

Pregnancy and Birth in the Bible and Ancient Egypt (Comparative Study)

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Birth is considered a joyous occasion in ancient writings. It is a commandment that contains within the possibility of settling the world. The joy of birth is mixed with pain „I will greatly multiply the pain of your childbearing; in sorrow shall you bring forth children“ (Genesis 3:16). This contrast highlights a unique aspect of a process which involves conflicting earthly forces: joy and pain, in addition to heavenly forces: God's intervention. Birth and pregnancy are mentioned often in the Bible although because of their frequency, there is no detailed description of actual births. Details of birth and pregnancy are only learned from occasional hints.

A similar difficulty arises in the collection of sporadic Egyptian sources. Important studies on pregnancy and birth in ancient Egypt were written, but they rely on diverse Egyptian literature. The documentation is taken from various spheres: myths, medical papyri, wisdom taught from the books of the dead, letters and tombstones, in addition to archeological findings¹.

Pregnancy and birth are mentioned in various Biblical texts: legal writings, Biblical narratives, prophecies and in the books of wisdom and was also researched in depth in various studies.²

This paper will try to focus on the similarities and differences in the perspectives on conception, the meaning of fertility and birth between the two neighboring cultures by reviewing attitudes toward the woman giving birth and the husband during the birth.

Infertility

Biblical writings show how important it was for every married couple to have children. It may even be said that the purpose of the marriage was to produce offspring. Prior to her marriage, a bride often received her family's blessing that she produce many offspring (Genesis 24:60). God blessed the patriarchs with numerous offspring, because only then could his promise to Abraham to make him the father of many nations (Genesis 17:4-8) be realized. Offspring are perceived as a person's pride (Proverbs 17:6) and as his reward from God (Psalms 127:3).

The first commandment Israel was given was to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28). This blessing is repeated after the great flood (Genesis 9:1-7). The first mother is called Hava (from the Hebrew root for the word life, *hai*) the mother of all living things (Genesis 3:20). Her name is linked to life, the giving of life.³

¹ There are several medical papyri which contain sections on fertility: Ebers papyrus, Kahun papyrus, Edwin Smith Papyrus, Carlsberg no. VIII, Chester Beatty, Berlin papyrus. For further information see B. Watterson, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, A. Stutton Press, London, 1991, p. 75-76, 84-93; G. Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, London 1993, British Museum Press, p. 75-91; J.M. Stevens, 'Gynaecology from Ancient Egypt', *Medical Journal of Australia*, 2, 1975, p. 949-952.

² Y. Zakovitch, „Between have no fear for it is another boy for and have no fear for you have born a boy,“ A Study of Parallels, *Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies*, 1944, pp. 9-16; Y. Amit, „There was a certain man... who's name was....“ Variation of Editing and its Purposes, *Beit-Mikra*, 30, 1995, pp. 388-399; Y. Amit, „Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?“ (Samuel 1:8), *A feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*, Brenner, A. (ed.), Sheffield, 1994, p. 68-76.

³ G.R. Driver, 'Hebrew Mothers', *ZAW* 67, 1955, p. 246-248. We learn about the importance of birth from the Bible's attitude towards motherhood and from the emphasis places in it on the special mother-child relationship;

Often the Biblical author casually notes a birth „and she conceived and she bore“ primarily as part of genealogical lists. Occasionally divine intervention is highlighted more, as in events with underlying theological motives such as „I have acquired a child from the Lord“ (Genesis 4:1) and „For God has appointed me another seed“ (Genesis 4:25).

Divine intervention intensifies with each visit to the barren. Jacob says to Rachel: „Am I in the place of God who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb“ (Genesis 30:2). The barren woman is told of the coming birth by an angel, messenger, man of God, etc. For example: the Shunamite woman and Elisha (Kings II 4:18-14), Sara and the angels (Genesis 18:9-14), the angel and Manoah’s wife (Judges 13:16), the story of Hanna (Samuel I 1:17) and a similar idea recurs in the story of Hagar (Genesis 16:11) and in the words of the prophet Isaiah (7:14; 8:3). The barren woman is miserably unhappy. In order to further emphasize her pain, the motif of the prolific mother is repeatedly contrasted with the barren mother as in the cases of Hagar, Sara, Rachel, Leah, Hanna and Prina.

The barren woman, in her despair, prays to God and with the help of prayer hopes to be answered. God remembers the barren woman’s prayer, i.e., „And God remembered Rachel...“ (Genesis 30:22-23), in the story of Hanna, „And God remembered her“ (Samuel I 1:19) and in the story of Rebecca, the Bible stresses that God was answering Isaac’s prayer (Genesis 25:21).

Divine intervention in remembering the plight of the barren is also expressed in the children’s names. Using hints and secrets, the Biblical author is relaying a clear theological message – due to God’s will the barren woman conceived or as in the case of Michal, daughter of Saul, her fate is sealed „And Michal, the daughter of Saul, had no child to the day of her death“ (Samuel II 6:23). The story of Ruth and Boaz on the threshing floor (Ruth, chapter 3) as well as the story of Lot and his daughters (Genesis 19:30-38) highlight various attempts to circumvent the problem of no offspring⁴.

The problem of a lack of children could surely have been easily solved through divorce, whereby each spouse is free to choose another spouse. This could be done either by marrying someone else or by preserving the marital framework and resolving the problem of no children with the help of another woman (alternate mother). Examples of this appear in the story of Sara and Hagar and when Rachel does not have children and is jealous of her sister, Leah, she brings her maid, Bilha to Jacob (Genesis 30:3). Leah does the same after she has already borne four children – she gives her maid, Zilpa, to Jacob (Genesis 30:9). In all of the stories described in the Book of Genesis, the initiative to expand the family comes from the primary woman. It should be noted that the relationship between the husband and maid is not a marriage relationship. Another way of solving the problem of infertility was via a polygamous marriage. Yet another way of having offspring was via adoption. Within the collection of Biblical laws there are no specific laws for adoption. The Biblical family is based on family name and blood relationships and the institution of adoption is contrary to this approach. That is apparently why the Bible does not specifically mention laws of adoption⁵.

J.S. Ackerman, The Literary Context of the Moses Birth Story (Ex. 1-2), *Literature Courses of Biblical Narratives* Vol. 1, Nashville Abingdon Press, New York, 1974, pp. 74-119.

⁴ Y. Zakovitch, The Life of Samson (Judges 13-16), A Critical Literary Analysis, Jerusalem, 1982, p. 73; Y. Zakovitch, Through the Looking Glass: Reflections on Stories in the Bible, Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995, pp. 23-26, 30-33, 37-39; Y. Amit, Op. Cit., 1994, p. 68-76; Y. Amit, op. cit., 1995, pp. 388-399.

⁵ J. Van Seters, The Problem of Childlessness in Near Eastern Law and the Patriarchs of Israel, *JBL* 87, 1968, 401-408; S. Paul, The Patriarchate in the Light of the Nuzi Documents, in *Dine Israel*, Vol. II, Tel Aviv, 1970, pp. 23-28. G.H. Tigay, Adoption, *Eretz Israel*, 11, 1971, pp. 289-301; S. Paul, Adoption Formulae, *Eretz Israel*,

In Egypt, nature and the lives of man and the gods are intertwined. Natural phenomena were, in the eyes of the ancient Egyptian, a reflection of the life cycles of man and the gods, of the processes of conception, birth, life and death. The unique physical conditions of the Nile valley fashioned the Egyptians' patterns of religious thought. They compared a woman's organs and life cycle to events in nature. According to this perception, the womb is compared to lower Egypt and conception, birth, life and death are linked to the Nile which symbolizes the growth of flora and the development of life. A song of praise to the Nile expresses part of the harmonious divine order. The act of bowing to the Nile also encompasses in it a song of praise to man⁶. The great importance attributed by the Egyptians to childbearing is evident in the art, wall drawings and sculptures depicting family scenes. Parents are portrayed standing behind their children. Occasionally, young children are seated on their parents' laps or on low stools – scenes reminiscent of the text in Psalms (128:3) „Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the recesses of your home, your children like olive saplings around your table.“ In the instructions in the Egyptian book of wisdom, we read:

Take a wife while you are young,
That she make a son for you;
She should bear for you while you are youthful.
It is proper to make people.
Happy the man whose people are many.
He is saluted on account of his progeny.⁷

„Let it be that women bear sons and daughters and are not childless.“ In Petahotep's instructions it is written: do not argue against the lack of children – a precept indicating the emptiness felt in the absence of fertility. The desire for offspring is evident in an Egyptian blessing. A woman should give birth to sons and daughters and not be barren⁸. Despite the great importance the Egyptians attributed to fertility, Egyptian documents offer no specific encouragement to have many children similar to the Biblical command of „be fruitful and multiply.“ It is known that the aristocracy was familiar with the use of contraceptive methods. These methods combined medical knowledge with magical utterances. Contraceptives were given only to women.

The longing for offspring is evident in the considerable attention given to the topic of barrenness and fertility in medical papyri. They include, for example, a series of evaluations of a woman's ability to conceive.

To tell a women who will give birth from and one who will not...

Most diagnoses are based on the assumption that a fertile woman has a clear passage from the vagina to the rest of her body organs.

14, 1978, pp. 31-36; E. Neufeld, *Ancient Hebrew Marriage Laws*, Longmans Green, London, New York, 1944, p. 265.

⁶ W. Westendorf, *Geburt*, LÄ II, 1977, p. 459-462; W. Westendorf, *Schwangerschaft*, LÄ V, 1984, p. 757.

⁷ M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. II, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1976, p. 136.

⁸ A. Erman, *Life in Ancient Egypt*, Dover Publications, 1971, p. 152; M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature I*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1975. The Instruction of Prince Hardjedef, p. 58; The Instruction of Ptahhotep, p. 69.

For example, in the Kahun papyrus⁹:

A crushed plant is mixed with milk of a woman who has given birth to a boy. If another woman drinks it and vomits, she will give birth. If she emits wind, she will never give birth.

The Kahun papyrus relates the case of a woman who wishes to bear children. Her desire to conceive is considered a physical ailment. There are descriptions of anguish and depression in women unable to conceive. The medical papyri describe a case, referred to as difficult, of a woman who lies in bed and does not want to get up. Alongside, the description of the case, the diagnosis is listed – desire to conceive. The remedy – a special potion promoting conception¹⁰. Many of the potions used to prevent infertility contain bededu-ka, a type of watermelon linked to fertility in Egyptian mythology. According to the Egyptian myth, when Seth was courting Isis, he appeared in the form of an ox. During his tireless wooing of Isis, he experienced serious frustration. He masturbated, spilled his seed on the ground and this particular type of watermelon was germinated from that¹¹.

Another way of asking for offspring is praying in a temple, something which is reminiscent of Hanna's prayer. A late Egyptian story dating from the Roman era and called *Setne khamwas and si osire* lacks its opening, but from what follows it is almost certain that it tells of Setne and his wife who hope to bear offspring. According to the material in our hands, Setne's wife is described as lying in a temple in the hope that her prayer will be answered. She remains in the temple to sleep and hears a voice command her:

Find a melon vine growing there, break off a branch with its gourds and grind it. Make it into a remedy put it in water and drink it... you will receive that fluid of conception.

And indeed she conceives¹² – she is remembered by the gods.

An additional way of asking for offspring was via letters to the dead in the hope that they would encourage and help the opening up of the womb. In a letter dating from the first Middle period, a son asks his dead father to take revenge on those responsible for his wife's

⁹W. Westendorf, Beiträge aus und zu den medizinischen Texten, ZÄS 92, 1966, p. 144-154; ZÄS 96, 1970, p. 145-149; H. Brunner, Fruchtbarkeit, LÄ II, 1977, p. 336-344.

¹⁰M. Rosalin & J.J. Janssen, *Growing up in ancient Egypt*, The Rubicon Press, 1990, p. 3; J. Worth Estes, *The Medical Skills of Ancient Egypt*, Science History Publication USA, 1989 p. 56 off; H. Speert, *Iconographia Gyniatrica*, F.A. Davis Company, Philadelphia, 1973, p. 43 off; T. Cianfrani, *A Short History of Obstetrics and Gynecology*, Charles C Thomas, Springfield, Illinois, USA 1960, p. 26 of; P. Findley, *Priests of Lucina, The Story of Obstetrics*, Little Brown and Company, Boston, 1939, p. 10ff.

¹¹L. Manniche, *An Ancient Egyptian Herbal*, British Museum Press, 1993, 92.

¹²M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature III*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1980, p. 138. This potion cannot be compared with the story of the mandrakes in Genesis 30:14, since in the Bible it was Leah who gave the mandrakes to Rachel who conceived, not Rachel who took them from her. On this, see: A. Shinan and Y. Zakovitch, *The Story of the Mandrakes, Genesis 30:14-18*, Early Translations and Ancient Jewish Literature, Research Projects of the Institute of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, 1986, p. 74.

Josephus Flavius adds information on the mandrake and its pregnancy – and birth – fostering properties; J. Flavius, *ANT*, Vol. I., Book I, pp. 307-308, 32-33. On potions with arousing qualities see: L. Keimer, *Die Pflanze des Gottes Min* ZÄS 59, 1924, 140-143; W.R. Dawson, *Studies in Egyptian Medical Texts*, L.E.A. 18, 1932, p. 150-154.

barrenness and to see to it that she conceives. Furthermore, he asks that his sister give birth to another son. Inside many graves, homes and sacred compounds in Deir el Medina, naked figurines were found, usually with the pubic triangle marked. Their presence in graves can be explained as a sign that the deceased hoped with their help to be reborn in the afterlife; their presence in temples can be explained as a ritual encouraging and requesting offspring. Often, there are no inscriptions on these figurines, but their presence in the temples of Hathor, the goddess of fertility, indicates that they were brought by people praying for offspring¹³.

If all medical and magical means were of no avail, Egyptian society found other solutions for the problem of infertility. Just as in Biblical society, there was in Egypt also the phenomenon of taking another wife, usually a maid, who enabled the husband to be remembered and have offspring, while the wife served as a mother to the newborn. The children were considered heirs in every respect and when the time came, they had to arrange all the burial and funeral ceremonies, as well as everything related to the rituals of death. There is a document from Deir el Medina describing a married woman who was impregnated by someone other than her husband. It is unclear whether this appeal to another man was due to male sterility, but apparently among the workers' class there was not always careful inspection of children's lineage. The polygamous option was also available, but usually was only possible in the upper classes with the most common solution being adoption, primarily for purposes of inheritance and usually included the clearly defined task of making all necessary arrangements for the dead. There is a legal document from the Ramses period allowing a couple to divorce due to a lack of offspring.

In the Bible, birth and infertility are part of God's hidden plans and therefore a family may not be dismantled because of a lack of offspring¹⁴.

Pregnancy and Birth

In the Bible, there is no description of the course of the pregnancy and the husband's or close family's attitude toward the pregnant woman other than the law stated in Exodus 21, verse 22 whereby a malicious attack against a pregnant is considered the utmost cruelty (see also, Kings II, 8:12; Hosea 14:1; Amos 1:13). An attack against a fetus is not considered murder, because a fetus is not as significant as a living being¹⁵.

The Bible does not contain precise details about the course of a pregnancy. The author uses the phrase „And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled“ (Genesis 25:24).

The Bible imposes no restrictions or specific commandments on a pregnant woman with the exception of the story of Manoah's wife in which she is told to refrain from eating certain foods which may affect the fetus. Despite the clear theological message in this commandment, it is apparent from this that already in this period it was known that the foods eaten by the pregnant woman affect the fetus. A similar phenomenon was evident in Egypt as well.

¹³G. Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, London 1993, British Museum Press, p. 76-77.; A.H. Gardiner, A New Letter to the Dead, *JEA* 16, 1930, 19-22; S. Schott, Die Bitte um ein Kind auf einer Grabfigur des frühen Mittleren Reiches, *JEA* 16, 1930, p. 23. On fertility figurines and different opinions on their functions see: B.J. Kemp, Wall paintings from the workmen's village at el-Amarna, *JEA* 65, 1979, pp. 47-53.

¹⁴A.H. Gardiner, Adoption extraordinary, *JEA* 26, 1940, 23-29; G. Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, British Museum Press, 1993, p. 62 off; M.L. Bierbrier, Terms of relationship at Deir el Medina, *JEA* 66, 1980, p. 102; W.K. Simpson, Polygamy in Egypt in the Middle Kingdom, *JEA* 60, 1974, p. 100-105; N. Kanawati, Polygamy in the Old Kingdom, *SAK* 4, 1976, p. 149-160.

¹⁵B.S. Childs, *Exodus*, Old Testament Library, 1974, pp. 470-474; M. Weinfeld, Killing a Fetus and the Viewpoint of Jewish Tradition as Compared with Other Viewpoints, *Zion* 42, 1977 pp. 129-142.

When her pregnancy becomes difficult, Rebecca goes to inquire of the Lord (Genesis 25:22-24). The information about Rebecca's feelings and her condition are also provided in detail because it is loaded with theological messages: news about the fate of the twins – „Two nations are in your womb and two peoples shall be separated from your bowels and the one people shall be stronger than the other people and the elder shall serve the younger.“

Birth is accompanied by pain. In the words of the prophets, contractions are used as a metaphor for stressful situations (Jeremiah 6:24, 22:23, 50:43; Psalms 48:7 and others). Birth is also an expression of distress which will be followed by redemption (Micha 4:10). Birth without pain is described as an unusual occurrence (Isaiah 66:7-9).

The Bible mentions several ways of giving birth. One method was to sit on a delivery chair (*ovnayim*), two stones upon which the woman placed her legs. Another method apparently was to deliver while kneeling as in „And she bowed herself and gave birth“ (Samuel I 4:19). A third method hinted at in the Bible is the knee method where a woman kneels behind and assists the woman giving birth. The midwife sat in front of the woman giving birth and received the newborn. Perhaps this is the source of the phrase „and she shall bear on my knees“ (Genesis 30:3) which Rachel says to Jacob and, perhaps, it became a symbol of parenthood in general. Understanding the birth process requires clarification of the term *ovnayim*, i.e., delivery chair. Commentators deliberated over its meaning. Some view the term as a cleaner way of referring to a woman's sex organs or to the fetus and others understand it as a chair of some type used during delivery – a birthing stool. This debate is also apparent in the various translations of the Bible¹⁶.

The Bible describes two incidents of death during childbirth – Rachel (Genesis, 35:16-18) and the daughter-in-law of Eli the Priest and wife of Pinhas the priest (Samuel I 4:19-22). Both stories are similar in meaning and in language – in both cases a son is born, the mother has difficulty during the birth and the mother's death endangers the baby's life; the mother dies only after completing the task of delivering a baby. Moreover, in both these cases, the divine plan is hinted at. The process of giving birth does not always end successfully; the Bible also mentions unsuccessful pregnancy, an aborted fetus, a stillborn baby (Psalms 58:9; Ecclesiastes 6:3; Job 3:16). During Rachel's difficult delivery, mention is made of the midwife's role (Genesis 35:17). A midwife also assisted Tamar during the delivery of her twins. The midwife marked the firstborn by tying a red string around his wrist (Genesis 38:28-30). In the description of Pharaoh's plan to enslave the Jewish people (Exodus 1:15-22), the Biblical author stresses the important role of the midwives as givers of life¹⁷.

The fate of the infant after his birth can only be learned about from hints in the writings of the prophet (Ezekiel 16:4). The prophet describes a foundling's abandonment on the outskirts by her parents. The foundling is saved thanks to God's mercy. The images and concepts the prophet uses reflect and preserve details taken from the world of giving birth and caring for a newborn after its birth:

¹⁶J. Doller, 'Obnain' (Ex. 1,16), *BZ* 7, 1909, p. 255-259; G.R. Driver, Hebrew Mothers, *ZAW* 67, 1955, p. 246-248; J. I. Durham, *Exodus*, Waco Texas (3), 1987, p. 11-12; W. Spiegelberg, *Aegyptologisches Randglossar zum Alten Testament*, Strassburg, 1904, p. 20-25.

¹⁷Y. Zakovitch, *Assimilation in Biblical Narrative Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism*, ed J. H. Tigay, Philadelphia, 1985, p. 175-192; J.S. Ackerman, *The Literary Context of the Moses Birth Story* (Ex. 1-2), *Literature Courses of Biblical Narratives* Vol. 1, Nashville Abingdon Press, New York, 1974, pp. 84-88.; M. Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, N.Y., 1969, p. 32 of; J.C. Exum, „You shall Let every Daughter Live“, *A study of Exodus 1:8-2:10*, *Semeia* 28, 1983, p. 63-82.

- cutting the umbilical cord which links the fetus to the placenta
- washing the infant
- rubbing the infant's body with salt and oil. Apparently salt was meant to prevent the growth of bacteria that might harm the infant
- and finally, swaddling the infant.

There is no information on what happened to the placenta.

Nor is there any description of where the woman gives birth. There is only a Biblical law stressing that after giving birth, a woman is impure (Leviticus 12:2-8). She must ritually purify herself seven days after giving birth to a male and fourteen days after giving birth to a female. After that, the new mother counts another 33 days after the birth of a male and 66 days after the birth of a female, i.e., the days of purification. After the end of the days of purification, the mother must offer a sacrifice at the Temple and she is purified by a priest¹⁸.

The ancient Egyptians had a special attitude toward the pregnant woman. They did everything to ensure a successful delivery and birth of an infant with no defects. These efforts were made using both magical and medical means. They used to spread the pregnant woman's stomach with special oil, made sure that she rested as much as possible and she was required to eat special foods to strengthen the fetus. The Egyptians knew how to diagnose a pregnancy based on unique signs such as: vomiting, changes in pulse rate, skin color and arm muscles, by checking the neck to see if it was hot or cold, and checking facial expressions. The papyri indicate there were diagnoses which required precise checks and a series of tests to determine whether the woman had indeed conceived. Many of the pregnancy tests used the urine of a woman who had already given birth or the urine of the woman who had conceived¹⁹.

In order to protect the pregnancy and prevent miscarriages, the Egyptians tried to close the vagina, as much as possible, sometimes with the aid of pine bitumen. The fear of miscarrying is also evident from the many jugs depicting pregnant women that have been found in archeological excavations. Despite the women's nudity, the jugs do not show their reproductive organs to protect them from miscarriages. Fear of miscarrying encouraged the use of magical means. The god, Seth, was associated with miscarriage and the birth of stillborn children. Two figurines made of knotted rope with their legs bound were found in the tomb of Beni Hassan. Binding legs is basically a practical symbol of an utterance meant to prevent miscarriage. One figurine from the 17th century, BCE was bound with an iron ring around the womb. Iron rings were rare during this period, but its task is obvious – to protect the fetus inside its mother's womb until the time to deliver arrived. Also found were amulets in the shape of an „Isis knot,“ meant to protect and seal the womb off from miscarriage. Some suggest the Isis knot was used to close the vagina of the goddess, Isis, during her pregnancy with Horus and was meant to protect her when Seth tried to kill the fetus while it was still inside its mother's womb.

The Egyptians believed they could guess the fetus' gender. Egyptian papyri mention several indicators²⁰.

¹⁸ T. Meachemi, A Suggested Commentary for the Doubling Days of Impurity and Purity for Women Who Give Birth to a Daughter, *Shnaton an Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies*, M. Weinfeld, ed., Vol. II, 1997.

¹⁹ G. Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, London 1993, British Museum Press, p. 79; D. Cole, Obstetrics for women in ancient Egypt, *Discussions in Egyptology*, 5, 1986, p. 29-30.

²⁰ W. Westendorf, Beiträge aus und zu den medizinischen Texten, *ZÄS* 92. 1966, pp. 148-154.

If the pregnant woman's nipples darkened during the sixth month of pregnancy, this signaled the birth of a daughter. If she urinated on beans and barley and the beans sprouted first, she would give birth to a son, if the barley sprouted first, she would have a girl, etc.

According to the story of Setne cited above, when a woman conceived her husband immediately placed an amulet on her to protect her from harmful spirits. Yet, in many tombs, figurines were found with amulets depicting the goddess, Isis, protecting, Horus, an infant carried in her arms. Ancient Egyptian amulets depicting Isis as a mother protecting her son, Horus, emphasized her magical powers and imbued her with great power and significance in a pregnant woman's perception – the power to protect her child while in the womb and during delivery.

Egyptian texts document the entire pregnancy. A text dating from the New Kingdom refers to a birth on the first day of the tenth month, another refers to 294 days. The Westcar papyrus, which is attributed to the Hyksos period, predicts a precise birth date²¹. Pregnancy is only rarely depicted in Egyptian art apart from the scene showing the birth of the divine son. Here the queen is brought by goddesses to the delivery room. Although the portrayal seems discrete, the pregnant woman's stomach protrudes. The only goddess who is shown while noticeably pregnant is Taweret. She is considered the protector of pregnancy; she appears with a bloated belly. Already in that case, the meaning refers to „the great.“ She was a most beloved goddess of all those who watched over pregnancies and deliveries. Several vessels in the shape of a pregnant woman were also found. Very little is known about the actual birth process itself. A hieroglyph describing a birth shows a woman bowing with the head and arms of the newborn peeking out from underneath her. It is difficult to recreate the actual birth accurately. It apparently took place while bowing to the ground and then birthing stones were placed beneath each leg. Msht stones afterwards became synonymous for birth and they already appear in texts dating from over 2,500 years ago, but none have yet been found. The goddess, Meskhenet, was embodied on birthing stones. The magical utterances whispered to encourage the woman giving birth also stressed that the utterance should be repeated while on the delivery chair to ease the process²². Several scenes show temples from the Ptolemaic period and the birth of the divine son with the goddesses standing behind the mother and assisting her during the birth. Evidence from the Middle Kingdom depicts the mother, Rudjedet, during birth, being helped by the goddesses: Isis, Nephthys, Meskhenet and Heketh²³. It should be noted that in Egypt, the description of the birth of gods is the same as the birth of mortals. The gods, too, are afraid and require utterances, protection and midwives. For the Egyptians, the world of the gods and the world of the living is one and the same. According to the Kahun, Ebers papyrus, there were different materials that could be used to ease the birth, such as salts with a special composition, honey, oil, onion, wine and even the Egyptians even knew of different methods to prevent bleeding during delivery and to induce birth, such as: heavy use of juniper leaves with jin reisen (an unidentified plant) and thyme. Numerous utterances that were said to the woman giving birth, such as: separating the child

²¹H. Grapow, *Krankheiten und Arzt*, 1956, Akademie Verlag Berlin, 9-11; F. Jonckheere, *La durée de la gestation d'après les textes Égyptiens*, *Chronique d'Égypte*, vol. 30, 1955, p. 19ff; K. Sethe, *Miszelle: Die ägyptische Berechnung der Schwangerschaftsdauer*, *ZÄS* 58, 1923, p. 24; J.F. Borghouts, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Texts*, N.Y., E.J. Brill Leiden, 1978, 40 no 63.

²²M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature II*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1976: "I sat on bricks like the woman in labor", p. 108.

²³W. Westendorf, *Geburt. LÄ II*, 1977, p. 459-462.

from the womb of the mother, speeding up the childbirth of Isis, come down placenta. The moment of delivery was dangerous, in the Egyptian perception, for both the mother and fetus. During this difficult time, the Egyptians sought to prevent demons and spirits from accosting the pregnant mother and the fetus, and therefore many amulets and utterances were used to scare away demons. Many utterances are connected to Hathor's name who is embodied as a cow or a woman with cow's ears whose name is linked to fertility and motherhood. Others are connected to the image of Isis as a mother. The midwives' role is important here. Many of the utterances were said by them during the birth. Occasionally, a figurine of the god, Bes, who is identified with birth, sexuality and fertility since the New Kingdom, hovers overhead. Bes is depicted as a demon-like dwarf with crooked legs and a grotesque face. His threatening image was used to frighten away harmful spirits. Sometimes he is shown holding a knife with symbol of protection on it. The goddesses Heket and Meskenet are also mentioned in the 18th dynasty at Deir el Bahri as goddesses of fertility and birth. Miscarriage and death during childbirth were common threats in Egyptian society and therefore, magical powers were appealed to, which according to their beliefs, were embodied in several gods who protected the mother and infant²⁴.

When the moment of delivery arrived, the pregnant woman would loosen her hair bows, apparently with the help of midwives. Loosening knots is linked in Egyptian mythology to the appearance of the god, Anubis, the god of mummification, which is characterized by knotted pieces of cloth. Knots and ropes, in particular, symbolized the hunting of unseen enemies. The Egyptians believed that demons get caught in nets and tangles of knots. Therefore, women had to be free of anything binding; in particular their hair and clothing had to be loosened, so that harmful spirits would not come. The midwives prepared the pregnant woman. She was helped by older, more experienced women. It is difficult to know whether there existed trained, professional midwives and if so, their status was apparently not respected very much. Egyptian documents, primarily, medical papyri, indicate that only rarely was a doctor present during births. Doctors were called upon to assist in births only if special difficulties were encountered. A figurine was found depicting a midwife; in one hand she clutches some type of birthing utensil, a medical tool and in her other hand, a small container for oil or salt with which it was customary to rub a newborn. During the birth, the midwife used a belt she had tied, apparently, around the body of the woman giving birth. Sometimes the husband would take part in tying and untying this belt²⁵. After the birth, the midwife would wash the infant and cut the umbilical cord. According to the Ebers papyrus, there were predetermined signs whereby the midwife would seal the fate of the newborn to live or die. One of the signs the midwife could use was the way the infant held his head, the cries he emitted and his involuntary reactions while emerging from the uterus.

In the royal family, there was a special priest designated to deal with the placenta. The importance of the placenta is evident in utterance number 17 in the Book of the Dead, where the importance of the umbilical cord is illustrated as well as its religious significance, and it played a significant role in purification rites²⁶.

²⁴G. Pinch, *Magic in Ancient Egypt*, British Museum Press, 1994, p. 126; G. Pinch, Childbirth and female figurines at Deir el Medina and el Amarna, *Orientalia* 52, 1983, p. 405-414; R.K. Ritner, A Uterine Amulet in the Oriental Institute Collection, *JNES* 43, 1984, p. 209-221.

²⁵E. Staehelin, Bindung und Entbindung, *ZÄS* 96, 1970, p. 136-138; H. Rand, Figures Vases in Ancient Egypt and Hebrew Midwives, *IEJ* 20, 1970, pp. 209-212.

²⁶R.O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, London, 1985, p. 45.

There were not many incidents of twins being born according to the available Egyptian documentation, but there is no mention of any births of twins that are not the same sex. Apparently, such twins were considered unusual and were thought to bring bad luck. It is known that the Egyptians used to kill undesired newborns, those borne of undesired pregnancies and newborns with defects²⁷. Petrie found burial rooms with miscarried fetuses from the twelfth dynasty. It is difficult to know whether they died during birth or shortly thereafter and why.

Egyptian documents indicate that there existed a special hut, separated from the other rooms of a house, where births took place. Occasionally, there was a room at the edge of the house or on the roof. Pottery from Deir el Medina and Luxor depict a kind of birth hut containing a bed and a mat on top of it. Sometimes there is a head rest and pillows. The Westcar papyrus shows a woman sitting in a structure outside a house, apparently a birthing hut. The door to the room was closed lest demons enter during the birth. No structures remain which can be definitively identified as birthing huts.

The folktale in Westcar papyrus indicates that after giving birth, the woman was required to undergo purification that took fourteen days. It is possible that the purification period was more than fourteen days after the birth of a normal child. That is because the text before us deals with the birth of a divine child. Texts from Deir el Medina include descriptions of the post-birth purification festivities with the mother sitting in the delivery room and her hair arranged in a special way. Only women were permitted to go in and congratulate her²⁸.

The Husband's Role

The Bible does not mention male infertility. The portrayal of men's roles in the stories about childbirth and barrenness downplay the husband. For example, Samson earns recognition not because of his tribe and family, but despite his origins. Manoah's character is downplayed by presenting him as the antithesis to his wife. In the story of Hanna and Elkana, Elkana comes to terms with the situation. Elkana does not pray for offspring, but rather obeys Hanna. Furthermore, the wording of Hanna's oath is mentioned at length, while all that is said about Elkana's oath is „And the man Elkana... and his vow“ (Samuel I 1:21). When Abraham turns to God (Genesis 15:2) he does not express his concern over his wife's barrenness, rather he stresses his fear that he will die childless, with no offspring. In the description of Moses' birth, mention is made of the father's importance and thereafter the story focuses on the mother only, while the father remains an anonymous figure²⁹. In the story of the Shunamite woman who is remembered (Kings II 4:8-14) mention is made that „her husband was elderly“ and then he disappears from the scene.

Some researchers suggest that because of the father's absence and the downplaying of his role, there was an adoption of the newborn by a parent. The verse in Job (3:12), „Why did the knees receive me“ is explained by Stade as referring to the father's knees, not the knees of the

²⁷M. Rosalin & J.J. Janssen, *Growing up in ancient Egypt*, The Rubicon Press, 1990, p. 12-13; J. Baines, Egyptian Twins, *Orientalia* 54, 1985, p. 461-482.

²⁸F. Daumas, *Geburtshaus*, *LÄ* II, 1977, p. 462-475; B.J. Kemp, Wall paintings from the workman's village at el-Amarna', *JEA* 65, 1979, pp. 47-53; the reference is primarily to the bibliography there, notes 19-20, p. 53.; E. Brunner-Traut, *Die Wochenlaube*, *MIO* 3, 1955, p. 11-30; A.R. Schulman, A Birth Scene(?) from Memphis, *JARCE* 22, 1985, p. 97-103.; G. A. Gaballa, *Narrative in Egyptian Art*, Verlag Philipp von Zabern, Mainz, 1966, pp. 53-60.

²⁹ See footnote no. 2 above and see also Y. Amit "Manoah promptly followed his wife" (Judges 13:11); on the place of the woman in birth narratives. *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (1993) pp. 146-156.

mother or midwife, who demonstrated paternity in this way. This argument is backed by Genesis 50:23 which notes a symbolic act that granted the father validity and legitimacy for the actual birth. Because of the father's absence during the birth, it was necessary, according to Stade, to recreate the event and legitimize the paternity³⁰.

In the Bible, it seems, there was an intentional tradition of downplaying the role of the new father. The savior was chosen by God and the downplaying of the man's role served to emphasize the cooperation between the mother and God who conceive a savior for the Jewish people.

Egyptian writings do mention male sterility. A letter found in Deir el Medina dating from the twentieth dynasty states: You are not a man since you are unable to make your woman pregnant like your fellow men³¹. In general, the man is more active and a more involved partner in all matters relating to pregnancy and birth. In the story of Setne, the man also prays for offspring – reminiscent of Isaac's prayer (Genesis 25:22). The moment Setne's wife conceives, he is happy and places an amulet around his neck. In a dream, he is told of the coming birth of the longed-for son. Ramoser, in the Westcar papyrus, waits for news of the birth. He is not permitted to enter the delivery room; he is very excited while he waits – they found him standing with his loincloth upside down³². The husband is active, he describes his wife's pains and feels her suffering. He is the one who brings in the midwives and is responsible for paying them.

Conclusion

The information about fertility, childlessness and birth was gathered from sporadic sources in both ancient Egypt and the Biblical canon. In every society, fertility and birth is a pillar around which faith and beliefs accumulate. The Biblical author stresses primarily the divine intervention in the stories about the births of heroes and the remembering of the barren woman. He does not deal with the actual birth itself, but, rather, is interested in the symbol aspect of the birth. The author's main purpose is to relay a clear theological message. God is responsible for the process of conceiving. Therefore, phenomena such as divorce because of fertility problems or adoption are difficult for the Bible's author and do not merit clarification. The pregnancy, the pregnant woman's condition and the husband's role are also not dealt with by the Bible's author who is interested only in details that help transmit the theological message.

In Egypt, there are objects, figurines, amulets, burial items as well written documentation that enrich the knowledge of the ancient Egyptians' perceptions and beliefs. It is apparent from this information that the Egyptians frequently used magic in all matters relating to fertility and birth. The Egyptian viewed conception and birth as an ongoing struggle between harmful and beneficial spirits, with the most effective way to overcome the evil forces being the use of magic. The items, to which magical powers were attributed, were used both in the world of the living and in the world of the dead: utterances, fertility figurines, amulets, letters to the

³⁰B. Stade, *Auf Jemandes Knieen gebären*, Gen. 30:3, 50:23, Hiob 3:12 und ovnaim Exod 1:16, ZAW 6, 1886, pp. 143-156. It is possible that in two other incidents, the Biblical author downplays the man's role during the process of conception while highlighting the women who inform their husbands that they have conceived, e.g., Tamar and Yehuda (Genesis 38:25) and Batsheva and David (Samuel II 11:5).

³¹Ostraca Berlin 10627, See E. F. Wente, *Letters from Ancient Egypt*, Society of Biblical Literature, ed. E. S. Meltzer, Atlanta, Georgia, Vol. 1, 1990, no. 206. Wente R., *Letters from Ancient Egypt*, 1990, Atlanta, no. 206.

³²M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature I*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1973, p. 220.

dead, etc. They were used to protect their owners. Similar beliefs were certainly prevalent in the area of Eretz Israel, because when it comes to matters related to fertility and birth, a dangerous area, people request the assistance of mediators. However, the author of the Bible ignored this perception and there is no hint in the Scriptures indicating the existence of such beliefs. On the contrary, the author follows his own path. Cosmic processes such as the creation of the earth and the mountains, as well as other universal processes are compared to birth (Job 38:21-29). Fertility and birth are fashioned in such a way that does not require intervention because it is under God's constant supervision. Those beliefs common in Egyptian society find full expression in the post-Biblical period, for example in the appearance of signs for diagnosing a pregnancy, determining the sex of the fetus and the duration of the pregnancy, the use of amulets, attempts to keep demons away during delivery and the importance attributed to the placenta, etc..³³

³³ Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 24b, Shabbat 66b, Nida 56a, Pesahim 111a, 112b, etc.