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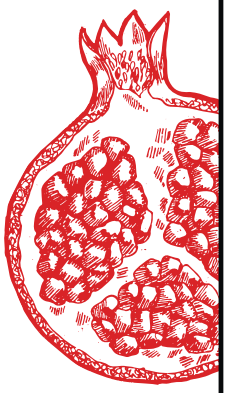

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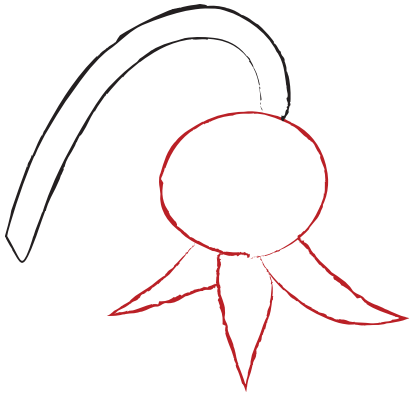

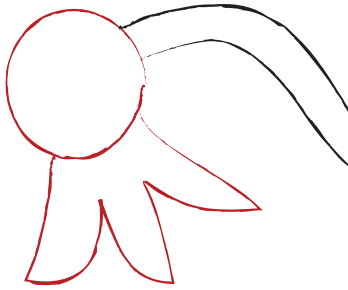

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BRINGING TO BIRTH: RELATIONSHIP WITH YHWH

Karen Langton

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Abstract

In the Hebrew Bible, YHWH controls the womb. He opens and closes the womb, controls gestation, and birth, and in Pss 22:10–11 and 71:6 there are physical descriptions, however brief, of YHWH bringing forth from the womb. The image in the text is physical. In both psalms, YHWH lays hands on the infant and in Ps 22:10 sets the infant on its mother's breast. The image is also conceptual. Being brought forth from the womb is a movement from darkness to light, from being enclosed to being exposed and vulnerable, from submerged in protective waters where YHWH's presence is guaranteed to being thrust into a world in which the supplicant accuses YHWH of abandoning him (Ps 22:1–3) and pleads with YHWH not to cast him off in his old age (Ps 71:9). The womb is a space of surety, existing in the same space as absolute doubt. It is the possibility of life and death, hope and devastation, great fear and overwhelming joy. It is a simultaneous knowing and unknowing. With this diverse range of physical aspects and conceptual parameters, the opening of the womb is one of the most compelling images to communicate humanities' relationship with YHWH.

In der hebräischen Bibel liegt die Kontrolle des Mutterleibes bei JHWH. Er öffnet und schließt den Mutterleib, kontrolliert Schwangerschaft und Geburt, und in Ps 22,10–11 und 71,6 gibt es – wenn auch nur kurze – Beschreibungen von JHWH als Geburtshelfer. Das Bild in den Texten ist physisch. Beiden Psalmen zufolge legt JHWH dem Säugling die Hände auf, und in Ps 22,10 legt er den Säugling an die Brust seiner Mutter. Das Bild ist auch konzeptionell zu verstehen. Aus dem Mutterleib hervorgebracht zu werden, ist eine Bewegung von der Dunkelheit zum Licht, vom Eingeschlossensein zu Enthüllung und Verletzlichkeit, von einem Zustand umgeben von schützender Flüssigkeit, in der JHWHs Anwesenheit garantiert ist, hinein in eine Welt, in der der Bittsteller JHWH beschuldigt, ihn verlassen zu haben (Ps 22,1–3), und bittet, ihn in seinem Alter nicht zu verlassen (Ps 71,9). Der Mutterleib ist ein Raum der Sicherheit, der im selben Raum existiert wie der absolute Zweifel. Er ist die Möglichkeit von Leben und Tod, Hoffnung und Verwüstung, großer Angst und überwältigender Freude. Er ist Wissen und Nichtwissen zugleich. Die Öffnung des Mutterleibs ist angesichts eines derartig vielfältigen Spektrums von physischen Aspekten und konzeptionellen Parametern eines der eindrücklichsten Bilder für die Beziehung der Menschheit zu JHWH.

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BRINGING TO BIRTH: RELATIONSHIP WITH YHWH

Karen Langton

Introduction

In the Hebrew Bible, YHWH controls the womb. He opens and closes the womb (Gen 20:17–18; 21:1; 29:31; 30:2, 17, 22; 29:31; 30:22; 1 Sam 1:5–6; Judg 13:3), forms inside the womb (Ps 139:13–16; Job 10:8–12; 31:15; Isa 44:24; 49:5; Jer 1:5), consecrates (Jer 1:5), calls from the womb (Isa 49:1–2), and brings to birth (Isa 66:9). And in Pss 22:10–11 and 71:6 there are physical descriptions, however brief, of YHWH bringing forth from the womb. I specifically use the terminology "brings forth from the womb" because in both psalms there is no vocabulary of birth, that is, ילד. Rather, the vocabulary refers to a womb, namely, רחם and בטן, and the image is of *how* YHWH brings forth from the womb. The image is not formulaic and, even though the image of YHWH bringing forth from the womb in both psalms has similarities, it is not identical. Further, it is only when the distinct differences of the two images are put into conversation within the context of the entire psalm that we are able to appreciate how the womb imagery contributes to meaning formation across the psalm.

YHWH bringing forth from the womb contributes meaning that is otherwise inaccessible. The image in the text is physical. In both psalms, YHWH lays hands on the infant and in Ps 22:10 sets it on its mother's breast. The image is also conceptual. Being brought forth from the womb is a movement from darkness to light, from being enclosed to being exposed and vulnerable, from submerged in protective waters where YHWH's presence is guaranteed to being thrust into a world in which the supplicant accuses YHWH of abandoning him (Ps 22:1–3) and pleads with YHWH not to cast him off in his old age (Ps 71:9). The womb is a space of surety, existing in the same space as absolute doubt. It the possibility of life and death, hope and devastation, great fear and overwhelming joy. It is a simultaneous knowing and unknowinwg. In other words, the opening of the womb is one of the most compelling images to communicate humanities relationship with YHWH. More importantly, given the distinct differences in the context of the psalms and the vocabulary, the writer is not broadly addressing humanity's relationship with YHWH. Rather, the image of YHWH bringing forth from the womb is the manifestation of each supplicant's personal and unique relationship with YHWH.

I ground my interpretation in Benjamin Harshav's definition of meaning formation and his theory of Integrational Semantics. Harshav explains that meaning is not formed in isolated units such as words, phrases, or sentences but is the integration of "discontinues semantic materials." These materials include the text as it appears on the page, the context of the text both inside and outside of the text, and the innumerable amounts of information required for a reader to make sense of the text. In other words, meaning formation is not one dimensional; rather, it is three dimensional. Additionally, just as meaning is not one dimensional, neither is it linear. Meaning is not created as a reader works through a text, that is, from verse to verse in a linear format; rather, meaning is formed as semantic materials unfold and overlap. Thus, the image of YHWH bringing forth from the womb in Ps 22:10–11 is integral to the image of YHWH laying the supplicant down in the dust of death in Ps 22:16. These images, in light of Ps 22:1, in which the supplicant complains that YHWH is so far, develop the concepts of near and far, as well as life and death. Meaning is dependent

on the organization of the text, that is, the specific vocabulary used and the order in which each image is placed. This unfolding and overlapping are not tied to the text, but they do not exist without the text. I am not saying that meaning is located in the text nor is it tied to the text; rather, the text, is the "floor" upon which all meaning is built (Harshav 2007, 39). Focusing on the details in the text prevents interpretations that offer overt theological interpretations, or, even more importantly, interpretations that minimalize the contribution of the womb to meaning formation.

The feminist theorist Cheryl Exum cautions against focusing on the written text or arguing that, in the Hebrew Bible, the female voice has been written out of the text in an effort to control women.[1] Rather, she advocates for going "beyond the boundaries of the literary text itself" (Exum 1997, 9). If this is not done, Exum explains, all that is left is a study of men's views of women. Exum's purpose in her book is to identify the hidden narratives of women's silenced voices. Undeniably, in both psalms, the mother's voice is silent. She has a womb that YHWH opens (Pss 22:10; 71:6) and breasts where YHWH places the baby (Ps 22:10). Exum addresses the silence of characters; however, the mother in these two psalms is not so much a character as she is an object. Her body, that is, her womb, serves a purpose, but her voice is unnecessary, inconsequential. By returning to the text, I am able to further understand how ancient writers used the womb to create meaning.

YHWH's Relationship with the Womb

Simply put, YHWH controls the womb. While man can control a female body through pure strength, he cannot control her womb. One can imagine that labor and delivery filled a man with terror, knowing there was nothing he could do. By assigning control of the womb to

[1] Exum (1997, xxiv) writes: "One of my discoveries in the course of writing this book was that, over and over, that agenda [i.e., of writing out the female voice] was motivated by male fear and desire in response to women's sexuality and the resultant need of patriarchy to control women."

YHWH, man is able control the uncontrollable. YHWH's control of the womb begins with control of fertility.[2] For example, in Gen 11:29 Abraham takes Sarah for his wife and the only thing revealed is that she is barren (Gen 11:30). Sarah does not speak until Gen 16:2, when she acknowledges that YHWH has prevented her from conceiving and offers Abraham her slave-girl, Hagar. Because of Hagar's obedience to YHWH, she conceives and gives birth to Ishmael (Gen 16:9–11). When Sarah is eavesdropping and hears that she will give birth to a son, she laughs (Gen 18:12), believing her womb is past the age of childbearing. In response, YHWH challenges her faithfulness. "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" (Gen 18:14). YHWH allows Sarah to conceive despite her age. In Gen 25:21, Isaac prays to YHWH to allow Rebekah to become pregnant. When Rachel says that she will die if she cannot have children (Gen 30:1), Jacob answers that it is God who closes Rachel's womb (Gen 30:2). YHWH does finally listen allowing Rachel to conceive (Gen 30:22). Hannah's desperation for YHWH to open her womb prompts her to promise the male child as a Nazarite (1 Sam 1:11). Samson's mother is barren and only conceives when YHWH appears to her telling her she will conceive a son (Judg 13:2–3). These stories, which all show that fertility is the reward for being faithful to YHWH, are representative of divine agency. Candida Moss and Joel Baden explain that the womb is a closed chamber and the only one who holds the key is YHWH (Moss and Baden 2015, 57). YHWH must intervene and this intervention is a direct line of communication with humanity, whether it be the angel of the Lord who speaks (Gen 16:11), YHWH himself (Gen 18:13–14; 25:23), or simply that YHWH listens (Gen 30:17).

In addition to commanding the opening and closing of the womb, YHWH controls the gestation process. YHWH declares that he is the one who forms in the womb (Isa 43:1; 44:2, 24; 49:5; Jer 1:5), and in

[2] The desperation of Sarah and Hannah to become pregnant points to the importance of fertility and a woman's place in society. Moss and Baden explain: "The laser-like focus on each woman's infertility, to the exclusion of nearly every other aspect of her identity, means that infertility is effectively her identity" (Moss and Baden 2015, 24). For a discussion on YHWH's control of fertility, see pp. 21–102.

Job 10:8–12 and Ps 139:13–16 YHWH carefully forms the fetus. In Job 10:8–12, Job describes the gestation process from an unformed substance (curdled cheese, Job 10:10) to skin, flesh, bones and sinews (Job 10:11). Similarly, in Ps 139, the supplicant describes how his kidneys are formed as YHWH knits him together (Ps 139:13). In this deep and dark womb, his bones are not hidden from YHWH (Ps 139:15). Even before the baby is formed, YHWH witnessed fertilization and sees his unformed substance (Ps 139:16). And YHWH controls birth (Isa 66:7–9). In Isa 66:1–6, YHWH proclaims that heaven is his throne and earth his footstool (v. 1), reminding the people he is the creator, all things belong to him (v. 2), and he will bring retribution to his enemies (v. 6) because they have not listened to him (v. 4). Then, in Isa 66:7, Zion gives birth without going into labor and without labor pains. When the nation wonders if this is possible, YHWH declares, "Shall I open the womb and not deliver? says the Lord; shall I, the one who delivers, shut the womb? says your God" (Isa 66:9 NRSV).

Presumably, the ancient writers were male, which leads to the question: "Did ancient writers have an understanding of the female body?" Several biblical texts suggest male knowledge of birth and complications of childbirth, such as the image in Hos 13:13 in which the child is unwise because of delays at the opening of the womb, preventing birth. Consider also 2 Kgs 19:3 (cf., Isa 37:3), in which children come to the opening of the womb and there is no strength to deliver them.[3] Other biblical descriptions of labor that indicate specific knowledge of childbirth include Jer 4:31, where Zion who is the laboring woman cries out like a woman giving birth to her first child.

Breach births are depicted in Gen 25:26, where Jacob is delivered hanging on to Esau's heel, and in Gen 38:28–30, where Zerha extends his hand through the womb and has to be repositioned to allow for the birth of Perez. Due to these two images, Eran Viezel concludes that men would have known more about animal births because animals such as sheep and cattle are delivered feet first (Viezel 2011, 689). In

[3] John Makujina describes Isa 37:3 as referring to a complication known in labor and delivery as dystocia in which the contraction of the uterus, i.e., labor pains, is not strong enough to dilate the cervix. Makujina 2016, 90.

breach births, the baby presents feet first rather than head first. Viezel explains that the image of Jacob holding on to Esau's heel when the babies were delivered is a description of a transverse lie position which will always lead to death or a macerated infant (Gen 25:26) meaning that Jacob could not have been born (Viezel 2011, 685–86). Therefore, there would not have been a story about Jacob. What Viezel fails to mention is that in the birth of twins, the type of presentation offered in Gen 25:26 is not atypical, and while the birth is difficult and can result in death for both the mother and baby, death is not a certainty.[4] Additionally, in twins, the presentation of a hand and the ability of the midwife or doctor to push the hand back into the birth canal to birth the first twin is not uncommon (Gen 38:28–30) and there is a good chance of survival.[5] More importantly, since the danger of breach births often ends in death, surely the man would have wanted to know why the infant and mother died and would most likely have been told that the baby presented feet first preventing the birth. This is certainly

[4] "Chapter 4: Pathologies during Pregnancy and Pregnancy-Related Disorders - Essential Obstetric and Newborn Care," 2020, https://medicalguidelines.msf.org/viewport/ONC/english/chapter-4-pathologies-during-pregnancy-and-pregnancy-related-disorders-51416661.html.

[5] This type of delivery is not uncommon in the birth of twins. A compound malposition presentation is when the baby is presented with the arm preceding the birth. This occurs when "the fetus is very small or dead or macerated." Samra et al. 1990, 234–36. In one labor study, the woman pregnant with twins was induced and labor started. The doctor's notes state, "One hour later vaginal examination revealed a compound presentation with the neonate's hand and forearm. This compound presentation persisted for more than 6 h, along with no change in cervical dilation… In our case, the infant's forearm and hand presented first into the birth canal, alongside the head, known as a compound presentation." Martinovski, Wilseck, and Mattson 2015, 79–81. The treatment is as follows. "Assist the woman to assume the knee–chest position. Push the arm above the pelvic brim and hold it there until a contraction pushes the head into the pelvis. Proceed with management for normal childbirth." World Health Organization 2017. One study out of Ghana described 152 transverse lie deliveries with two maternal deaths and 25 stillbirths and 37 requiring hospital care. The maneuver is dangerous but not impossible. "Management of the Fetus in Transverse Lie," https://somepomed.org/articulos/contents/mobipreview.htm?17/61/18398.

possible considering Hos 13:13, in which the baby עמד, "stands," at the mouth of the womb. The mouth of the womb certainly refers to the cervix, which is circular and when ripe for delivery looks like a mouth. In addition, a baby presents headfirst. If the feet present first, the midwife must reach into the womb and turn the baby around. And while translations do not reflect the baby physically presenting feet first, the vocabulary certainly points to a standing position.

Additional evidence of birthing knowledge occurs in Qumran texts, where there are references to the cervix being a "crucible." The opening of the womb is described in 1QH XI, 9:

> like a city fortified before [the enemy]. I was in distress like a woman giving birth to her firstborn, when pangs and painful labor have come upon her womb opening, causing spasms in the crucible of the pregnant woman. For children have come to the womb opening of death. (Schuller and Newsom 2012, 37)

Similarly, 1QH XI, 13, states "the crucible of the pregnant one. But she who is pregnant with venomous vanity (will be subject to) to painful labor, and the womb opening of the pit to all the works of terror" (Schuller and Newsom 2012, 37). Referring to the cervix as a "crucible" evokes images of fire, an apt description of what the cervix feels like when ripening. In fact, the cervix is sometimes called "the ring of fire" when the cervix is fully dilated and ready for the birthing process. If the child becomes stuck in the opening of the womb, labor during ancient times often ended in death for both mother and child.

The earliest gynecological text we have comes from the second-century physician Soranus of Ephesus, with the subsequent Latin translation of Soranus by Caelius Aurelianus, and includes a detailed account of labor and delivery, describing how the cervix dilates for labor and delivery as well as enumerating problems that might occur. Soranus notes that if the cervix has not dilated from 1 cm to 10 cm, the midwife must help the dilation. He explains how the cervix can widen so much that the fetus simply slips out. And, he describes how the cervix ages from fleshiness to a hardness depending on how many children a woman has delivered (Soranus and Temkin 1956, 74–75).

Given the birthing details involved in birthing twins (Gen 25:26; 38:28–30), descriptions of babies stuck at the cervix (2 Kgs 19:3; Isa 37:3; Hos 13:13), the details of gestation (Job 10:8–12; Ps 139:13–16), and the observations on the sound of a woman's cries in labor (Jer 4:31), it would appear that the biblical writers did have knowledge of the workings of the womb.[6]

YHWH as Midwife: Psalms 22 and 71

It is likely that ancient writers purposefully and skillfully used the image of YHWH bringing forth from the womb in both Psalms 22 and 71. Although there are similarities in the images, they are not identical. However, sometimes scholars homogenize the image of YHWH bringing forth from the womb and interpret YHWH's actions as those of a midwife. Phyllis Trible first suggested the interpretation of YHWH as midwife in 1973 as part of her attempt to "examine interactions between Hebrew Scriptures and the Women's Liberation Movement." Trible acknowledged that biblical literature is patriarchal but also emphasized that to reject the bible outright was to accept "male chauvinistic interpretations" (Trible 1973, 31). Trible's solution was to "reread" the Bible and to attempt a translation without sexism which included identifying feminine characteristics of YHWH. For example, in Hos 11:3, YHWH takes Ephraim into his arms and teaches Ephraim to walk. Trible's argument is that YHWH's care in teaching Ephraim is the activity of a mother and not that of a father in ancient Israel (Trible 1973, 32). Additional examples Trible identifies as "feminine imagery for God" include images of YHWH as a mother and nurse (Num 11:12; Isa 49:15; 66:13), a midwife (Pss 22:10–11; 71:6; Job 3:12), and one who gives birth (Deut 32:18; Isa 42:14) (Trible 1973, 32). Trible writes: "Midwife, seamstress, housekeeper, nurse, and mother: all these feminine images characterize Yahweh, the God of Israel" (Trible 1973, 34). Many scholars have followed Trible's lead,

[6] For a discussion on Assyrian and Babylonian midwifery, see Von Soden 1957.

and the interpretation of YHWH as midwife in Pss 22:9–10 and 71:6 is commonly repeated.[7]

For example, Dörte Bester, Marianne Grohmann, and Hanne Løland identify YHWH as midwife due to the fact that the action of delivering a baby in ancient society was performed by women.[8] Juliana Claassens devotes a chapter to discussing God as midwife in both Psalms 22 and 71,[9] and Nancy Declaissé-Walford notes that Psalm 71 echoes the image of YHWH as midwife in Psalm 22 (Declaissé-Walford 2012, 227; 2020, xliv–xlv). Ulrike Bail identifies YHWH in Psalm 22 and says YHWH is "perhaps" a midwife in Psalm 71 (Bail 2012, 250). And, in her discussion on Psalm 139, Fiona Black references both Pss 22:9 and 71:6 as containing images of YHWH as midwife (Black 2012, 27). These interpretations homogenize the image of the womb in both texts. This suggests that the womb in each psalm offers no unique meaning; therefore, the womb can be replaced. However, the texts are distinctly different, and it is only through highlighting this difference that we can experience the full impact of the text.

Psalm 22

The supplicant in Psalm 22 begins with an accusation that God has abandoned him. He begs for answers: Why has God forsaken him? Why is God so far away (v. 1)? The supplicant cries day and night and

[7] Schmitt 1985; Korpel 1990; Johnson 1992; Gruber 1992, 351–59; Foster 1994; Terrien 2003; Løland 2007, 157 n. 79; Bergmann 2008, 153–54; Claassens 2012.

[8] Dörte Bester (2007, 144) discusses the female image of God as midwife in both Psalms. She writes: „Da die Tätigkeit von Hebammen nach den Zeugnissen des Alten Testaments wie des Alten Orients von Frauen ausgeübt wurde, wird damit in Ps 71,6 wie in Ps 22,10a die Tätigkeit von Frauen für das Handeln Gottes transparent." "Since the activities of midwives according to the evidence of the Old Testament and of the Old Orient were exercised by women, in Ps 71: 6, as in Ps. 22:10, the activity of women becomes transparent for the action of God." See also Grohmann 2007, 65; Løland 2007, 157 n. 179.

[9] Claassens 2012, 64–79. Also see Løland 2007, 157 n. 79; Declaissé-Walford 2012, 225, 227.

still, God does not answer (v. 2). He remembers how his ancestors trusted in God and God saved them (vv. 4–5), so why does God not answer him? He is just a worm whom others scoff at. They mock him, turn their heads, and walk away (vv. 6–7). The people who pass by tell him that if he would commit his cause to YHWH, he will survive (v. 8). The supplicant appeals to YHWH and his appeal is couched in language of the womb (vv. 10–11) (cf. Job 10:8–12):

> כי־אתה גחי מבטן מבטיחי על־שדי אמי
> עליך השלכתי מרחם מבטן אמי אלי אתה
>
> Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast.
> On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God. (Ps 22:10–11 NRSV)

Scholars often interpret the image as that of a parent figure. For example, Mitchell Dahood explains that the supplicant is placed into YHWH's custody (Dahood 1965, 1:136, 139). Bernhard Duhm says the image is of YHWH laying the child in front of the father, who will either reject or accept the child,[10] while Gerstenberger explains the image is an "affirmation of confidence" by the supplicant towards YHWH who is insisting that YHWH acknowledge his responsibility as a parent (Gerstenberger 1988, 111). Some scholars focus on the mother's breast as a central image. James Mays emphasizes that the image is of a human

[10] Duhm (1922, 93) writes: „Angespielt wird v. 10 f. auf die Sitte, dass das neugeborene Kind vor dem Vater niedergelegt wird, damit der entscheide, ob es aufgezogen oder ausgesetzt werden soll; im ersteren Fall nimmt er es auf die Knie und übergibt es der Mutter oder Amme zum Säugen." "In v. 10 the custom is shown that the new-born child shall be laid down before the father, so that he may determine whether it is to be reared or expelled; In the former case, he takes it on his knees and hands it over to the mother or nurse for suckling." See, e.g., Gen 30:3; 48:12; 50:23. The same argument appears in Baethgen 1904, 93. For a discussion of the ancient practice of infant exposure, see Stol and Wiggermann 2000; Galpaz-Feller 2000. The exact practice of infant exposure is debated. Judith Grubbs emphasizes that one must differentiate between infant exposure and infant abandonment (2013, 83). Grubbs provides a detailed discussion of the history of infant exposure. For a discussion on infant exposure in the Graeco-Roman World, see Harris 1982.

father who lays the child to rest on his mother's breast.[11] Rashi explains that the supplicant gains trust through the mother's breast that is supplied by YHWH (Gruber 2007, 126). Similarly, Bester explains that the image depicts trust, but not necessary trust in YHWH. It is the trust that the supplicant experiences at the mother's breast.[12]

As noted above, an often-repeated interpretation of vv. 10–11 is that God is performing the actions of a midwife. In reference to Psalm 22, Trible argues that not only is God a midwife, but also the divine and maternal intertwine, with images melding and crossing so that God is both midwife and mother (Trible 1978, 61). She writes:

> In the first line, the divine you receives the infant from the womb and places it safely upon the breasts of the mother. Deity and mother appear at the beginning and end of this sentence, respectively. Their syntactic distance signals a content difference between divine midwife and human mother. But at the center of the poetry this distance lessens… Subject has become object; divine midwife has become divine mother. To be kept safe upon the breasts of the mother is to be cast upon God from the womb.[13]

Similarly, Juliana Claassens argues that the image of God as midwife is used to show that God is present in times of suffering just like parents are there for their children (Claassens 2006, 173). Two scholars offer an emotional element not present in the text. William Brown suggests that the womb serves to identify God as motherly, a term in itself that is problematic (Brown 2014, 412). And Tarja Philip writes: "The intimacy

[11] James Mays (2011, 10) writes, "This individual relationship is described by the use of a metaphor that portrays God in the role of a human father who takes the child as it comes from the womb, lays it on its mother's breast to be nursed, and thereafter furnishes the environment of provision and security in which life is lived."

[12] Bester (2007, 146) writes: „Es geht nicht um eine Vertrauensleistung des betenden Ichs, sondern um das Vertrauen, das ihm an der Mutterbrust zuteil wird, das es mit Nahrung und mütterlicher Zuwendung, eingeflößt bekommt." "It is not a question of the supplicant trust, but of the trust that is given to him in the mother's breast, which is fed with food and motherly affection."

[13] Trible 1978, 60. Bester 2007, 133 makes a similar argument to Trible.

between baby and the midwife, the first person who touches him, forms the basis of the close and warm relationship between them."[14] Goldingay identifies YHWH as midwife; however, he also adds that the infant's trust is on his mother's breast and the "expectancy of finding milk there" (Goldingay 2007, 330). And, in her discussion of "nonmale imagery for God," Gale Yee identifies God as the "holy midwife" (Yee 2018, 152).

Whether it be as a midwife or parent figure, the supplicant needs YHWH to step in and save his life. The image of YHWH bringing forth from the womb seems to break up the supplicant's lamentation with ideas of YHWH as a father or mother, suggesting a relationship of care and perhaps compassion. Ideally, the delivery of a baby is close, warm, and consoling. However, the description of YHWH bringing forth from the womb in Psalm 22 is not a comforting, tender scene. Instead, the image is of YHWH forcefully, perhaps even violently, removing a baby from the womb and throwing the baby down almost as if it is a dead body onto its mother's breast.

The key to interpreting Psalm 22 lies in the two verbs, גֹּחִי in v. 10a and הָשְׁלַכְתִּי in v. 11a. In v. 10a, גֹּחִי (from the root גחה), is not so easily translated. It is a *hapax legomenon* and typically translated as "took me" from the womb (e.g., NRSV, KJV, JPS) with a transitive meaning (Dahood 1965, 1:139). However, if גֹּחִי is emended to גָּחִי (from the root גיח), the result is a more forceful action, a bursting from the womb.[15] This interpretation can be sustained in that is used twice more in relation to giving birth. גיח is the same verb in Job 38:8, where YHWH prevents the sea from bursting forth from the womb. Also in Job 40:23, the River Jordan breaks or surges. And, in Mic 4:9–10, Zion is in labor

[14] Philip 2006, 103. Bester also identifies YHWH as midwife. Her book is specifically about body imagery. She emphasizes that Ps 22:10a is not about creation, but about the specific body image of God as midwife. She writes, "Denn in Ps 22,10 handelt es sich nicht um Schöpfungsbilder, sondern um Geburtsbilder." "For in Ps 22:10, there are not images of creation, but images of birth" (2007, 136).

[15] The entry in *DCH* 2:342–43 reads: "or em[ended]. גֹּחִי *one who extracts me* to גָּחִי in the same sense, from גיח *burst out*) 71_6 (if em. גזה *sever*)." See also *HALOT*, 187–89; Baethgen 1904, 63–64. According to the dictionaries just quoted, there is no further evidence of the use of this word in neighboring Semitic languages.

(Mic 4:9), escaping her enemies, and she is told to writhe in labor and burst forth (Mic 4:10).

In Ps 22:11a, the verb שלך (hoph. pf. first fem. sg.) is typically translated as the baby being "cast onto" YHWH. This interpretation does not capture the nuance of the word. Again, the intensity of the verb is lost in translation. In Jer 36:30, a dead body is שלך (hophal fem. ptc.), "thrown," into the road. Likewise, in 1 Kgs 13:24, a lion mauls a body and שלך, "throws," it in the road. In 2 Sam 20:21, a severed head is שלך (hophal masc. ptc.), "thrown," over a wall. And, in Jer 7:15, YHWH says he will שלך (hiphil pf. first sg.), "cast," the people out of his sight. Hagar, dying in the desert and unable to care for her child, casts her baby under the shrub (Gen 21:15). YHWH, in his aggression, accuses Jerusalam of her abominations, saying she says she was not swaddled when she was born but was cast out into an open field and loathed (Ezek 16:5). Goldingay explains the image as bursting out of the womb and notes that perhaps the image is to represent the breaking of the amniotic fluid. Noting the forcefulness of the verbs, Marianne Grohmann says the birth is not gentle.[16] However, the language is not only forceful, suggesting the breaking of the waters during birth; it is violent and suffused with bloodshed. Every image here involves death and damage done to the integrity of the body. Jeremiah 7:15 is significant because the context recalls the destruction of Shiloh, the death of the Elides, and very likely the disastrous battle of Aphek.

The womb is the first of several body-centric images that follow. The supplicant is brought to life from the womb, but the remainder of the psalm recounts how his body is slowly decaying into death, a cruel reversal of birth. The supplicant pleads for YHWH to come near (v. 12). Being encompassed by the womb, he was safe, but now the supplicant is surrounded by bulls (v. 13) that open their mouths, perhaps reflecting the opening of the womb (v. 13). Rather than being brought to birth, the supplicant is being delivered into the mouth of a

[16] Grohmann (2007, 310) notes: "Gleichzeitig zeigen die Verben גחה q. (herausziehen; V. 10) und שלך ho. (geworfen sein; v. 11), dass Geburt keineswegs als' sanft' wahrgenommen wird." "At the same time the verbs גחה q. (pull out; V. 10) and שלך ho. (be thrown; V. 11) show that birth is not perceived as 'gentle.'"

lion (v. 14). The supplicant says that his body is poured out, his bones out of joint, and his heart melting (v. 15). Evildoers encircle him and his hands and feet have shriveled (v. 16). These images are reminiscent of a stillborn baby whose head might be caved in, bones out of joint. The skin on a stillborn baby separates from the bones and slips away if touched. All the organs and tissues are softened and fluid and blood leak as if the body is melting. The progression of this loss of fluid results in a baby that looks mummified (Faith n.d.). The supplicant's strength is dried up like a potsherd (Ps 22:16) as YHWH, the one who brought him from the womb, has laid set him in the dust of death (Ps 22:17).

Trust in YHWH is a requisite for a relationship with YHWH. The psalm begins with the supplicant pleading for YHWH to help, but YWHH is silent (v. 3). He recalls how YHWH saved his ancestor (vv. 4–6). The people remind him that he must commit his cause to the Lord and only then will YHWH save him (vv. 8–9). As Grohmann points out, the word "trust" occurs three times in Psalm 22 (vv. 5, 6, 10) and the theme of trust anchors the psalm.[17] Robert Alter says the purpose of the image of YHWH bringing forth from the womb is to show the supplicant's trust in YHWH. The fact that God brought him to birth is "proof that his present state of abjection will not continue" (Alter 2009, 72). However, the image of YHWH bursting the supplicant from the womb and throwing him down on his mother and then into the dust of death suggests that the supplicant cannot trust YHWH. Further, it is specifically the image of the womb that suggests that the supplicant questions if he should have ever trusted YHWH.

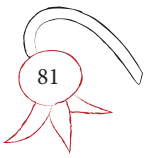
Relationship with YHWH requires absolute trust even in the face of absolute doubt. By invoking the womb, the supplicant can acknowledge YHWH as creator, proving his faith in YHWH yet still communicating

[17] Grohmann (2007, 57) writes: "Die Verse 10–11 sind gut im Kontext von Ps 22 verankert: מבטיחי (*du gibst mir Vertrauen/birgst mich sicher*; בטח Part. *hi.*) in V. 10b nimmt das in V. 5.6 dreimal vorkommende בטחו (*sie vertrauten* בטח Perf. q.) auf." "Verses 10–11 are well anchored in the context of Ps 22: מבטיחי (you give me confidence/securely me, בטח Part. hi.). The word בטחו in v. 10b occurs three times in vv. 5 and 6 (they trusted בטח Perf. q.)."

his distrust by describing his violent birth. By describing the process of his birth, the supplicant invites the reader to imagine the most vulnerable moment one can experience. Being brought out of the womb can end in birth or death and all is in the hands of YHWH. The image is powerful because the womb is multivalent. Most importantly, it is the one place where YHWH's presence is guaranteed and represents a connection that cannot be breached: YHWH's control of the womb is irrefutable.

Psalm 71

While the issues of trust in Psalm 22 revolved around the supplicant's lack of trust as he feels YHWH has abandoned him, in Psalm 71, the supplicant proclaims his trust in YHWH (v. 1). In Psalm 71, the supplicant is so confident in his relationship with YHWH that, rather than pleading with YHWH as the supplicant does in Psalm 22, he makes demands. In v. 2, YHWH must incline his ear to him (הטה־אלי אזנך hiphil imp.) and "deliver" him (והושיעני hiphil imp.; פלטני piel imp.). The supplicant demands that YHWH be his rock and fortress (v. 3) and tells YHWH to פלטני (piel imp.), "deliver," him. The supplicant in Psalm 22 asserts that YHWH has abandoned him. In contrast, in Psalm 71, the supplicant declares that he has trusted in YHWH since he was a child (v. 5). This affirmation of trust is repeated in 71:6, when YHWH brings the baby from the womb:



> עליך נסמכתי מבטן ממעי אמי אתה גוזי בך תהלתי תמיד
> I have leaned on you from the womb. From my mother's womb you severed the umbilical cord. My continuous praise is of you.

As noted above, it is common to compare Ps 71:6 to Ps 22:9 and to identify YHWH as midwife. For example, Declaissé-Walford (2012, 227) says Ps 71:6 "echoes the midwife imagery of Psalm 22," and Bester refers to the imagery in Ps 22:10–11 and Ps 71:6 as "parallel." Bester explains that both texts address the inner body of the mother and both

texts show God as midwife because the context of the image is the trust the supplicants have had in YHWH since they were born.[18]

However, the vocabulary used to describe YHWH bringing forth from the womb is not identical. There is no mention of laying the supplicant down as in Ps 22:10. The comparable word is the verb in question in Ps 71:6, גוֹזִי. גוזי is from the root גזה, and is also a *hapax legomenon*.[19] In the BDB, גוזי is rendered as "cut off" or "sever." In a translation that sounds like it is referring to a caesarean section, the BDB translation is "severed me from my mother's womb." This evokes images of a womb being opened rather than the umbilical cord cut (BDB, 159). Claassens interprets the reference similar to the BDB translation. She writes:

> Actually the "severing" or "cutting loose" language may be explained in terms of the duties of a midwife, who in a situation of near-death, where both the mother and the baby would most certainly die, would as a last resort cut open the mother's womb to free the baby. (Claassens 2007, 768)

Although evidence indicates that cesarean sections were performed during ancient times, the first written record of baby and mother surviving such a procedure does not occur until 1500.[20] However, the image of a woman being cut open in order to deliver a baby does not

[18] Bester (2007, 144) state: „Die Nähe beider Texte wird durch die jeweils partizipiale Formulierung der Aussage noch verstärkt. Darüberhinaus steht das Hebammenbild in beiden Texten im Kontext von Vertrauensaussagen, die auf die vom Lebensanfang an bestehende Beziehung zwischen Gott und dem betenden Ich rekurrieren." "The similarity of both texts is reinforced in particular with the participial formula statement. Moreover, the midwifery image in both texts occurs in the context of statements of trust which refer back to the relationship between God and the praying I, a relationship that exists from the beginning of life."

[19] Dahood (1965, 2:173) argues that "gōzī remains an unsolved puzzle."

[20] The term "cesarean section" does not refer to Julius Caesar's birth and was not officially a term until 1598. The association with Caesar is due to the fact that he enacted a law stating that if a baby's life was in danger, the mother was to be cut open. "Cesarean Section – A Brief History: Part 1," Exhibitions (U.S. National Library of Medicine), https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/cesarean/part1.html.

fit within the context of the rest of the psalm, particularly in light of the paucity of bodily images across the text. *HALOT* has "cut off (the umbilical cord)" (*HALOT* 1:185–86). Samuel Terrien says it "might" refer to the cutting of the umbilical cord but could also simply refer to drawing forth from the womb. However, he describes elements that are not in the text. He writes: "The birth had perhaps been a difficult one. God acted to save the life of a half-dead infant" (Terrien 2003, 512). This type of interpretation aligns more with imager in Psalm 22. Bester translates "to cut the umbilical cord."[21]

James Crenshaw adds an emotional interpretation filled with disturbing imagery of the female body. He writes: "Trapped in the turbulent waters of the depths, the psalmist prays to be extracted from the jaws of death" (Crenshaw 2001, 151). In Crenshaw's interpretation, the opening of the womb is identified only with death, but the image is powerful only if the opening of the womb represents both life and death. In line with BDB, *HALOT*, and *DCH*, I translate "to cut the umbilical cord." The image of YHWH bringing to birth in Ps 71:6 is not reminiscent of opening pregnant bellies. The action of cutting the umbilical cord lends an image that is more distant than the image of bursting from the womb in Ps 22:10. Psalm 22 depicts the physical image of a womb opening. It invites the reader into the female physical space. In the cutting of the umbilical cord, on the other hand, the baby is already delivered, and the woman's naked vulnerable body, probably already covered with a sheet, is not part of the image.

The emotions of terror and fear that are prevalent in Psalm 22 are absent in Psalm 71. If one considers the image as a caesarean birth or

[21] Bester (2007, 143) states: „Die Annahme der lebensbestimmenden Bedeutung des Abschneidens der Nabelschnur steht möglicherweise im Hintergrund des Bildes von Ps 71,6. Sicher ist, dass das betende Ich in Ps 71 Gott als den sieht, in dessen Hände sein Geschick von Anfang an gelegt ist. Diese Überzeugung findet im Bild von Gott, der die Nabelschnur durchtrennt, seinen konkreten Ausdruck." "The assumption of the life-determining importance of cutting the umbilical cord may be found behind the image of Ps 71:6. What is certain is that, in Psalm 71, the praying self sees God as the one in whose hands his destiny has been laid from the beginning. This conviction finds its concrete expression in the image of God who cuts the umbilical cord."

a difficult birth, one might conjure up bloody images. Psalm 22 is ripe with references to the human body: breasts (v. 10); gaping mouths of lions (v. 14); the supplicant's body being poured out like water, bones, heart, and breast (v. 15); mouth dried up, tongue, and jaw (v. 16); hands and feet (v. 17); and bones (v. 18). However, in Psalm 71, other than the cutting of the umbilical cord in v. 6, bodily references are sparse and idiomatic: the supplicant requests for YHWH to incline his ear (v. 2), his mouth is filled with praise (v. 8), his mouth will tell of YHWH's deeds (v. 15), he has grey hair (v. 18), and his lips shout for joy (v. 23).

The supplicant in Psalm 71 demonstrates his confidence by not lamenting God's absence. Instead, he proclaims what he will do *because* he trusts in YHWH. He says, "I will hope" (v. 14), "my mouth will tell" (v. 15), "I will come praising" (v. 16), "I proclaim" (v. 17), and "I proclaim to generations" (v. 18). The supplicant's seemingly independent tone could be attributed in part to the fact that he is an old man (vv. 9, 18). He refers to his long life and asks God not to leave or forsake him until he has time to teach the new generation about YHWH's strength and power (v. 18). Whereas the supplicant in Psalm 22 accuses YHWH of throwing him in the dust of death (v. 16), in Ps 71:20 the supplicant says YHWH will bring him up from the depths of the earth (v. 20).[22] This type of agrarian imagery also occurs in Psalm 92, in which the righteous flourish like palm trees and grow like cedars (Ps 92:13). The righteous are planted in the house of the Lord and still bring forth fruit in old age (Ps 92:15). The association of the womb with the depths of the earth is also present in Job. Job bemoans that he was not left in his womb to die, buried like a stillborn infant (Job 2:16), so he could be lying down quiet and finding joy and peace in his grave (Job 3:17–22). Job blames his womb. If he had not been born, he would have no troubles. Job's wish is to return to the womb, to the dark depths of the earth. Perhaps the reference to YHWH bringing up from the depths of the earth suggests a rebirth, a restoration to his former glory, which is all the supplicant is asking for (Ps 71:21).

[22] Claassens (1971, 763) writes: "The psalmist's confident, almost over-optimistic proclamation of the certainty of God's deliverance sounds throughout the psalm (cf. vv. 6, 8, 14–17, 19) forming a resounding climax in vv. 21–24."

The image of the womb in Ps 71:6 does not invite the type of visceral feeling as Ps 22:10–11. Neither does it invite images of vaginal jaws of death (Crenshaw) or a dangerous birth (Terrien, Claassens). The womb is surrounded by images of trust, praise, and safety. The supplicant leans against YHWH (Ps 71:6). Interestingly, the female body is mostly absent. Although there is a reference to the mother's womb, the supplicant is not placed onto his mother's breast (Ps 22:10). The image of cutting an umbilical cord does not invite bodily images of a birth. The birth has occurred, perhaps the woman's legs covered, and the baby has been handed to the person who will cut the umbilical cord, in this case, YHWH. The supplicant in Psalm 71 trusts YHWH and while he is having a difficult time, he feels confident that YHWH will intervene and bring him back to his place of honor.

Conclusion

One thing remains certain in both psalms: ancient writers relied on the image of the womb to contribute meaning that is otherwise inaccessible. The image of the opening of the womb is effective because it is a place in between. It is the possibility of birth and the fear of death. It is confidence when a labor is easy and terror when labor is hard. Most importantly, it is movement. It is a movement from dark to light, from non-being to being, and from being safe to being vulnerable.

Whether it be YHWH claiming all the first born who breach the womb belong (Exod 13:2; 34:19), holding back the undulating waters of the birthing sea (Job 38:8), or Zion writhing in labor and bursting forth (Isa 66:7–9), the womb is a primeval image that encompasses all life. And, as a place of passage, it is also a story. In Psalm 22, it is a story of a turbulent relationship with YHWH. In Psalm 71, it is the story of a long-held and secure relationship with YHWH. By turning the focus on the actions of YHWH rather than finding a title for YHWH, be that midwife, mother, or father, we are able to see that understanding the contribution of the womb is crucial to the overall message of the psalm.

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