Peter Abelard, *Problemata* (McNamer, 178).

raising of children, including breastfeeding. However, ascetic denial does nothing to alleviate potential pains of menstruation and conditions causing infertility.

Abelard's reference to Eve appears near the end of the response, within an argument that sexual passion is shameful. Leaving them unnamed, Abelard alludes to the act of the first man and woman in covering their nakedness:

> For when there was no preceding commission of sin, it might have been possible for the first couple not to be embarrassed. But when this passion was aroused after the first sin, then they were confounded and forced to cover it. Whence it remained to the couples who came afterwards....Thus two things are indicated: both the good of laudable conjoining, by which children are begotten; and the evil of shameful passion, by which those who are begotten need to be regenerated lest they be damned. Accordingly those who licitly lie together use a bad thing well; while those who do so illicitly use a bad thing badly."[281]

The themes raised here in discussion of the first couple are found throughout Abelard's forty-second response. He speaks of sin in conversation with sexual passion, which he names both "evil" and "shameful." He references a positive by-product of sexual intercourse, procreation, which nevertheless fails to render sexual passion itself a good thing. Finally, he connects the story of the first couple to a human need for "regeneration" (in Christ).

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[281] Peter Abelard, *Problemata*, (McNamer, 183). Within the scope of this response, "honest" spouses are those, if they come together for sexual intercourse, who do so more out of a desire of procreation than for pleasure.

Abelard's extensive reliance on Augustine to make this argument demonstrates his acceptance of an emphasis with original sin common in early Christian interpretations of the garden narratives of Genesis.[282] Eve is significant not for her personal experiences of childbearing or child loss, but insofar as she explains the nature of sin and the need for Christ. Patriarchy was an unquestioned "natural" reality, often denigrating women whose only obvious use to men was in bearing children.[283] Such discussions of Eve as universal woman included negative associations with sexual activity, especially sexual pleasure.[284] Into these conversations, the character of Eve is depicted as a foil for Mary, as Adam is to Jesus.[285] Mary birthed the Christ, the remedy against sin. That she conceived him without engaging in sex further elevates her in these writers' estimations.

Thus, within this interpretive tradition, Eve and Mary, and their experiences as mothers, are largely significant as they fit into a Christocentric narrative about sin and its

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[282] Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* XI:30-42. See also n. 1 in the introduction.
[283] Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage* IX:5.
[284] Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* VI-XI and *The City of God* XII-XIV.
[285] Tertullian, *On the Soul* 43.10; Augustine of Hippo, *City of God* II:37 (24) and *Letters 211-270, 1-29*, Letter 243, p. 169. Jennifer Awes-Freeman, "Erasing God: Carolingians, Controversy, and the Ashburnham Pentateuch" (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 2016), n. 4. See also her discussion of visual depictions of a nursing Eve in the Ashburnham Pentateuch and later Carolingian illuminated manuscripts of Genesis, especially pp. 181-183.

remedy. The same is true of Abelard's portrayals of Eve and Mary, as he too focuses on the negative aspects of the union of Eve and Adam while valorizing the marriage of Mary and Joseph.[286] As with Eve, Mary is not significant to his argument for her experiences of childbirth, nor for her experience of child loss. Both characters are subsumed into broader theological discussions of redemption, sin, and the rejection of sexual expression except as necessary for procreation.

Within the letters, it is Heloise who first invokes Eve, in Letter 4, within a biblical survey of women who lead men to their downfall. Her interpretation is harsher on woman than Abelard's would be in the *Problemata*, as she plays the role of seducer Eve to his Adam.[287] She opens the section with a question that speaks to her interpretation of Eve and to biblical women generally:

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[286] Among his citations of Augustine's "On the Marriage of Joseph and Mary," Abelard praises the marriage of Jesus's parents on three points: it lacked adultery, lacked divorce, and produced a child, "the Lord Jesus himself." Peter Abelard, *Problemata* (McNamer, 182).

[287] I agree with Ruys' argument that Heloise and Abelard assume roles throughout their correspondence: "The divergences in the *Letters...*are read as a contest between Heloise and Abelard, played out via shifting roles assumed by each in turn, in a pattern where one chooses a role, which is negotiated by the other and then reprised. These roles present a particular view of the relationship and, consequently, of the obligations pertaining between them. The disjunctures in Heloise's Letters occur when she alters or abandons one role in favour of another. Each attitude she expresses is that which is proper to the role she is playing at the time." Ruys, "Role-playing," 54.

> Was it my sorry birthright to become the cause of evil,
> the well-known curse of womankind
> to lead the greatest men to greatest ruin?[288]

She follows this with a reference to the Woman of Folly in Proverbs 7, and a quote from Eccl 7:26:

> "I have surveyed all things with my mind
> and I found more bitter than death
> a woman who is the hunter's snare"[289]

Having set up her interpretation of woman as a danger to man, she then refers specifically to the garden narrative:

> The first action by a woman lured man from paradise,
> becoming his undoing when the Lord
> created her to be his helpmeet.[290]

She then further invokes the examples of Samson and Delilah, Solomon and his wives, and Job and his wife.[291] In each case, she relates a negative portrayal of the woman in relation to her husband. All of this she uses to illustrate her claim that Abelard had suffered unduly on her account:

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[288] Heloise of Argenteuil, Letter 4 (Levitan, 75).
[289] Heloise of Argenteuil, Letter 4 (Levitan, 75).
[290] Heloise of Argenteuil, Letter 4 (Levitan, 75).
[291] Heloise of Argenteuil, Letter 4 (Levitan, 75-7).

> Oh yes,
> the great Seducer in his cunning
> knew one thing well, and that from long experience:
> the easiest path to ruin for men
> is always through their wives.
> So when he would extend his well-known malice
> to our own time and found a man
> he could not bring down through fornication,
> he tempted him with marriage instead,
> using good to work his evil,
> now that evil was denied him for the purpose.[292]

Despite such a robust interpretation of the downfall of man by means of woman, she ultimately refuses to fully ascribe guilt to herself, at least with regard to the purity of her motivations.[293]

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[292] Heloise of Argenteuil, Letter 4 (Levitan, 77).

[293] Heloise of Argenteuil, Letter 4 (Levitan, 77). According to Posa, Heloise is arguing that though she lacks "true repentance," her honesty is preferable to those who feign their repentance before God. Posa, "*Problemata Heloissae*," 347. Ruys offers a different interpretation: "These claims allow Heloise to do two important things in her struggle with Abelard for control of the relationship discourse. First, by counteracting Abelard's Biblical quotations about good wives with the standard antifeminist quotations, she refutes Abelard's assertions about the efficacy of uxorial prayers and gives herself space to propose a new role for the wife in the convent. Second, she proves that her marriage to Abelard requires of her constant subservience to him... Heloise's presence in the convent is thus presented solely in terms of her persona as Abelard's wife, and has nothing to do with any spiritual relationships such as those of daughter or sister. Moreover, as a wife in a convent, her role is to provide constant reparation, not to God, but only to Abelard." Ruys, "Role-playing," 63.

Thus, Heloise and Abelard's Eve is discussed in terms of sin. Heloise takes on a role of interpreter who lays blame of the consequences of sin on woman. Though drawing strong parallels to herself and Abelard, she ultimately refuses to assume total guilt. Abelard's Eve goes in a different direction, focusing instead on the "first couple," within an argument for celibate marriage. By contextualizing their correspondence, we may be able to better understand why Heloise would draw such a comparison and why Abelard would move in a different direction.

Contextualizing Heloise and Abelard's Eve

Several questions remain surrounding Eve's appearance in the *Problemata*. The first is why Abelard invoked her image in the first place. Indeed, the entire direction Abelard takes in his forty-second response seems oddly specific to Heloise's question. Such a specific answer indicates that he does not interpret her question as one of generalities. Rather, he reads between the lines and writes of an issue that has been at the center of their respective lives and correspondence. Furthermore, the length and vehemence of his response to a seemingly succinct question is striking. Heloise's interpretation of Eve is equally beguiling in that she seemingly accepts such a denigrating view of women, while elsewhere in their

correspondence writes with a proud confidence of her abilities and invites Abelard to do the same. It is only in conversation with their personal, embodied experiences detailed in their letters that the nature of their collective reception of Eve begins to take shape.

By placing their Personal Letters (1-6) in conversation with the *Problemata*, we may attempt to read between the lines of the latter correspondence, gaining greater insights into their references to both Eve and maternal pain.[294] In the first of these, Letter 1 (*Historia Calamitatum*), Abelard writes an autobiographical account of their history to a friend, meant to console him during his own difficult time of suffering. Their story, as told by Abelard is as follows: Heloise and Abelard begin their relationship as passionate lovers, and she becomes pregnant with his child.[295] After fleeing to the protection of his family, Abelard decides that they should marry despite her wish to remain lovers.[296] Abelard details her valiant and prescient attempts to dissuade him from an irrevocable choice that would

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[294] I follow Mews and Perry's dating of the *Problemata* to the 1130s, and after the Personal Letters: Mews and Perry, "Peter Abelard," *JEH* 62.1 (2011): 10.

[295] Peter Abelard, Letter 1 (Levitan, 9-11).

[296] "She went on to point out that it would be dangerous for me to bring her back, and added in the end that it would be far dearer to her—and more honorable for me—for her to be called my lover than my wife. I would be hers through a love freely offered, not forced or constrained by some marital tie, and the time we spent apart could only increase the sweetness of our reunion, our joys together as precious as they were rare." Peter Abelard, Letter 1 (Levitan, 16).

neither protect them from her vengeful family nor allow him to live the life of a philosopher.[297] Heloise's warning proves correct. Fearing for his life and Heloise's welfare, and the life of the child, they leave him with Abelard's family, and return to Paris to marry in secret. As soon as her family becomes aware of the situation, Abelard brings Heloise to a convent in Argenteuil.[298] Nevertheless, members of her family violently assault and castrate Abelard, leading to his public shaming.[299] In response, Abelard decides that they should live apart for the remainder of their lives, convincing Heloise to take the veil before committing to monastic life himself.[300] Given that the beginning of their own celibate marriage was intertwined with such a fraught history, including a violent assault against Abelard, it is considerably less surprisingly that he would write an extended argument for the goodness of marriage and the uselessness of sex. To answer why he would do so in response to Heloise's forty-second question requires an examination of Heloise's previous writings to Abelard.

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[297] Peter Abelard, Letter 1 (Levitan, 13-4).

[298] Peter Abelard, Letter 1 (Levitan, 18).

[299] Peter Abelard, Letter 1 (Levitan, 18).

[300] Peter Abelard, Letter 1 (Levitan, 19).

Heloise intercepts the letter from Abelard to his friend and resumes their correspondence twelve years after the events in question. She is now abbess of the Paraclete, established by Abelard as a community for Heloise and her fellow nuns when forced out of their previous convent.[301] Of their Personal Letters, Letters 2, 4, and 6 are from Heloise's voice. Her letters tell us how she views her own suffering—or what she wants Abelard to know of it—and of the nature and intent of their future correspondence including the *Problemata*.

In the resumption of their direct correspondence, Letter 2, Heloise laments Abelard's suffering and then vents her own frustrations at encountering his letter:

> You have written your friend a long letter of consolation,
> addressing his adversities but recounting
> your own.
> But as you told of them in such detail,
> while your mind was on his consolation,
> you have worsened our own desolation;
> while you were treating his wounds,
> you have inflicted new wounds upon us
> and have made our old wounds bleed.[302]

[301] Levitan, *Abelard and Heloise*, x.

[302] Heloise of Argenteuil, Letter 2 (Levitan, 50-1).

To whatever measure Heloise had been able to reconcile herself to her situation in the twelve intervening years, reading his letter brought their history of suffering swiftly to the fore. Heloise poignantly details the nature of their suffering, beginning in this letter and extending into her next.[303] As she recounts her suffering, she lays the fault at both their doors, sometimes taking more of the onus upon herself, at other times with a rhetoric challenging Abelard to recognize the part he has played in her suffering.

The suffering that dominates their correspondence is the change in each of their circumstances following the chain of events set off by their unplanned pregnancy. Primary among these old wounds for Heloise was the moment she entered cloistered life. Though it had been Abelard's idea both that they marry and then enter religious life, living apart, Heloise highlights her acquiescence to his plans:

> I threw myself away at your command.
> And the greater irony is that my love
> then turned to such insanity
> that the one thing it desired above all else
> was the one thing it put irrevocably beyond its reach
> in that one instant when, at your command,
> I changed my habit along with my heart

[303] Abelard's intervening letter expresses his gratitude to Heloise and her community for the prayers they may offer on his behalf, thankful that God "has allowed you all to share in my affliction." Peter Abelard, Letter 3 (Levitan, 63).

to show that my body along with my heart
belonged only to you.[304]

Among her examples of the "insanity" of taking the veil is that it has led to conflict within herself over memories of their sensuality she would rather cherish than denigrate. Perhaps her most gripping portrayal of this comes in Letter 4. Following angry memories of the violence done to Abelard, she details how "sweet" memories have begun to haunt her:

For me,
the pleasures we shared in love were sweet,
so sweet
they cannot displease me now,
and rarely are they ever out of mind.
Wherever I turn, they are there before my eyes
with all their old desires.
I see their images even in my sleep.
During Holy Mass itself,
when prayer should be its purest,
unholy fantasies of pleasure so enslave my wretched soul
that my devotion is to *them* and not my prayers:
when I ought to groan for what I have done,
I sigh for what I have lost.
...
I have no rest from them even in sleep.
At times my thoughts betray themselves in a movement of my body
or even in involuntary words."[305]

[304] Heloise of Argenteuil, Letter 2 (Levitan, 54).

[305] Heloise of Argenteuil, Letter 4 (Levitan, 78).

Unsurprisingly, neither Heloise nor Abelard disclose the precise nature of his injury, though in Letter 1, he reports, "they cut off those parts of my body with which I had done that which was the cause of their sorrow."[306] Neither remarks with precision on his subsequent libido and sexual function—whether, and to what extent he experienced sexual desire for Heloise in the years they lived apart. It is possible his libido remained, though impacted by the trauma of his experience of the violent assault. However, his injury most likely rendered him unable to have procreative sex, the only kind of sexual encounter he allows for married persons within his argument in favor of celibate marriage. Thus, his interpretation of Eve forms part of a biblical and theological basis for his desired response to his suffering and the trauma he endured. Eve is useful to his larger argument for celibate marriage insofar as she and Adam are symbols for the doctrine of original sin, and because they covered the evidence of "the evil of [their] shameful passion." Though it seems that a lack of physical intimacy was his preferred response to the ramifications of their own unplanned pregnancy, it was time and again resisted by Heloise.

Heloise's suffering undoubtedly includes the loss of the sexual nature of their encounters, but it does not end there. She argues throughout Letter 2 that her decision to

[306] Peter Abelard, Letter 1 (Levitan, 18).

remain cloistered is evidence of a passionate devotion that outlasts the loss of their physical union due to both their separation and Abelard's castration:

> Recall what I have done, I beg of you.
> Remember what you owe me.
> In the days
> when we shared the pleasures of the flesh,
> no one was sure if I acted out of love or lust.
> Now the end confirms the beginning.
> I have denied myself all pleasure to follow your will:
> I have kept nothing for myself but to become yours.[307]

Fully aware of the situation which separates them, Heloise demonstrates throughout their letters, and extending to the *Problemata*, her appetite for his mind. Their correspondence is one of two energetic minds seeking intellectual stimulation amidst shared personal struggles and regret, seeking a way forward.

Heloise couches her proposal that they resume their correspondence as a means to alleviate their suffering. She begins by focusing on the merits of her plan for Abelard:

> So by that Christ who keeps you for his own even now,
> we beg of you,
> as we are his handmaids and yours,
> write to us,
> tell us of those storms
> in which you find yourself tossed.

[307] Heloise of Argenteuil, Letter 2 (Levitan, 61)

> We are all you have left:
> let us share your grief or your joy.[308]

Anticipating Abelard's reticence to write directly to her, Heloise proposes that he write to her on intellectual and theological matters. She suggests he take on the role of one of the early Christian "Fathers" known to discuss scriptural matters with women. Contrasting her disposition to learn from him with that of men who reject his teachings, she opens with a playful deference that nods to the inequality of their social standing:

> The wealth of your learning
> knows better than the poverty of my own
> how many treatises the Fathers have composed—
> long, weighty, careful treatises—to teach,
> encourage, and, yes, console women in religious orders.[309]

Heloise opens the *Problemata* by recalling them to these roles, casting them as Jerome and his interlocutor Marcella.[310] Heloise describes Jerome's praise of Marcella's capacities, and in so doing, invites Abelard to take up her queries with all seriousness and delight. Abelard himself acknowledges their role-play by prefacing a response, filled with references to Augustine and Paul, with a single citation of Jerome.[311]

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[308] Heloise of Argenteuil, Letter 2 (Levitan, 49-50)

[309] Heloise of Argenteuil, Letter 2 (Levitan, 52-53)

[310] Heloise of Argenteuil, *Problemata* (McNamer, 111).

[311] Peter Abelard, *Problemata* (McNamer, 174).

Thus as Marcella and Jerome do Heloise and Abelard converse throughout the *Problemata*. Though Heloise recalls him to his duty as instructor to "his spiritual daughters," the recollection to her request in Letter 2 places the whole within her desire that they share such intellectual stimulation as an unburdening of their common suffering.[312] In the same way, when themes arise from her questions on the Scriptures that veer toward their personal history, Abelard responds—or pushes back—in kind. It may be that with her concluding question in the *Problemata* she is provoking Abelard to do just that. She is provoking him, not to agree to a sexual union—the hope of which has long since passed them by—but to direct to her his attempts at reconciling himself to their past.

Abelard's interpretation of Eve within this response may be read in response to their personal history and to Heloise's earlier interpretation of Eve. By adopting a negative interpretation of Eve, Heloise assumes another role to provoke his response, rather than necessarily acceding to such a negative portrayal of women. Abelard sidesteps her negative portrayal of woman, refusing to paint her as solitary seductress in their personal history. He

[312] Carmel Posa, following Dronke, casts Heloise's request for their correspondence as hopeful for taming her own lustful thoughts. Carmel Posa, "*Problemata Heloissae*: Heloise's Zeal for the Scriptures," *JRH* 35.3 (2011): 340.

speaks instead of the first *couple* to form his two-part argument.[313] He proposes the general uselessness of sex outside of its procreative function, which even then does not render it good. At the same time, he takes care to note that even if a marriage is marred by a sexuality he understands to be sinful, marriage itself may still be a good thing, especially in terms of the companionship it offers.

The harm that comes to Abelard in the aftermath of their unplanned pregnancy is of such significance, it is unsurprising it predominates in his relationship with Heloise.[314] For her part, her desire for her husband including, but not limited to, sexual desire remains. Yet, in a somewhat literal interpretation of Gen 3:16b, her husband rules over her. Due to the patriarchal nature of their cultural (including religious) context, his decisions subsequent to discovery of her pregnancy dominate their lives. Expression of her sexual desire, a part of her reproductive health system, is rejected by Abelard, who uses theological arguments to support him.

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[313] Ruys has demonstrated that in Letter 3 Abelard favors "roles of equality, such as monastic brother and fellow abbot," and deflects roles of superiority to God. Ruys, "Role-playing," 59.

[314] The role of trauma following the sexual assault upon Abelard is a needed next step for scholars contextualizing Heloise and Abelard's correspondence.

Furthermore, Abelard himself may be said to suffer from the effects of patriarchy reflected in Gen 3:16, in that those who perpetrate violence against him are those men who assume a right to Heloise's sexuality, marriage prospects, and care. Traditionalist Christocentric interpretation of Eve is useful to him in this endeavor, and so he invokes Eve within his response to the forty-second question of the *Problemata*. The dominance of the nature of their suffering as it relates to 3:16b overshadows potential conversations about issues related to 3:16a. The subtext behind their discussions of Eve determines the questions they bring to the text. As such, both their received history of interpretation and their personal circumstances result in their respective interpretations of Eve.

Heloise and Abelard on Maternal Pain

The lack of Eve's maternal aspect in both Abelard and Heloise's interpretations of Eve is to be expected giving the interpretive traditions from which they draw. The focus on sin and denial of one's sexuality are easily understood in light of their personal history. Yet, for Heloise and Abelard the erasure of maternal Eve is a lost opportunity to identify with Eve's experiences, painful and otherwise, in their discussions of scripture in the *Problemata*. The erasure of Eve's maternal pain in Genesis 3-4 is owed to a complex web of factors,

including the history of reception of the biblical interpreters on whom they rely, religious and cultural attitudes about marriage and sexual expression, and their personal experiences. The question remains whether they engage with matters of maternal pain elsewhere in the *Problemata* or in the rest of their correspondence.

The lack of information we have about these experiences is as glaring as their discussion of Eve without her maternal aspect. Of her pregnancy, Abelard only states that Heloise first came to him with the news "in a delirium of joy."[315] Beyond this detail, we know nothing of her experience of pregnancy, childbirth (except that it occurred amongst his family), or what she felt about separation from her child throughout her life. Whether Heloise and Abelard regarded their separation from their son with a sense of loss or not is absent from the historical record. While Abelard mentions in Letter 1 that they left him with his family, he and Heloise never speak of him in their letters written to each other. The only other thing we know is that Heloise asked Peter the Venerable to secure him a position, which was granted.[316]

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[315] Peter Abelard, Letter 1 (Levitan, 13).

[316] Betty Radice, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 43, quoted in Albrecht Classen, "Abelard and Heloise's Love Story from the Perspective of Their Son Astrolabe: Luis Rinser's Novel Abelard's Love," *Rocky Mountain Review* 57.1 (2003): 16.

An opportunity to converse about maternal pain appears within the *Problemata* before Abelard's discussion of celibate marriage. Heloise poses a short series of questions (31-35) about Hannah's experiences detailed in 1 Samuel. Among these, we find Heloise's attention to literal rather than allegorical interpretation resulting from close reading of the text. Abelard distances himself from the actual experiences of the female biblical characters through Christological interpretations and an emphasis on abstinence and denial. In his response to problem 33, Abelard ascribes Hannah's importance to the Christological function of her Canticle, which he compares to the Canticle of Mary. As with his discussions of Eve and Mary, Hannah is significant to Abelard insofar as she relates to a Christological narrative, rather than for her personal experiences.

Problem 32 offers another opportunity for Abelard to engage with experiences relating to their own. It pertains to the moment following Eli's pronouncement that she would have a child after years of infertility and suffering bullying on that score:

> <u>The thirty-second problem of Heloise</u>
> Also, what does it mean when said of Hannah: "And she no longer appeared downcast." (1 Sam 1:18)
>
> <u>The solution of Abelard</u>
> She showed from then on a happy face, and not a sad face or a teary one.[317]

[317] Heloise of Argenteuil and Peter Abelard, *Problemata* (McNamer, 163).

Abelard's suggestion that Hannah never again showed an outward sign of distress is as absurd as it is brief. He does not even attempt to argue that her happiness in having a child would overcome any tumult of giving him up. If Heloise's question was another playful provocation, this time to consider either the complexities of Hannah's turn from grief or a comparison with the giving up of their own child, he refuses to engage.[318]

When placed in context of an exchange in their final personal letters, Abelard's response may be rendered somewhat less callous. He may view her question about Hannah with suspicion that she is attempting to engage him on matters he would rather put to rest. Instead of actually believing the position he spouts, he too may be responding rhetorically to sentiments from Heloise, who has continued to remind him, with favorable expressions, of their past sexual encounters and shared love. In Letter 5, Abelard accepts her prayers on his behalf but directs her tears away from himself:

> Weep for your Savior, not for your seducer, for your Redeemer, not for the man who used you as his whore.[319]

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[318] In solution 31, he eschews a plain interpretation of Hannah's statement to Eli that she had drunk no wine—an explanation to Eli that he had misinterpreted her act of silent prayer as the raving of a drunken woman—, instead arguing that this detail indicates she had chosen to abstain from alcohol so that God would be more likely to heed her prayer.
[319] Peter Abelard, Letter 5 (Levitan, 100). According to Ruys, Abelard similarly deflects Heloise's sentiments in his greeting of Letter 5, in which he addresses her as the bride of

The history of their correspondence suggests that his direction to Heloise, that she distance herself from him and fond memories of their past, comes with less than confident hope of success.[320] In light of this history, the thirty-second problem and solution read as a mirror of themselves in which Heloise seeks more open sharing of their emotional states than Abelard is willing to indulge in.[321] Behind her question of what it meant that Hannah no longer remained downcast, exists their shared experience of continued suffering and their divergent approaches to remedy it.

Despite his attempts to distance himself from Heloise in the Personal Letters, their correspondence continues, albeit with much more subdued references to their own history. His depiction of Hannah in solution 31 is symbolic of the life to which he urges Heloise—and himself—as they continue to negotiate the circumstances of their lives so radically altered by responses to her unplanned pregnancy.

Christ: "Abelard reads but subverts the wife role. If Heloise wishes, let her play wife—but to God, not to him." Ruys, "Role-playing," 65.

[320] Mews suggests that Abelard's disparaging portrayal of their previous sexual activity was an attempt at the same distancing. Constant J. Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France* (New York: Palgrave, 1999), 36.

[321] I agree with Posa that "one could conclude that their sole role is as "comforter" to him." Posa, "*Problemata Heloissae*," 343.

This brief interplay on Hannah in the *Problemata* offers a mere glimpse of their thoughts on maternal (and paternal) pains. Their story is one writ large with maternal (and paternal) pains, in that Heloise's suffering is set in motion by events stemming from an unexpected pregnancy, and the decisions made by the men who were, and would become, her legal family. In all of their surviving correspondence, they speak of the difficulties of their separation, of the struggle to tamp down their passion, and the frustrations of their current positions in life determined by her pregnancy, the assault against him, and the decision to wed and enter religious life.

The proclamation of Gen 3:16b, "your desire shall be for your husband, yet he shall rule over you," may be read in to the most dramatic moments of their personal history, marked by Heloise's continued desire for her husband, who took it upon himself to direct their separation, and by the violence perpetrated on Abelard by men who assumed the right to rule over Heloise's marriage and sexual activity. Were Heloise to write of her experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding, or they on the subsequent separation from their son, these sentiments could be similarly read in conversation with Gen 3:16a and 4:25. Yet of the pains of reproductive health (Gen 3:16a) or of separation from children (4:25), they are silent.

Ascetic avoidance of theological concerns of the body (in particular, denial of passions), societal rejection of an unplanned pregnancy, violent reprisals, and theological views of virginity and the role of marriage all impacted Heloise and Abelard's individual circumstances. These circumstances, personal and societal, impacted their contingent productions of readings of Eve (and Hannah) as much as their received traditions surrounding Genesis 3-4. Each of these circumstances led to readings in which references to the maternal pain of Gen 3:16a were largely absent. Far from merely passing on received readings, they brought them into their own conversations about how to best navigate their lives following an unplanned pregnancy and the aftermath that ensued.

Thinking more generally about contextual readings of Eve in Genesis 3-4, Abelard's comment about Hannah, that "she never cried again," is rather representative of the ability of authoritative interpreters to control the narrative about what is, and is not, theologically significant. "What does it mean that 'she was no longer downcast,'" might be read today as any number of interpretative questions: "What about her pains of pregnancy and childbirth?" "Did the sweetness of their short time together balance the pains of breastfeeding, or did the brevity of their time to bond heighten any frustrations?" "How did she experience living apart from her child?" Whether these questions are attended to will

depend on appraisals of their significance, determined through a web of personal, social, and historical factors.

If experiences of maternal pain are to become accepted as an interpretive lens for Eve's story and beyond, it will no doubt have to overcome an array of synchronic and diachronic factors at play. In my estimation, readers must be 1) willing to discuss matters of maternal pain, including those considered "taboo" within certain modes of discourse; 2) open to multiple readings of a passage, especially in interpretive communities for whom this passage is associated with foundational doctrines and controversial positions on gender and sexuality; 3) ready to acknowledge that what occurs in our bodies and in society are of theological concern; and 4) willing to acknowledge that idealized representations of motherhood are not representative of women's experiences of maternal pain. In the next section, I will attend to this fourth point.

Metaphors of a Breastfeeding Divine

Despite the reticence of Heloise and Abelard on such subjects, among their Jewish and Christian contemporaries we find metaphorical language of maternal pain for humans

and the divine as well as more expansive readings of Gen 3:16.[322] The writings of Christian monastics Anselm and Bernard of Clairvaux, as well as the Zohar, foundational to Jewish mysticism, offer opportunities to reconsider the biblical idea of maternal Eve and metaphoric possibilities of a maternal, and in particular, a breastfeeding divine. As with sources in the previous chapters, I will present a few examples of ideas that were "in the air," in this case, in the intellectual communities of western Europe during the High Middle Ages.

During the High Middle Ages, Jewish and Christian intellectuals described human and divine figures with maternal imagery, including as a breastfeeding mother.[323] In the

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[322] Mews and Perry argue that Abelard's citation of a literal interpretation of the silver coin in his solution 36 of the *Problemata* from "a certain Jew" was reflective of Rashi's teaching, and that they may have known one of Rashi's grandsons in Troyes. Mews and Perry suggest that Abelard turned to the disciple of Rashi because he could not find within Christian exegesis an answer to the specificity of Heloise's question. Mews and Perry, "Peter Abelard, Heloise and Jewish Biblical Exegesis," 13-15, 18-19. We do not know whether Heloise or Abelard were also aware of Rashi's interpretation of Gen 3:16. Even if they had, we may argue, in the vein of Mews and Perry, that in their interpretations of Eve they found the exegesis of their Christian interlocutors sufficient for their immediate purposes. On their association with Bernard of Clairvaux, see Mews, "Heloise and Liturgical Experience at the Paraclete," *Plainsong and Medieval Music* 11.1 (2002): 26, 29, 33-34.

[323] For expanded treatments of these traditions, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), and Ellen Davina Haskell, *Suckling at My Mother's Breasts: The Image of a Nursing God in Jewish Mysticism*. (Albany, NY: State University of New York

previous chapter on maternal pain in the Hebrew Bible, I considered depictions of YHWH as a writhing and nursing god.[324] I concluded that such imagery offers opportunities for imagining the divine, but pointed out the limits of the use of such metaphors as they are used in service of the glorification of civil conflict in the Hebrew Bible. In this section, I will consider the merits and limitations of metaphorical depictions of a maternal divine in the Zohar and in the writings of Anselm of Canterbury and Bernard of Clairvaux.[325]

A Breastfeeding Christ

Maternal and breastfeeding imagery was used by Christian monastics of the High Middle Ages to affirm the sustaining and nurturing qualities of the divine. In his Prayer 10 to St. Paul, Anselm of Canterbury names both Jesus and Paul "Mother." He compares Jesus to a mother hen, referencing Matt 23:37, adding, "Truly, master, you are a mother. For

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Press, 2012). On the simultaneous rise in maternal divine imagery within Jewish and Christian thought in Western Europe, see discussion and bibliography in Haskell, *Suckling at My Mother's Breasts*, 95-101.

[324] See discussion in chapter three, "Divine Associations with Maternal Pain."

[325] Within Jewish mysticism, descriptions of a breastfeeding Shekinah would find their full form in the Zohar, but as Haskell has shown, the image extends to early rabbinic writings.

what others have conceived and given birth to, they have received from you."[326] Jesus, as mother of the soul, has life-giving power, bringing about new birth to the "dead son":

> Paul, mother,...lay then your dead son [i.e., the sinful soul] at the feet of Christ, your mother, for he is her son. Or rather throw him into the bosom [*sinus*] of Christ's love, for Christ is even more his mother. Pray that he may revive this dead son, not so much yours as his. Do, mother of my soul, what the mother of my flesh would do.[327]

As he continues, Anselm's expectation of how a mother might respond to a young child in distress is to hold the little one to herself, allowing the warmth of her body to flow into the child. He writes, "Christ, mother...Your warmth resuscitates the dead; your touch justifies sinners...resuscitate your dead one...For the consolation of the wretched flows from you, blessed, world without end, Amen."[328]

Skin-to-skin contact between newborns and mothers has been shown to have positive impact on neonatal outcomes, including improved mortality and breastfeeding rates among low birth weight infants.[329] In the case of Mother Christ, this touch has the

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[326] Anselm, prayer 10 to St. Paul, (Bynum, 114).

[327] Anselm, prayer 10 to St. Paul, (Bynum, 114).

[328] Anselm, prayer 10 to St. Paul, (Bynum, 114-5).

[329] Among infants born in hospitals in low/middle income countries. A meta-analysis of fifteen studies on so-called Kangaroo mother care (KMC), featuring skin-to-skin contact with mother and baby "found compelling evidence that KMC is associated with a reduction in mortality at discharge or 40 - 41 weeks' postmenstrual age and at latest follow up, severe

power even to revive the dead (soul). Within the imagery of a resuscitative mother who draws the dying to her breast, the closing reference to the consolation which *flows* from Mother Christ may extend the metaphor from skin-to-skin contact to that of breastmilk reviving an infant from the brink of death.

Half a century later, Bernard of Clairvaux would use the same image, with none of Anselm's subtlety, to unequivocally depict a breastfeeding Christ in his sermon 9 on the Song of Songs.[330] The primary text from which Bernard works is "your breasts are better

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infection/sepsis, hypothermia, and length of hospital stay, and an increase in weight gain and exclusive of any breastfeeding at discharge or 40 - 41 weeks' postmenstrual age and at one to three months follow up. Moreover, there was some evidence that KMC reduces the risk of nosocomial infection/sepsis at discharge or 40 - 41 weeks' corrected gestational age, and increases head circumference gain, maternal satisfaction with the method, maternal-infant attachment, and home environment." A. Conde-Agudelo, J.M. Belizán, and J. Diaz-Rossello, "Kangaroo Mother Care to Reduce Morbidity and Mortality in Low Birthrate Infants," *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 3 (2011): 19-20, doi: 10.1002/14651858.CD002771.pub2.

[330] Like Anselm, Bernard applies metaphors of maternal pain to human and divine figures. In his correspondence he relies on metaphors of maternal pain to convey a loss of intimacy with a friend. For discussion and examples see Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 115-8, and especially notes 9, 18 and 19. Bynum has suggested that Cistercian monks, who counted Bernard of Clairvaux among their number, may have borrowed the Mother Jesus image from Benedictine Anselm of Canterbury, based on the known influence of his prayers. Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 112.

than wine" (Song 1:2b).[331] In a sermon advocating patience and forgiveness over severe reproofs for the sake of spiritual advancement, he extols the breasts of Christ from which flows grace, the "milk of consolation." Bernard begins the comparison by encouraging his hearers to think of Jesus's approach to his followers, as on the road to Emmaus (Matt 18:20), and as one who kindly anticipates their petitions (Isa 65:24).[332] The "sweetness" of Christ's milk is measured by the patience bestowed on the sinner and in the forgiveness extended to the penitent. Thus, the sweetness of the milk draws the petitioner forward in prayer.[333]

In addition to breastmilk's sweetness, Bernard extols its nourishment. Wine, which Bernard likened to pleasures of the flesh, could also offer sweetness, but not the nourishment that sustains.[334] The milk of Christ's patience and forgiveness, Bernard argues, is more efficacious for spiritual advancement than is severe rebuke.[335] In this, Bernard

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[331] *quia meliora sunt ubera tua vino*. Here the Latin Vulgate follows the Septuagint tradition, against the Masoretic pointing of דדיך, as דֹּדֶיךָ, "caresses," or, commonly, "love." So J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 91.

[332] Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 9 on the Song of Songs, par. 4.

[333] Bernard, Sermon 9, par. 5.

[334] Bernard, Sermon 9, par. 10.

[335] Bernard, Sermon 9, par. 6.

exhorts those with young monks under their charge to imitate Christ, as mothers to dependent babies.[336] In Sermon 10, Bernard would expand upon this "motherly" role, though with less explicit reference to breastfeeding. He writes of babies as dependent on their mothers for happiness and health.[337] The mother would respond to children according to their needs, either with consolation and support, or with celebration and further instruction.[338]

Bernard's attention both to the imagery of breastmilk and to the Virgin Mary would be picked up by later artists who would depict Bernard himself as receiving a stream of Mary's breastmilk into his mouth. The first known example is the Lactation of St Bernard, St. Bernard of Clairvaux Altarpiece, dated to around 1300.[339] In distinction with Anselm's cuddling Christ, the breastmilk in this image is received by Bernard from a distance of a few feet; Mary, squeezing her breast, shoots a stream of milk into Bernard's mouth. Doron

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[336] Bernard, Sermon 9, par. 9. "Bernard of Clairvaux, whose use of maternal imagery for male figures is more extensive and complex than that of any other twelfth-century figure, uses "mother" to describe Jesus, Moses, Peter, Paul, prelates in general, abbots in general, and, more frequently, himself as abbot." (Bynum, *Jesus as Mother* 115).

[337] Bernard, Sermon 10, par. 1.

[338] Bernard, Sermon 10, par. 2.

[339] The Lactation of St Bernard, St. Bernard of Clairvaux Altarpiece, Museo de Mallorca. Doron Bauer, "Milk as Templar Apologetics in the St. Bernard of Clairvaux Altarpiece from Majorca," *Studies in Iconography* 36 (2015): 81.

Bauer has argued that "the bracketing away of intimacy betrays a desire to focus attention on the transmission of the breast milk itself rather than on affection, on taste and nourishment rather than touch."[340] Furthermore, the arrangement of the scenes of the altarpiece is such that Bauer has concluded that the breastmilk in the altarpiece symbolizes Bernard's "extraordinary rhetorical competence in godly matters."[341] Such an interpretation, entirely plausible for an artistic work created over a century after Bernard's death, would nevertheless diverge from Bernard's sermons on the breast of Christ, in which affection as well as spiritual nourishment are present in the breastfeeding imagery.[342] Indeed, for both Anselm and Bernard, the affectionate love of the mother as demonstrated through cuddling and nursing is a crucial aspect of the breastfeeding divine image.

Jewish Mysticism

Regarding the possibilities and limits of breastfeeding imagery within Jewish mysticism, Ellen Haskell has shown that the suckling image effectively communicates a

[340] Bauer, "Milk as Templar Apologetics," 85.
[341] Bauer, "Milk as Templar Apologetics," 89.
[342] "Breasts, to Bernard, are a symbol of the pouring out towards others of affectivity or of instruction and almost invariably suggest to him a discussion of the duties of prelates or abbots." Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 116.

relational theology and affective spirituality.[343] Among images of suckling from the *Shekhinah* in the Zohar, is a particularly lavish depiction of breastmilk flowing like a river.[344] In reference to the Song of Songs 5:12, divine milk flows so generously as to bathe the world in it. Whereas the metaphor of a breastfeeding mother and child can communicate an individualistic relationship between human and divine, the image of milk flowing over the world matches Haskell's description of the nursing metaphor as "predominately a social image" which "asserts the quality of relation because it never deals exclusively with an individual, speaking instead to *the connection between* its participants."[345] This is accomplished in 2:122b by shifting focus away from mother and suckling child to the breastmilk itself. The image becomes malleable, as breastmilk becomes a river which bathes the earth, and concrete images of mother and baby fade away.

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[343] The metaphor of a breastfeeding mother communicates, for Haskell, a quality of human-divine relationship defined by "tenderness, rather than dominion." Haskell, *Suckling at My Mother's Breasts*, 3, 10, 69, 94.

[344] Sefer ha-Zohar 1:203a, 2:65b-66a, 2:122b. For translations and discussion, see Haskell, *Suckling at My Mother's Breasts*, 67-79.

[345] Haskell, *Suckling at My Mother's Breasts*, 3, emphasis mine. Within the rabbinic literature, the suckling image represented the transmission of "a life-long spiritual disposition." Haskell, *Suckling at My Mother's Breasts*, 15.

Accordingly, breastfeeding imagery in the Zohar is somewhat removed from the complexity of women's actual experiences with the practice. Haskell states:

> Kabbalah's breastfeeding divine relies upon an idealized literary representation of femininity that was understood and produced by men, based on their cultural associations regarding motherhood and breastfeeding. These associations relate more directly to the nursing divine than do the actual lives of medieval women.[346]

These cultural associations with breastfeeding led to associations with tender feelings, affection, and love. The mingling of these abstracted notions with metaphors from rabbinic writings and emerging Kabbalah, in which spiritual nourishment comes as breastmilk, communicate a quality of the divine-human relationship as tender, loving, intimate, and enlivening. Of the potential power of these images, Haskell states,

> Anthropomorphic images, such as the nursing mother, are especially powerful because they engage personal experience and self-perception. Thinking of God in human terms reciprocally encourages a mentality that thinks of humans in godly terms, and this interactive property of religious imagery helps to provide a convincing internal logic for the kabbalistic principle of imitating God. It also underlies the kabbalistic idea that divinity and humanity act mutually upon each other, with the human being both reflecting and affecting the divine.[347]

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[346] Haskell, *Suckling at My Mother's Breasts*, 91.

[347] Haskell, *Suckling at My Mother's Breasts*, 10.

Without the complexity of women's experiences with breastfeeding, this particular anthropomorphic image of the divine is limited. As Haskell suggests,

> Feminist readings of the breastfeeding divine could also yield fruitful results, particularly if they move beyond the old goal of exposing misogyny toward an informed, constructive reading of how the kabbalists' feminine divine images might translate from a medieval context into a modern one.[348]

Bringing into conversation women with varied experiences of breastfeeding, including those marked by pain and frustration, could spark an imaginative dialogue about the nature of the divine, the divine-human relationship, and how the divine image manifests in humans.

These critiques extend to each instance of a breastfeeding divine that I have surveyed, in which the metaphor of a breastfeeding divine relies on a measure of confidence in the outcome. For Anselm and for Bernard, a theological message of spiritual regeneration was communicated through the image of a Mother Christ who cuddles and suckles her young. Her touch and her milk offer the comfort of abiding with one whose presence restores life. In the Zohar, breastmilk bathes the earth. In each case, there is no question that the breastmilk will flow, reaching its restorative end. If Haskell is correct, that "thinking of God in human terms reciprocally encourages a mentality that thinks of humans

[348] Haskell, *Suckling at My Mother's Breasts*, 109.

in godly terms," then does it follow that thinking of god in only *idealized* human terms encourages a mentality that only thinks of humans in godly terms insofar as they adhere to that ideal?[349] The imagery, poignant as it is, could be read anew by taking into account women's actual experiences with breastfeeding in which breastmilk does not always flow, or only does so with great pain. Turning to my own context, Christian theologians might reimagine a Christ who knows the pains of mastitis, a Holy Spirit suppressed as in a blocked duct, or a person's inability to latch on to the divine breast. In the next section, I will briefly consider such possibilities.

Rereading Genesis 3-4 in Contexts of Erasure of Maternal Pain

Scholars' approaches to ancient metaphors that involve women's bodies and their reproductive health have varied. Bergmann and Kalmanofsky, in their respective work on the metaphor of childbirth in the Hebrew Bible and across literature of the ancient Near

[349] Kristi Keuhn has argued that "while Anselm valued the attributes of a mother in a spiritual sense, he did not necessarily desire to focus on the physical or social function of motherhood." In his correspondence with women who were mothers, Anselm "never directly praises them for their feminine or motherly qualities." Kristi L. Keuhn, "Finding the Feminine in the Divine: St. Anselm's Prayers and Meditations and Women," *Magistra* 11.1 (2005): 68.

East, have heightened our awareness of the rhetorical impact of the metaphor in its ancient contexts, before the advent of modern medical care. In so doing, they have asked modern readers to recognize the differences between their experiences with childbirth and those in the ancient world, when maternal and infant death rates were much higher.[350]

The question I bring is slightly different than those of Bergmann and Kalmanofsky, in that my primary interest in metaphorical language for a breastfeeding divine lies beyond the metaphor's function in the ancient or medieval text. My question lies in how the metaphorical language of a maternal divine works to unleash our imaginations to the creative possibilities of the literature and of our personal and social lives. If in doing so, I move beyond the thought world (surrounding breastfeeding) of Anselm and Bernard, and the Zohar, that is perfectly acceptable to my aims. This is because my final goal is not only in understanding the text, be it Genesis 3-4, or an image of a breastfeeding divine; my

[350] Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis,* 2, 6; Kalmanofsky, "Israel's Baby," 66. In her analysis of the use of the woman's body in the marriage metaphor in Hosea, Alice Keefe pushed back against assumptions made by previous interpreters regarding the woman's role in the society out of which the metaphor emerged. Using a "feminist ideological critical approach," Keefe set out to demonstrate that these readers of the marriage metaphor had run far afield of its ancient context. Alice Keefe, *Woman's Body and the Social Body in Hosea* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 33. Even with their historical focus, Bergmann (5-6) and Keefe (33) acknowledge the fluidity of meaning.

ultimate interest is in the conversations (and actions) produced by encounters with these texts.

As I indicated in the introductory chapter, "Eve's Maternal Pain in Conversation," my interpretation of Eve's story of maternal pain arises out of a moment of dissonance in a local faith community of which I was an active member. Around that time, I met regularly with a small group from my local congregation, sharing a meal in a member's home, discussing a passage or theme from our Scriptures, and praying over the burdens and joys from our lives. At the same time, I had been invited to work on a theology of relationships for a clergy development group, for which our focus passages were the Eve and Adam narratives of Genesis. As I explored the various possibilities for teaching and preaching, I found a story marked by Eve's maternal aspect.

I took note as she heard the divine remark that she would know the great pains of childbearing in an unequal society (Gen 3:16). I watched her be named—by her man—"mother of all the living," only to soon know the violent death of one child and estrangement from another (3:20). I was moved by her finding her voice as a character

reminding us of joy and grief co-mingled in the birth of a child after loss (4:25).[351] Despite Eve's acknowledgment of divine activity in the birth of her children (4: 1, 25), I could not shake the role of the divine in declaring the harsh reality of maternal pain, without any word on its alleviation. Nor that the man's own comments about Eve's maternal aspect in 3:20 came on the heels of the divine proclamation in 3:16.

While the ideas for a project on Eve were nascent, my small group uncovered the many ways our lives, and those of our friends and families, were being impacted by maternal pains. Miscarriages, stillbirth, and health conditions that caused infertility as well as a range of other health issues dominated our life updates. Complex emotions simmered underneath the surface of our prayers for those unable to get pregnant when desperately wanting to, and for those who quietly feared an unplanned pregnancy for which they were neither economically nor relationally prepared.

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[351] Ilana Pardes has argued, against Mieke Bal's interpretation, that "it is Eve's impressive come-back as a name-giver in Genesis 4—and not the emergence of the proper name 'Eve'—which serves as the final stroke in the formation of the first female character." Ilana Pardes, "Beyond Genesis 3: The Politics of Maternal Naming," in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, ed. Athalya Brenner, The Feminist Companion to the Bible 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 175 and passim. See also Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 128.

For this group, the literature of the Hebrew Bible was seen to have potential for meaningful integration into prayer life with a higher power, for bonding with community over lived experiences, and as a guide for behavior. We would try to identify with characters of our Scriptures, and yet it never occurred to us to identify with Eve's maternal pain. Like Heloise and Abelard, our receptions of Eve were usually tied up in discussions of original sin, or else tired arguments about gender roles. It seemed as if our experiences and her story had nothing to do with one another. Our biblical exegesis was as inadequate for our pain as was Heloise and Abelard's shallow exchange about Hannah's tears.

It is unsurprising that we naturally assumed our bible, so central to our religious experience, had little to offer us in relationship to our maternal pains. I have argued that Heloise and Abelard's responses to their own personal history informed their discussions of Hannah and Eve. The individual circumstances of my own contextual example may be vastly different, but have been no less impactful on our readings. Beyond the limits posed on our interpretations by reception history of Eve, we had no rituals or prayers to process such experiences. Instead, we offered hugs after knowing looks to each other at the fringes of worship services where maternal pain would go almost entirely unacknowledged. And while some lamentation is rightly left to more private places, I began to imagine how

meaningful it could be to discover prayers and rituals from our own tradition, composed for such moments and conveyed by ecclesial leaders who thought God cared about our bodies in ways other than to desexualize them. The journey into the Lamaštu corpus, which I have discussed in chapter 2, gave me the opportunity to play with creative expressions of embodied maternal pain. In Genesis 3-4, we hear Eve's voice for only the briefest of moments. Adam and the divine speak to and about her more often than she speaks for herself.

It is not so very different in my religious context. I know of ecclesial leaders offering maternity leaves so short their employee could still be suffering from a vaginal tear sustained during childbirth. Church boards may not pay a living wage so that their staff can afford childcare, and then inadvertently shame them for breastfeeding at work. The irony is, these actions can come from the lips of those who extol readings of the Genesis narrative as advocating gender parity. It is as if there exist two simultaneous conversations about maternal pain, only one of which significantly involves those who directly experience it. Yet, when the realities of the scope of maternal pain are erased from conversations at large, we pretend that childbirth is a single, discrete event disconnected from other relational, societal, economic, and political factors. It is Gen 3:16a without 3:16b-20.

At the end of chapters 2 and 3, I raised some of the practical impacts of ignoring maternal pain and its associating factors. As I have considered maternal imagery for the divine, I have discovered that the impact of its erasure extends further. For as generative as maternal divine language can be, I found myself hesitant to explore an image of a deity who knows maternal pain, particularly as integrated into my own faith context. Some of this hesitance is based in the limitations of biblical images of a maternal divine that I noted in chapter 3. Within the Hebrew Bible, the divine sometimes assumes language of maternal pain within conversations threatening violence, including against pregnant women and children.[352] Why should I now grasp hungrily at *this* metaphor, shrouded as it is in the rest?

However, as I have argued from the beginning, it is not merely the text (or even multiple texts placed in conversation), that fully produces an actualized meaning. Maternal language for the divine can run into further opposition, even in those theoretically open to feminine language for the divine, in light of our own contextual experiences in communities of faith. It took some time for me to realize the extent to which I carried such matters with me to my exploration of a maternal divine. I struggled with whether and how to accept

[352] See discussion above, chapter 3, in the sections "Divine Associations with Maternal Pain," and "Rereading Genesis 3-4: Violent Loss and Language of Blessing."

metaphorical use of maternal pain for the divine as a positive association between myself—a woman with some experience of maternal pain—and the divine. I have not uncovered in those texts, whether biblical or in the medieval language of a breastfeeding divine, an interest in women's complex lived experiences. The divine role in Gen 3:16 is hardly encouraging in this vein. Additional images are needed.[353]

If I may speak for a moment confessionally, the simple truth is, I do not trust the metaphor. I trust the god I have been raised to worship, and even proclaim a gospel message from pulpits in a tradition that in the words of my own mother, "does not do well with women pastors," despite the movement having begun with a number of strong women preachers and ordaining women since its inception. I am moved by the theological narrative of a god who would lay down all the power and authority of the divine to become human. It is not that I resent the male embodiment of this god, made flesh in the person my Christian tradition reveres; I proclaim a god whose relational image is reflected in humanity: male,

[353] The library of images with which to place Genesis 3-4 in conversation will vary, based not only on biblical canon, but also from a wealth of traditional and personal sources called upon by individuals and communities for whom Genesis is viewed as scripture. I will refer to a few that have been significant for me in my context.

female, and those whose gender is not so defined. No, my quarrel is not with god, at least not directly.

After a life spent listening with my sisters to men from pulpits and politician's chairs weaponizing and politicizing our wombs and our pains, I have constructed walls of distrust around these mouthpieces of god who play god, defining for us our maternal aspect. They who so often speak for me but seldom accurately about me, I have come to distrust on such matters. I did not jump at incorporating images of divine maternal pain into my tradition, because I had yet to trust my tradition to respond adequately to women's experiences of maternal pain.

A few years ago, while composing a Canticle of Eve in the style of the Canticle of Mary (Luke 1:46-55), I had the following realization: *our tradition's message of god's salvific nature has been so affected by centuries of patriarchal control that I hesitate to proclaim with confidence god as savior of women's bodies.* I ended that reflection, however, with a reorienting prayer: *Forgive us, god, for envisioning you as you are not. Do not allow us to cede you to them.* So, I turned back to the potential of postbiblical images of a breastfeeding divine from Jewish and Christian traditions to connect with my own theological language and experiences.

My faith tradition emphasizes a transformative, personal relationship with the divine. We often speak of this experience as being mediated by the spirit of god. Biblical passages likening the spirit of god to the wind resonated with a young girl growing up on the eastern plains of the United States, where the wind blew freely and with exhilarating power. As children, we used to harness the wind like a human sail on playgrounds, linking our little hands and anticipating each gust of wind that would carry us away. In the image from the Zohar of abundant breastmilk flowing expansively over all, I can imagine the same exuberance over its life-giving flow.

Still, this idealized vision of flowing breastmilk does not match up with the experiences of those nearest to me who have found breastfeeding frustrating and painful. What would it look like to experiment with receptions of the breastfeeding divine in conversation with painful experiences of breastfeeding and other aspects of women's reproductive health? To begin with, the image of a god who suffers has long been meaningful to me. It is based on the idea of the incarnation, that an all-powerful creator god chose to empty godself to become fully human, and in so doing, accepted the realities of mortality.

From there, I might revel in the efforts of a god who persists in relationship with us despite the pains of rejection, as a nursing mother might persist through the pains of breastfeeding. We may consider her frustrations when we, like infants, cannot latch on. We might explore the image of a mother god who offers consolation at her breast to those she does not breastfeed, acknowledging the reality that not all mothers breastfeed, and querying how a community who worships god might offer consolation to those who do not suckle at her breast. And we may moan with her about the forces that quench her spirit, blocking her life-giving flow.

It may be that by focusing on experiences of maternal pain, maternal divine imagery could become a meaningful way for some to reflect on theological matters. It is equally possible that we may do the same with efforts to alleviate maternal pain. I will close with one example, which I take from oral family history that my mother shared with me about my great-grandmother Ruby and her husband Lyman. It is for me an ancestral story of the Eves of my family and it was passed down to my mother in the midst of her own experiences with maternal pain:

> I think my mom told me the story that Ruby had told her at some point. I don't remember the occasion, but maybe it was when I had a blocked duct when nursing your brother that eventually caused me to have to quit nursing.

> That happened with you too, by the way, but it wasn't as distressing for me the second time.[354]

Ruby's story, as told to and reinterpreted by me, is as following: once when she was breastfeeding, Ruby developed a painful blockage in the milk duct of one of her breasts. Her spouse, Lyman, sucked on Ruby's nipple until the blockage cleared, so that the pain could (eventually) diminish and she could breastfeed again.

Maybe he would have found what I am about to say taboo, but I would call Lyman an enfleshed blessing of Gen 49:25 from the god of his ancestors upon my ancestor Ruby. In reflecting on this vignette, I contemplate what it means to claim they were created in the image of god; "male and female [god] created them" (Gen 1:27; 5:1-2). Collectively, Ruby and Lyman created and sustained life, experienced the pain of caring for precarious life, and did what was possible to alleviate pain in order to unblock the life-giving flow. This personal blessing, from one to another, is also representative of the systemic societal changes needed to alleviate maternal pain, thus unblocking every life-giving flow.

[354] Marsha Smith, email message to the author, January 17, 2020.

Chapter 5

In Conversation with Eve's Maternal Pain

In pain, I bear children *In pain, I am dominated*
In pain, I do not *In pain, I have lost*

Do you not know you are each an Eve?

In pain, I lament *In pain, I hope*
In pain, I writhe *In pain, I survive*

Contributions to the Field

When a close reading of the texts of Gen 3-4 illuminated themes absent from my received interpretations of Eve's character, I began a project of enquiry into both. My methodological approach has involved taking seriously not only the cultural conversations into which biblical Eve entered, but also those subsequent conversations into which the biblical idea of her was invoked. Throughout, I have looked for the humanity behind and within the literary works that touch on matters of maternal pain.

The aims of this project have been two-fold: to explore biblical ideas within and beyond the text, and to bring to the fore experiences of maternal pain in Eve's story, human

experiences, and, briefly, in conceptions of the divine. Even as her character's symbolic associations with sin, sexuality, and gender roles remain influential for many reading communities, I invite readers to consider multiple points of conversation with a biblical narrative. With gratitude to the feminist scholars whose work combatted centuries' worth of misogynistic assumptions about Eve, I turned to other aspects of Eve's story. Among these in Genesis 3-4 are the multiple references to Eve's maternal pain. I have focused on some of the painful aspects of women's reproductive health and child loss.

Lamaštu incantation RA 18: 163 rev. 13-29 came alive with a dual process: by giving attention in translation to its rhetorical and symbolic impact, but also by taking seriously how such a prayer might be internalized by a woman who lives with one or more conditions now known to cause infertility. With the latter approach, I engaged with infertility beyond its function as a literary trope, or as a "status" which a person may or may not interpret as painful. Rather, this reading was inspired by the experiential knowledge of this reader, from her life and that shared with others, that infertility can also involve deeply embodied experiences involving physical pain. A miscarriage, for example, is not only an event, but also a visceral experience that embeds itself on the memories of those who go through it. Endometriosis can show up with painful monthly reminders. Attention to women's lived

experiences as well as linguistic and literary matters produced an actualized reading of Lamaštu incantation RA 18 as a reckoning with the embodied nature of pregnancy loss.

The environmental associations with maternal and infant health outcomes in the Northwest Semitic Curses are mirrored in the blessings and curses of breasts and wombs in the Hebrew Bible. These associations support an interpretation of Gen 3:16-20 as an acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of humans and their environment. While the Genesis 3-4 narrative is often sparse on details, the Jacob narratives allow us to explore the themes of maternal pain and death, famine, child loss and parental grief, interwoven into a more extended narrative arc. The blessing of Jacob, read within this narrative context, opened up conversations about associating environmental factors in maternal pain. Such a reading invites readers to both critique the limited patriarchal framework of the blessing of breasts and womb, as well as pursue creative means of alleviation of maternal pain in light of the constraints of particular contexts.

The correspondence of Heloise and Abelard offered the opportunity to engage with a woman's interpretation of Eve. At first glance, her interpretation may disappoint the feminist reader, as she passes on a low view of women. Abelard's interpretation, though notably speaking not of Eve but of the first couple, is similarly illustrative of received

interpretations of Eve from their favorite interlocutors. The extent and personal nature of their sometimes playfully provocative correspondence allowed me to test the theory that interpretations of biblical ideas are influenced by a complex web of factors, including personal experiences. Against the temptation to portray Heloise and Abelard as only lovers or scholars, I approached them as fully human interpreters who brought each aspect of themselves to bear upon both their interpretations of Eve and Hannah, including their resistance to engage directly on matters of maternal pain.

These explorations into embodied maternal pain and child loss inevitably led me to consider their implications for images of a maternal divine. Once again, I sought multiple conversation partners. Imagery from the Hebrew Bible, its Jewish and Christian interpreters, and my own contextual grappling with the concept, offer several entry points to conceptions of divine maternal imagery. To Haskell's invitation, I join my own, to weave into theological explorations of a maternal divine the painful, embodied aspects of women's reproductive health and child loss. My analysis of the contextual influences on readers, both in the case of Heloise and Abelard, and in my own engagement with maternal divine imagery, underscores the contingent nature of all readings of biblical texts. As I

demonstrated in the history of interpretation in chapter one, this contingency includes the dominance of certain traditions surrounding Eve in Genesis 3-4.

This project, then, fills gaps in biblical scholarship on Eve and maternal pain as well as highlighting a particular methodological approach to those ends. It is one which places multiple texts and experiences into a common conversation about lived experiences of maternal pain. It begins with questions raised by an encounter with a biblical text that was dissonant from dominant interpretations of it and seeks to both affirm and spark conversations about maternal pain in conversation with Gen 3:16 and beyond. I take seriously their existence as historical artifacts, while also playing with their literary and thematic qualities and their resonance beyond themselves. In so doing, it has been my aim to acknowledge both the limitations and opportunities of readerly encounters with these texts.

Future Research Directions

My exploration of references to women's reproductive health in the literature of ancient Western Asia, including the Hebrew Bible, exposes several avenues of inquiry that deserve further consideration. These include exploration of additional texts and experiences, read through a variety of hermeneutical lenses, as well as an expanded definition of

maternal pain. To the first point, in this exploration into Eve and maternal pain, I have done deep dives into, rather than survey vast corpuses of literature. The Lamaštu corpus alone offers an extensive collection of rituals, incantations, and amulets. With regard to the Northwest Semitic curse formulae, I noted that maternal pains were often subsumed into larger religiopolitical conversations concerned with dominance and asked how such curses of maternal pain, threatened or realized, might affect women in their reproductive years. The necessary next step is for sustained ideological critiques of these texts that emphasize their propagandistic functions and the unequal power dynamics at play.

Biblical scholars and theologians whose work is in environmental studies may find the sections in chapters 2 and 3 on environmental associations fruitful to their work. That divine blessings and curses of violence upon women's maternal health and the land are often intertwined, in recognition of their symbiotic relationship, is but one area that deserves further consideration. My reading supports ecological readings of Genesis 3, while pressing biblical scholars to include in their consideration specific aspects of women's reproductive health.[355] The emphasis on the human contribution to environmental factors

[355] See, for example, Peter Heinegg, "The Ecological Curse: A Reading of Genesis 3," *Cross Currents* 65.4 (2015): 441-47; and David G. Horrell, "War, Ecology, and Engagements with Biblical Texts: A Response," *Ecological Aspects of War: Engagements with Biblical Texts*,

in maternal pain may be of particular use to those who engage with biblical texts in the pursuit of intersectional environmental justice and in addressing social determinants of health.

Outside of biblical studies, this work may prove generative to theologians and others interested in maternal imagery of the divine. I echo Haskell's interest in seeing theologians reimagine these metaphors in light of women's actual experiences. Such conversations may prove particularly fruitful when placed in dialogue with the contextual examples of efforts to embrace feminine language for the divine.[356]

As I outlined in the introduction, the array of experiences that could be included under the term "maternal pain" is vast. My inclusion of modern medical research on certain embodied aspects of women's reproductive health is illustrative rather than comprehensive.

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ed. Anne Elvey and Keith Dyer with Deborah Guess (London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2017), 149-60. Anne Elvey's chapter in the same volume, "Reading the Magnificat in Australia in Contexts of Conflict," (45-68) might be further strengthened by the studies on maternal and infant health outcomes in contexts of civil violence. See discussion and references in the section, "Rereading Genesis 3-4: Violent Loss and Language of Blessing," in chapter 3.

[356] On a personal journey of exploring feminine divine, see Lucy Reid, *She Changes Everything: Seeking the Divine on a Feminist Path*, (London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2005). See also Irene Alexander, *Awakening Desire: Encountering the Divine Feminine in the Masculine Christian Journey* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018).

For instance, the biblical narratives of maternal pain I reference in chapter 3 touch on the vast array of experiences women could have that could be categorized as maternal pain which deserve further scholarly attention than they have received in this study.[357] These include rape, forced surrogacy, loss of protection of self and child, and physical and emotional pain directly resulting from pregnancy. It is my hope that other scholars and interpreters will bring to bear a broader array of experiences into this conversation about maternal pain. Conversation partners on these themes are numerous, including both evidence-based research and more personal, creative sources.

Ethical Implications

Both the subject matter of maternal pain and my methodological approach have ethical implications, particularly among those for whom Eve's story functions as scripture.

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[357] See, for instance, Kozlova's analysis of Hagar's ritual weeping in Genesis 21: Kozlova, *Maternal Grief*, 49-86. Bathsheba's narrative, sorely lacking in her response to her painful experiences in 2 Samuel 11-12, merits consideration, especially insofar as her experiences are representative of women's experiences of maternal pain that are ignored by storytellers. Though on the one hand the lack of a recorded response to Bathsheba's experiences painfully underscore patriarchal ideologies at play in biblical texts and their interpretation, on the other, the gap in the narrative makes room for a plethora of interpretations representative of women's individual responses to unplanned pregnancies, rape, and how those who have experienced trauma continue on with their lives.

My sustained focus on women's reproductive health raises questions about whether and to what extent we are working to alleviate such suffering. Speaking only within my own country, there are implications for women's equal access to healthcare, reasonable maternity leave, and humane immigration policies. For those communities who privilege the individual, we must note the ways in which patriarchal systems uphold and even worsen maternal pain among those whom the systems have not been built to benefit. And we must acknowledge, as with these ancient texts, that if our environmental system is destroyed, humanity will be taken down with it.

Bringing these matters into conversation with Genesis 3-4 poses particular advantages in that many interpretive communities are already accustomed to universalizing themes from the garden narrative. If for centuries readers have used Genesis 3-4 as a lens to speak about the nature of women with regard to a sinful nature or our role in society, we may also leverage these chapters to hold theological conversations about our varied experiences with maternal pain, associating environmental factors we encounter, and what may be done to alleviate them. My emphasis on the varied contingency of productions (readings), however, resists readings that homogenize women's experiences. Consequently,

I offer insights from some experiences of maternal pain as an invitation to an open-ended conversation about maternal pain.

My methodological approach speaks to the power of those who control scriptural interpretations. When receptions of biblical ideas, such as Eve as temptress, become the dominant interpretations, they function to control what the biblical text can be about. The damage of such interpretations of Eve wielded to uphold patriarchal structures has been well documented. There is also a loss of the fruits of individual and communal encounters with scripture that are never realized when under the shadow of dominant readings of a passage. Negating damaging interpretations of biblical texts is essential. The next step is to acknowledge, from places of scholarly or religious power, the legitimacy of other readings. To be sure, biblical interpreters have long been about subversive readings. Still, I have witnessed first-hand, on occasion, the difference made when such a reading is legitimized by a biblical scholar or religious leader. The present work, then, is in part an effort to valorize interpretations of Eve and maternal pain through the lens of lived experiences.

May the God of your ancestors come to your aid,
May el Shaddai, your ezer, bless you:
Blessings flowing down from the heavens above,
Blessings bubbling up from the depths below,
Blessings of breasts and womb.

May this blessing outrun she who proclaims it,
Spreading as far as the everlasting hills. [358]

[358] Adapted from Gen 49:25 and imagery from the Zohar 2:122b.

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