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Rev. Rebecca E. Duke-Barton

The Social Construction of Motherhood in the Hebrew Bible

by

Rev. Rebecca E. Duke-Barton

Master of Arts

Graduate Division of Religion

_____
Dr. David L. Petersen
Advisor

_____
Dr. Carol Newsom
Committee Member

_____
Dr. Joel LeMon
Committee Member

Accepted

_____
Dean of the Graduate School

_____
Date

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By Rev. Rebecca Duke-Barton
M.A., Emory University, 2008

Adviser: David L. Petersen, Ph.D.

An Abstract of
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate
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ABSTRACT

Societies construct motherhood based on the needs of that society, the sources of authoritative knowledge, and the view of children. Combining literary and sociological methodologies, I will investigate the work of mothers and the symbolic value placed on motherhood in the Hebrew Bible. Utilizing scholarship in motherhood studies across cultures, I focus on the ways in which the biblical texts construct motherhood, through managing the household, becoming a mother (conception, pregnancy, childbirth), and mothering young children (lactation, socialization).

Many of the women who rise to prominence in the Hebrew Bible do so because they are mothers: Eve, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Samson's mother, and Hannah. The phrase "mother in Israel" describes a woman (Judg 5:7) or a city (2 Sam 20:19) that deserved special honor. Mothers manage the household, engaging in productive and reproductive labor that was vital for the household (Prov 31). In the legal and wisdom traditions, mothers emerge as figures with authority over their children, serving as teachers to young children and as promoters of the interests of their offspring, both minor and adult (Prov 8:1; Deut 21:15).

A competing construction of motherhood exists alongside this version, however, where mothers are vulnerable or missing. A common prophetic metaphor envisions a woman in childbirth experiencing fear and helplessness; in these texts, childbirth represents loss of control rather than the strength and joy of the mother (Hos 13:13; Isa 26:18). Mothers are missing when the lives of their children are in danger, making them appear insignificant compared to the authority of the father (Gen 22; Judg 11). This mixed construction of motherhood reflects an ambivalence: motherhood is a powerful institution, but in the patriarchal culture of the Bible, the role is occupied by a woman.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Many of the women who rise to prominence in the Hebrew Bible do so in their capacity as mothers: Eve ("the mother of all living"), Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Samson's mother, and Hannah. The phrase "mother in Israel" is used metaphorically to describe a woman (Judg 5:7) or a city (2 Sam 20:19, grammatically feminine) that deserves special honor. The legal material concerns itself with the respect due to mothers as well as fathers (Exod 20:12; Lev 19:3). The wisdom tradition views mothers along with fathers as teachers (Prov 1:8). A variety of texts present mothers in protective roles over their children, protecting their physical safety and promoting their interests (Gen 21; 1 Kgs 1). In these texts, mothers are a source of authority, security, and comfort.

A competing picture of motherhood exists alongside this version, however. In other texts, mothers are vulnerable, or completely missing. A common prophetic metaphor envisions a woman in childbirth experiencing pain and helplessness; in these texts, childbirth becomes as a source of fear and loss of control rather than a moment of strength and joy for the mother (Hos 13:13; Isa 26:18). Mothers are absent from key points in Israel's story, suggesting the story of God's people is actually about fathers and sons.[1] Mothers are missing when their children are in danger, making them appear insignificant compared to the power and authority of the father (Gen 22; Judg 11). Mothers sacrifice themselves for the sake of their sons (Gen

1 See Cheryl Exum, "The (M)other's Place," in *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (JSOTSup Series 163; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 103.

27:13). This mixed picture of motherhood, women who sacrifice themselves for their sons, but also who are figures of wisdom and authority, may reflect an ambivalence in the biblical text: motherhood is a powerful role, but it is inhabited by a woman.

Utilizing recent scholarship on motherhood across cultures, I intend to focus on the way in which the biblical texts construct motherhood. Using a combination of literary and sociological methods, I will analyze the competing social constructions within the Hebrew Bible. I will provide an introduction to motherhood studies (ch. 1) and analyze the role of the mother in the family household (ch. 2). I will then turn to two important periods in the life of the mother: pregnancy and childbirth (ch. 3) and mothering young children (ch.4). Finally, I will draw some conclusions about the depictions of motherhood in the Hebrew Bible (ch. 5).

SITUATING THE CONVERSATION: MOTHERHOOD STUDIES

Motherhood studies emerged among feminist scholars as a way of identifying the work that women perform in raising children, as well as understanding that the role of mother is a key component of the self-identity of many women. Sociologists, historians, literary critics and biologists have all contributed to an understanding of motherhood and the work of mothering. These studies suggest that the expectations and experience of mothers vary from society to society; particular groups construtheir own expectations and ideals of motherhood.[2] Scholars have explored the ways in

2 See, e.g., Rima D. Apple and Janet L. Golden, *Mothers & Motherhood: Readings in American History (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997),* 3.

which mothers serve to perpetuate a society, not only through population growth, but also through passing on the cultural norms to the next generation. According to sociologist Jessie Bernard, the extensive expectations of societies on mothers move motherhood from being simply a role within the family; rather, motherhood is an institution: "Motherhood is more than the biological process of reproduction. As an institution it consists of customs, traditions, conventions, beliefs, attitudes, mores, rules, laws, precepts, and the host of other rational and non-rational norms which deal with the care and rearing of children." This sociological focus on motherhood as an institution enables scholars to look at society's mechanism for shaping what mothers do and how they feel about what they do.[3]

Adrienne Rich's 1976 work, *Of Women Born,* presented the concept of motherhood as an institution and ignited an interest in motherhood studies among feminist critics. She differentiated between two overlapping meanings of motherhood: one meaning involves the reproductive potential of the woman and her potential relationships with her children, a relationship that can represent power and authority for women; the other meaning of motherhood refers to the set of ideological forces that cast mothers into a particular role that serves to reinforce patriarchy. Rich believes that this culturally enforced meaning attached to motherhood is oppressive to mothers, forcing mothers into a structure that does not allow them to exercise their

3 Susan E. Chase and Mary F. Rogers, *Mothers and Children: Feminist Analyses and Personal Narratives* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 60.

own creative power and authority.[4] This basic theoretical concept underlies much of motherhood studies. Feminist scholar Tina Miller, expanding on Rich's work, agrees that a difference exists between the individual experience of mothering and the cultural institution of motherhood. Miller differentiates between the institution of "motherhood," the way that motherhood is constructed at a societal level, and "mothering," the personal experiences that individual women have in their responsibilities over their dependent children. Mothering, the experience of the individual mother, is affected by the construction of motherhood, the expectations presented by society.[5] Most of what the Hebrew Bible presents about mothers falls loosely into Miller's category of "motherhood;" it presents social expectations rather than the feelings and experiences of individual mothers.

Using Rich's understanding that motherhood is shaped by a set of ideological forces, motherhood studies have explored the ways in which societies serve to construct the ideology of motherhood. Each culture provides “scripts” about how to mother, especially during pregnancy, childbirth, and caring for infants; this authoritative knowledge may come from other mothers, religious leaders, or medical authorities.[6] The needs of a particular society, it core values, and the perceived needs of children affect the perceptions of motherhood as well.

4 Adrienne Rich, *Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976), 13.

5 Tina Miller, *Making Sense of Motherhood: A Narrative Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3.

6 *Ibid*, 3-5.

In spite of the differences in expectations of mothers across cultures, societies rarely recognize that motherhood is a social construction. Cultural scripts are so pervasive that they seem to be an intrinsic part of the experience of motherhood. Clarissa Atkinson has argued that the construction of motherhood is based on physiological assumptions about mothers: "What is known and believed about conception, pregnancy, birth, and lactation not only describes what mothers are but colors expectations of what they should be, shaping our judgments of 'good' and 'bad,' 'natural' and 'unnatural.'" She points out the circular logic of this phenomenon; beliefs about motherhood shape the way mothers are perceived, but perceptions about individual mothers and supposed biological facts in turn shape the ideologies that uphold the institution of motherhood.[7]

Early work in motherhood studies exhibited this essentialism about motherhood, suggesting that there are natural, essential characteristics of mothers that are always true across cultures. More recent feminist scholars, such as Jean O'Barr, have argued that motherhood is not biologically determined. "[T]he greatest impact of feminist scholarship on concepts of mothering has been to divest them of their biological or moral agency, univocally expressed, outside of time and history, and to demonstrate the importance of understanding mothering within a dynamic, interactive

7 Clarissa W. Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 23-24.

context of social, political, historical, and sexual factors, multicultural, multiracial, and multivoiced."[8]

One need only engage in a brief comparative study to see variances among cultural attitudes toward motherwork.[9] Mothers in some cultures perform the bulk of mothering, while other cultures assume that other figures will tend to many of the needs of children. Some societies assign legal authority over children to mothers; other societies assign legal authority elsewhere (such as the father, grandfather, an uncle, or the state), but mothers may still hold unassigned power over the children. Thus, what an individual mother experiences as motherhood is not biologically determined, but rather strongly influenced by the culture in which one becomes a mother. In this way, societies "construct" motherhood.

MOTHERHOOD IN BIBLICAL STUDIES

Social historians and archaeologists in recent years have turned their attention to the lives of average women in ancient Israel. Mothering would have been a significant part of many women's daily lives (and being a mother a significant aspect of her status and identity within society). Within biblical studies, women as wives have tended to capture more attention than women as mothers. Motherhood has been treated as a role among many, but, with the exception of Lelia Leah Bronner's

8 Jean F. O'Barr, Deborah Pope and Mary Wyer, *Ties that Bind: Essays on Mothering and Patriarchy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 3.

9 For a cross-cultural sampling of differences in views of motherhood, see Tina Miller, *Making Sense of Motherhood, 6.*

literary analysis, motherhood has not been the focus of a major work.[10]

Readers in biblical studies have not always recognized the cultural implications of the construction of motherhood and therefore have not been careful to understand the way that the Hebrew Bible in particular constructs motherhood. Suzanne Dixon has suggested that the modern Western ideals of motherhood are those of tenderness, indulgence, and continuous presence with her infant. The modern father, by contrast, is seen as the figure of authority, passing judgment and keeping the family money.[11] Because cultural ideas about motherhood are so persuasive that they seem intrinsic, these modern ideals have often been read back into the biblical text, making it seem as if those ideals describe motherhood in the Hebrew Bible.

One example of reading modern ideals of motherhood into the biblical text is in Freema Gottlieb's reading of Judges 4-5, "Three Mothers."[12] Gottlieb's reading provides much that is of interest as she views the ways in which the stories of Deborah, Jael and Sisera's mother are interwoven. However, when she compares these three women and unnamed others to an ideal of motherhood, I question whose ideal she is describing. Is her ideal drawn from the Hebrew Bible itself, from a reconstruction of mothers in ancient Israel, from an ideal of motherhood implied by rabbinic interpretation of the story, or from her own modern bias about how motherhood should be constructed? Is this an ideal of motherhood in particular, or of

10 Leila Leah Bronner, *Stories of Biblical Mothers: Maternal Power in the Hebrew Bible* (Dallas, Tex.: University Press of America, 2004), xi.

11 Suzanne Dixon, *The Roman Mother* (London: Croom Helm, 1988), 1.

12 Freema Gottlieb, "Three Mothers," *Judaism* 30 no 2 (Spring 1981): 194-203.

the role of women in general? In utilizing the matriarchs as the ideal of motherhood, Gottlieb chooses to read Deborah as an atypical mother because she is not exactly like the mothers in Genesis. However, even Gottlieb's ideal is not simply based on the texts in Genesis, but rather an amalgamation of ideas about women (not just mothers) from a variety of sources. Gottlieb's analysis presents the "ideal of Jewish motherhood," but this idea is not completely consist with the biblical texts. Her reading of the story posits a universal ideal of motherhood that is nurturing, private, personal, concerned about producing a future generation, and willing to protect the son at all costs to herself. While some of these aspects are part of the biblical constructions of motherhood, Gottlieb overlooks places in which the mother is constructed as a teacher, an authority figure, and a disciplinarian.

The literature of some of Israel's neighbors includes mother figures who are public figures. Asherah, the consort of El and mother goddess in Canaanite religion, combines fertility and power. Symbols associated with Asherah include snakes and trees, connoting fertility, and nursing breasts, connoting nurturance, yet she is also depicted atop a lion, connoting strength. Nurturing images are combined with images of power, underscoring the idea that motherhood can be conceptualized as nurturing and at the same time aggressive and even violent.[13]

Utilizing studies in the social construction of motherhood will enable me to look afresh at the biblical depictions of motherhood, recognizing that modern ideals of motherhood may differ from those of the biblical texts. Motherhood studies pose a

13 Susan Ackerman, "Asherah," *NIDB* 1:297-299.

new set of questions to the biblical text, bringing into focus the role of mothers in society and the work of mothers in the lives of their children. How did the norms of society affect the individual experiences of mothering? What are the sources of "authoritative knowledge" that help determine how a mother acts or thinks about her actions through each stage of motherhood?[14] Might the values attached to motherhood be a way of rationalizing existing social and economic circumstances?[15] How does the view of children affect the expectations of mothering?[16] How closely did documents about mothers affect the actual practice of mothering?[17] The answers to these questions of the depictions of mothers will clarify the social construction of motherhood in the Hebrew Bible.

SOURCES FOR THE SOCIAL CONSTRCTION OF MOTHERHOOD

The texts I have chosen to explore cover a variety of genres and a number of centuries. This synchronic view of motherhood in ancient Israel over time is not intended to obscure differences among the texts, nor to imply that all mothers in every social class would have had the same experience of motherhood. Conditions for

14 Coined by Brigitte Jordan, the concept of authoritative knowledge is that every culture defines the expectations and practices of motherhood in ways that affect the experiences of an individual mother. Brigitte Jordan, *Birth in Four Cultures: A Cross-cultural investigation of Childbirth in Yucatan, Holland, Sweden and the United States* (Montreal: Eden Press, 1978). See also Tina Miller, *Making Sense of Motherhood,* 29.

15 Dixon expands on this hypothesis, suggested by sociologists Minturn and Lambert in 1964, in her work on citizen mothers in ancient Rome, *The Roman Mother,* 4.

16 Chase and Rogers, M*others and Children,* 62.

17 Dixon suggests that the coded law in ancient Rome gave mothers little authority, but in practice mothers administered their children's property and arranged marriages, thus giving them authority by custom, *The Roman Mother,* 5.

a mother living in Jerusalem would have been quite different than for a mother living in a small village as part of a family of subsistence farmers. A woman who had married within her tribe and therefore became a mother in a more familiar context would have experienced motherhood differently than a woman who had come from another part of Israel (or outside of Israel) and had to learn the mothering expectations of her husband's area. Further, in choosing to utilize the entire Hebrew Bible in my project, I acknowledge the difficulty of presenting a view of motherhood that extends over such a long period of time. Certainly, family institutions changed over time. However, as Miller notes, there is a difference between the institution of motherhood and the individual experience of mothering.[18] The institution of motherhood, socially constructed and pervasive in a society, can be reconstructed from the texts.

Suzanne Dixon has argued that the history of the ancient world is a chronicle of political and military events, and that the social historian must "ransack a variety of sources" to investigate the experience of mothers in an ancient society.[19] Although the focus of this thesis will be on the way the the Bible itself constructs motherhood, borrowing from archeology and ethnographic studies will inform my understanding of the social construction. The excavation of homes suggests the size of households over which a mother would have had responsibility and presents tools and pottery

18 Miller, *Making Sense of Motherhood,* 3.
19 Dixon, *The Roman Mother*, 7.

that represent the daily work of mothers.[20] Ethnographic studies of Israel's neighbors can be suggestive as well, though other societies would have had their own constructions of motherhood that differed from ancient Israel's. I will utilize archeology and ethnography in a limited way in order to illuminate a discussion of motherhood, but the bulk of my work is drawn from the construction in the biblical texts themselves.

METHODOLOGY

Gary Long notes that to write a story is to create a representation of reality. The representations differs from reality in significant ways, such as the order in which events happen and the tempo of the events unfolding.[21] Recent motherhood studies have been careful to point out that social constructions of motherhood encoded in texts may or may not reflect the actual work of mothering. However, these social constructions are powerful in the lives of mothers because the way a particular society constructs motherhood influences what mothers (as well as spouses, children, and other interested parties) believe motherhood ought to be.[22] This distinction is instructive for biblical studies. The stories of mothers in ancient Israel are mediated through texts, none of which were written by mothers themselves. Many scholars

20 Archeology has limitations for understanding social construction, however, in that these implements are not marked according to gender.

21 Gary Long, "The Written Story: Toward Understanding Text as Representation and Function" *VT* 49 (1999):165-85.

22 Miller, *Making Sense of Motherhood,* 29.

have highlighted the difficulty of ascertaining information about the lives of real, mostly rural, women from texts generally composed by elite urban men. Feminist biblical critics, such as Cheryl Exum, have argued that the texts tell as much about the beliefs, fears and prejudices of authors as it tells about women in biblical times.[23] Carol Meyers likewise believes that the official documents may not reflect the daily realties of life: as anthropologists have discovered, the male-oriented, formal record of any society does not stand in one-to-one relationship with informal reality, in which women are also powerful actors in daily affairs and in family decisions on matters ranging from the mundane to the momentous. She argues that women played a prominent role in the context of family life, especially in their role as mothers.[24]

Other scholars believe that, though the texts may not reflect direct history, they must be sociologically correct in order to have been accepted in their own time. In her discussion of marriage in ancient Israel, Naomi Steinberg argues that even if the stories are fictional and written for the purpose of justifying political issues, the ancient author must have seen these marriages as sociologically correct.[25] The representation of reality must reflect Israelite social customs in order for it to be accepted.

Utilizing motherhood studies pushes this argument even farther; by the very nature of social constructions, ancient authors would make assumptions about what it

23 Cheryl Exum, "The Hand That Rocks the Cradle," in *Plotted, Shot and Painted* (Gender, Culture and Theory 3; JSOT Supplement Series 25; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 92.

24 Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988),* 50.

25 Naomi Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis: A Household Economics Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 8.

means to be a mother. Exum's concern that symbolic production is generated by men fails to recognize that Israel's own understanding of motherhood would have strongly influenced the writing and shaped the authors' depiction of motherhood, perhaps without the awareness of the authors. The attitudes and assumptions that the text displays toward mothers preserve some of the expectations and ideals that the society held about its mothers. At times, the biblical text provides a glimpse into the actual work of mothering (such as the attendance of midwives at birth, references to weaning, and the involvement of mothers as well as fathers in arranging marriages for their children). That the authors do not expound on these glimpses suggests the authority that social constructions carry; the ideal of motherhood is so embedded that it *seems* universal. The glimpses of motherhood provided in the Bible suggest a set of cultural assumptions that would have influenced the way that mothers behaved and thought about their behavior. These cultural assumptions, known as social constructions, permeate the texts.

THEORETICAL MODELS

Literary critics have identified ways in which texts encode social values. Jameson understood texts as a representation of reality, expressing the repressed conflicts or fears of a society. He has suggested that unresolved social conflicts generate texts. He argues that texts try to present a lack of conflict where one exists in order to persuade society into an understanding that the view being espoused is correct. Jameson says that recurrent patterns within narratives are a symbolic

representation of shared political life His method deconstructs texts, searching for the unresolved conflicts that generated texts.[26] Although he is particularly interested in the political aspects of texts, his method of "unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts" is helpful. Texts that deal with the daily life of mothers, as well as metaphors of motherhood, convey the cultural values that surround motherhood. As David Clines notes in his discussion about the conflicts in rebuilding the temple exhibited by Haggai, the actual society that produced a text cannot be reconstructed using Jameson's theory; however, the unresolved conflicts of the society come through the text. One can reconstruct the society that the text imagines based on the conflicts that emerge from a reading of the texts.[27]

Mieke Bal employs a similar methodology of reading "through the text" to see what has been repressed. Though she argues that meaning is a “readerly product,” it is based on “an elaboration of possibilities offered by the text.” In her use of narratology, she looks as who speaks, who sees, and who acts as a way of understanding the dynamics of power within the text.[28] In *Death and Dissymmetry,* Bal argues that the issues of daily life in the text, such as sex, marriage, violence, power, and building homes, betray a fundamental national fear. In her reading, a

26 Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1981). It is only unresolved conflicts that generate texts because resolves conflicts do not need a textual resolution. The texts, however, try to present a lack of conflict, but a political reading can deconstruct a text and evaluate the conflict the text encodes.

27 David Clines, “Haggai's Temple, Constructed, Deconstructed and Reconstructed” in Second Temple Studies Vol 2 (ed. Tamara C. Eskenazi and Kent H Richards; JSOTSup 175; Sheffield: JSOTSup, 1994), 81.

28 Mieke Bal, *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible* (Bible and Literature Series 22; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 17.

tenuous hold on the father's power, which she argues is the foundation of the patriarchal social system, generates texts that portray extreme violence done to daughters, showing the insecurity surrounding male, and particularly paternal, power. Avenging mothers, who would serve as a counterbalance to the father's power, are displaced in the text until the point that they are hardly recognizable. In Bal's view, these texts attempt to erase the power of the mother in order to uphold paternal power.[29]

Tarja Philip sees the depictions of childbirth in the Bible as a manifestation of fear experienced by the male authors and compilers. She argues that men were not allowed in the delivery area during childbirth, indicated by the fact that only women are mentioned as attendees at the birth (Gen 8:28; 1 Sam 4:20), and fathers receive word of the birth from messengers (Jer 20:7). Men, then, imagined childbirth as an experience of fear, loss of control, and pain. They saw birth pangs as coming unexpectedly, heard cries, and believed that the woman becoming a mother was experiencing great distress. Further, childbirth would have tapped into men's own anxieties; the high rate of death by women giving birth would have lead men to feel anxious and powerless themselves.[30] When childbirth is used metaphorically in the

29 Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry* (Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature; Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988), 229-230.

30 Tarja Philip, "Woman in Travail as a Simile to Men in Distress in the Hebrew Bible" in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East Part II:* Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2-6, 2001 (ed. Simo Parpola and R.M. Whiting; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian text Corpus Project, 2002), 502.

Bible, then, it is often depicted as a time of fear.[31] Philip's method enables the reader to uncover encoded fears and social conflicts in the depictions of motherhood.

Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes analyzes texts to ascertain whether the literary representation reflects extra-textual reality. In her discussion of the birth narrative of Samson, she argues that the mother is at the center of the action, while the narrator assigns the father a secondary role. She suggests that texts with a dominant mother "conflict with reality and serve as literary compensation for it." In van Dijk-Hemmes's discussion, literature can express an underlying conflict. However, she further argues that

> patriarchal society also recognized the power that pregnancy and birth imparted to women. The woman who gives birth is considered to possess creative power similar to that of God the Creator, as it is written: "I have gained a male child with the help of the LORD" (Gen 4:1), meaning, says Cassuto: "I stand together with Him among the creators." This existential fact assures the woman a central position in the 'real' world; and it is this awareness which finds expression in the hierarchy of images in birth narratives.[32]

In this case, Eve's literary declaration reflects the social construction of the creative power of the mother. Van Dijk-Hemmes' discussion recognizes the possibility of competing social constructions within the text, where the institution of motherhood is both full of creative power but subject to a patriarchal understanding of the world.

31 Philip notes, however, that several narratives about childbirth emphasize the wonder and pride of the new mother, suggesting that these may be female-generated texts. The variable social construction may be affected by the perceptions and experience of the ones who generate the text, 503.

32 Fokkelien Van Dijk-Hemmes, "Mothers and a Mediator in the Song of Deborah" in *A Feminist Companion to Judges (*ed. Athayla Brenner; *A Feminist Companion to the Bible 4*; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993). See also V. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Chapter 1, Verse 1-Chapter XII, verse 5* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1965), 135.

The literary representation of the reality of motherhood represents this social conflict between mother as powerful figure and mother as subject of patriarchy.

My own argument, arising from discussions about the power of social constructions, differs from those who suggest that the ideology of the text is vastly different than the ideology of actual mothers. While there is a difference between the social construction of motherhood and the individual experience of mothering, social constructions are such that they affect the work of mothering. While at times the author may be suppressing the power of the mother (such as in instances where the mother is missing from the narrative), the encoded ideology of motherhood (the social construction) would have affected the experiences and perceptions of individual mothers.

The work of these scholars, combined with the insights of scholars interested in the social construction of motherhood, suggests that the texts that deal with motherhood carry encoded messages about the conflicting position of mothers in the world that the Hebrew Bible imagines. The texts about motherhood were generated by a conflict in the perceptions of the role of mothers--as figures of power and wisdom but subjects of patriarchy. These theoretical models suggest a method for uncovering the social construction of motherhood within the text. I argue that the literary depictions of mothers and motherhood encode a sociological reality. The methodology I propose is a combination of literary and sociological work. In the literary analysis, I will explore the way that mothers are characterized, their interaction with other characters, and repeated motifs or plots surrounding

motherhood. I will also suggest some places that mothers are missing, with the assumption that these literary holes imply a sociological conflict. The sociological work will include discussions of the work of mothers, including discussions of their productive and reproductive labor, the cultural values associated with lactating mothers, and the role of mother as the household manager. I will employ modern studies in motherhood that look at the work that mothers do, thinking in particular about the variables in societies that can affect the construction of motherhood (see below). Together, the literary analysis of the texts, as well as an understanding of the sociological environment in which Israel's mothers would have lived, will suggest a way in which the Hebrew Bible constructs motherhood.

SOCIOLOGICAL VARIABLES IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF MOTHERHOOD

If motherhood is indeed constructed by individual societies, then it is important to understand some of the reasons why the construction of motherhood might vary from culture to culture. Utilizing the work of medical sociologist Ann Oakley,[33] Miller argues that a society's core values and organizational principles affect reproductive practices.[34] I suggest three ways in which these core values and organizational principles can be identified: through the socioeconomic and cultural needs of a given society, through forms of authoritative knowledge, through attitudes about children.

33 See Ann Oakley, *Essays on Women, Medicine, and Health* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993).

34 Miller, *Making Sense of Motherhood,* 29.

The needs of a particular society are one variable that affects the social construction of motherhood.[35] The need for mothers to populate and perpetuate the society is generally true across cultures. Societies grow or sustain themselves by births or immigration. Since extensive immigration tends to alter the values and make-up of the society, for societies to perpetuate themselves while holding the structure and values of the society intact, one needs mothers. Beyond this reproductive need, however, many societies have depended on mothers to fulfill social, political, and economic needs by nurturing children and providing the skills and values that society deems necessary. From this view, motherhood underpins the institutions of society. Thus, the concept of motherhood is shaped by the other institutions, which in turned are shaped by the institution of motherhood. Rich makes this point by suggesting that the "[i]nstitution of motherhood revives and renews all other institutions.[36] Because mothers influence each successive generation within a society, the attitudes toward other institutions are shaped by mothers.

Chase and Rogers provide examples of ways in which society's needs have affected the construction of motherhood in various historical settings. During the period of the American Revolution, good mothering was connected to nation-building. It would have been necessary for the Revolution and the young republic to have support among the young men being called upon to fight. Thus, good mothers were to prepare their sons for the roles needed by society, and their daughters to be

35 *Ibid,* 63.
36 Rich, *Of Woman Born,* 45.

supportive wives and future republican mothers. Puritan society, influenced by Calvinist thought, saw a need for mothers to raise moral children, and therefore held mothers responsible for their children's, and by extension, society's moral caliber[37]. As I will demonstrate in ch. 2, the interdependence of the family household for ancient Israel's subsistence farmers required both the productive and reproductive labor of mothers. Mothers also fulfill the need of passing knowledge to future generations by serving as the primary teachers of young children and acting as a source of wisdom passed through the generations. Additionally, many biblical texts indicate the cultural/religious need of passing on God's blessing and covenant to the next generation. In Genesis, Rebekah is strongly involved in the selection of the son to carry on God's covenant (Gen 27). With Bathsheba's help, Solomon becomes the next caretaker of the Davidic Covenant (I Kgs 1).

Another variable to consider in the construction of motherhood is a society's sources of "authoritative knowledge." Coined by Brigitte Jordan in the 1970's, the concept of authoritative knowledge is that every culture defines the expectations and practices of motherhood in ways that affect the experiences of an individual mother. The practices and expectations are recognized by the culture and reinforced with each pregnancy and birth; the repetition of practice gives the practices their legitimacy. Jordan's work across four contemporary cultures examines the practices around pregnancy and childbirth. Her biosocial approach led her to think that what women knew and experienced through these events was based on authoritative knowledge in

37 Chase and Rogers, *Mothers and Children,* 63.

their own culture.[38] Different forms of authoritative knowledge are discernible in different cultures. In many modern western cultures, authoritative knowledge is hierarchal. Distinctions are made between experts, medical professionals, and non-experts, women having babies.[39] Miller uses this concept of authoritative knowledge in her discussion of women's experience of giving birth. The power of authoritative knowledge comes from not its truth or correctness, but because it counts in the mind of the mother and the people around her, whether people assisting her in the process of becoming a mother (midwives, doctors, fathers), or disinterested parties who nonetheless express an opinion of her mothering.[40]

As I will discuss in ch. 3, women's experience in ancient Israel would have been contextualized by the sources of authoritative knowledge emerging from that society. Based on ethnographic studies, one would assume that the authoritative knowledge for mothers would come from other women who had themselves been through pregnancy and childbirth.[41] Little is said of these sources of authoritative knowledge in the Hebrew Bible. Instead, the few biblical references to pregnancy suggest another source of authoritative knowledge: God or God's representative. When Rebekah struggles with pain in her pregnancy, she turns to God (Gen 25:22); a messenger from God gives instructions to the wife of Manoah about her pregnancy (Judg 13:.3-5). Many would argue that this simply indicates the way in which the

38 Jordan, *Birth in Four Cultures.*
39 Miller, *Making Sense of Motherhood,* 29, 31.
40 *Ibid,* 29.
41 Victor Matthews and D.C. Benjamin, *The Social World of Ancient Israel 1250-587 BCE.* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993).

male authors of the text have appropriated women's experience in pregnancy; rather than acknowledging the authoritative knowledge that emanates from women, the author places the authoritative knowledge with God.

Another key variable in the construction of motherhood is society's beliefs about young children. Chase and Rogers have argued that a society's view of children is closely tied to its social construction of motherhood.[42] What is expected of a mother is directly related to the perceived needs of young children. The view of children has direct bearing on how a mother is expected to interact with her young offspring, including expectations of psychological attachment, the practice of maternal breast-feeding, and socialization. Chase and Rogers use the example of the change in attitudes toward children and motherhood experience by European society in order to illustrate her contention. Through the Middles Ages until the eighteenth century, European society did not have a concept of instinctive maternal love. Mothers did need to love all of her children equally, and they were not expected to be the primary care-givers of children. During this period in France, children were sent away to the homes of wet-nurses since breast-feeding was considered immodest and disgusting. This view of motherhood was closely related to the view of children. The theological focus on original sin created a view of children as naturally inclined toward evil. Further, children under seven were not valued as contributing members of society. At age seven, if the child survived that long, children were expected to participate in adult activities (such as work and worship) and contribute to the

42 Chase and Rogers, *Mothers and Children, 62.*

family's survival. With the advent of the Enlightenment, the European attitude toward children began to change, developing a view of children as innocent, and childhood as a special time in life. One can see the valuation of children changing though artifacts of the time: special clothing, books, toys, and schools just for children began to develop. There was an increase in the popularity of family portraits or portraits of children alone. As a result of the change in attitudes about children, the social construction of motherhood changed. Motherhood came to be viewed as a critical social role. Breast-feeding one's own children became common, and maternal love for children came to be viewed as instinctive and natural for mothers.[43]

As I will discuss in ch. four, the biblical construction of motherhood likewise points to a strong connection between the view of children and the expectations of mothers. As the picture of childhood emerges as one of vulnerability, ignorance, dependence on the family, the work of the mother is to protect, instruct, and provide for the child. Mothers breast-fed their own children (1 Sam 1:22), providing nourishment and comfort. Mothers had the primary responsibility of protection and care (Gen 21:10 Exod 2:2-3), as well as teaching responsibilities along with the father. The needs and vulnerability of children provides the impetus for much of the work of mothering.

43 *Ibid,* 62-63.

CONCLUSION

Each society constructs motherhood in ways that support the institutions and cultural values of that particular society. Motherhood goes beyond a biological function and becomes a cultural institution. These constructions of motherhood tend to be held so strongly that the society views them as intrinsic. The experience of individual mothers is affected by the constructions because the perception of motherhood affects the mother's expectations of her work, both from internalized attitudes and from the attitudes of other interested parties. Texts that represent a society, then, carry encoded messages, often without the author's intention or knowledge. However, even within a particular society, there may be competing constructions, where mothers are viewed as sources of power and wisdom, but yet are in an inferior position in society. Through literary analysis of texts, along with sociological models of motherhood, I will argue that the majority of texts about motherhood place mothers in a position of authority over their children, as teachers, disciplinarians, protectors and advocates. A competing social construction of a vulnerable mother exists alongside this one, such as in poetic depictions of childbirth or when the family structure breaks down due to the death of her husband.

A text from Fourth Maccabees encapsulates several assumptions about motherhood, made apparent through the lens of motherhood studies. In this passage, a mother encourages her seven sons to martyrdom. The narrator describes the mother's love as deep-rooted, felt in her inmost parts. The love and sympathy that parents have for their offspring is a part of nature; these same characteristics exist in birds and

bees. Further, birds and bees show this love by protecting their young. Still, this mother encourages the sons to die: “But sympathy for her children did not sway the mother of the young men; she was of the same mind as Abraham” (4 Mac 14:13-20). The narrator assumes that the duties of motherhood, love and protection, are universal and biologically based. What is distinctive for this mother, however, is her understanding of her own moral duty, teaching her children to devote their lives to God. The mother's "natural" tendencies must find a balance with the distinctive values of her society.

CHAPTER 2: THE HOUSE OF THE MOTHER, THE HOUSE OF THE FATHER

THE bêt ʾā*b*

The social construction of motherhood is most readily apparent in texts that depict domestic settings, known in the biblical texts as the *bêt ʾāb*, the father's house. References to the *bêt ʾāb*, abound throughout the Hebrew Bible. God tells Abraham to leave his country, kindred and father's house (Gen 12:1); when he wants a wife for his son, he sends his servant to return to his father's house to find a bride (Gen 24:38). Jephthah's brothers disinherit him from his father's house (Judg 11:2). Widows are routinely instructed to return to their father's house (Gen 38:11). The household is also called *bayit* is some texts; Shunya Bendor argues that the difference indicates point of reference. Jacob refers to his household (Gen 30:30), the kinship group which he heads. Joseph refers to the same entity as *bêt ʾāb*, his father's house, when he goes with bury Jacob (Gen 50:7-8). In the same verse, there is a reference to Joseph's household (*bayit*). The term used depends on the perspective of the character.[44]

Most references depict the father's house as multi-generational, spatially connected household (Gen 24:38; Lev 18:1-16). It represents economic and physical safety, a place of protection for young children (in the breach, Gen 41:37) and financial security (Lev 22:13). Depictions of the household, as well as the work of

44 Shunya Bendor, *The Social Structure of Ancient Israel: The Institution of the Family (beit 'ab) from the Settlement to the End of the Monarchy. (Jerusalem Biblical Studies 7. Jerusalem: Simor, 1996),* 54.

archaeologists and anthropologists, point to the interdependence of residents of the father's house.[45] For Israel's subsistence farmers, the work of all members of the household contributed to the survival of the family. Mothers were central figures within the father's house, serving as household managers and providing a wide range of productive and reproductive labor.

SIZE OF THE HOUSEHOLD

Archaeologists have uncovered clusters of connected dwellings that suggest the existence of multi-generational families within the *bêt ʾāb*. Wright believes that it would have been common for the head of a *bêt ʾāb* to preside over four generations (including his own), which might mean that fifty to one hundred people lived within a cluster of dwelling units.[46] Others have argued that this event was uncommon due to the young age of mortality.[47] E. B. Banning argues for large family units, citing the need of laborers for agricultural tasks.[48] Lawrence Stager argues for small nuclear families living within larger family clusters. Women likely gave birth to an average of four children, but given the size of houses that have been excavated, six was too high of an occupancy for the house, so while four were born, only two survived into

45 Lawrence Stager, "The Archeology of the Family in Ancient Israel," *BASOR* (November 1985): 1-36.
46 C.J.H.Wright, "Family," *ABD* 2:761-769.
47 King and Stager believe that an average Israelite living with harsh conditions probably did not live past 40. They suggest an even younger age of mortality for mothers, who had to survive pregnancy and childbirth. Phillip J. King and Lawrence. E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel (ed. Douglas A Knight;* Library of Ancient Israel. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 37.
48 "Housing Neolithic Farmers," *Near Eastern Archeology* 66 (2003): 11-17.

adulthood. The average occupancy of a mother's house was then four: the mother, father, and two children who had survived infancy. [49]

One of the key factors that would have affected the number of children born to the women of ancient Israel is the length of breast-feeding. Although I will return to the symbolic value of breast-feeding in the section on mothering young children, here I explore the effect of lengthy breast-feeding as a way of controlling the birthrate.

R. V. Short's study on breast-feeding looked at contemporary agricultural societies that practice lengthy and exclusive breast-feeding. He discovered that lactational amenorrhea, lack of menstruation due to breast-feeding, lasts an average of eighteen and a half months.[50] This causes the birth of children to be spaced farther apart than women in societies where women regain fertility sooner after childbirth.[51] In societies where women commonly experience lactational amenorrhea, the rate of childbirth is about four per mother. King and Stager argue that, since breast-feeding provides a certain measure of natural contraception, extended breast-feeding may have helped to control the spacing of children, showing another aspect in which a

49 "The Archeology of the Family in Ancient Israel," 1-36.

50 R.V. Short, "Breast-feeding," *Scientific American* 250/4 (April 1984): 23-29.

51 Jean Louis Flandrin's discussion of wet-nursing practices in the Middle Ages in Europe helps to illustrate the effect of maternal breast-feeding on fertility rates. Urban mothers had high fertility rates but also high infant mortality rates, while rural mothers experienced lower fertility and infant mortality rates. Flandrin attributes the statistical differences to differences in breast-feeding practices. Rural mothers tended to breast-feed their own children, thus increasing the spacing between children. Urban mothers tended to send an infant to the country to a woman whose child had died or who had finished nursing. *Families in Former Times: Kingship, Household and Sexuality.* (Trans. Richard Southern; Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press, 1976), 23.

social need is incorporated into the cultural expectations of mothers.[52] Gruber concludes that lengthy and intensive breastfeeding was a "significant factor leading to the low fertility of ancient Israelite women."[53] In ancient Israel, where mothers were expected to breast-feed their own children for an extended period of time, fertility rates were likely lower than in societies that depended more heavily on wet-nurses. Thus, lengthy maternal breast-feeding likely led to smaller family sizes in the house of the father.

Within the biblical texts, it is rare for a family to contain more than three generations. The incest taboos in Lev 18:1-16 assumes a multi-generational family; the prohibitions against incest (addressed to the male head of the household) deal with one preceding and two succeeding generations. Exodus10:2 also suggests a living unit of three generations. While Jacob and David's households are compromised of many children, Abraham, Isaac and Joseph's families are actually more typical of the biblical descriptions of families. Very few mothers have a large number of children. Jacob has thirteen children, but it takes four wives to accomplish this. Only Leah has more than two herself (Gen 29-30). Rehoboam's household consisted of twenty-eight sons and sixty daughters, but with eighteen wives and sixty concubines (2 Chr 11:21) According to Hilma Granqvist, if one explores the mathematical possibilities of his household, most of the mothers could only have had one child. Since one wife is listed as having three of the sons and another four, that

52 King and Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel,* 41.

53 Mayer Gruber, "Breast-feeding Practices in Biblical Israel and in Old Babylonian Mesopotamia" *JANES* 19 (1989): 63.

leaves five mothers to have two children and seventy-one with only one child.[54] However, Archer points out that the genealogies can be misleading. They cannot reflect "demographic reality" because there are so few daughters listed.[55] The weight of the textual evidence, though not irrefutable, along with the excavations of houses and the family spacing influenced by maternal breast-feeding point to smaller family households.

bêt ʾēm THE HOUSE OF THE MOTHER

Scattered among the recurrent references to the house of the father are references to the *bêt ʾēm,* the house of the mother. The term appears in three literary contexts: after encountering Abraham's servant, Rebekah goes to her mother's house; Naomi admonishes Ruth and Orpah to return to their mother's house; the woman in the Song of Songs refers to her mother's house.

The first reference to the mother's house occurs in Gen 24. Abraham's servant has been sent to Abraham's country and kindred in order to find a wife for Isaac. The servant inquires whether there is room in her father's household for his party to stay (v. 23). Rebekah identifies herself as "the daughter of Bethuel son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor." Here, she gives the name of her father paternal grandmother and grandfather. Rebekah then tells Eliezer that the family has plenty of straw and fodder

54 Hilma Granqvist, *Child Problems Among the Arabs (*Studies in a Muhammadan Village in Palestine.Helsingfors: Söderstrøm, 1950), 53.

55 Leonie Archer, *Her Price is Beyond Rubies: The Jewish Woman in Graeco-Roman Palestine*, (JSOTSup 60; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 18.

for his animals and invites him to stay the night. Rebekah has identified significant members of her household as well as something about the holdings of the family. The narrator then has Rebekah run home to give a report of the encounter with Abraham's servant, but this time the term for the household changes: “Then the girl ran and told her *mother's household* about these things” (v. 28, emphasis mine). Fretheim simply says that the phrase “refers naturally to a girl's family,” without any further explanation.[56] Naomi Steinberg suggests that the reference in Gen 24:28 to Rebekah's mother's house may indicate that Nahor had more than one wife.[57] That would mean that the house of the father is primary, but that within the umbrella of the *bêt* āb, individual *bêt ’ēm* might exist.

Another reference to the *bêt ’ēm* occurs in the book of Ruth when Naomi encourages her widowed daughters-in-law Ruth and Orpah to return to their mother's house: "Go back each of you to your *mother's house*. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband" (Ruth 1:8-9a; emphasis mine). Widows or displaced women are normally admonished to return to the father's house (see Gen 38:11; Lev 22:13; Num 30:16; Deut 22:21; Judg 19:2-3).[58] Trible suggests that Naomi's advice to Ruth and Orpah to return to their mother's house may indicate

56 Terence E. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" in *General Articles on the Bible; General Articles on the Old Testament; Genesis; Exodus; Leviticus (ed. Leander E. Keck; v*ol 1 NIB; Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), *511.*

57 Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis,* 14.

58 Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “Returning to the 'Mother's House': A Feminist Look at Orpah,” *The Christian Century* 108.13 (2004), 430.

opposition between the mother and mother-in- law.[59] However, Miller-McLemore questions this interpretation, arguing that Naomi's words point to the "unifying, solidifying power of the mother" because her words depict the idea that while paternity may construct households and marital alliances, paternity is not the central social relationship. Rather, her request shows the appeal of the mother's house. "The request protests a system in which men control motherhood in order to maintain patriarchy."[60] Kathleen Farmer argues that this reference, along with the others, is in a context of marriage arrangements; the arrangement of marriages is a function of the work of the mother and father. Although she does not argue for an overall meaning of the term "mother's house," in this context she argues that sending the women back to their mother's house is sending them to look for new husbands.[61]

In Song of Songs, the mother's house appears twice (3:4 and 8:2). In the first instance, it is followed by a parallel reference to the mother's chamber. "Scarcely had I passed them, when I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go until I brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her that conceived me"(3:4). Renita Weems says that the use of this phrase, rather than father's house, is surprising within the context of Song of Songs. The father's house implies a place where the father or some other male protects and controls the

59 Phyllis Trible. *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality (*Overtures to Biblical Theology; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 166-70.

60 *Ibid,* 430.

61 Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer, "The Book of Ruth: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections, " in *Numbers, Deuteronomy, Introduction to Narrative Literature, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel* (ed. Leander Keck; vol. 2 of NIB; Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 889-946.

daughter's chastity. However, she argues that the Songs of Songs focuses on women's private emotions and dreams:

> The references to the 'mother's house' symbolize the private, enclosed world of women's secrets and sexuality. Where the maiden intends to lure her lover is no place for fathers, brothers, uncles, or other male guardians. The 'chambers of her who conceived me" are where women's secret rituals, fantasies, speech, and private dramas (e.g., bathing, having babies) take place.[62]

In 8:2, the woman wishes that she could have a more publicly acknowledged relationship with the man: "O that you were like a brother to me, who nursed at my mother's breast! If I met you outside, I would kiss you, and no one would despise me. I would lead you and bring you into the house of my mother, and into the chamber of the one who bore me" (v.2-3a). Again, Weems reads this reference metaphorically; the mother's house is the place for female fantasy, outside of male control.[63]

Meyers provides a unified reading of these texts that mention the mother's house. Looking at all of these texts together, Meyers draws the conclusion that the *bêt ʾēm* refers to the same entity *bêt ʾāb*, but from a different vantage point. Just as the difference between bayit and *bêt ʾāb* depends on the perspective of the speaker or character involved. While an outsider would have thought of the household as belonging to the male head, a view from the inside saw the mother as manager of the household. Instead of providing the societal view of the household, these texts could be references from within the household. Although legally it is the *father's* house, the

62 Renita Weems, "Song of Songs: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections, " in *Introduction to Wisdom Literature, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom, Sirach (*ed. Leander Keck; vol. 5 of *NIB*; Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 397.
63 *Ibid,* 428.

family would experience it as the *mother's* house. [64] I am inclined to agree with Meyer's reading of these texts. The mother's house suggests the same sense of economic and physical safety suggested by the father's house. Mothers are prominent figures in each of these stories. The difference between *bayit* and *bêt ʾāb i*s not location, but point of reference. Since these texts all voice the perspective of daughters*, bêt ʾēm* may well reflect the daughter's point of reference on the family household: from the daughter's perspective, it is the mother's house.

AUTHORITY IN THE HOUSEHOLD

The terminology of the father's house has lead some to believe that the father had absolute authority within the household, leaving the mother without any authority over her children. In her monograph on mothers, Bronner argues that mothers are able to get things done, but she brings a sociological distinction between power and authority and power: "authority" is legally assigned; "power" is the ability to get things done. Bronner's argument is that through the narratives, mothers are figures with power (getting what they want done without society's official sanctioning), but not authority (given by society). When mothers mothers assert power in surreptitious or underhanded ways, as in the case of Rebekah or Bathsheba, it is an indication that these mothers lack authority, but use their power to have their desires accomplished.[65]

64 Carol Meyers, "Families in Early Israel" in *Families in Ancient Israel.* (ed. Don S. Browning and Ian S. Evison*; The Family, Religion and Culture,* ed. Don S. Browning and Ian S. Evison; Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), 34.

65 Bronner, *Stories of Biblical Mothers*, *ix.*

Other scholars see these texts in which women work surreptitiously as an indication of a lack of power as well as authority; mothers must become devious in order to snatch power from those in authority.

Rich noted that mothers in patriarchal societies do not make the rules but are expected to enforce them, which Rich calls "powerless responsibility."[66] Women do not have the social sanction to make decisions, but are expected to enforce the decisions that others have made. Many readers of the biblical narratives believe that mothers in these texts exhibit a powerless responsibility. Arguing for the inherent patriarchal nature of the texts, feminists have suggested that the mother's role is subverted while the father retains absolute authority within the family structure.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE FATHER

Many scholars have viewed the father as the equivalent of the Greco-Roman *pater familias*, with the authority of life and death over his children, the decision-making authority for his wife, and dominating all aspects of family life. Victor Matthews argues that the authority of the head of the household was the power of the *pater familias* in the patriarchal period through the settlement. He views the legal tradition of honoring the father and the mother (Exod 20:12) as well as the tradition of respect (Prov 30:17) as examples of the power of the father. Exodus 21:15 gives

66 See Andrea O'Reilly, ed. *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 6.

the father the power of the death penalty for man who struck father or mother (Exod 21:15) Using Judg 6:28-31 as an example, he suggests that "[i]t was his right to punish or reward the members of his family without the interference of the other villagers."[67]

The example from Judges actually undermines Matthew's point about the absolute power of the father. This is not a story about the rights of the father over the son. In Judg 6, it is the townspeople, not the father Joash, who demand the death of Gideon. The men of the town feel that they have the authority to demand Gideon's death. The father provides protection for his son by verbally attacking the god Ba'al and insisting that the townspeople let Ba'al defend himself. Joash does not argue that the authority to punish and kill his son rests with him alone. Thus, in this story, the father does not have unrivaled authority over the life and death of his children. Instead, the townspeople assert their own authority for punishment. Matthew's examples from the legal and wisdom materials also undermine the social construction of the father as the *paterfamilias.* As I will discuss below, these texts place the mother beside the father, and make no differentiation between the respect due to the father and the respect due to the mother. The penalty for disobedience to the mother is the same as disobedience to the father. The presence of the mother serves to mitigate the authority of the father.

67 Victor H. Matthews, *Manners and Customs in the Bible* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 68-69.

In Delany's discussion of the Israelite father as a *paterfamilias,* she argues that the missing mother indicates the authority of the father at the expense of the mother. She argues that the idea of conception that she sees contained in the texts, that the father provides all that is essential to a child while the mother is simply a fertile soil for growth, leads to the father-right. Using parallels from Greek mythology, Delany argues that infanticide stories demonstrate the authority of the father and serve to solidify patriarchy. Reading the binding of Isaac alongside the myths of infanticide, she argues that the story serves to establish the father-right (Gen 22). She then turns her attention to the authority of the mothers; she argues that since the mother is completely missing from the episode, it is an indication that the mother does not have authority over the life of child..[68] In Delany's assessment, then, the father has absolute authority over the children from conception to death, while the mother has no authority.

I suggest, however, that the binding of Isaac actually encodes a conflict of parental power and authority. Delany argues that this story establishes the father's right over the life and death of his child; the absent mother suggests that the mother has no authority. However, the story is similar to other stories in which mothers are missing; the child's life is in danger from the father (see also Judg 11; 1 Sam 14). As I will argue in ch. four, mothers are protectors of children, advocating for the safety of their children. In the chapter preceding the binding of Isaac, Sarah has asserted her

68 Carol Delany, "The Legacy of Abraham" in *Anti-Covenant: Counter-reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible* (ed Mieke Bal; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 34, 38.

role as one who protects Isaac by sending Ishmael away in spite of Abraham's objections. Abraham does not have exclusive authority over either of his sons in this text; Sarah asserts her parental authority in protecting Isaac, even over the authority of Abraham (Gen 21). In ch 22, Abraham and Isaac journey three days away from the household, and therefore from the presence of the mother, precisely because her protective intervention would mitigate Abraham's authority over the life of their son. Mothers are absent from the stories that establish the father's authority, such as the binding of Isaac, precisely because the mother's presence challenges the father's authority over their children.

MATERNAL AUTHORITY

Bronner's argument about household authority is that mothers have power, but not authority (see above). However, it is my contention that mothers do have authority over their children within the structure of the household. Matthews and Benjamin likewise argue that mothers *did* have authority. They suggest that land and children are the two basic resources in every society; status is determined by how authority over these resources is delegated. They argue that the mother of the Israelite household had power and authority over decisions related to land and children.[69] I suggest, however, that mothers had authority over their children, but that they did not hold authority over land. As I will show, a variety of texts command obedience to the mother, or show the mother acting in ways that indicate her decisions about her

69 Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel,* 23.

children are accepted by society. However, their authority does not extend to decisions about how land may be used or inherited. The texts in which mother work surreptitiously are generally about matters that affect the transmission of property; mothers try to assert power when they do not have societally sanctioned authority.

Narratives of mothers and children indicate the authority mothers had over their children. Hannah has the authority to make decisions about the young Samuel, as she choses to dedicate him to the Lord and she appoints the time that he will go to live at the temple. Although Esther Fuchs argues that Hannah is circumventing the authority of her husband and the priest by making a vow on her own, I instead argue that she is asserting her own authority over the child.[70] No one questions her right to offer her child to God and leave him in the temple. Her husband has children with another mother; this child is for Hannah. Hannah has asked of God, and God has given her a child (1 Sam 1:20). She exerts authority in deciding not to go to the temple until Samuel is weaned. Again, no one questions her authority to make decisions about her child. She does not trick her husband to circumvent his authority; his response, "Do what seems best to you," indicates that he accepts that the authority over young Samuel is hers (v. 23).

Susan Ackerman argues that the references to the queen mother found throughout the books of Kings and Chronicles indicate these mothers as authority figures. Even though these mothers as exceptional (queens rather than typical

70 "The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible" *Semeia* 46 (1989): 151-166.

Israelite women), their institutionalized status shows an elevated view of motherhood.[71]

Mothers have authority in matters that deal with adult children as well: mothers are paired with fathers in responsibility for matters of marriage. Bronner notes that arranging marriages was "usually a function of the patriarch of the family."[72] The stories themselves, however, indicate that mothers were heavily involved in the process. They are involved in the selection of wives (Gen 27:46; Judg 13:2) and negotiating marriage arrangements (Gen 24:55). In one instance, a male figure is missing completely, yet the mother still has the authority to arrange a marriage, as Hagar secures a wife for Ishmael from Egypt (Gen 21:21). Mothers, with fathers, have the authority to provide assurance of the daughter's virginity before marriage (Deut 22:13-17). This law, imagines a situation in which a man married a woman, but decides that he dislikes her and so makes up the charge that she was not a virgin. According to the law, it is the responsibility of "the father of the young woman and her mother" to **"**submit the evidence of the young woman's virginity to the elders of the city at the gate" (v. 15) by spreading a cloth before the elders. While the law envisions the father as the spokesperson for the family before the elders, the mother and father together are to produce evidence. The authority of mothers over their unmarried offspring extends beyond the household into the sphere of social networks.

71 See "The Queen Mother and the Cult in Ancient Israel" *JBL* 112/3 (1993): 385-401.
72 Bonner, *Stories of Biblical Mothers*, 16.

PAIRING FATHER AND MOTHER

The motif of a paired mother and father points to shared authority over the children. With few exceptions, in the legal materials mothers and fathers are considered with equal respect.[73] The penalty for disrespecting a mother is the same as that of disrespecting a father; the blessings for honoring a mother are the same as that of a father.[74] As these are presented as *laws* in the text, the commandments to honor and obedience are legal, socially sanctioned authority of mothers over their children.

The most well known pairing of mother and father, included among the Ten Commandments, calls for honor of both father and mother, with an attending promise of living long in the land (Exod 20:12). Leviticus 19:3 calls for listeners to "revere your mother and father." In this unusual instance, the mother is listed first. Van der Toorn contrasts Exod 20: "Honor your father and your mother," with the instruction in Lev 19:2-4, 'Everyone shall respect his mother and father." Van der Toorn suggests that the former commandment is addressed to adults, with "honor" carrying the connotation of financial commitment. The Leviticus passage, by contrast, is

73 The equality of respect seems to be common among other ANE cultures as well. A son accused on dishonoring father or mother was to be punished; in Mesopotamia, children were expected to make a funery offering to deceased parents. See Rivkah Harris, "Women: Mesopotamia," *ABD* 6: 947-951.

74 This understanding makes sense within the Ancient Near Eastern provenance of these stories. "Socially, the woman possessed a status similar to that of the man. While her husband was alive, she was completely free to engage in business, as long as she had his permission. When there was no man present, she could even run her own business, a fact which can be deduced from many letters and documents (see below, X.3). As a mother, she could claim under both divine and human law the respect of her adult children. Contempt for one's mother was no less a sin than a similar bearing toward one's father (a fact which is true of Hebrew law as well). Expulsion from the home and disinheritance threatened the child who said, 'You are not my father...' or '...not my mother.' Karel Van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to her Grave: The Role of Religion in the Life of the Israelite and Babylonian Woman* (trans. Sara J. Denning-Bolle; Biblical Seminar 23; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 77.

addressed to children and therefore calls for "respect" or obedience.[75] The mother comes first, perhaps because she is the authority figure with whom the children would spend much of their time.[76]

Other laws command punishment for those who dishonor their parents in some way. Exodus 21 calls for death to anyone who strikes father or mother (v.15) or even curses father or mother (v.17). Deuteronomy 21:18-19 addresses rebellious sons, commanding the parents to bring the son before the elders: "If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place." In this instance, the expectation is that both the father and mother should be obeyed, and the father and mother alike are called upon to bring the son before the elders at the gate. This text indicates that maternal authority is not simply relegated to the private sphere, but here, the mother's authority over the son extends to the public sphere as well.

Ezekiel 22 speaks out against Israel for breaking the laws of God, equating treating father and mother with contempt along with murder, mistreating the less fortunate, and profaning God.

75 By contrast King and Stager interpret this commandment to "honor" as a reference to proper burial practices, such as interring the parents in the ancestral grave and overseeing the rituals associated with mourning. *Life in Biblical Israel*, 42.

76 Van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle,* 27-28.

> The princes of Israel in you, everyone according to his power, have been bent on shedding blood. Father and mother are treated with contempt in you; the alien residing within you suffers extortion; the orphan and the widow are wronged in you. You have despised my holy things, and profaned my sabbaths. (Ezek 22:6-8)

Wisdom writings likewise command respect for the mother, often pairing the mother and the father as sources of wisdom and authority. Proverbs, like Deuteronomy, also reflects the idea that punishment is due to anyone who disobeys or harms either father or mother. In several instances in Proverbs, mother and father are paralleled with threats against any who opposes their parents. Proverbs 19:26 says that “those who do violence to their father and chase away their mother are children who cause shame and bring reproach.” Proverbs condemns anyone who curses mother or father, saying that, “your lamp will go out in utter darkness.” Proverbs 30:17 suggests another dire threat for “the eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother;” the eye “will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures.” Proverbs 28:24 says that anyone who robs either father or mother and does not see it as crime is “partner to a thug.” These texts all threaten punishment for those who disobey mother and father. These, again, are socially sanctioned authority of mothers and fathers over their children.

Several texts in Proverbs pair father and mother with a call to obedience. Proverbs 23:22 instructs, “Listen to your father who begot you, and do not despise your mother when she is old." This pairing assumes that obedience to the parent will be lifelong, indicating an expectation of respect not only from young children but also adult offspring. The description of the father as one who begot connects the

commandment to birth and young childhood; the second half of the verse calls for the listener to obey the mother even when she is old; presumably, an old mother would mean that the offspring is now an adult, but her wisdom is still be be respected. It is interesting to note here that the mother is not simply connected to the birth and the father to the influence of the life of the child, but that by pairing both parents, mother and father are connected to the lifespan of the offspring. The verses go on to invite the listener to “buy truth, wisdom, instruction, and understanding” (v. 23), so that the father will be glad (v. 24). The next verse then pairs mother and father in their gladness, and now connects the mother to her biological function as "one who bore you."

The motif of the paired mother and father points to an important aspect of the way that motherhood is constructed in many texts in the Hebrew Bible. If authority is defined as socially sanctioned, these texts point to a mother whom society vests with authority. While “honor” does not necessitate authority, texts that command obedience to the mother along with the father do assign legal authority. The mother and father are depicted as sharing responsibilities for and authority over their offspring, both young and adult. The texts encode a shared responsibility and shared authority between mother and father over their children.

LIMITED AUTHORITY

The texts that present a competing social construction, where mothers do not have authority, tend to be in matters that deal with inheritance (whether of land or

position). While mothers do have socially sanctioned authority over their children, this authority does not extend to matters that affect inheritance rights. Frederick Greenspahn argues that the majority of Biblical heroes are younger, defying the notion that primogeniture was the norm in antiquity. He says that the motif of the forsaken firstborn indicates that the practice of inheritance was more fluid than has been suggested; fathers could choose favored sons.[77] Although mothers gave birth to the heir, this area seems to be one place in which the authority of the father over the children is not balanced by the authority of the mother. This does not mean that mothers do not have opinions about inheritance; this is the point at which mothers resort to surreptitious means to assert power. Bathsheba convinces David that his promise was that Solomon could be king (1 Kgs 1:17). Rebekah encourages Jacob to trick his father into gaining the special blessing. Although this is not about land *per se*, it is more generally about inheritance rights; the sons are competing for the father's best blessing (Gen 26).

This discussion has called into question the absolute authority of the father. Mothers share authority with fathers over their children. The legal materials assign socially sanctioned authority to mothers along with fathers, calling children to respect and obey. This balance of power helps to make sense of texts in which mothers are missing from the text. Often, mothers at missing at points of danger for their children; the mother's role as protector and authority over her own children would mitigate the

77 Frederick E. Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5.

authority over the father. However, the mother's authority does have limitations; while mothers have authority over their children, that authority does not extend to decisions about inheritance within the family.

Phylis Bird suggests that the mother's equal status with the father in the legal material is related to her economic value within the family:

> The ancient command to honor one's parents (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16) recognizes the female as the equal of the male in her role as mother. It places the highest possible value upon this role, in which her essential function in the society was represented—the reproductive function. The welfare of family and society and the status of the husband depended upon her performance of that task. [78]

In Bird's view, the legal authority of the mother reflects her invaluable potion as the manager of the household. This fits motherhood studies that indicate constructions of motherhood may be a way of justifying societal needs.[79] Interdependence within the household was required for survival. The mother's significant economic contributions are lead to a construction of motherhood with authority. That authority, however, is limited by the need of household to keep land in tact. Thus, the mother's authority over children is circumscribed by economic contingencies.

78 Phyllis Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 29.
79 Dixon, *The Roman Mother,* 7.

ECONOMIC VALUE OF MOTHERHOOD:

PRODUCTIVE AND REPRODUCTIVE LABOR

Economic theorists suggest that the work of members of a household can be divided into two categories: productive and reproductive labor. Both kinds of labor contribute significantly to the well-being of the family. Stephanie Shaw defines productive labor as "physical labor related to the production of ordinary goods and services." Reproductive labor is "all the tasks related to the generation of and maintenance of human life."[80] Reproductive labor, then, includes pregnancy and childbearing as well as caring for infants and socializing children.

Particularly within the Pentateuch, the Hebrew Bible suggests the dual economic function of motherhood. When the Bible mentions mothers of young children, it is often to say that they have been left behind to care for young children and take care of the economic necessities of the family. In Gen 32:7, Jacob, fearing Esau's revenge, divides his family and livestock into two groups; if Esau were to attack one, the other group could escape. in 32:22-23, he sends his two wives, two maids, eleven sons and "everything he had" across the stream ahead of him. Mothers are responsible for the safety of the children and their potential inheritance. In Gen 33, when Jacob and Esau finally reunite, he places the mothers with their own children, particularly providing for the protection of Rachel and Joseph. In Gen 43-45, when the sons of Jacob travel to Egypt in search of food, they leave behind their

80 Stephanie J. Shaw, "Mothering Under Slavery in the Antebellum South," in *Mothers and Motherhood* (ed. Rima Apple and Janet Golden; Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997), 297.

children and wives. Numbers 32:26 suggests that in the preparation for battle, one should leave behind “children, wives and livestock.” Again in Deut 3:19 “wives, children and livestock” are left beyond the Jordan while the men cross over to take the land. In these texts, mothers are expected to stay behind to protect not only the children, but also the family's livelihood.

MOTHER AS HOUSEHOLD MANAGER

Several texts in Proverbs associate the mother with management of the household: Prov 14:1 contrasts the wise woman who builds her house with the foolish woman who tears the house down. The connection between mother and manager is made explicit in the poem in Prov 31:10-31, celebrating a woman ably managing her household. She is involved in physical labor, in economic activity and in moral leadership.[81] Her children rise up to call her blessed for all that she has accomplished. Verse 21 directly refers to the household: "She is not afraid for *her household* when it snows, for all her household are clothed in crimson.” The text refers to *her* household. It is not simply the father's house; it is the mother's as well.

Deriving information from the depictions in Prov 31, the mother was responsible for making clothing and transforming foodstuffs into edible and storable form. This specialized knowledge gave women particular power within the household since they could determine the amount of food given to each member of the family. Meyers has argued that patrilocality made sense in ancient Israel because farming the

81Meyers, *Discovering Eve,* 48.

difficult terrain required an intimate knowledge of a particular plot of land. Men needed to stay with their land in order to produce crops; their acquired knowledge was not easily transferable to another plot of land since soil and weather patterns could vary greatly from place to place. Women's knowledge, such as sewing and food processing, was more portable. She argues that the value placed on mothers in the legal materials (such as Lev 19:3 and Deut 27:16) reflects this social reality: the mother was often the one who knew how to turn raw materials (supplied by the men) into edible or storable food.[82] Again, the expectations of motherhood are affected by economic contingencies.

REPRODUCTIVE LABOR

While other aspects of reproductive labor are not the exclusive realm of the mother, the mother would have carried on the majority of tasks related to raising children. The modern western ideal of a mother with young children providing constant supervision for her children would likely not have been the experience of Israelite mothers. Cross-cultural comparisons from the ancient world indicate that mothers were not expected to invest the same amount of time in their children that is

82 Meyers, "The Family in Early Israel," 33. Further, Meyers notes that due to the patrilocal custom, the woman, having lived in more than one household, may have developed wisdom in seeking compromises, strengthening her status as a manager of the household.

expected of modern western mothers.[83] Meyers postulates that "childbearing may have been a less dominant aspect of women's lives than might be imagined." Women had a great deal of productive work to do, such as gathering and preparing food for the family and taking care of animals, so that reproductive work by necessity took up less of the mother's time.[84]

Meyers cites the table of labor equivalences in Lev 27 as an indication of the amount of reproductive labor expected of women. Leviticus lists the value of humans in shekels, meaning that the labor each could contribute is worth a certain amount of money. The amount given varies by gender and age group. According to the table, adult women from twenty to sixty (the time in which women would have been most engaged in reproductive labor) were valued at thirty shekels, while the equivalent ages of men were valued at fifty shekels. While this has been read as an indication that women's work was therefore less valued than men's economic contribution to the family,[85] Meyers argues that this table is an indication that women contributed forty per cent of the productive labor in the household. The additional ten per cent of women's contribution to the family came through reproductive labor.[86] The ages at which men and women are closer in labor equivalences are times at which women would not have been as heavily involved in reproductive labor.

83 Cross cultural comparisons in the ancient world suggest that young children were often left unattended as mothers and other caregivers went about their work. Suzanne Dixon provides evidence from Roman sources that even Caesar's children were left without adult supervision. *The Roman Mother,* 126.

84 Meyers, "The Family in Early Israel," 28.

85 For example, Phylis Bird, for example, reads this table as an indication that men were more valued in society. *Missing Persons,* 28.

86 Meyers, "The Family in Early Israel," 34.

CONCLUSION

In the mother's house, the responsibilities of the mother include both productive and reproductive economic functions. Because of the contributions of women within the inner workings of the household, something more akin to gender balance existed. While outward signifiers of status may have been biased toward men, within the household, women may well have dominated many aspects of economic life as well as social and parental activities.[87] For subsistence farmers, everyone's work would have been valued as contributing to the needs of the family; the survival of the bêt āb would have depended on the contributions of all family members.

A mother's authority comes from the key position that mothers played within the household. The legal materials as well as Proverbs assign the mother, along with the father, authority over the children. Texts with mothers working surreptitiously indicate the limitations of maternal authority; mothers try to influence inheritance, even though maternal authority does not extend to inheritance. Domestic scenes with missing mothers, rather than indicating a lack of authority, suggest that the authority of the mother would mitigate the authority over their children. The mother is written out of the text rather than take away from the father's authority. The economic balance, the shared parental authority over children, and references to the house of the mother amidst the references to the house of the father indicate a parity, if not equality, between the mother and the father in the lives of their children.

87*Idem, Discovering Eve,* 42.

CHAPTER 3: BECOMING A MOTHER

Motherhood studies have raised the question of how women in different cultures understand their experience of conception, pregnancy and childbirth. Because these are biological events, one might believe that the experience of becoming a mother is the same across cultures. The Wisdom of Solomon betrays this notion that Israel's own understanding of childbirth is universal:

> And when I was born, I began to breathe the common air, and fell upon the kindred earth; my first sound was a cry, as is true of all. I was nursed with care in swaddling cloths. For no king has had a different beginning of existence; there is for all one entrance into life, and one way out (11:3-6).

Though there is a physiological basis to conception and childbirth, it is also affected by cultural expectations and assumptions, such as how conception is understood to occur, the expectations of behavior for an expectant mother, and who attends the birth. However, societies often assume that their constructions have a biological basis.[88]

Anthropologist Brigitte Jordan has suggested that what women know and experience in the process of becoming mothers is directly related to what their society has led them to expect and who is thought to posses the "authoritative knowledge" of the process of becoming a mother. Authority figures, whether doctors, midwives, or elder mothers, communicate expectations to the potential mother that affects her own experience of pregnancy and giving birth. For example, when childbirth is strongly associated with pain by those who are viewed as authoritative, childbirths tend to be

88 Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation,* 23-24.

more painful.[89] Miller notes that the power of cultural authoritative knowledge comes not from its inherent truth or correctness (since different cultures have different sources of authoritative knowledge), but rather from the authority granted to it by the culture. The knowledge is reinforced during each pregnancy and birth, granting it a certain legitimacy because it seems to reflect a universal wisdom and experience of women.[90]

Miller, building on the ideas set forth by Jordan, suggests that "cultural scripts," a set of ideas in part determined by the dominant forms of authoritative knowledge in the society, help to guide people through significant life events, such as the process of becoming a mother. These scripts help to define expectations of behavior during pregnancy and childbirth, determine who belongs at the birth, and affect the overall experience of the women involved. Miller notes that scripts may contain inherently contradictory messages, but the contradictions do not lessen their power. She argues that the dominant cultural scripts are often underpinned by the society's social structures and become so accepted as the norm that they are difficult to resist.[91] As The Wisdom of Solomon attests, there is for all one entrance into the world.

In the stories dealing with fertility (or the lack thereof) and giving birth in the Hebrew Bible, a social construction emerges in which women have two sources of authoritative knowledge: midwives and God/God's messenger. Midwives attend

89 Jordan, *Birth in Four Cultures,* 4.
90 Miller, *Making Sense of Motherhood,* 29.
91 Ibid, 28-29.

births, console dying mothers, and determine birth order in the case of twins. Although the work of midwives is well-documented throughout the Ancient Near East, the Hebrew Bible emphasizes the latter source, putting the focus on God as the one who makes women fertile or infertile, who influences the pregnancy, and who directs women's experience in becoming mothers. It is only during depictions of childbirth that the authoritative knowledge of the midwives breaks through (Exod 1:18ff; 1 Sam 4:19ff).

IN THE WOMB: CONCEPTION

The womb possesses a special meaning in descriptions of the way in which a woman becomes a mother. Beyond the references to the actual organ, the womb is used metaphorically to symbolize fertility, infertility, and motherhood itself. Some texts refer to a special consecration for the first child to break through the mother's womb (Exod 22:29; Num 3:13).

Two Hebrew words are used for the womb. *Reh em's* semantic range is centered around the mother's womb, with references throughout the Bible to going forth from the womb (Jer 1:5, 20:18; Job 38:8), opening the womb in childbirth (Gen 29:31), and concern for the *bᵉkōr*, the firstborn (whether child or animal) to emerge from the womb as consecrated to God (Exod 13:12, Num 8:16). *Re em* is also used in conjunction with words that indicate problems with fertility, such as to "the miscarrying womb" (Hos 9:14) and "restraint of the womb," meaning barrenness (Ps 30:16). Judges 5:30 uses *reḥ em* as a metaphor for women to be brought home as

spoil from Sisera's battle, although the NRSV translates the term simply as “a girl”: "Are they not finding and dividing the spoil?-- A girl or two for every man. . . " *Reh em* is not simply a reference to a woman, but rather functions as a synechdoche for the women who are brought home. Fewell and Gunn suggest that the use of this "crude synechdoche" shows the female captives as nothing more than body parts for men to invade.[92] As the verse indicates, what becomes significant about these women, whether as slaves or potential wives/concubines, is their potential to become mothers.

Bet en has a broader semantic range; it does not refer exclusively to the uterus, but can also refer to the belly, either of a woman (Num 5:21) or of a man (Judg 13:7). Like *reh em, bet en* can refer to the womb of the mother (Gen 25:23; Gen 38:27; Eccl 11:5; Job 3:10). It frequently occurs in the phrase “fruit of the womb” or “fruit of the body” and can therefore refer to the offspring of either the mother or the father. Genesis 30 uses the phrase to identify the fruit of the mother's body: Rachel has demanded that Jacob give her children. He responds that he is not God, and that it is not he who has withheld from her the “fruit of the womb (*bet en*),” but God; the “fruit”comes from God, not Jacob's seed. Other times that the phrase “fruit of the womb” is employed, it does not identify a specific mother. Deuteronomy 7:13 gives promises from God, including blessings of “the fruit of your womb.” The promises are addressed to all of the people of Israel, not a particular mother. Texts

92 Dana N. Fewell and David M. Gunn, “Controlling Desire: Women, Men and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 and 5,” *JAAR* 58 (1990): 389-411.

that reflect the fruit of the father's body include Mic 6:7 and Ps 132:11. In these instances, the text is generally translated as “fruit of my body” or “fruit of your body” rather than “fruit of the womb.” Psalm127:3 says that "the fruit of the womb a reward.” The NRSV"s translation implies that the fruit emerges from the mother's womb, but the fruit could as easily be understood as emanating from the father's body. Likewise, Isaiah and Hosea both contain references to children as the fruit of the womb, but are not particularly addressing mothers: "Their bows will slaughter the young men; they will have no mercy on the fruit of the womb; their eyes will not pity children” (Isa 13:18). “Ephraim is stricken, their root is dried up, they shall bear no fruit. Even though they give birth, I will kill the cherished offspring of their womb” (Hos 9:16). The use of *bet en,* then, often indicates not simply a bodily organ, but the connection between the mother or father's bodies and the offspring they produce.

Both words that can be translated as "womb" are part of the social construction of motherhood. Israelites thought that God opened the womb, affecting the understanding of both conception and birth.

CLOSED WOMBS: INFERTILITY

Although the womb is part of the mother's body, according to the social construction in the Hebrew Bible, the mother seems to have very little control over the action of the womb. Rather, God is depicted as the one who opens and closes wombs (a metaphor for fertility and infertility). Ruth 4:13 reports that when Ruth and Boaz came together, the Lord “made her conceive.” Deuteronomy 7:14 suggests that

a lack of barrenness is a significant sign of God's blessing on the people of Israel: "You shall be blessed above all people: there shall not be male or female barren among you, or among your cattle." The motif of the "barren wife" can be seen throughout the Hebrew Bible, from Sarah to Rachel, Samson's mother, and Hannah. Bronner notes that the stories about women struggling with infertility "functioned to show that the gift of life comes from God alone." Further, the motif appears in narratives that report obstacles encountered by heroes at their birth.[93]

This motif encodes the real barrenness that many women would have experienced. Difficulty with conception would have been a reality for many women due to poor nutrition, affecting the cycle of menstruation. Others would have conceived but been unable to carry the child to term (see below).

Although many fertility rituals were known in the Ancient Near East, the Hebrew Bible only alludes to a few, such as the use of mandrakes or bearing child on the knees of an infertile woman.[94] For the most part, fertility rituals reflect the key source of authoritative knowledge in the Bible. Since the Hebrew Bible attests to the conviction the view that conception comes from the Lord, the only effective rituals involve prayers to God. In several of these cases, the Lord closes the womb of the

93 Bronner, *Stories of Biblical Mothers, 27.*

94 While this ritual has been read as a ritual of adoption, in its context in Genesis, it seems to be part of a fertility ritual. Raphael Patai believes that "in view of the fact that in each of the three cases the wife herself ultimately conceived following the union of her husband with her handmaid, it seems probable that the intended purpose was to achieve fertility. Bodily contact can transfer something of the powers of the fertile woman unto the sterile woman." He notes that this principle of contagious magic is common in folk societies, with things such as using the navel and afterbirth or a piece of clothing worn during childbirth being placed on the body of a sterile woman in order to bring about fertility. *Family, Love and the Bible: Sex and the Family in Bible and Middle East* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1960), 70-71.

mother; in all cases, the texts report that the Lord opened the womb when a woman finally conceives. Thus, in Gen 30, Leah conceives, but Rachel does not because of the Lord's action (see below). Even when Rachel tries to encourage conception with mandrakes, the text states that it is the Lord and not the plant that enables her conception. In the Hebrew Bible's social construction of motherhood, only prayers to God for conception, such as Isaac's (Gen 25:21) and Hannah's (1 Sam 1:11), provide an effective way for human intervention into the process.

SARAH'S CONCEPTION: GEN 18:1-15

The transition into motherhood is often a focal point of stories about women in the Hebrew Bible, implying that becoming a mother is a time of utmost significance. J.P. Fokkelman has noted that the issue of fertility/infertility is a primary theme in Genesis. God's promise of land and progeny structures the book and carries the plot forward, but the plot is complicated by the initial barrenness of many matriarchs. The genealogies of Genesis (chs. 5, 10, and 11), by their sheer repetition and by the “hyperbolic ages of people who reached eight hundred or nine hundred years,” indicate that having children is a natural and simple part of life. The narratives of Genesis undermine this certainty in life because women find themselves unable to have children. God, not a natural process, opens the womb of the mothers. Rather than simply being a matter of course, conception and birth becomes a miracle

because only God can cause it. Only God's actions can ensure the continuity of the generations.[95]

Sarah is one of the few women to be mentioned in a genealogy. Immediately her place there become suspect, however, because she is not a mother, and therefore cannot take part in the generational continuity. Instead, the narrator announces: "Now Sarai was barren; she had no child (Gen 11:29-30)." The repetition of her childless state, in contrast to the repeated lists of fathers and sons, is jarring. By placing the initial announcement of her infertility amidst generations of fertile men, she is characterized as a woman who is not capable of fulfilling her obligations as a wife.

Genesis 18 adds a new difficulty. It is not simply that Sarah has been barren in the past; now she is infertile due to menopause. “Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women” (v.11). The narrator refers to the connection between menstruation and fertility. Sarah's advanced age explains why Sarah is no longer after “the manner of women.” Sarah overhears the three men who have come to visit Abraham and laughs when she hears their promise that the couple will have a son. “So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old (*bālâ)*, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure ('*ednâ)*?' " (Gen 18:12). In other contexts, *bālâ* describes things that have worn out (clothing in Deut 8:4, 29:4, bones in Ps 32:3, a dying man in Job 13:28).[96] Sarah's fertility, always

95 J. P. Fokkelman, *"*Genesis*,"* in *The Literary Guide to the Bible (*eds. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode; Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1987), 43.

96 Tarja Philip*, Menstruation and Childbirth in the Bible: Fertility and Impurity, (*Studies In Biblical Literature 88; New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 20.

in question, has worn out. Sarah will have pleasure when she moves from her barren status into the status of a fertile women. '*Ednâ,* generally translated as pleasure, is used only in this text in the Hebrew Bible. Sarah will have pleasure when she moves from her barren status into the status of a mother.

Philip notes that this story fits into the Yahwist source's understanding of fertility: It is the woman's role in life to give birth (Gen 3:16); both parents are involved in the process. She contrasts the story with Gen 17, a story traditionally connected with the priestly source, which mentions the advanced age of the couple, but not Sarah's menopause. In the priestly source, fertility is connected to circumcision, and the emphasis is on the man's seed, not in the couple joining together.[97] While the priestly texts focus on the role of the father in conception, non-priestly writers were more willing to express the mother's role.[98]

Sarah's story highlights elements of the social construction of conception, both in terms of God's role and the role of the human parents. This text acknowledges a father and mother role in conception and connects menstruation to conception, but assumes that God can override the natural process in order for the couple to have a child.

97 *Ibid*, 20-21.
98 *Ibid,* 87.

ZERA': THE SEED OF THE FATHER AND THE MOTHER

Understanding God's role in the social construction of conception helps one understand the human roles in conception put forth by the Hebrew Bible. Many scholars have argued that the baby is seen primarily as the offspring of the father, with words such as seed (*zera'*) to describe the offspring, while the mother's womb is viewed as fertile soil, but the mother herself does not contribute directly to making the child. Patai cites an Arabic proverb: "In descent people rely on the father and not on the mother; the mother is like a vessel that is emptied." He argues that this proverb can be understood as an underlying assumption in the way that the Hebrew Bible constructs conception; the mother's body in the Ancient Near East was seen as "merely a vessel in which the embryo is formed by God out of the seed of the father."[99] According to this social construction, the mother plays only a limited role in the process of conception. Likewise, Baruch Levine notes in his discussion of "seed" versus "womb" that there are recurrent references in the Hebrew Bible to children emanating from the father, whether as *zera'* or the issue of the loins or thigh of the father. References to children as the fruit of the mother's womb are much less frequent.[100] Carol Delany also agrees with the reading that the father's role is primary in conception. She argues that the text abrogates the mother's role in conception and pregnancy by referring to children as the seed (*zera')* of their fathers, indicating that

99 Patai, *Family, Love and the Bible,* 17, 165.

100 For a discussion of the linguistic nuances, see Baruch A. Levine, " 'Seed' versus 'Womb': Expression of Male Dominance in Biblical Israel," in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East Part II:* Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2-6, 2001 (ed. Simo Parpola and R.M. Whiting, Helsinki; The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project , 2002), 337-344.

the father provides the entire child in its essence, while the woman supplies nothing that is essential to the being of the child. While she believes that earlier social constructions would have assigned the father a joint role with the mother in conception, the story of Abraham marks the change from men having *a* role in conception to men having the *primary* role.[101] Following Delany's view, the social construction of conception would leave the mother as a supporting member, but not performing a primary role.

These scholars argue for a social construction of conception in which mothers play a limited role, but the use of *zera'* in the biblical corpus is not as clearly indicated as these arguments suggest. Certainly, the majority of the references to *zera'* are in conjunction with the father (see below), but notable examples do refer to the seed of the mother. Further, the use of *zera'* referring to the immediate descendants of the mother or father is actually rare. The majority of the texts that use *zera'* to refer to offspring do so with reference to future generations (Gen 24:60; Num 25:13). The way that *zera'* is commonly used does not create a social construction in which the mother contributes nothing to the child beyond fertile soil. Rather, it suggests that the concern with seed is a concern about carrying on the father's family line. In the modern social construction of conception, one might say that this is not a discussion about passing on genetic material, but rather about carrying on the father's family name. Though some texts do bear out the assumptions that the child is considered the father's seed alone, the varied usage of the word does not indicate a

101 Delany, "The Legacy of Abraham," 28, 35.

unified belief that the child is simply the seed of the father with no relation to the mother.

ZERA' IN BIBLICAL TEXTS

In Gen 3:15, God tells the first mother that there will be enmity between her *zera'* and the serpent's. The text is a projection into the future; the concern is not for Eve's immediate offspring, but rather for future generations of her descendants. When Eve names Cain, she does not indicate a lack of maternal contribution in the conception of the child. To the contrary, Eve claims to have had a child with the help of the Lord; she does not mention Adam. When Eve names her son Seth, she refers to him as her *zera',* appointed to her by God (Gen 4:25). Although the father is clearly a part of the process, "Adam knew Eve his wife" (Gen 4:1), Eve is not depicted as fertile soil with no real connection in making the child. In this narrative of the first mother, whom the text claims to be "the mother of all living," the focus is on the *mother's* role in conception and producing offspring.

Though Eve as mother is the focus of the narrative material related to her children's birth, Adam as the father becomes the focus of the genealogical tables. "When Adam had lived one hundred thirty years, he became the father of a son *in his likeness*, according to his image, and named him Seth. The days of Adam after he became the father of Seth were eight hundred years; and *he* had other sons and daughters" (Gen 5:3-4, emphasis mine). The child is said to be in his likeness. Although the mother is mentioned in the previous verse as one who has been created

by God, here only Adam is mentioned as the one who has produced this child and the others to follow.

In addition to the story of the first mother and father, Genesis, with its concern for genealogy and generations, includes many references to the seed of both mothers and fathers. The majority of these references show a concern for future generations. In the story of the deluge, God promises Noah and his *zera'* that he will not flood the world again (Gen 9:9). In the Abraham-Sarah cycle, seed is a particularly important motif. In Gen 15, Abram is concerned that God has given him no seed (v.3) Here, Abram is using seed in the sense of his own children. God's response takes the long view, saying that Abraham's seed will be greater than the number of stars in the heavens (Gen 13:15, where God promises that the seed will outnumber the dust of the earth and that the land will be Abram's seed's forever, and Gen 17, where the covenant with Abraham is promised to his seed). Genesis 16:10 refers explicitly to the mother's seed; the angel promises Hagar that God will multiply her seed. This does not mean that she will bear many children, but rather, that through Ishmael, her line will continue. This statement from God's messenger, the possessor of authoritative knowledge, is addressed to the mother, not the father. The Isaac-Rebekah cycle again shows concern for the seed of the mother as Rebekah's own family sends her to marry Isaac: “And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, " 'May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads; may your offspring (*zera'*) gain possession of the gates of their foes' " (Gen 24:60). The promise of future generations comes to Isaac in Gen 26. God promises that his seed will multiply, his seed will be

given the land, and through his seed all of the nations of the earth will be blessed. God's appearance to Jacob in his dream carries a similar promise for future generations.

References to the seed inheriting the land continue throughout the Pentateuch. Deuteronomy1:8 refers to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and their seed possessing the land. Numbers 14:13 is a promise that Caleb's seed will possess the land. Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers share a concern for the seed of Aaron and the priestly lineage. Exodus 28:43 and 30:21 refer to Aaron and his sons (*bēn*), but in the statutes that follow, which concern future generations of priests, *zera'* appears. Leviticus 21 and 22 contain a number of statutes for Aaron and his seed. In Num 25:13, Phineas and his seed receive an everlasting priesthood. All of these texts show *zera'* as a reference to future generations.

The legal material in the Pentateuch refers to mothers and their seed. Leviticus 12:2 is a law about a woman becoming ritually unclean after the birth of a son. This time, *zera'* refers to her child, not future generations. However, there is no mention of it being the husband's seed; it is the woman who has conceived. “If a woman conceives seed and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean.” Numbers 5:28 describes the ordeal of woman whose husband accuses her of adultery. If she survives the ordeal, she will be allowed to conceive seed. This is a neutral rendering of seed; it could be either her own seed or refer to the seed of her husband.

Outside of the Pentateuch, *zera'* continues to be used most often not to refer to direct offspring, but future descendants. In Ruth, the people of the city bless Boaz with a hope for descendants: “and, through the children (*zera'*) that the LORD will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah" (4:12). These are the seed of Boaz who come through Ruth. A case appears in 1 Sam 1:20 (in Eli's blessing to Elkanah and Hannah); he asks the Lord to give Elkanah seed though Hannah. In these two instances, though the mother is a central figure, it does seem that the seed is the father's seed passing through the mothers.[102]

This overview of the use of *zera'* shows that, although most texts refer to the father's seed, there are a significant number of texts that specifically refer to the mother's seed (such as in the cases of Eve, Rebekah and Hagar). One cannot assume that the seed comes only from the father. Further, the use of the term indicates that *zera'* shows a greater concern for future generations than for immediate offspring. The actual usage of "seed" undermines the argument that children are from the fathers, with mothers simply providing fertile ground.

THE MAN LAY WITH HIS WIFE AND SHE CONCEIVED

Another place to look for the way that the Hebrew Bible constructs conception is in the formula "a man lies with *(*šā*kab*) his wife, and she conceives

102 Some texts use of *zera'* to refer to future generations, but do not refer specifically the mothers: 1 Sam 20:42; 1 Sam 24:21; 1 Kgs 2:33; 1 Chr 17:11; Neh 9:2; Esth 6:13.

(*hārâ*) and gives birth (*yālad*)." This formula is the most common way to announce conception; it indicates that both parents are active in the process. It is significant to note in this formula that there always is a human father. Though God is generally understood to allow for conception to happen, *God* is not the progenitor.

There are several euphemisms for intercourse, the first stage of the formula. Most commonly, a man is said to lay with his wife (e.g, Gen 16:4; 19:35-37; 30:4-5; 38:18; 1 Sam 1:19-20, 2 Sam 2 1:4-5, 1 Chr 7:23). Genesis 4:1 uses the verb “knew”(Exod 2:1-2; Hos 1:3); Isa 8:13 uses the sequence of "went into, conceived, and gave birth to." At times, the conjugal act is implied, and the narrative simply describes the conception and birth (Gen 21:2; 25:21; 29:34, 35; 30:7; Judg 13:5, 7, 24; 2 Kgs 4:17; Isa 7:14).[103] The mother is the subject of both conceived[104] and gave birth.[105] Generally, the mother's name is the nominative before *hrh* (or “she” if the mother's name precedes the action in the narrative, such as in Gen 4:1). This is true even when the woman conceiving is a slave whose name might not normally be recorded (Gen16:4; 21:2, 25:21, 29:32, 30:23, 38: 3, 4; 1 Sam 1:20; 2 Sam 11:5, Hos 1:3). On occasion, God's representative is addressing the mother directly, and therefore “you” serves as the subject (Gen 16:11, 30:5, 7; Judg 13:3).

One could assume that the purpose of listing the father's action first goes beyond simply describing the physical action, but rather to make a statement about

103 Victor Hamilton, "*HRH," NIDOTT* 1:1057.

104 Conceive may also be used metaphorically as conceiving mischief and or evil plans (Ps 64:6; Is 59:4).

105 The q. of *yld* can mean “beget” when a man is the subject; it is, however, more common for *yld* to appear in the hi. when the meaning is beget. *BDB*, "yeled," 408b, ca. 22t; *BDB* 409a.

whose child this is. Conceiving and giving birth takes place within the mother's body, but it is the father who initiates the action and creates the child. There are instances, however, when the narrator does not emphasize the father's role, and instead the mother is the key figure in the conception of the child. Hamilton notes that it is rare for the subject of the verb *hrh* not to be named.[106] This is significant in that it is not simply unnamed women who have children and disappear from the story, but rather particular women, most of whom are named, who become mothers. Their own identity matters, even in the androcentric world of the story.

Even within the formula that includes the man and the woman coming together and conceiving, God is often included as an actor, particularly in cases in which divine intervention has been necessary for conception. Although Eve has not been described as barren, she makes it clear that she understands God to have a significant role in the conception of her son (Gen 4:25). The author of Ruth 4:13 reports that when Ruth and Boaz came together, the Lord "made her conceive."God is still understood to be the source that enables conception. The role of both the mother and the father is diminished, for though they are both in turn subjects of the verbs related to conceiving a child, the narratives that surround many of these formulas highlight God's action.

106 Even with genealogical tables, which normally focus on the names of fathers and sons, when conception is noted, the mother's name is generally given (1 Chr 4:17; Ruth 4:13); exceptions include Exod 2:2, Moses' mother, 2 Kgs 4:17 and 1 Chr 7:20, Ephraim's wife; Is 8:3, the prophetess. Job 3:3 and Ps 51:5 also refer to their mothers conceiving them but do not give a name for the mother. Hamilton, *NIDOTT* 1:1058.

The uses of *zera*' as well as the formula for conception used throughout the Hebrew Bible point away from a construction of the father as the most significant figure in the creation of offspring. Instead, the mother and father each have a role in conception, but their roles are subservient to God's action.

IN THE WOMB: PREGNANCY

Conception and pregnancy are connected in the Hebrew Bible's social construction. Linguistically they are joined in the same root: *hrh* in its qal form means "to be or become pregnant;" in its pu'al form it means "to be conceived;" as a participle, it is generally translated as "pregnant." The recurrent formula of the husband and wife coming together, conceiving, and bearing a child links conception and pregnancy. Conception, though obviously stemming from the man and woman coming together, is a discrete verb, while the pregnancy itself does not appear in the formula. For many of these narratives, the birth of the child is the significant moment; the pregnancy is the means to that end. In other texts, what happens within the womb plays a significant role in the child's life.

Much of the focus of pregnancy is on counting months. Job wishes that his mother's pregnancy had not “come into the number of the months” (Job 3:6). While Mary Foskett says that ancient people saw pregnancy as a nine month process, there are no biblical texts that indicate a nine month period.[107] The Wisdom of Solomon refers to the ten months in which the child develops: “I also am mortal, like everyone

107 "Birth," *NIDB 1:470-471.*

else, a descendant of the first-formed child of earth; and in the womb of a mother I was molded into flesh, within the period of ten months, compacted with blood, from the seed of a man and the pleasure of marriage (7:1-2)." Pringle explains that this focus on the months of pregnancy also appears in the literature of the neighboring Hittites; Hittite birth rituals attest counting the months of a woman's pregnancy, with childbirth expected in the tenth month.[108]

GOD AT WORK IN THE WOMB

Although there is little biblical evidence for women's practices during pregnancy, ethnographic studies reveal that authoritative knowledge for mothers comes from other women who had themselves been through pregnancy and childbirth.[109] In exploring the way that the Hebrew Bible constructs motherhood, one can observe that little is said about these sources of authoritative knowledge. Instead, the few biblical references to pregnancy suggest God is the key source of authoritative knowledge. The fact of pregnancy itself, the activity of the baby or babies within the womb, and the effect that the pregnancy will have on the life of the child derive from God or God's messenger. Any information about the pregnancy or its outcome comes from the divine realm. This comes as little surprise God controls

108 Jackie Pringle, "Hittite Birth Rituals," in *Images of Women in Antiquity (*eds. Averil Cameron and Amelie Kuhrt; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 130. Pringle explains that the Hittite-Luwain word for becoming or being pregnant, *arma*, is derived from the name of the Anatolian moongod Armas, who also lends his name to "month." "It seems possible that the Hittites counted the months as appearances of the moon from the last rising before the cessation of menses."

109 Mathews and Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel,* 67.

conception as well. God not only “opens the womb” and thereby permits conception, but God also controls what happens within the womb.

Just as the Lord controls fertility, the Lord is also forms the baby in utero. Particularly in poetic sections of the Hebrew Bible, there are descriptions of God's work before a child is born: “He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does he not see?” (Ps 94:9). Active verbs describe God's work, indicating the deity's direct involvement in the formation of the child.

> For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. (Ps 139:13-16)

The psalmist depicts God as actively involved in the development of the child. In fact, only God is fully aware of what is happening within the womb of the mother; the action occurs "in secret." In similar fashion, the author of Ecclesiastes uses imagery of the way bones grow in the expectant mother to describe the inscrutability of God's work (11:5). God possesses the authoritative knowledge about the child within the mother's womb.

The social construction concerning pregnancy involved the conviction that events occurring during pregnancy have a lifelong effect on the child. Second Isaiah and Jeremiah both describe themselves as having been called from the womb. Second Isaiah uses metaphorical language to describe his calling as a prophet, attributed to God's action within the womb: “The LORD called me before I was born, while I was

in my mother's womb he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away" (Isa 49:1b-2). Jeremiah likewise claims that God was intimately involved in his formation in the womb, and that he was consecrated to the life of a prophet before his birth: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jer 1:5). In both of these cases, as well as in Psalm 139, God's actions in the womb have consequences for what the psalmist/prophet would eventually become.

ANNUNCIATIONS OF PREGNANCY

Since God is the source of authoritative knowledge concerning pregnancy, it is not surprising that in the annunciation type scene is commonly employed in stories of potential mothers. The Lord (or a messenger, such as an angel) appears to a previously barren woman and announces that she is about to have a baby.[110] The mother is generally unaware of what is about to happen within her body, emphasizing God's authoritative knowledge about the mother. Each time the annunciation type scene is employed, the foreknowledge of the woman's pregnancy come through God or God's messenger.

110 See Robert Alter's discussion of the annunciation type-scene, "How Convention Helps us Read: The Case of the Bible's Annunciation Type-scene," *Prooftexts* 3 (1983): 115-30.

THE MOTHER OF SAMSON: JUDGES 13

In the annunciation to Samson's mother, the messenger gives instructs the mother on her behavior during pregnancy. In the story, God is the source of authoritative knowledge for her pregnancy, and her actions will have lifelong consequences for Samson.

The story of Samson's mother begins with the expected introduction of a barren woman. The narrator in Judg 13:2 notes that the wife of Manoah was “barren, having borne no children.” Like the introduction of Sarah in Gen 11, this repetition emphasizes her infertility. The messenger from the Lord then repeats the words of the narrator in the next verse: "And the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, 'Although you are barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son.' " The redundancy here indicates that, not only is she barren and unable to have children in the present, but in the past she has also been barren. This woman is decidedly not yet a mother.

Patai writes that “we must assume that, like every barren women in the Bible and in the Middle East, she greatly and even desperately desired a son, and was ready to make any vow in order to obtain her desire.” He cites similar vows undertaken by nineteenth and twentieth century Middle Eastern women.[111] Bewailing barrenness is a common element of the annunciation type scene throughout the Bible. In this instance, though, nothing is said about Manoah's wife bewailing her childless condition. Unlike Hannah, who makes a vow in order to obtain a son, Manoah's wife

111 Patai, *Family Love and the Bible,* 69.

only undertakes the vow because the angel instructs her to do so once she has conceived. [112]

God's messenger gives the mother specific instructions about her actions during her pregnancy: "Now be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, or to eat anything unclean, for you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines" (Judg 13:4-5). Patai cites a widespread belief in folk cultures that what a mother experiences during pregnancy affects the future of the baby. Although he finds no direct evidence of this belief in the Bible, this belief may be encoded in the instructions from the messenger to Samson's mother.[113] The husband approaches God and asks for a second visit from the divine messenger to "teach us what we are to do concerning the boy who will be born" (v.8). When the messenger returns, Manoah's wife is again alone; she must go bring her husband to the angel. The father inquires about the child's "rule of life," asking what the boy is to do. The messenger responds in a way that emphasizes the mother's authority over the boy: "The angel of the LORD said to Manoah, 'Let the woman give

112 Reinhartz suggests the possibility that Samson could be understood as having been conceived with the angel since the formula "and the man knew his wife, and she conceived" is missing, and Manoah is not directly called the father of Samson in this text. It is in fact, the messenger who is said to "come in to me," used at times as a metaphor for sexual relations. Further, in 13:3, the messenger assures the woman with the verb *harit,* conveying a future sense "you will conceive," while in v. 5 he announces her conception with the perfect, "you have conceived." Reinhartz notes that most translators assume the perfect also conveys a future tense. However, she notes that most commentators think that the married couple are intended to be the biological parents, and the remainder of the Samson saga treats Manoah as the father. Adele Reinhartz, "Samson's Mother: An Unnamed Protagonist," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, (ed. Athalya Brenner; *A Feminist Companion to the Bible 4;* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 166-167.

113 Patai, *Family Love and the Bible*, 162.

heed to all that I said to her. . . ' " (vv. 13-14). The messenger instructs Manoah's wife, the potential mother, and not Manoah, with how she should behave during pregnancy, "implying a close interdependence between the mother's actions and future son's life."[114] Although this is one of the instances in which the text does not list the mother's name, Reinhartz notes that the anonymity of Samson's mother, rather than marginalizing her, strengthens her place as protagonist within the birth narrative and connects her to the messenger whose name is also unknown.[115] As Bronner notes, it is Samson's mother who will have a more significant role than her husband in the upbringing of their son.[116] Her actions during pregnancy are the beginning of her duties as a mother.

Yairah Amit argues that in birth narratives, literary devices assign an "inferior status to the father while emphasizing the centrality of the women." In this instance, Manaoh plays a secondary role in the annunciation and subsequent birth. He is present in the narrative, yet his importance is diminished throughout.[117] Significantly, Manoah has called the messenger to return, but the messenger appears again to his wife. In the conversation with the messenger, the potential father harbors doubts about the veracity of the messenger's words and identity, and later about whether the Lord has accepted the offering (13:22). While those who fear having seen the face of

114 Esther Fuchs, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible," *Semeia* 46 (1989): 151-166.

115 "Samson's Mother," 157-170.

116 Bronner, *Stories of Biblical Mothers,* 28.

117 Yairah Amit, " 'Manoah Promptly Followed His Wife' (Judges 13:11): On the Place of the Woman in Birth Narratives" in *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (*A Feminist Companion to the Bible*; ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 147.

God are regularly reassured by the deity, in this case, it is the potential mother who provides the reassurance.[118] Again, the mother's authority is apparent.

Naming speeches often give a glimpse into the character's feelings as she becomes a mother. Here, however, when the mother names her son Samson (13:24), she does not explain the meaning behind the name.[119] The story provides a very limited picture of the mother's ideas about becoming a mother, both because she does not express her feelings before she becomes pregnant or upon becoming a mother. However, she accepts the authoritative knowledge of the messenger and follows the instructions, implying she understands her actions will influence the life of her son. She does not turn to other potential sources of authoritative knowledge, at least in the world of the text, but instead accepts the Lord's messenger as the one who posses knowledge about her behavior during pregnancy.

DIFFICULTIES IN PREGNANCY

In the Hebrew Bible pregnancy is a time fraught with potential danger for mother and child. Tobit, when giving instructions to his son Tobias about his burial, reminds Tobias that his mother “faced many dangers for you while you were in her womb” (Tobit 4:4). The dangers inherent in pregnancy included dangers to the child with the possibility of miscarriage or premature birth, as well as posing health risks to the mother.

118 *Ibid,* 149-150.
119 Bronner, *Stories of Biblical Mothers,* 28.

REBEKAH'S PREGNACY: GEN 25:19-34

Robert Alter has observed that the typical point at which a mother-in-waiting could expect a word from the Lord was *before* she conceived. Once the conception had taken place, her prayers would have been answered. The unusual placement of Rebekah's annunciation emphasizes not the birth itself, but the future struggle between the sons.[120] Like the annunciation of Samson, this text suggests that what takes place in the womb has lifelong consequences for the sons. Although Rebekah's case differs from the annunciation type scene in that she is already well along in her pregnancy, God is still the one who possesses the authoritative knowledge about her pregnancy.

The lack of narrative space dealing with her barrenness, and the twins she conceives, characterize this mother of Israel as a fertile woman. Like Sarah, Rebekah's name first appears in a genealogical list (Gen 22:23). However, there is no reference to her barren state; instead, it soon becomes apparent that she is a link between generations. She meets the representative of her future husband at a well, a motif tied to fertility.[121] As Rebekah leaves her homeland, her family gives her a blessing reminiscent of God's blessing to Abraham in Gen 22:17-18. Just as the Lord promises to make Abraham's offspring "as numerous as the stars of heaven" and that his "offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies," Rebekah's family hopes that her offspring will become "thousands of myriads" and that her offspring will "gain

120 Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: Norton, 1996), 126.
121 *Idem, The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981), 52.

possession of the gates of their foes" (Gen 24: 60). When she arrives in Canaan, Isaac takes Rebekah into his mother's tent, and she takes Sarah's place as the next mother of Israel.

Whereas Sarah's and Rachel's barrenness occupies significant narrative space, Rebekah's barrenness takes up very little narrative space. Instead, it would seem that her barrenness is short-lived, with conception coming quickly after Isaac's prayer for a child. Isaac, in fact, is already praying to God before the narrator mentions that Rebekah is barren. “And Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived” (Gen 25:20-21). This juxtaposition of the prayer, announcement of barrenness, and conception emphasizes God's role; Rebekah's barrenness is eclipsed by God's quick action. It is only at the end of the birth narrative that the narrator reports that Isaac was sixty years old, meaning Rebekah had been barren for twenty years.

Instead of focusing on the hardship of Rebekah's barrenness, the narrator highlights the hardship of her pregnancy. When Rebekah struggles with pain in her twin pregnancy, she turns not to a midwife, but to God. Philip notes that Mesopotamian and Hittite sources depict many cases in which pregnant women went to the priests during difficult pregnancies, but this is an unusual occurrence within the Hebrew Bible.[122] However, it is in keeping with the social construction of God as the

122 Philip, *Menstruation and Childbirth*, 89.

one who knows and understands the process of becoming a mother. God explains the struggle taking place inside of her as a struggle that will continue after birth: “And the LORD said to her, 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger' " (Gen 25:23). God's authoritative knowledge here is apparent, both in the pregnancy itself and for the future of the two sons.

Using the image of a difficult pregnancy to foreshadow the struggle that will occur with her sons encodes a belief that experiences in the womb have lifelong consequences. Although the pregnancy is not the main point of the narrative, Rebekah's difficulty during her pregnancy suggests the difficulty that many Israelite women would have experienced as they sought to become mothers. Fears about the dangers of pregnancy are encoded in Rebekah's story.

MISSED MOTHERHOOD: THE DEATH OF A FETUS

While the womb is generally constructed as a place that gives life, there are texts that point to the womb as a location of death. Although there is no way to ascertain accurately the rate of miscarriage, miscarriage would have been a common experience.[123] In spite of its frequency in real life, there are no narratives in the

123 Statisticians estimate that miscarriages occur in 20% of pregnancies in the Untied States, but note that this figure may be low since many miscarriages are not reported, and other women may miscarry without being aware that they were pregnant. If something like this rate occurred in ancient Israel, and women generally had four pregnancies, then the majority of women in ancient Israel would have experienced a miscarriage at some point in their lives.

Hebrew Bible in which a woman conceives and fails to give birth. Each time that the verb *hrh* appears, it is followed by a form of *yld.*[124] The text does not present mothers wailing over miscarriages as it presents women bewailing their barren state. However, prophets, poets, and lawmakers all encode the fear of miscarriage. In a society that viewed the birth of a child as part of God's mandate for humanity, the loss of a baby was not simply a loss for the individual mother and father, but for the community as well. These texts construct the death of a fetus as a potential threat for pregnancy, either as something to be avoided or a curse to be given. The excitement of a potential child, lost before birth, becomes a metaphor for a sense of loss and fear of the future.

Just as God is the source of authoritative knowledge in successful pregnancies, God is the source of authoritative knowledge under the threat of miscarriage Exodus 23:26 views miscarriage as another mode of barrenness, and therefore carries a promise that there would be “no miscarrying or barren in your land.” In this text, God is able to prevent miscarriage just as God is able to overcome barrenness. In a particularly vengeful passage, Hosea presents that idea that God can cause a miscarriage as well. Hosea demands from God the punishment of a womb that cannot carry a child, and a mother who cannot feed a child who is born: "Give them, O LORD-- what will you give? Give them a miscarrying womb and dry breasts" (Hos 9:14). Hosea's curse wishes for something even worse than barrenness, the hope that one would have a child, only to have that hope snatched away.

124 Hamilton, *NIDOTT* 1:1057.

Both Job and Jeremiah wish that they had died in the womb and never been born. In each case, these texts do not describe actual miscarriages but use hyperbolic language to express deep emotion. Job's first words in the poetic section of the book are part of a curse, not a curse of God as his wife suggested, but rather his of own birth. Although this text serves an important rhetorical function within the book of Job, for this discussion, I am less interested in the curse itself, but rather in the way that Job depicts a miscarriage/aborted pregnancy.[125] Job begins by cursing the day of his birth and the messenger who delivered the news of his birth. "Let the day perish in which I was born, and the night that said, 'A man-child is conceived' " (3:3). Hamilton notes the unusual order here, placing his birth before his conception.[126] Carol Newsom thinks the text refers to two distinct periods under the curse: the night of conception and the day of birth.[127] Newsom suggests that 3:6, “let it (the night he was conceived) not come into the number of the months,” is a curse on the night itself, asking for that night to be excluded from the calender.[128] Given the interest in fulfilling months as a sign of the end of pregnancy, I believe that this verse is a wish

125 For a discussion of the way in which this curse functions within the book of Job, see Carol A. Newsom, "The Book of Job: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" in *1 and 2 Maccabees; Introduction to Hebrew Poetry; Job and Psalms.* Vol 4 of *NIB (ed* Leander E. Keck; Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 366.

126 Hamilton, *NIDOTT* 1:1059.

127 Newsom, *"Job," IV:* 366.

128 The NIV's rendering suggests this reading as well: "may it not be included among the days of the year nor be entered in any of the months."

for an aborted pregnancy: the pregnancy should not come into the number of months. Job wishes against a full-term pregnancy.[129]

Although in v. 11 Job wishes he had died as a newborn, in v. 16 he returns to the idea of dying before birth. He wonders why he was not "buried like a stillborn child *(nēpel)*, like an infant that never sees the light?" (3:16). The precise stage of the baby's development indicated by *nēpel* is unclear, since at times this term seems to indicate a child lost in pregnancy, while at other times the context suggests the child died at birth. *BDB* defines the term as "untimely birth, abortion," indicating a fetus who is miscarried or a child born before the number of months have been fulfilled so that the child is not viable. The author of Ecclesiastes claims that a *nēpel* is better off than an old man who does not enjoy life's good things (Eccl 6:3). NRSV translates this as "stillborn child." Psalm 58 also uses the term *nēpel*, but in this case NRSV translates as *nēpel* "miscarriages," describing God's destruction of the wicked “like the miscarriages (*nēpel*) of a woman which never see the sun” (v. 8). The image of the psalm's *nēpel* never seeing the sun parallels Job's *nēpel,* who never sees the light.

Jeremiah, like Job, curses the day he was born, but also wishes that the messenger of his birth had aborted him:[130]

129 The reason for this curse upon the night of his conception appears in v. 10: "because it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb, and hide trouble from my eyes." Newsom notes that the use of this idiom of closing the womb may indicate something of the object of Job's anger, since it is not the night who opens and closes the womb, but rather God. *"Job," IV:* 366.

130 This is the final in a series of laments expressing anger to God over the message he feels he must deliver. Jer 20:7-13, immediately preceding this lament, follows a formal lament structure ending in praise. The curse against the day he was born begins a final lament. Patrick Miller, “The Book of Jeremiah: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" in *Introduction to Prophetic Literature, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel.* Vol 6 of *New Interpreter's Bible (ed.* Leander E. Keck. Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 728.

> Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed! Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, saying, "A child is born to you, a son," making him very glad. Let that man be like the cities that the LORD overthrew without pity; let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noon, because he did not kill me in the womb; so my mother would have been my grave, and her womb forever great. (Jer 20:14-17)

In Jeremiah's case, he wishes not simply for a loss of pregnancy, but for a more direct approach, a killing within the womb. If Jeremiah's curse were to come true, he would have died as a fetus within his mother's womb.[131]

Although Jeremiah wishes he had been killed in the womb, the Hebrew Bible does not seem to have room in its social construction for pregnancies that are intentionally ended by the mother.[132] Even Jeremiah does not wish that his *mother* had aborted him, but rather the messenger bringing the news of the birth. Christine Gudorf believes that, other than infanticide, most methods of abortion available in the ancient world would have threatened the life of the mother and were likely avoided.[133]

There are a limited number of texts that deal with someone other than the mother causing a miscarriage, whether intentional or accidental. Amos and 2 Kings refer to pregnant women as fodder for battle or retaliation with references to “ripping open” pregnant women (2 Kgs 8:12, 15:16; Amos 1:13). Exodus addresses the

131 Robert Garland has noted a connection between wombs and death often seen in ancient literature. The connection may stem in part from the high rate of miscarriage, infant mortality and death of the mother in giving birth. For many, the place of conception and life would also have served as the place in which death occurred. “Mother and Child in the Greek World,” *History Today* March (1986): 40-46.

132 The practice of abortion was known in the ancient world. See, for example, the Ebers Papyrus, a 16th century B.C.E. medical document that lists substances that could end pregnancy, qtd. in King and Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*, 41.

133 Christine E. Gudorf, "Abortion," *NI DB* Vol I A-C (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 17-18.

possibility that a miscarriage/premature birth could be caused by a fight between men.

When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage (*y*ā ā*'), and yet no further harm ('*ā*sôn)* follows, the one responsible shall be fined what the woman's husband demands, paying as much as the judges determine. If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe (21:22-25).

Following the NRSV's translation, this law provides one consequence for a miscarriage but "no further harm," and another set of consequences should any other harm occur. Brueggemann notes that the word used for harm here *'*ā*sôn,* indicates bodily injury that would lead to death. Causing a miscarriage incurs a fine as a way of making restitution for the loss of the child. Brueggemann writes, "The loss of the pregnancy in and of itself is not judged serious enough to evoke retaliation."[134] Retaliation is only warranted should the mother also die. Brueggemann suggests that the series of laws in this part of Exodus tries to adjudicate between economic value (in this case of a potential child) and the humanity of individuals at risk (in this case the pregnant woman).[135] The expectant mother is understood to be a person at risk.

134 Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *General Articles on the Bible; General Articles on the Old Testament; Genesis; Exodus; Leviticus v*ol 1 of NIB (ed. Leander E. Keck. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 864.

135 Other laws in this section deal with injury to slaves, another vulnerable group who nonetheless have economic value.

Cassuto, however, argues for a different translation of this passage, which alters the meaning significantly:

> When men strive together and they hurt unintentionally a woman with child, and her children come forth ((yā ā') but no mischief ('āsôn) happens--that is, the woman and the children do not die--the one who hurts her shall surely be punished by a fine. But if any mischief happens, that is, if the woman dies or the children, then you shall give life for life...[136]

In Cassuto's reading of the text, the first part of the law does not refer to a miscarriage. Instead, the child's birth comes prematurely. The initial harm is causing the child to be born early, not killing the child. Cottrell explains that the fine would have been charged to the men fighting "because of the danger to which mother and child are exposed and the parents' distress in connection with the unnaturally premature birth."[137]

This reading hinges on the translation of *y*ā ā*'*. House argues that the root is consistently rendered as "come or go out" and is specifically used in texts regarding childbirth to indicate a baby who is coming out of the womb.[138] *BDB* gives "go or come out" as the basic meaning, with no examples of the word meaning "miscarriage," as in the NRSV's rendering of the word. The death of the fetus is included in the second part of the law, the "further mischief"*('* ā*sôn*), and the *lex talionis* therefore applies. Jackson notes that the LXX and Philo take*'* ā*sôn* to refer to

136 Umberto Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1967), 275.

137 Jack W. Cottrell, "Abortion and the Mosaic Law, " *Christianity Today*, XVII, 13, (March 16, 1973), 8.

138 Wayne House, "Miscarriage or Premature Birth: Additional Thoughts on Exodus 21:22-25," *WTJ* 41, no 1 (1978): 105-23. House further notes the the Ugaritic cognate, though not used of birth in particular, means "to come out."

the child, not the mother, and explains why *'ā*s*ôn* (rather than the more common word for death) is used in this context.[139] The linguistic arguments seem to side with the reading found in the KJV and Cassuto, that this Exodus passage deals first with a premature birth, and in the second half with a miscarriage.

The texts that refer to miscarriage point to the death of a fetus as time of deep sorrow, or even as a curse. Although some texts point to God as one who can cause/prevent miscarriage, other texts point to human intervention in the loss of a fetus. Still others seem at a loss to explain why a child would die in utero. The loss of a fetus is a threat that looms over pregnancy with very little that can be done to prevent such a loss. It is used metaphorically to express fears about the future, but in using the image this way, actually serves to encode fears about the loss of a pregnancy.

OPENING THE WOMB: CHILDBIRTH

Jordan describes of childbirth as a physiological event, but argues that the language of childbirth is cultural. Jordan's cross-cultural research shows childbirth to be a "marked life crisis event" in most cultures; the birth and post-partum period are considered a time of vulnerability for mother and child. What is culturally determined, however, is the way in which different groups perceive the vulnerability. In many cases, societies develop rituals and practices to manage the physiologically

139 Bernard S. Jackson, "The Problem of Exodus XXI 22-23," *VT* XXIII (July 1973), 293.

and socially problematic aspects of childbirth in a way that makes sense in that cultural context. Although not all of the rituals and practices that may have been used in ancient Israel are apparent in the text, the rituals that are included reflect childbirth as a time of vulnerability, as Jordan's research would suggest.

THE CULTRUAL LANGAUGE OF CHILDBIRTH

In her monograph *Menstruation and Childbirth in the Bible*, Philip cites three common features in narratives about the childbirth stories in the Hebrew Bible: they share a common vocabulary, they narrate the birth of son, and only women attend the birth.[140] In other places in the Bible, childbirth is used metaphorically, and she notes that although these texts do not add to our body of knowledge about *actual* childbirths, "they do reveal attitudes toward the experience of giving birth;" the experience of childbirth has social, cultural and personal aspects.[141] These cultural and social attitudes toward childbirth, also known as social construction, become apparent in childbirth narratives and metaphorical uses of childbirth.

Part of understanding a culture's language about childbirth involves identifying who is able to speak about childbirth experiences. As I noted in the discussion about Samson's birth, the birth narratives emphasize the centrality of women. Manoah plays a secondary role in the annunciation and subsequent birth.[142]

140 For a full discussion of the vocabulary used in depictions of pregnancy/birth, see Philip, *Menstruation and Childbirth,* 81-87.
141 *Ibid,* 81.
142 Amit, "Manoah Followed His Wife,"147.

In the birth narrative of Moses, the father is introduced and immediately disregarded; the mother becomes the focal point of the story, with a series of feminine verbs in v. 2-3.[143] It is the mother who sees the newborn child and hides him from Pharaoh's decree. The social construction that this literary technique encodes is that mothers are central to the birth process, while the father's role is limited to conception, but relegated to a marginal role in childbirth. This may reflect normal human experience. Mothers, midwives, and other women were present at the birth of children. Fathers and other men were not directly part of the experience of childbirth. First Samuel 4:20 refers to women in attendance. Likewise, Jer 20:15 has the father waiting for the messenger to announce the birth of the child.[144]

MIDWIVES

The cultural language of childbirth implies sources of authoritative knowledge. Up until this point in birth narratives, God has often been the single source of authoritative knowledge. God alone can open the womb for conception, God forms the baby in the womb, and God provides any knowledge about pregnancies. The metaphor of opening the womb shifts in texts about childbirth. When the text says that God opens the womb of a woman, it is used as a metaphor for conception. When a child opens the womb, it is used as a reference to childbirth. Another shift in the language also occurs. Though God has been the source of

143 *Ibid,* 150-151. She notes rabbinic sources have tended to expand the role of the father, which, she argues, highlights the father's limited role within the biblical narratives.
144 Patai, *Family, Love and the Bible,* 166.

authoritative knowledge, when it comes to childbirth, a new source of authoritative knowledge is acknowledged: the midwife.

The importance of the midwife is clear in texts that narrate childbirths, helping the baby, determining which baby comes out first in twin births, and comforting the mother during difficult births. The importance of the midwife is also apparent in texts about metaphorical births. In Isa 66:9, God is a midwife: "Shall I open the womb and not deliver? says the LORD; shall I, the one who delivers, shut the womb? says your God." The text acknowledges the authoritative knowledge of the midwife by casting God in the role of the midwife.

Midwives were in common use throughout the ancient Near East.[145] They attended the birth but also performed rituals for the mother and new baby. As Jordan notes, birth rituals arise because childbirth is seen as a time of extreme vulnerability, and rituals are a way cultures manage that vulnerability. Jackie Pringle has conducted extensive research into Hittite birth ritual texts. She says these rituals were written from the practitioner's point of view, paying attention to incantations and rituals, and focus very little attention on the mother. Because these are ritual texts, they do not give a full picture of childbirth, but they do indicate something about the way Hittite society constructed motherhood.[146]

145 See Jackie Pringle's discussion of midwives in Hittite culture in “Hittite Birth Rituals,” 128-141.
146 *Ibid,* 128.

> If a boy were born, the Midwife in [Text] B gave the 'goods of the male child," saying, “let a female child be born in a year forth.' If a girl were born, there was the same procedure, in reverse, “the goods of a female child, saying, “Let a male child be born in a year forth.' It would seem that female children were as welcome to the Hittite family as the male.[147]

In this text, particular items are associated with each gender and given to the child at birth. Sumerian birth rituals suggest a mace and an axe were the goods of a male child while a spindle was given to a female children. In Hittite culture generally, although apparently not specifically in birth texts, the bow and arrow were associated with the male while the distaff and spindle were the goods of the female. The ritual calls for continued fertility for the mother, and welcomes boys and girls equally into the society.

Matthews and Benjamin make the assumption that the practices of midwives from other cultures (even much later ones) apply to ancient Israel.[148] While one would expect rituals to surround a "marked life crisis event," one cannot make the assumption that the cultural roles would have been exactly the same. It is unclear whether similar rituals existed in Israel, or what those rituals would have entailed. Ezekiel implies the existence of ritual by stating what did not happen, but that might have been expected at the birth of a child. After delivery, the umbilical was cord cut, the infant bathed and rubbed with salt, and then wrapped in strips of cloth (Ezek

147 *Ibid,* 132.

148 Matthews and Benjamin, *The Social World of Ancient Israel,* 77-81. They provide a much more expansive description of the duties of the midwife than is warranted by the biblical evidence.

16:4). [149] Likewise, when Job laments about his birth (see above), he gives a glimpse into the rituals that would have surrounded childbirth.

TWIN BIRTHS: REBEKAH AND TAMAR

Births often are announced with the formulaic "and she gave birth to a son." The stories that directly narrate a birth beyond this formula indicate something unusual occurring during the birth, usually something that will affect the rest of the narrative. Twice, there is a narrative when twins are born. In both cases, the narrator views the twins as a surprise: Although ostensibly Rebekah knows that she is to bear twins, based on her word from God during pregnancy, Rebekah's knowledge is not apparent. "When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb" (Gen 25:24). The surprising appearance of twins recurs when Tamar gives birth: "When the time of her delivery came, there were twins in her womb" (Gen 38:27).

Rebekah's birth narrative immediately turns to the children emerging from the womb. Esau comes out red and hairy, while Jacob comes out gripping Esau's heel. Each boy is named according to their experience during childbirth. The grasping during childbirth, as well as the struggle within the womb, prefigures the struggle to come between the brothers.

In Tamar's birth narrative, inheritance rights are also a concern, since the midwife is careful to observe which child is born first. During Tamar's labor, the midwife ties a crimson thread on the wrist of the twin to stick out his hand first.

149 Meyers, *Discovering Eve,* 52.

However, the twin withdraws the hand and the brother comes out first. While one might debate which twin should actually have the rights of the firstborn, it is the midwife whose authority is unquestioned in this matter. In fact, her authority extends into naming the child, as Perez is named for the comment that the midwife makes about their birth order. The midwife is active throughout the birth process. The mother, though active in labor, receives very little narrative space. "While she was in labor," it is the midwife who is described as busily dealing with the children themselves.

DYING IN CHILDBIRTH: RACHEL AND THE WIFE OF PHINEHAS

Other narratives describe the death of a mother in childbirth. Meyers points to the dangers of childbirth as one of the main factors in the short life-expectancy of women in th ancient world. Though only two women in the Hebrew Bible are specifically identified as dying in childbirth, Meyers suggests that Rachel's death may have representative of all the mothers who died in giving birth to a child.[150] Matthews suggests that the “primitive and isolated environments”of the villages in ancient Israel may have led women to give birth with the help of family members or even alone. He suggests that the lack of a reliable birth partner may have contributed to the high mortality rate of infants and their mothers.[151] However, in the two stories about

150 *Ibid,* 112-113.
151 Matthews, *Manners and Customs*, 73-74.

the death of the mother that are included in the Hebrew Bible, the woman is attended by midwives or at least other women.

In both cases in which the mother dies in childbirth, an outside factor contributes to the difficulty of the birth. Rachel's difficult childbirth takes place on a journey (Gen 35:16-19). She is far from a city: away from Bethel, yet “still some distance” from Ephrath (Bethlehem). “Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labor ” (v.16b). Even away from a city, the midwife is present. It is the midwife who provides the voice of authoritative knowledge about the birth: “When she was in her hard labor, the midwife said to her, 'Do not be afraid; for now you will have another son' " (v.17). However, the midwife is not able to keep Rachel alive, and the thought of having a son does not assuage her feelings of sorrow. She names the son Ben-oni, son of my sorrow.

Like Rachel, the wife of Phineas encounters difficulty during her childbirth (1 Sam 4:19-22). In this case, she receives the shocking news that her husband and father-in-law Eli have been killed and that the ark of the Covenant has been captured. Although it seems that she is already in labor, when she hears the news she begins delivery. “When she heard the news that the ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she bowed and gave birth; for her labor pains overwhelmed her” (v.19b). In this instance, it is not clear whether she attended by a midwife or simply other knowledgeable women. However, the women standing by her give the same word of comfort that the midwife gave Rachel during her difficult childbirth: "Do not be afraid, for you have borne a son" (v.20). Phineas's

wife, like Rachel, is consumed by her own pain. She does not answer or give heed to the women, but instead gives her child a name that indicates her sorrow. “She named the child Ichabod, meaning, 'The glory has departed from Israel,' because the ark of God had been captured and because of her father-in-law and her husband. She said, 'The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.' " (v.21-22). For Rachel and Phineas's wife, the normal joy associated with the birth of a son is subsumed in pain and sorrow.

CHILDBIRTH AND PAIN

Childbirth is not only a time of vulnerability, it is also narrated as a time of pain. Jordan's contention, based on her cross-cultural research, is that though childbirth is a physiological event, the experience of childbirth is affected by cultural expectations. If the cultural language surrounding childbirth assumes pain, then pain will be greater. One might ask, then, how closely childbirth and pain are associated in the social construction of motherhood in the Hebrew Bible. In the two prior instances of childbirth, Rachel and the wife of Phineas are both depicted as having painful labor. Rachel's is described as “hard labor,” and Phineas's wife's “labor pains” overwhelm her. Birth and pain are associated frequently in the text. *Yld i*s paired with *yl* (to writhe in pain) thirty times in the Hebrew Bible. By way of comparison, *yld* and *hrh* are paired forty-one times.[152] The association between childbirth and pain/distress are common throughout the Hebrew Bible, yet this language rarely

152 Hamilton, “*HRH*,” *NIDOTT* 1:1059.

occurs when a mother is giving birth to a child (Hos 13:13). The twin childbirths discussed above do not mention pain, nor does pain enter the equation in the formula of the man and woman coming together, conceiving, and giving birth to a child. Instead, when childbirth is associated with pain, childbirth is used as a metaphor for an impending disaster.

In Gen 3:16, Eve's sentence has traditionally been read and translated involving pain in childbirth. “To the woman [God] said, 'I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing ('i *ᵉbônēk wᵉhērōnēk)*; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you' “ (Gen 3:16). As in the NRSV translation, many read this phrase as a hendiadys, two words used together to convey a single idea.[153] However, there are linguistic problems with this translation. Meyers argues that ' *b,* used two other times in this chapter, is associated with physical labor or struggle. In v. 17, it indicates Adam's toiling in the ground.[154] In no other context is the word associated with the pain of childbirth.[155] The second word is also the subject of debate. While most English translations render the phrase as multiplying Eve's pain in *childbirth,* Meyers argues that because the root of is *hrh*, Gen 3:16 concerns conception or pregnancy, not childbirth.[156] Meyers translates this

153 Irvine A. Busenitz, "Women's Desire for man: Genesis 3:16 Reconsidered," *Grace Theological Journal* 7.2 (1986), 206 n.17; Ephraim A. Speiser, "Genesis: Introduction, Translations, and Notes." (*Anchor Bible* vol 1; 1964), 24.

154 Carol 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* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 344-45.

155 Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 103-105.

156 *Idem,* "Gender Roles and Gen 3:16," 355.

verse: “I will greatly increase your toil and your pregnancies.”[157] She argues for understanding this verse in the socio-historical context of mothers in a subsistence agricultural context, where productive and reproductive labor encapsulated much of an Israelite's woman's life. This verse refers to the dual work of women, toiling in the household and having babies.[158] In Gen 4, when Eve has children, her pregnancies and childbirth are not connected to pain; her naming speeches instead indicate a celebration (Gen 4:1, 25).

Other narratives of childbirth also point to the celebration rather than the pain in childbirth. The only anguish present in the narratives occurs when the mother is about to die in childbirth, as in the case of Rachel and Phineas' wife. When both mother and child survive, the story does not refer to pain. The oft-repeated formula of intercourse/conception/birth suggests an ease with the process of bringing a child into the world. The midwives Shiphrah and Puah tell the pharaoh that birth comes so quickly and easily for the vigorous Hebrew women that they have little need of a midwife (Exod 1:19). Though the midwives may be lying to the pharaoh about their participation in childbirth, pharaoh believes their lie; he does not insist that childbirth is so painful and arduous that surely a midwife is required.

The lack of pain associated with childbirth in these stories, however, does not constitute the entirety of the social construction of childbirth. As I have noted, it is

157 *Idem, Discovering Eve,* 106; "Gender Roles and Gen 3:16," 355. Hamilton still reads the two verbs together, but also argues that *hrh* is the root. He renders the phrase, “I will multiply/intensify your pregnancy pains.” Hamilton, "HRH," *NIDOTT* 1:1059.

158 Meyers, *Discovering Eve,* 106.

possible for competing social constructions to co-exist. Metaphorical uses of childbirth associate childbirth, pain, and sorrow. Generally, when labor's onset and childbirth are used metaphorically, they describe people in desperate situations. Isaiah 13:8 describes the day of the Lord as a day of destruction and dismay, noting that “pangs and agony will seize them; they will be in anguish like a woman in labor.” The metaphor describes labor pains overcoming the mother; she is “seized,” taken captive, by birth pangs. In 21:3, Isaiah views the pangs of childbirth as so forceful that, when bowed down (in labor), one cannot hear or see. Likewise, Isa 26:17 describes the one giving birth as writhing in pain. Interestingly, he uses the first person plural here: “We were with child, we writhed, but we gave birth only to wind.” The people of Israel are represented as mothers in painful childbirth, but the labor does not produce a baby. In Isa 37:3, also reflected in 2 Kgs 19, King Hezekiah publicly describes the Assyrian threat using the imagery of childbirth: “This is a day of distress, rebuke and rejection; for children have come to birth, and there is no strength to deliver.” Hezekiah describes mothers in such pain that they do not even have the strength to give birth to their children. The speech alludes to the difficulty of childbirth; Hezekiah depicts Judah's prospects against the Assyrian threat as a mother too weak to give birth.

The image of a mother in distress is used similarly by other prophets. Hosea presents the perspective of the child to be born; the baby is “unwise” because, though the "pangs of childbirth come for him . . .at the proper time he does not present himself at the mouth of the womb" (Hos 13; see also Jer13:21 and 22:23; Mic 4:9). In

each case, a woman in childbirth is described as being in great pain and anguish in order to illumine the pain and anguish experienced by the people of Israel/Judah in the midst of a distressing situation.

The prophets depict childbirth as a time of pain and fear—it is sudden, unexpected, debilitating. The narratives in which a mother gives birth depict childbirth differently; though the exact time of the event is unknown, the event itself is anticipated. The mother has been counting the months. A midwife or another woman with authoritative knowledge attends the birth. The arrival of the child is a joyous event, not an event that brings distress and destruction. Why, then, the difference between the metaphorical uses of people in distress and the birth narratives? Philip finds the contrast problematic and argues that this simile of the woman in labor as an expression of distress reflects that authors' "limited knowledge about the birth-giving process and their fear of death."[159] The sources of authoritative knowledge that helped women though this initiation into motherhood may well have been hidden from the writers of the Hebrew Bible. Thus, Philip believes the narratives of birth reflect actual births more accurately. It is worth noting that the birth narratives rarely focus on the mother and her experience in giving birth, though as I will discuss below that naming speeches turn to focus on the mother's experience. At times the focus is temporarily on the action of the midwives or supporting women

159 Tarja Philip, "Woman in Travail as a Simile to Men in Distress in the Hebrew Bible" in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East* Part II: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2-6, 2001 (eds. Simo Parpola and R.M. Whiting; Helsinki: the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), 499-506.

during labor, but the overall purpose of the narrative is almost exclusively to focus on the child being born. The prophetic texts I have cited, however, do focus on the experience of the mother, if only to compare her feelings and experiences to some dreadful experience for the people of Israel.

OUT OF THE WOMB: FOLLOWING BIRTH

There are rituals related to the period that immediately follows childbirth; they are primarily delineated in legal texts. Exodus 22:30 calls on mothers and fathers to present the firstborn son at the cultic center on the eight day after birth. Leviticus 12:3 also indicates a special presentation on the eighth day, including a circumcision of the son. This passage in Leviticus shows childbirth was followed by a period of ritual uncleanness, seven days for boys and fourteen for girls, although reference to this period of uncleanness rarely appears in other texts in the Hebrew Bible. Philip notes that Mesopotamian ideas about uncleanness after the birth of a child are difficult to understand since many of the texts are broken or are unclear. In these texts it is difficult to determine whether the parturient's blood is the source of impurity.[160] Eilberg-Schwartz, using Mary Douglas' theory that beliefs about the body serve as a symbol of the society, argues that in the priestly literature, the severity of the impurity of bodily discharges was based on gender. Men had more status in the society, so their discharges were considered less impure. Gruber suggests that the difference in length of impurity for the birth of boys and girls serves a more practical

160 Philip, Menstruation *and Childbirth,* 31.

purpose, enabling the mother to attend to the needs of the newborn through breast-feeding. The affect of breast-feeding on fertility might encourage mothers to forgo breast-feeding more quickly for girls than boys; the longer period of uncleanness helps the mother to focus her attention on the newborn daughter (see ch. 4 on lactation).[161]

NAMING

Generally the first action for the new mother (less often the father) is to name the child. Of the naming speeches in the Hebrew Bible, in twenty-seven instances the mother is the namer, while seventeen times the father serves as the namer.[162] Generally, the naming speeches tell more about the circumstances of the child's birth and the attitude of the namer than about the child. The one woman whose name is explained by the narrator in the Hebrew Bible is Eve. Significantly, her name reflects her status as the archetypal mother: she is the "mother so all living." The only thing the narrator suggests about Eve's relationship with her sons is through her naming speeches. Bronner says that Eve's claim, "I have created," rather than "I have birthed," focuses on the pleasure of becoming a mother rather than on the pain associated with childbirth. Eve's use of the pronoun "I," and her claim as one who creates is a boast of power. She sets the prerogative of the mother to name the child.[163] In her study on the phenomenon on naming speeches, Pades compares the

161 Gruber, "Breast-Feeding Practices" 68.
162 Bronner, *Stories of Biblical Mothers,* 2.
163 *Ibid,* 2-3.

relationship between Cain, whom Eve celebrates as a great source of creativity, and Abel who receives a name with no accompanying speech, perhaps foretelling his early death.[164]

Some names reflect the circumstances surrounding conception of the child. Sarah does not name Isaac, but his name is connected to her reaction to the news that she would conceive. It is less about Isaac than about her attitude toward becoming a mother (Gen 21:3). Lots' daughters use the names of their sons to communicate with their father about the conception of the children: Moab ("from father") and Ben-ammi ("son of my people"). Hannah recalls the vow she made before she conceived in naming Samuel: “In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, 'I have asked him of the Lord' " (1 Sam 1:20). In each of these instances, the child's name is connected with the experience that the mother had in becoming a mother.

Another group of naming speeches reflects the conditions associated with the birth. The two women who died in childbirth gave their sons names that reflected the mother's immanent death and acknowledge the sorrow that the mother felt. Although it is clear that Rachel desired a son from the way she named her first child, her particular experience of childbirth leads her to give her son a sorrowful name. Jabez' mother explains in her speech that "I bore him in pain" (1 Chr 4:9-10). Pharaoh's daughter names Moses, not for the circumstances of his birth, but the circumstances

164 Ilana Pades, “”Beyond Genesis 3," in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis (*ed. Athayla Brenner; A Feminist Companion to the Bible 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 178.

in which he came to her. The act of drawing him out of the water becomes a metaphor for his birth. Whatever name he may have been given by his birth mother is erased and replaced by his adoptive mother: "When the child grew up, she (the birth mother) brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, 'because,' she said, 'I drew him out of the water' " (Exod 2:10). In handing over the right of naming, the mother also hands over authority and responsibility over her child.

FERTILTY, INFERTILITY, AND GOD'S INTERVENTION: NAMING SPEECHES IN GEN 29:32-30:24

The naming speeches in Gen 29 and 30, which depict the births of most of the eponymous fathers of the tribes of Israel, encapsulates the attitudes about becoming a mother. With eleven naming speeches in quick succession, these chapters include reflections on conception, birth, the feelings about becoming a mother, and the way that motherhood is expected to affect the status of the new mother.

Genesis 29:31-35 presents a series of births without interruptions; prolific Leah easily conceives and gives birth. As the narrative begins, Leah, the less-loved wife, gives birth to a son. Leah provides a dual etymology for Reuben’s name. Echoing the narrator, Leah attributes the birth of her child to the Lord, expressing the conviction that it is God who opens the womb of the mother. Leah says that the Lord sees her oppression. The narrative provides a subtle irony, namely, that God sees the

situation of this women with “weak eyes,” and she thus names her first son with a pun on seeing.[165] She assumes that having given him a child, Jacob will now love her; her status as a mother will make her the preferred wife. Leah 's situation betrays a social construction in which becoming a mother improves the status of the woman within the family.

Although the narrator does not now describe the state of the relationship between Leah and Jacob, the naming speech upon the birth of her second child makes it clear that the situation has not changed; her expectation of motherhood moving her into an improved status has not been fulfilled. Again, the naming of the child gives the reader access to Leah’s thoughts. “The Lord has heard that I am unloved.” Simeon’s naming speech attributes the birth to the Lord, but Leah does not add a hopeful word that a second son will inspire Jacob to love her. Her status continues to be “unloved.” As in Reuben's speech, this speech reinforces the social construction that births are caused by God.

Upon the birth of her third child, Leah has lowered her expectations for Jacob’s affections. She no longer expects love, but she does believe that having had three sons together, Jacob will become attached to her. She does not directly mention the Lord in this birth, an ironic omission since the tribe of Levi will become the priestly line of the family.

165 Morton H. Seelenfreund and Stanley Schneider, “Leah’s Eyes,” *Jewish Biblical Quarterly* Vol 1, no 25, (1997): 21.

On the birth of her fourth child, Leah's commentary shows that she has temporarily given up on having her husband love her; she simply gives credit to God as the one who enabled the pregnancy and birth. "This time I will praise the Lord," as opposed to other times when she was more focused on her relationship with Jacob. Judah's naming speech, with its reference to the Lord and glaring absence of any mention of Jacob, reinforces the Hebrew Bible's social construction: it is God who opens wombs and gives children, not Jacob.

Chapter 30 begins with a sharp contrast to Leah's many sons; Rachel has borne Jacob no children. The fertile wife is contrasted with the infertile but preferred wife. Although Rachel has been a character in the narrative for several chapters, she has not yet spoken. Just as Leah's first words in naming Reuben show her desperation to have Jacob love her, Rachel's first words show the depth of her desire to become a mother. Rachel says to Jacob, "Give me children! If you do not, I will die!" (30:1). At this impassioned plea, Jacob becomes angry. "Am I in the place of God who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" (v. 2). Amit notes that Jacob's response minimizes the role of the father:

> This dialectical juxtaposition of the role of God with the procreative role of the man-father results in the tendency of the birth-narratives to minimalize the importance of the father and present him as secondary to the mother. This hierarchal weave of characters, which accentuates the cooperation between the mother and God in bringing about the appearance of the chosen son, is indeed reminiscent of the ancient tradition, but displaces any hint of a possibility that divinity played any corporeal role in the birth of the hero.[166]

166 Amit, "Manoah Followed His Wife,"154-155.

Since God will not make Rachel a mother, she gives her servant Bilhah to her husband so that she may have a child through her. Rachel's resort to surrogate motherhood is quite different than in Sarah's story. Sarah was desperate for Abraham to have an heir; Jacob already has four heirs with another woman. Rachel wants a son for herself, not for Jacob. Each time that a son is born to Bilhah, the narrator mentions that this is a child born "for Jacob," yet in this narrative, Jacob seems to have very little to do with the children; he is the first patriarch not involved in the naming of his children.[167] The children are born for Leah and Rachel. Rachel, in fact, asserts as much when she names Dan, Bilhah's first child. The narrator states that Bilhah has born Jacob a son, but Rachel immediately contradicts that statement by saying, "God has given *me* a son." In naming Bilhah's second son, Naphtali, Rachel comments directly on the conflict with her sister. She sees the birth of the second child as overcoming her sister in wrestling for God's favor.

After the birth of four children, Leah temporarily stops bearing children. The narrative of Bilhah's sons has delayed the expression of Leah's feelings, but in v. 9, the narrator's focus returns to Leah. Not to be outdone by her sister, she gives her servant Zilpah to Jacob. Leah, like Rachel, names the children of her maid. She abandons the themes found in her earlier naming speeches. She no longer thinks that giving Jacob children will make him love her, but neither does she attribute either of

167 Francine Klagsbrun, "Ruth and Naomi, Rachel and Leah: Sisters Under the Skin" in *Reading Ruth* (eds. Judith Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer; New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 270.

these two sons to God's activity. She considers the birth of Gad to be a stroke of luck. In Asher's naming speech, she focuses on her own happiness in becoming a mother.

After the incident with the mandrakes, the narrator reports that God heeds Leah and provides her with another son, yet Leah's prayers have been that Jacob will love her. Leah has three children in quick succession. Again, she affirms God's role in conception. She sees Issachar as payment for giving her servant to Jacob. The idea of payment also seems to be playing on the idea of her purchase of his night. She has paid for the ability to have a child with Reuben's mandrakes.

Leah sees Zebulun, her sixth son, as a sign of God's blessing, and offers one more wish that Jacob, if he will not love her, at least will honor her. The desperation for her husband's affection, absent from the four previous naming speeches, now resurfaces.

Finally, Leah gives birth to Dinah. There is no naming speech attached as a part of her birth announcement, but the reference of Dinah, even without a naming speech, emphasizes Leah's prolific ability to have children. With Dinah, she has given birth to more children than all of the other women combined. Much like the rapid succession of births of her first four sons, Leah's fertility here stands in sharp contrast to Rachel's barrenness. The narration of Leah's final three children serves another purpose as well. When Rachel finally does conceive, her conception has nothing to do with the mandrakes. Three children provide a large lapse of time between the scene with the mandrakes and the final scene of this narrative. Thus, all

of Rachel’s attempts to produce children without the aid of God were fruitless. This fits Genesis' social construction of motherhood; only God can open and close wombs.

The narrator brings the story to its climax with a simple statement: "Then God remembered Rachel." She gives a dual etymology for Joseph’s name. God has taken away her disgrace by giving her a child; he status as a mother is secured. The second is a prayer, that God will give her another son. Again, she clearly wants children for herself; Jacob already has twelve children, but Rachel wants to be a mother again.

The naming speeches of Leah and Rachel, with the rapid succession of children, bring into focus important issues within the social construction of motherhood in the Hebrew Bible. The status and even self-worth of the woman is tied to her ability to produce children, yet the repeated motif of the barren woman undermines the woman's status. The sharp contrast between the fecund Leah and barren Rachel in this text highlights the encoded fear of infertility, especially for mothers whose own economic well-being for the future would have been tied to their status as mothers. Rachel's expression to Jacob that she will die if she does not have children and the naming speech in which she says that God has taken away her disgrace point to the sense of her own status in society being determined by becoming a mother. The role of God in opening and closed the womb, acknowledged by the naming speeches, further complicates the mother's situation. Rachel is not able to control her own fertility, whether through demands on her husband or through fertility rituals. Leah's fertility does not, in fact, change her status within the family.

CONCLUSION

Although motherhood is viewed as an institution involving strength, the process of becoming a mother is fraught with danger. There is danger to the mother, both during her pregnancy and during childbirth. Dangers exist for the child as well, as is indicated in texts about miscarriages. Some texts encode this fear, connecting child-bearing with pain and distress. As a "marked life crisis event," rituals attest to Israel's way of dealing with the vulnerability of the mother and child.

In spite of these encoded fears, most narratives depicting childbirth, with the exception of texts in which mothers die, connect the experience of birth with happiness at the arrival of a child. The womb functions as a metaphor for the experience of becoming a mother: wombs are the location of conception and the growth of the fetus, and offspring are reminded of the womb in depictions throughout the Hebrew Bible. The experiences of the child in the womb, whether the result of the mother's actions or God's activity, are understood to prefigure the later experiences of the offspring. The mother's role as guide and protector of children, which I will discuss in ch. four, begins with the child in the womb.

Though various texts recognize the joint role of mother and father in conception, the importance of each is subordinated to God. It is God who makes women fertile or infertile, who influences the pregnancy, and who directs women's experience in becoming mothers. God is the source of authoritative knowledge, directing women through the experience of becoming mothers. Even within the

secrecy ascribed to the womb, only God understands how a child develops in the womb.

CHAPTER 4: MOTHERING YOUNG CHILDREN

Texts throughout the Hebrew Bible reflect that biological mothers were vested with the primary responsibility for the care and socialization of young children. While few texts depict the actual work of mothering, a wide variety of texts reflect the symbolic values placed on motherhood. Mothers of young children are both teachers and disciplinarians, reflecting the mother's responsibility for socializing young children. The mother's economic role continues to be a focus of the text, with the mother balancing the needs of the children with the needs of the household. The mother's nurturing role, so often mentioned a key part of the social construction of motherhood in modern western imagination, is encapsulated in the image of the lactating mother. These cultural expectations of mothers were rooted in the view of children and needs of society; mothers needed to care for young children and socialize them into Israelite customs, but at the same time, mothers needed to manage the household to keep the family fed and clothed throughout the year. This attempt to balance the work of mothering is encoded in the text, with mothers being excused from other religious and civic duties, not as a way of excluding them, but as a way of acknowledging the priority of mothering young children.

VIEWS OF CHILDREN AND THE WORK OF MOTHERING

While many factors affect the way that motherhood is constructed in any given culture, Chase and Rogers have argued that society's beliefs about young

children is one key variable.[168] Expectations of the mother are directly related to the perceived needs of young children. The construction of motherhood in the Hebrew Bible points to a strong connection between the view of children and the expectations of mothers. The relatively high status of mothers within the household reflects the view of children as a blessing from God; mothers deserve respect because they produce and rear children. The depictions of mothers as teachers, disciplinarians, and protectors reflects the understanding of children as ignorant, immature, and vulnerable.

The literature of ancient Israel points to a high valuation of children, especially boys. Having progeny is part of the promise to the ancestors, repeated throughout Genesis. Children are depicted as a gift from God and a tangible sign of the continuity of God's covenant with Israel.[169] Rabbinic tradition considers the admonition to "be fruitful and multiply" to be the first divine law. Psalm 127:3 presents the idea that children should be viewed as a gift: "Behold, children are a gift from the Lord; the fruit of the womb is a reward." Other texts point to children as immature and vulnerable (Prov 22:15; Isa 3:4-5; Wis 12:24-25). John Carroll describes the biblical view of childhood as a time of "immaturity, ignorance, and deficient reason; therefore, education played a critical role in molding persons for adulthood."[170]

168 Chase and Rogers, *Mothers and Children, 60.*
169 John T. Carroll, "Children in the Bible" *Int (Ap 2001), 123.*
170 *Ibid*, 121-134.

CHILDHOOD AS A DISTINCT PHASE IN LIFE

Philippe Aries' classic study on childhood concluded that, in the premodern period, childhood was an insignificant phase of life; children were simply "small-scale adults."[171] This understanding of childhood would have direct bearing on the work of mothering since there would be a distinct difference between mothering people who are considered mini-adults versus mothering people who are considered to be at a distinctive phase of life. Banning notes that there is little or no direct evidence about the lives of children, although he posits that some figurines assumed to be idols may have been used as toys. "What we do know, thanks to osteological evidence, is that some children had a hard life, and child mortality was high."[172] Joseph Blenkinsopp takes Aries' conclusion that childhood is not a distinct phase to apply to the social construction of childhood in the Bible. Blenkinsopp argues that *yeled* and *na'ar* have such a wide range of meaning that they do not seem to indicate childhood as a definable period of life.[173]

In spite of Blenkinsopp's contention, texts in the Hebrew Bible characterize children in ways that are distinctive from their older counterparts. Joyful play is a distinctive aspect of childhood. Zechariah's description of the return of better days for Jerusalem includes a description of children at play in the streets:

171 Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life (*trans R. Baldick; New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 58.

172 Banning, "Housing Neolithic Farmers," 11-17.

173 Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Family in First Temple Israel*,"* in *Families in Ancient Israel* (ed. Don S. Browning and Ian S. Evison; Vol. 1 of *The Family, Religion and Culture*, ed. Don S. Browning and Ian S. Evison; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), 57.

> Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets." (Zech 8:4-5)

Jeremiah also describes children playing the in the streets. In 6:11, there is a progression of ages, from children to young men, husbands and wives, to the aged. Jeremiah 9:20 also lists children and young men as two groups affected by destruction. The use of different age groups in these poetic parallels indicates the extent of an action (rejoicing or destruction). This shows an understanding of childhood as a distinct period from young adulthood, the period of marriage, and old age. Clay models found in excavations also indicate childhood as a time for play; Roland de Vaux argues that the texts that depict children singing and dancing, paired with the existence of these clay models, indicates that children would have played with them as toys.[174] Childhood, then, is a distinctive period for play and joy that is expected to dissipate as the children age.[175]

THE END OF CHILDHOOD

If childhood is constructed as a distinct stage of life in the Hebrew Bible, at what point would childhood end and the responsibilities of mothering change? The table in Lev 27 indicates that age five should be considered a transitional year, with

174 Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (trans by J. McHugh; Bible Resource Series; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 48.

175 King and Stager also argue that Eccl 11:9-12:1 views childhood in the abstract, though the advice is actually delivered to young men, not children. However, the passage does describe youth as fleeting and encourages the young man should enjoy pleasure now, because there will be no pleasure in later years. *Life in Biblical Israel,* 40.

another transition at age twenty. Following Meyer's argument that these tables should be read as the amount of economic contribution each member made to the family (rather than a sense of some inherent value of the person), the economic contribution of a child under five is minimal. From five until twenty, a youth could be expected to make some economic contribution to the family, and then at twenty would be expected to make a full adult contribution to the family's economic well-being. The census in Num 1 lists families, the father's household, and individual males twenty years old and upward. At twenty, men would be able to go out to war, an indication that the time before twenty was recognized as a different, more vulnerable period. Numbers 14:29-31 also indicates twenty as the age at which one moves from dependency to full adult status, since only those over twenty were to die while wandering in the desert; their children *(ap)* under twenty years of age were not considered at fault for the people's sins and were therefore able to enter the promised land. The genealogy of priests in 2 Chr 31:17 lists priests according to father's households, twenty years and upward; this enrollment included all of their little children, their wives, their sons and their daughters.[176] These texts reflect a sense that children are not fully responsible for the own actions, nor are they expected to give the same economic contribution as other members of the family. Instead, children were dependent on the mothers, fathers, and other members of the household.

176 The census of the Levities in Num 3 lists males from one month old and upwards.

WORDS FOR OFFSPRING IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Although there may be no way to determine attitudes toward children in ancient Israel, the texts present a picture of childhood as distinct period of life. The range of meaning of words for childhood/offspring, rather than indicating that childhood is not a special period, suggests a way that attitudes about childhood are encoded. The distinctions between the Hebrew words for offspring are not always clear, but in general each has a semantic range that indicates something of either the age or status of the child. The linguistic cues may indicate a construction of childhood as a distinctive period of life, but the exact age varies depending on circumstances of the family. Significantly for this study, several of the words for children are related to the interaction of the child and the mother. Linguistically, there is a connection between the view of children and the expectations of the mother.

I have discussed *zera'* (seed/offspring) at length in ch. 3. As noted, many scholars have argued that the idea of a child as a seed indicates a belief that children are directly from their fathers, with the mother simply acting as soil for that seed, an argument that I question.

The word for infants, *yônēq,* is a participle based on the root *ynq* "to suck," referring to their sucking action as they nurse from their mother's breast.[177] The language encodes a relationship between the child and the lactating mother. In two instances, the word is followed by references to mother's breast (Song 8:1 and Joel

177 Although the word for wet-nurse also comes from this root, biological mothers are constructed as the primary women to feed their own children; the use of wet-nurses, from whom infants might also give suck, was the exception (see below).

2:16). As W. R. Domeris says, the emphasis in this and related terms is on "the parental aspect, particularly the mother's role as the breast-feeder, but also the wider context of nurturer and protector."[178] In six cases, infants are coupled with children. *Yônēq* is used to express the extent of an action, from the youngest members of society to the oldest, often related to destruction. Including infants in descriptions of destruction indicates the close relationship of family groups; infants are directly affected by the behavior of their parents. Y*ônēq* can be used to declare the extent of the praise of God in society, as infants are invited to participate (Ps 8:2); Joel's sacred fast includes children and infants, those nursing at the breast (2:16).[179] The use of y*ônēq* indicates a dependent relationship between infant and mother as well as a sense of comfort from the mother to the infant.

Children or little ones, ap, generally refers to people who are chronologically children. The word is based on *tpk*, "to trip or take quick little steps." *BDB* concludes that the nominal form (m. collective) comes from the way children walk, "as going with quick, tripping steps."[180] Hamilton argues that the word cannot refer to anyone over twenty years old, based on the references in Num14:29-30. Deuteronomy 1:39, also referring to the group who will be allowed to enter into the promised land, describes ap as people "who do not yet know good from bad."[181] Thus, although an exact age cannot be assigned to ap, it indicates young people who are not fully

178 W.R. Domeris, "*YNQ*" in *NIDOTT* 2:473.
179 Domeris, *NIDOTT* 2:472-474.
180 *BDB*, "*TAP*," 381.
181 Victor P. Hamilton, *"TAP" in NIDOTT 2:*381-382.

accountable for their own actions; the term refers to someone dependent upon fathers and mothers. Like the use of *ynq, ap* can be used to describe the extent of an event, as in Deut 2:34 and 3:6. "Frequently *ap* refers to victims caught in the crossfire of war of violence. They are either killed (Num 31:9; Deut 2:34; 3:6; Judg 21:10; Esth 3:13; Ezek 9:6) or carried off as plunder (Gen 34:29; Num 31:9, 18)."[182]

Another reference to a young child not yet aware of the difference between good and bad occurs in Isa 7, but the word here is *na'ar.* A young woman is expecting a son (*bēn*) whose name is to be Immanuel. The child is described as a toddler; he is not yet able to make moral distinctions, and the curds and honey indicate soft, first foods. *Na'ar* has an age range that includes infancy (Exod 2:6, referring to Moses at 3 months;1 Sam 4:21), a child not yet weaned (1 Sam 1:22; Is 8:4), a newly weaned child (1 Sam 1:24); a teenager (Gen 37:2 refers to Joseph at 17), and even a youth of marriage age (Gen 34:19).[183] Other forms of the word focus on youth and early life. Although at times the text indicates a servant or messenger, often when the *na'ar* is a child, the text focuses on vulnerability or a need for protection (Gen 21:18; Gen 44).

Yeled is a noun word related to birthing or bringing forth. Again, the word carries an implicit relationship with the mother; a child (almost always a son) is one who has been birthed by a mother. The noun *yeled* covers a range of ages: newborns (Exod 1:17, 18; 3:6-10; 2 Sam 12:15); children who have been weaned (Gen 21:8);

182 *Ibid,* 2:381-382.
183 BDB, "*na'ar," 654-655,*

teenagers (Gen 21:14-16; 37:50; 42:22); youths (2 Kgs 2:24); young men (Dan 1:4, 10, 15, 17); descendants (Isa 29:23).[184] With the exception of Mahlon and Kilion in Ruth, it refers to unmarried children, though in this instance the sons are associated with their mother. Thus, the word generally refers to offspring who have not yet married and established themselves as adults. The word is often associated with mothers, an indication that mothers were often in close connection with *yeled* (Gen 33:2; Exod 2:3-10; 1 Sam 1:2; 1 Kgs 3:25).

Like *yeled, bēn* can refer to offspring of any age. While the singular refers to male offspring, the plural can refer to both boys and girls. The noun occurs throughout the Hebrew Bible frequently (close to 5000 occurrences). It is used of babies being born (Gen 3:16), of children in need of discipline (Exod 12:24), and an identifier of parentage for people of any age (Gen 35:23, 24). It is repeatedly used metaphorically, as in the "children of Israel" or the "son of man."[185] The feminine equivalent, *ba ,* though used less extensively, refers to daughters of any age.

As I discussed in ch. 3, *b^{e}kōr*, firstborn, indicates the significance of the eldest child in religious rituals as well as economy of the household. *B^{e}kōr* likewise links children and parents, reflecting the ongoing relationship created by the act of giving birth. The term includes a wide age range, though it is more often used of adult offspring. It is used in lists of descendants (Gen 25:13). The feminine form can be used of daughters (Gen 19:31). It can also refer to animals, asking for the sacrifice of

184 Victor Hamilton, "*YLD*," *NIDOTT*, 2:457.
185 BDB, *"bēn,"* 119.

the firstborn. It is often used metaphorically, such as the firstborn of death (Job 18:13), the firstborn of the poor (Is 14:30), and even linking Israel as the firstborn of the Lord (Exod 4:22).[186] Genesis implies a special privilege for firstborns, such as in the blessing Jacob wrests from Esau (Gen 19), Laban's concern about the order of marriage of his daughters (Gen 29:36), or the seating position of the brothers (Gen 43:33).

This brief review of into words used for offspring and children indicates the way in which the social constructions of mothers and children are linked. The expectations of the care the mother would provide are implicit in the words for children. Although some of the words may refer to offspring of any age, several of the words indicate a person who is chronologically a child, often depicting them as morally or physically different than an adult. The linguistic cues suggest a view of childhood as a distinct period in life, a period in which the child is dependent on mother and father.

BALANCING THE HOUSEHOLD AND YOUNG CHILDREN

The mother of young children had to balance household duties, including food and clothing preparation, with the needs of young children. This was primarily the duty of mothers (though in the interdependent household, many others would have contributed to the care of children as well). Lamentations 2:11-12 depicts infants and babes crying to their mothers**,** "Where is bread and wine?" The children in this poem

186 *BDB*, *bᵉkōr, 114.*

expect mothers to provide nourishment for them. Isaiah 23: 4 connects the action of giving birth with rearing young men and women, indicating an implicit link between the biological mother and the duties of childcare. Hannah, even though she has turned over her responsibilities for the education of young Samuel, still makes him a little robe every year. As they work, mothers are depicted as carrying their children (Num 11:12 in bosom; Isa 49:22 sitting on shoulder; Isa 60:4 and 66:12 on side.)[187] These texts suggest not only the actual work of mothering, but also the symbolic value of a close connection between mother and child. The needs of children, such as nourishment and education, had to be addressed even as mothers went about their household work.

The needs of young children were taken into account in family activities, with mothers in particular adjusting their responsibilities to include the care of young children. Genesis 33:14 says that Jacob's family adjusted the pace of their travels to fit the pace of the children. Mothers were generally the ones entrusted with caring for children while other members of the family went about other forms of business or religious activities. As I discussed in the context of the economic contribution of mothers to the household, mothers are often left behind to care for young children (Num 32:26; Deut 3:19; Gen 43:45).[188]

187 Patai, *Family, Love and the Bible,* 185.

188 Conversely, Gen 50:8, describing Jacob's burial in Canaan, suggests that even the mothers went for the burial: "the household of Joseph, his brothers, and his father's household. Only their children, their flocks, and their herds were left in the land of Goshen." This time, it does not appear the mothers are left behind, perhaps because, as Gruber suggests, the time in Egypt is depicted as a time when mothers did not breastfeed their own children, but rather relied on wet nurses (see below). Gruber, "Breast-Feeding Practices," 81.

Recognizing the needs of young children and the value placed on the mother's work in caring for them clarifies the reasons behind legal materials that excuse women from participation in cultic activities. Many scholars have noted that the legal materials keep women from being full participants in the religious life of the community due to the biological functions that would enable them to become mothers, including menstruation and childbirth. Bird has suggested the difficulty of women of childbearing age participating in worship due to the bodily emissions that would have made them ritually unclean. “The frequent and regular recurrence of this cultically proscribed state in women of childbearing age must have seriously affected their ability to function in the cult.”[189] Likewise, Leonie Archer suggests that Leviticus' “primitive blood taboo which lay behind so many of the Hebrews' ideas about purity led to women being declared unclean for a large part of the lives in consequence of the blood of childbirth and of the menstrual cycle.” Women were severely restricted from cultic activities due biological functions (Lev 12:2).[190] Women are not included in the commandment to gather three times a year (Exod 23:17).[191] Many scholars have noted that this command excludes women from the normal cycle of worship services.

It is possible to understand the commandments that seem to exclude women, however, as a way of accommodating the work of mothering and the needs of young children. Gruber understands the commandments about the cult that specifically

189 Bird, *Missing Persons,* 28.
190 Leonie Archer, “The Role of Jewish Women in the Religion, Ritual and Cult," 275.
191 See also Exod 34:23 and Deut 16:16.

address men and seem to exclude women as an accommodation for mothers of young children, allowing them to put mothering duties ahead of their cultic duties.[192] This reading takes into account the social construction of a mother and the cult elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. In 1 Sam 1, Hannah participates in religious festivals before becoming a mother; while she is breast-feeding young Samuel, she chooses to stay home (1 Sam 1:22; her statement to Elkanah makes it clear that she is has the authority to make the decision about her participation). Once Samuel is weaned and she gives over her day-to-day mothering responsibility, she returns to making a yearly pilgrimage to the temple. While Exod 23 allows for mothers to be excluded from cultic obligations, other texts allow for the inclusion of the lactating mother with her nursing child. Deuteronomy 29:11 specifically includes children and their mothers in the covenant; it lists not only all the men of Israel, but also specifies the inclusion of "your children (*tap*), your women, and the aliens who are in your camp, both those who cut your wood and those who draw your water." Deuteronomy 31:12 calls for "men, women, and children (*tap*)" to assemble for the reading of the Torah.[193] Joshua 8:35 suggests a similar understanding, as Joshua read the words of Moses "before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones (*tap,*), and the aliens who resided among them." The legal material, then, allows for mothers

192 Although most scholars now question this dating, Gruber follows Noth's idea that Exod 23, as part of the Covenant Code, reflects the same period as that of 1 Sam 1. Gruber argues that Hannah in fact set the legal precedent expressed by the Covenant Code by refusing to appear at the shrine until Samuel was weaned. The text describing Hannah's action then becomes the impetus for a law that allows women to put their mothering duties ahead of their cultic duties. Gruber, "Breast-Feeding Practices," 67.

193 *Ibid*, 67.

of young children to have flexibility. They are not excluded, but rather excused, when the needs of young children call for the absence of the mother. Motherhood, then, is constructed in these texts as a role that must facilitate the needs of young children. The value of the maternal role is encoded in the texts, so that even religious obligations are subordinate to the duties of mothering and the needs of young children.

MOTHERS AS PROTECTORS OF CHILDREN

While children as viewed as a blessing and childhood is a time of play, the use of the words for children in a variety of text indicates the vulnerability of children. The biblical texts project the grim reality that life is not always easy for children. *Yônēq* and *ap* are used to indicate extensive destruction. Children are often listed alongside widows, foreigners, and the poor as being in a vulnerable position physically, emotionally and economically. Because of this vulnerability, the social expectations that the texts exhibit were that mothers would act as protectors and teachers. Motherhood is constructed as the institution that shepherds vulnerable children into adulthood.[194] However, mothers themselves also depend on the structure of the household, and their husbands in particular. Though mothers are protectors, if their husbands die, they lose their economic viability and themselves need protection alongside their vulnerable children.

At times both mothers and fathers serve as advocates for their children, again

194 Carroll, *"Children in the Bible,"* 121-134.

demonstrating the parity within the familial household. In Neh 5, there is a "great outcry" from fathers and mothers, saying that they have had to mortgage fields, houses, borrow money from the king, and forced sons and daughters to be slaves. Here, the mothers and fathers make a public outcry on account of children.

At other times, the mother alone is depicted as the advocate. Parker's study of petition narratives shows the mother in this light. He observes that often in this genre the petitioner is a woman, and especially a mother. Parker identifies seven petition narratives in the Deuteronomistic History; of these, four involve mothers, petitioning specifically in their roles as mother.[195] Second Kings 4 provides one example, depicting a mother of the wives of the prophets. Her husband has died, and the creditor has come to take two children to be slaves. She approaches the prophet Elisha to petition him for her children. At his command, she works feverishly to fill oil in vessels until they ran out of vessels. Thus, the mother advocates for her children and works diligently to ensure their protection.

Another place in which mothers take on a symbolically protective role is in Gen 33, when Jacob returns with his family and reunites with Esau. He lines the children up to stand with mothers, keeping the favored Rachel and her son in the back. There is an element of fear in the text since Esau had threatened to kill Jacob. The mothers beside the children represent the protective role of the mothers.

Another example of the mother's protective role comes in the story of Sarah's

195 Simon B. Parker, *Stories in Scripture and Inscriptions: Comparative Studies on Narratives in Northwest Semitic Inscriptions and the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 35.

reaction to Ishmael and Isaac in Genesis 21. Ishmael is laughing or fondling with Isaac, the same root used of the interaction with Isaac and Rebekah that indicated to the king that they are married (*shq*). The MT reads, “Sarah noticed that he (Ishmael) was playing,” while the LXX includes ”with her son Isaac” (v. 9). Kirsch suggests that the omission in the MT lessens the sexual suggestion of the words. If it is not molestation, he wonders, then why was Sarah so angry?[196] Since *shq* is also the root for Issac, Jo Ann Hackett says that Ishmael is "Isaac-ing;" he is trying to be like Isaac, so Sarah feels the economic threat to the heir.[197] Whether Sarah is angry because of molestation or economic threat, she is the mother who protects her son, to the point of ordering Abraham to send his other son away.

When the mother fails to live up to the role as protector, the texts are particularly jarring because they diverge from the cultural scripts. A shocking text comes from 2 Kgs 6, when the mother gives her son to be eaten in the midst of a siege and famine. However, this mother's complaint in the text is not that she has killed her own son and been forced into cannibalism, but rather that the other mother did not fulfill her end of the bargain and instead hid her son. This text is so shocking because it breaks the convention. Mothers are expected to protect, but this mother kills her own child in order to save herself and another mother. The other mother, however, behaves according to the expected cultural scripts; she hides her son in

196 Jonathan Kirsch, *The Harlot by the Side of the Road: Forbidden Tales of the Bible* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997), 50-51.

197 "Rehabilitating Hagar: Fragments of an Epic Pattern" in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (ed. Peggy Day; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 21.

order to protect him. The conflict between the mothers, one who fits the social construction and the other who does not, points to a societal conflict: in the chaos of war, even the institution of motherhood breaks down. When mothers lose their role of proctors, it is an indication of all of the institutions of society breaking down.[198]

Another time that the mother's protective role breaks down is when the mother is absent from the text. Missing mothers include Jephthah's wife, who is not there to protect her daughter from the father's rash vow (Judg 11). Tamar's mother is also missing, and although her father is not a direct threat, his lack action puts Tamar in danger; her brother Absalom must step forward and serve as protector (2 Sam 13). Some see this absence of the mother as part of the social construction of fatherhood; the mother's absence establishes the father's authority over their children while abrogating the mother's. Many have noted the absence of Sarah from a point of danger in her son's life when his father tried to sacrifice him (Gen 22). Delany argues that the meaning of the binding of Isaac comes in establishing the father-right; Sarah's absence highlights Abraham's absolute power over the life of his son.[199] Perhaps these texts do no indicate the lack of authority or power of the mother. Perhaps instead, she is absent because her presence would mitigate the father's authority. In the example of the binding of Isaac, Abraham takes full authority over the life of Isaac. However, the preceding chapter indicates Sarah's protective

198 Laurel Lanner, "Cannibal Mothers and Me: A Mother's Reading of 2 Kings 6:24-7:20" JSOT 85 (1999): 107-116.

199 Delany argues that the idea of the father's primary role in conception leads to the father-right, and the father-right is the foundation of patriarchy, “The Legacy of Abraham,” 38. As discussed in the section on conception, I do not view this idea of conception as the social construction portrayed in the text.

authority, as well as establishing Hagar as the protector of her own child (Gen 21). Abraham's own authority over his sons is mitigated by the authority that the mothers claim. The binding of Isaac is presented as a test of Abraham; Sarah's presence would have tempered his authority.

Although children could be vulnerable within their families, children without families are depicted as especially vulnerable; the legal and prophetic materials demonstrate a special concern for the fatherless in danger of destitution. With the father dead or missing, the mother's role as protector is compromised. Many texts link the vulnerable position of children and woman, generally with a command for society as a whole to provide for their care. “You shall not abuse any widow or orphan (fatherless). If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans” (Exod 22: 22-24). “Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow”(Isa 1:7). “Do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another” (Zech 7:10). The fatherless are repeatedly placed with other vulnerable groups, such as widows, foreigners, or the poor. These texts demonstrate the vulnerability of children without families since they demonstrate concern to find a way to care for the children when there is no family to take on the expected role of caring for the child.[200] Mordecai raises Esther, for example, because

200 Again, however, this particular stage of vulnerability points to childhood as a distinctive period. The poor are vulnerable because they lack the economic resources needed to care for themselves; widows are vulnerable as women without men; orphans are vulnerable because they are children.

both her mother and father are dead. Mothers without husbands are in a vulnerable position as well as their children. None of these texts, however, use the word mother to depict the vulnerable woman; it is the widow who is vulnerable. Thus, though the woman does become vulnerable when family support is gone, it is not her role as mother that is the focus of this vulnerability.

INFANT MORTALITY AND MOTHERHOOD

One point at which mothers could not uphold their expectations as protectors is in the case of the death of a child. Children were vulnerable to disease and death. Meyers estimates that the infant mortality rate in ancient Israel may have been as high as fifty per cent.[201] Bird notes that socioeconomic factors may have affected the attitude of mothers at the death of children. The loss of a child, especially for a widow, may bring "panic as well as pathos" because the mother's livelihood could well depend on the child.[202] Some historians have argued that societies with a high infant mortality rate develop an attitude of indifference toward infants as a coping mechanism; very young children are not viewed as full persons. This view of children, and the experience of death of children, could directly affect the way the work of mothering, since one could expect a very different relationship with children who were not considered full persons, versus a relationship where children could reasonably be expected to live into adulthood. Lawrence Stone, for example, writes

201 Meyers, "Families in Early Israel," 28.
202 Bird, *Missing Persons,* 35.

about England predating 1750; he argues that in order to maintain their "mental stability" parents only had limited "psychological involvement with the children."[203] Dixon suggests that "it is notable that small children are of little account in many cultures, perhaps because their chances of survival have been too low to permit a great emotional investment."[204] In ancient Rome, according to Plutarch, Numa Pompilius rationed the mourning of infants in Rome. While some people made huge tombstones for infants, in general children are under-represented in sepulchral inscriptions. Dixon sees this lack of funerary inscriptions and ritual to indicate the low social value that was placed on small children.[205]

Even though a high infant mortality rate was common throughout the ancient world, other scholars have argued against this idea of emotional and psychological detachment from infants. Writing about ancient Greece, Robert Garland views Stone's theory about limited psychological involvement as suspect. He uses examples of graves of infants in ancient Greece to counter Stone's view of the psychology of parents. While he does concede that there are fewer infant graves than one might expect, given the high infant mortality rate, the graves that do exist show signs of affection. Epitaphs include nicknames of children and reliefs of children at play. These he takes to indicate not simply artistic expressions, but art that shows an understanding of the child who has died as a full, active person. He sees this funerary

203 Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800 (*New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 70.
204 Dixon, *The Roman Mother*, 104.
205 *Ibid,* 105.

art as an expression of the joy that the child brought into the family and the grief that the child's departure has caused.[206]

Knowing the attitude about infant mortality is important for understanding the way that mothers would have interacted with their young children. Mothers showing "limited psychological involvement" with their infants would have quite a different experience of mothering than mothers who were more emotionally invested in the lives of their infants. Israel's view of infant death cannot be easily reconstructed from graves, but Von Soden argues that one aspect of material remains in ancient Israel may indicate the psychological attachment of mothers to their children. He cites the numerous miniature terra-cotta figurines have been unearthed, depicting a women cradling a child. He takes this as an expression of the strong bonding of parents and children: "The strong bonding of children to their parents even found expression in that many gods were addressed as father or mother. Innumerable terra-cotta figurines, modeled primarily in miniature, depict a naked woman holding a child in her arm."[207]

In these miniatures, the mother in particular appears in close connection with the infant. There are surprisingly few stories about infant deaths in the Hebrew Bible, given the high rate of infant mortality. The lack of stories related to the death of infants might lend support to the suggestion that mothers and fathers lacked psychological involvement with infants, since the paucity of literary representation renders them non-persons. However, the stories that do exist about infant death

206 Garland, "Mother and Child in the Greek World," 40-46.

207 Wolfram von Soden, *The Ancient Orient:* An Introduction to the Study of the Ancient near Eat. (trans. Donald G. Schley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 73.

suggest that Stone's hypothesis does not fit Israel's construction of motherhood, but that instead mothers were psychologically involved with their infant children. I will analyze the stories of two kings who lost young children; although the mother's reaction is not the focus of either story, the loss of a child is met with mourning and grief. The second story deals with two prostitutes, one of whom loses a son, the other who is unwilling to see hers die. Finally, the image of the mother Rachel weeping for her children (Jer 31:15), indicates a social construction of mothers who feel deeply for their children.

THE FIRST SON OF DAVID AND BATHSHEBA

The death of David and Bathsheba's first son gives insight into the social construction of parenthood as it relates to infant mortality. The mother's reaction is not the subject of the story, but I analyze the story of the father's reaction because the text presents an attachment to an infant and therefore brings into question Stone's theory of a lack of psychological involvement. David, the father, grieves over the prospect of losing his son, pleading, fasting, and lying on the ground (1 Sam 12:15b-17). On the seventh day, the unnamed child dies, and the servants are afraid to tell David the news, concerned that David "may do himself some harm" (v. 18). When David learns of the child's death, David reacts as one who has finished a period of mourning, washing, anointing himself, rising from the ground, worshiping God, and finally eating.

David's reaction, and the lack of name for the child, might lend credence to

the idea that infants were not regarded as full persons in ancient Israel. However, the full story seems to indicate otherwise. The depth of concern David showed before the child died does not indicate a lack of psychological involvement; it shows a deep attachment to the life of this particular child. That David's servants are surprised because he does mourn suggests his behavior is anomalous: “Then his servants said to him, "What is this thing that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while it was alive; but when the child died, you rose and ate food" (21). The question suggests that the socially expected behavior of a parent whose infant had died would be to fast and weep.

Verse 24 hints at the mother's reaction, otherwise absent from the narrative: “Then David consoled his wife Bathsheba, and went to her, and lay with her; and she bore a son, and he named him Solomon” (24). The fact that Bathsheba needs to be “consoled” suggests that she is mourning over the death of her child.

THE PROSTITUTE MOTHERS

First Kings presents the perspective of a mother whose child died in infancy. In 1 Kgs 3, two prostitutes approach King Solomon with a case for him to solve relating to an infant's death. Although the story is designed to showcase Solomon's wisdom, the text reveals, at least in part, the attitude of the two mothers about infant mortality and attachment to their infants.

> The one woman said, "Please, my lord, this woman and I live in the same house; and I gave birth while she was in the house. Then on the third day after I gave birth, this woman also gave birth. We were together; there was no one else with us in the house, only the two of us were in the house. Then this

> woman's son died in the night, because she lay on him. She got up in the middle of the night and took my son from beside me while your servant slept. She laid him at her breast, and laid her dead son at my breast. When I rose in the morning to nurse my son, I saw that he was dead; but when I looked at him closely in the morning, clearly it was not the son I had borne. (1 Kgs 3: 17-21)

From the perspective of the first mother (who Solomon identifies as the truthful mother), the second mother and child were co-sleeping, and the child died in the night. The second mother shows a degree of callousness about the infant's death since she simply switches her child for another living child, as if the babies are interchangeable. Perhaps here is a mother with "limited psychological attachment" to her child, at least once the child is dead. When Solomon suggests dividing the child in half, however, the mother of the living child is quick to insist that her child remain alive, even if with another mother. “But the woman whose son was alive said to the king-- because compassion for her son burned within her--'Please, my lord, give her the living boy; certainly do not kill him!' The other said, 'It shall be neither mine nor yours; divide it' ” (26). The first mother's compassion for her son overrode the desire to raise the child herself. The first mother is characterized as showing deep psychological engagement with her infant, while the second mother lacks compassion for the living child and her own dead child. Claudia Camp notes that two stereotypes are at work of the women in this text: one would expect lies from prostitutes. However, “this stereotype is confronted with another one, namely, the mother who loves her child so much as to surrender him rather than have him harmed. Solomon's

wisdom is manifest in his ability to uncover one stereotype hidden beneath another."[208]

THE WIFE OF JEROBOAM

Another king must deal with the death of a child (1 Kgs 14). When Abijah, son of the first king of Israel, becomes ill, the father and mother want to turn to a prophet of God for help. Though Ahijah was the prophet who gave Jeroboam the kingdom, he had disappointed the prophet by building golden calves. Jeroboam instructs his wife to disguise herself and approach the prophet. Ahijah, though almost blind, recognizes the mother. Here, the mother serves as an advocate for her child, but the mother's protective role is subverted. She learns from the prophet that all of the men in her family will die. For her husband and the others, it will be a violent death. This child (*yeled)* also will die when she returns to the city, but his is to be a less violent death, for there is "something pleasing to the Lord" in him. "The bitter irony of this 'reprieve' is excruciatingly sharpened for the boy's mother: she is told that he will die 'when her feet enter the city' " [209] The mother's feet gave away her identity to the prophet; the *yeled* dies as the mother's feet touch the threshold of the house. In v. 14 (in the prophet's words) and v.18 (from the narrator), the child is mourned by "all Israel." While part of the mourning no doubt is related to his status as the king's son, there is no indication that the mourning is lessened because he is a young child rather

208 Claudia V. Camp, " 1 and 2 Kings," in *WBC* (ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon Ringe; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 100.
209 *Ibid,* 105.

than a young man or an adult.

RACHEL WEEPING FOR HER CHILDREN

Jeremiah presents a mother who weeps bitterly over children who have died. “Thus says the LORD: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more” (Jer 31: 15). Rachel's lamentation and bitter weeping mirror David's lamentation and fasting before the death of his infant. Whereas Bathsheba is consoled by her husband and by the birth of another child, in Jeremiah's imagination, Rachel refuses to be comforted. Jeremiah's metaphor would have been poignant for Jeremiah's audience only if mothers whose children died experienced grief at their loss.

These expressions of infant/child mortality suggest that in Israel's construction of motherhood, mothers were psychologically involved with their children and deeply hurt when their children died. Bird notes that there are no social distinctions. Each woman shows the same “maternal feeling, a special and enduring bond with the fruit of their womb that makes the loss of a child a woman's greatest loss. In this bereavement all women are alike, and all are equal.”[210]

210 Bird, *Missing Persons,* 35.

CONCLUSIONS ABOUT MOTHERING AND THE VIEW OF CHILDREN

This discussion of the Israelite attitude toward children helps to develop a picture of motherhood in ancient Israel, since the view of children affects the work of mothering and the construction of motherhood. Within the biblical corpus, the picture that emerges of childhood is that of vulnerability, connection to family, and especially a connection to the mother. The high valuation of children can be seen in the view of children at play, depicting childhood as a joyous time in life. However, the Hebrew Bible also depicts children as vulnerable: physically, economically and emotionally. The prophets demonstrate a special concern for the fatherless (along with widows and the poor), since they were in danger of destitution. Mothers, then, are protectors, advocates, and teachers of young children.

LACTATION

In his monograph on the life of an average Mesopotamian woman, *From her Cradle to her Grave,* Karel van der Toorn refers to the period from birth until about three as "the nursing period.[211]" However, in the discussion of that period, he addresses only birth and naming; he says nothing about nursing itself (other than to mention weaning), nor does he return to the topic in his discussion on women as mothers. However, breast-feeding is such a large part of the work of mothering an infant that the topic should not be neglected. Several key issues that affect the social construction of motherhood regarding nursing include the following important issues:

211 Van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to her Grave,* 18.

whether biological mothers breast-fed their own children or whether wet nurses were employed; whether the nurse came to live with the family or the child was sent to the nurse's home; the length of time a child was breast-fed; and the effect that lactation has on fertility rates.

Throughout history, a society's view of children has affected cultural scripts about lactation. In societies with a fairly positive view of infants, mothers have breast-fed their own babies, often for lengthy periods of time, while in societies or sub-cultures that view infants as an inconvenience or as sinful, mothers have been less likely to breast-feed their own children. For example, in 18th century France, babies were viewed as bearers of original sin. This negative view of infants carried over into interactions with mothers. Mothers generally did not breast-feed their own children, seeing the act as dirty and degrading. Instead, parents sent their infants out to wet-nurses, often for several years.[212] The Hebrew Bible depicts children as vulnerable, but also as a blessing from God. This view of children correlates with the work of mothering in that breast-feeding was celebrated as a symbol of motherhood. The view of children as vulnerable and in need of maternal care may be the primary explanation for the depictions of the lactating mother in the Biblical texts.

In Marylynn Solman's discussion about breast-feeding practices in Colonial America, she complains that historical anthropologists have so focused on the negative connotation of menstrual blood that they have failed to recognize the

212 Mary Salmon, "The Cultural Significance of Breast-feeding and Infant Care in Early Modern England and America," in *Mothers & Motherhood: Readings in American History* (ed. Rima D. Apple and Janet Lynne Golden, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997), 11.

positive connotations of breast milk.[213] “Perhaps that imbalance should be corrected to recognize the symbolic as well as practical value placed on lactating women's milk flow.”[214] Certainly the symbolic value of menstrual blood in the Hebrew Bible has received a great deal of scholarly attention.[215] The symbolic value of menstrual blood in the legal material, as well as the bodily emissions related to childbirth, is generally negative. The biblical corpus contains references to menstrual blood as making one ritually unclean, as do other emissions from the body[216] (Lev 15:19-24; Ezek 18:6). Breast milk seems to be the one emission from the body that is not associated with uncleanness in the biblical corpus. If a nursing mother and her infant could go to hear the reading of the Torah, clearly nursing did not imply ritual uncleanness and the need to stay away from sacred assemblies (Deut 29:11).There is no indication in the biblical text, for example, of Aristotle's idea, appropriated by some rabbinic interpreters, that milk was transformed menstrual blood.[217] Instead, the Hebrew Bible characterizes mother's milk positively, even metaphorically describing God as one who nurses the children of Israel (Num 11:12). In Gen 49:25, Jacob gives Joseph his blessing from his deathbed, asking for his offspring to receive the "blessings of the breasts and of the womb;” babies and the milk that nourishes them are blessings in

213 For an overview of anthropological beliefs about menstruation and impurity, see Philip, *Menstruation and Childbirth,* 8-12.

214 Salmon, “The Cultural Significance of Breast-feeding," 11.

215 For a comparative discussion of beliefs about menstrual impurity between Mesopotamia and Israel, see Philip, *Menstruation and Childbirth,* 5.

216 This sense of ritual uncleanness during menstruation, resulting in exclusion from the cult during this time, was known throughout Mesopotamia as well. A menstruating woman was considered ritually and socially “taboo.” See van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to her Grave ,* 51.

217 Gruber, “Breast-feeding Practices,” 68.

this statement. The injunction against boiling a kid in its mother's milk may reflect the symbolic value of milk as something that produces life and sustenance (Exod 23:19).

Even in antiquity, whether mothers breast-fed their own children varied from culture to culture, but biblical texts about lactation indicate an expectation that mothers were generally expected to breast-feed their own children. This notion occurs in diverse literary genres: the legal material allows for breast-feeding to be a priority (Deut 29:11); in the prophetic material, breast-feeding is used as a symbol of a comfort (Isa 66:12-13); in narratives that include mothers of young children, mothers are depicted as breast-feeding (1 Sam 1:22).

NARRATIVES OF NURSING MOTHERS

Sarah uses the image of the nursing mother as a synechdoche for all of the duties of motherhood: "And [Sarah] said, 'Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.' The child grew, and was weaned*;* and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned" (Gen 21:7-8). Sarah's statement depicts breast-feeding as central to the practice of motherhood. Sarah could have, for example, wondered who might have said that Sarah would bear children or teach children. At the end of the time of breast-feeding, the father hosts a feast, indicating that weaning represented a significant change in the life of the child.

Hannah is another mother who cares for a young child through breast-feeding. In 1 Sam 1:22, Hannah does not go to the yearly religious festival while she is nursing. Instead, nursing takes priority over religious obligations.

> The man Elkanah and all his household went up to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice, and to pay his vow. But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, that he may appear in the presence of the LORD, and remain there forever; I will offer him as a nazirite for all time." Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Do what seems best to you, wait until you have weaned him; only-- may the LORD establish his word." So the woman remained and nursed her son, until she weaned him. (1Sam 1:21-23)

Samuel's weaning concludes with his being taken to Shiloh to appear in the presence of the Lord.

AGE OF WEANING

Scholars have debated the age at which mothers would have weaned their children. The Hebrew word for infant, *yônēq,* is related to the sucking action in breast-feeding, but the exact age of the child depicted by this noun is unclear. The debate has especially centered around Hannah's story, since the text itself does not give an exact amount of time, but rather simply says that Hannah nursed her son “until she weaned him” (v. 23) and notes that “the child was young.” Other texts suggest a lengthy period of breastfeeding. The nursing child of Isa 11 is old enough to go with his father to the field; at weaning, he is old enough to be taught the Lord's message. Psalm 8:2 presumes that nursing children can speak and praise God, although this may intended as a surprise, that even one so young could praise. Second Maccabees 7:27 suggests three years as the period of nursing. Rabbinic tradition has generally suggested

twenty-two to twenty-four month as the normal length of breast-feeding.[218] Modern scholars either suggest parallels between twentieth century Palestinian Arabs, who breast-fed for two to four years,[219] or follow Old Babylonian wet-nurse contracts that indicate three years as the expected length of nursing.[220]

Matthews and Benjamin posit that the period of nursing varied according to the gender of the child; girls were weaned at eighteen months, boys at thirty months.[221] Hosea 1:8 may provide support for this notion that girls were weaned more quickly than boys. Gomer breast-fed her daughter Lo-Ruhamah, but weaned her daughter and (narratively, at least) very quickly conceived a son. "When she had weaned Lo-Ruhamah, she conceived and bore a son." If Mathews and Benjamin are correct that girls were nursed for a shorter period than their male counterparts, why would there have been such a difference? No biblical text suggests that girls were weaned more quickly because they were considered impure or even that caring for a daughter was less important. However, if such a practice did occur it may stem from a desire to have a boy, as fertility is affected by breast-feeding. Gruber argues that it may have been common for girls to be weaned earlier than boys so that the mother would more quickly resume ovulation and try again to conceive a son. Gruber uses this idea to explain Lev 12:1-5, which requires the avoidance of sexual relations (and impurity)

218 Gruber notes that Rabbi Eliezer, son of Hyrcanus; late 1st or early 2nd century A.D., set the limit at twenty-four months in Tosefta *Niddah* 2:2; that assumption is followed by Rashi and others. Rabbi Eliezer's contemporary Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah argues for a more lengthy nursing period of four to five years. "Breast-Feeding Practices," 66.

219 Patai, *Family, Love and the Bible*, 173.

220 King and Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel,* 41.

221 Matthews and Benjamin, *The Social World of Ancient Israel,* 72.

for twice as long for a girl as for a boy, arguing that the law is intended to assure that breast-feeding is well-established for infant girls, i.e., that the mother will not too quickly wean her daughter and then attempt to have a boy.[222]

METAPHORICAL IMAGES OF THE NURSING MOTHER

As with the case of childbirth, the way that the image of the nursing mother is appropriated by the prophetic literature and in the Writings says a great deal about the social construction of motherhood. Although the narratives may describe typical expectations of maternal duties, the metaphorical images of breast-feeding indicate the symbolic value of that action.

Isaiah 66 personifies Jerusalem as a nursing mother, with a promise from God that the people

> may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breasts; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom. For thus says the LORD: "I will extend prosperity to her like a river, and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem" (v.11-13).

Jerusalem is personified as the nursing mother, from whom consolation and satisfaction comes. Psalm 131:2 likewise connects comfort and nursing, depicting the psalmist as a quieted soul: "like a child quieted at its mother's breast." Psalm 22:9-10 links learning to trust in God and breast-feeding. Isaiah 49:15 asks the rhetorical question, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child

222 Gruber, "Breast-Feeding Practices," 68.

of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you." The implication is that a nursing mother would never forget her child; the link between mother and nursing child would seem to be unbreakable. However, God's memory and commitment is even stronger the commitment the lactating mother.

The woman in Song of Songs wishes that she and her lover had nursed together as infants: "O that you were like a brother to me, who nursed at my mother's breast! If I met you outside, I would kiss you, and no one would despise me. I would lead you and bring you into the house of my mother, and into the chamber of the one who bore me" (8:1-2a). Patai explains that according to Koran law (4:23), when a mother served as a wet-nurse, breast-feeding a boy and girl who were not siblings, they became "milk brother and sister" and cannot marry. However, the children did not have to follow the normal laws of avoidance between boys and girls. Such is the bond created by the nursing mother, that two people sharing her milk become like siblings. In this text, the woman desires to be able to interact with her beloved in a closer way within her mother's house.[223]

These texts indicate that maternal breast-feeding belonged to the social construction of motherhood in ancient Israel. The image of the nursing mother illustrates the strong bond formed between a mother and her children. The nursing mother represents comfort and protection for the children. The legal material indicates the the importance placed on breast-feeding, making accommodations for mothers so that they could nurse more easily, and even making cultic duties secondary to

223 Patai, *Family, Love and the Bible,* 175-176.

providing for the child.

WET-NURSES

Some of Israel's neighbors showed a preference for wet-nurses rather than maternal breast-feeding. Throughout Mesopotamia, many contracts for wet-nurses, along with law suits and legal statues, provide some idea about the attitudes and actions surrounding lactation. These records indicate that wet-nurses were often employed.[224] Some scholars have attributed this prevalence of wet nurses to a high rate of maternal death and the inability of other mothers to produce sufficient milk. Others argue that the use of wet-nurses rises in affluent societies where wealthy mothers choose not to be tied down to the obligation of nursing. Gruber suggests that the

> examination of data from various times and places from ancient Egypt through Homeric Greece, the world of the Talmuds, and medieval, renaissance, and modern Europe suggests that the legal regulation of wet-nursing and litigation arising from the employment of wet-nurses are characteristic of cultures in which it is fashionable for women of the more powerful economic classes to hand over their children to wet nurses.[225]

Breast-feeding one's own children was seen as an inconvenience for the family, at least in wealthy classes, such as the *awīlūtu.* Van der Toorn argues that the less wealthy classes would have tried to emulate the wealthy classes when possible,

224 Harris notes that woman in Mesopotamia are well-attested as midwives and wet nurses. The royal household also has nurses to feed and care for weaned children. Harris, "Women: Mesopotamia,"6:949.
225 Gruber, "Breast-Feeding Practices," 71. She cites the awīlūtu, an affluent group of religious in Babylonian culture, as an example of women who rarely breast-fed their own children, particularly in the Old Babylonian period.

including the practice of wet-nursing.[226]

The conventional wisdom about breast-feeding seems to be that Israelite women, following their Mesopotamian neighbors, might either breast-feed their own children or use a wet-nurse.[227] Domeris, in discussing the semantic range of *ynq* (nurse, suck, nursing mother, wet nurse, suckling child) says that "Hebrew women, like their *ANE* counterparts, might nurse their own children (1 Sam 1:23) or use a wet nurse (2 Chr 22:11)." While occasionally wet-nurses appear in the Hebrew Bible, these are exceptional circumstances.

Gruber disagrees with those who view the use of wet-nurses as common in Israel. Since ancient Israel was mostly an agrarian society, it seems that economically mothers would have needed to breastfeed their own children.[228] "In Biblical Israel, which was an essentially rural society, whose so-called cities were essentially villages, the tendency, encouraged by cultic law, was for women to nurse their own children."[229] Based on the textual evidence, Gruber is correct that mothers were the primary breast-feeders, but her basis for the argument is questionable. The biblical texts, written primarily by people with enough wealth to have the leisure time for writing, indicates that even among the wealthy classes, breast-feeding was expected. The texts in which wet-nurses are clearly employed are occasions in which mothers have encountered a foreign culture where maternal breast-feeding was not the social

226 *From her Cradle to her Grave,* 19.
227 See, for example, Domeris, "YNQ," *NIDOTT*, 2:472.
228 Gruber, "Breast-Feeding Practices," 73.
229 Van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 28.

expectation (Gen 50:8), or in exceptional circumstances, such as when the mother had died or the child is adopted (Exod 2: 7; 2 Sam 4:4). Thus, while economic contingencies may influence the practice of breast-feeding, the text promotes the lactating mother as an ideal of a mother-child interaction.

The imagery in Num 11:12 presents the cultural expectation that biological mothers and not wet-nurses feed children. Moses wonders how God expects him to care for the people in the wilderness and pictures God as the mother of the people. Moses then places himself in the role of the wet-nurse, carrying the people into the promised land: “Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,' to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors?” Moses is surprised that God as the mother would expect another to serve as the nurse. This text is significant, not only because it points to the idea of the mother as the one who is expected to feed the infant, but also because it shows the high value placed on the act of maternal breast-feeding.

I have discussed occasions in which mothers were left behind with children as other members of society went into battle or performed religious duties. However, Gen 50:8, describing Jacob's burial in Canaan, suggests that even the mothers went for the burial:“the household of Joseph, his brothers, and his father's household. Only their children, their flocks, and their herds were left in the land of Goshen.” This time, it does not appear the the mothers are left behind to care for the children, perhaps because, as Gruber suggests, the time in Egypt is a time when mothers did not

breastfeed their own children, but rather relied on wet-nurses.

Moses' birth is an unusual circumstance in that the life of the baby is under threat, and he is removed from his biological mother and adopted by another mother (Exod 2:1-10). The woman who employs the wet-nurse is an Egyptian princess, not a Hebrew mother. A wet-nurse becomes a necessity in this situation, although ironically Moses' biological mother becomes the wet-nurse. Moses' mother protects her son for three months, but when she realizes that she can no longer hid him, she places him in a basket on the bank of the river (Exod 2:1-3). One can infer from the text that Moses' biological mother breast-fed him herself during this confinement. She is still lactating three months later; her milk would have ceased production had she been feeding him through some other method. When Pharaoh's daughter pulls the baby out of the water, she finds herself in need of the services of a wet-nurse, asking her servants to "call a woman giving suck for baby" (Exod 2:7). The baby's sister, who has been watching, volunteers to find a woman able to nurse the baby. Moses' mother takes him home and Pharaoh's daughter pays her until he has grown enough to take to her home and claim as her son (though the exact length of time is unspecified). It is notable in that the wet-nurse takes Moses home with her rather than coming to the home of the Pharaoh's daughter. Salmon has shown that, historically, this has often been the case in societies where the wet nurses are wives with their own families.[230] Once the child is weaned, the Pharaoh's daughter then takes him into her own house.

230 Salmon, "The Cultural Significance of Breast-Feeding," 11.

Second Kings 11, paralleled in 2 Chr 22, provides another example of the use of a wet-nurse, again for the child of a royal family. Domeris uses this as an example of how common the use of wet nurses may have been.[231] However, this is an unusual circumstance because again the baby is under threat from a murderous queen:

> Now when Athaliah**,** Ahaziah's mother, saw that her son was dead, she set about to destroy all the royal family. But Jehosheba, King Joram's daughter, Ahaziah's sister, took Joash son of Ahaziah, and stole him away from among the king's children who were about to be killed; she put him and his nurse in a bedroom. Thus she hid him from Athaliah, so that he was not killed; he remained with her six years, hidden in the house of the LORD, while Athaliah reigned over the land of Ahaziah. (2 Kgs 11:1-3)

This can hardly be viewed as a typical circumstance for an infant. The life of the infant is in danger. The mother is absent from this story, which may imply that she has already been killed in Athaliah's murderous rage. However, his aunt, acting as the mother's surrogate, protects the infant along with his nurse, putting them into hiding. This story does not show how common wet-nurses were, but rather that they were employed in extreme circumstances.

CONCLUSIONS ABOUT LACTATION

The cultural script for lactating mothers was for biological mothers to breast-feed their own children for an extended period of time. This act of nursing one's own children was viewed as a source of comfort and protection for the child, creating a strong bond between mother and child. The bond between mother and child is encoded in the word for infant, y*ônēq,* referring to the sucking action that an infant makes

231 Domeris, *NIDOTT* 2:472.

while drinking milk. Maternal obligation to the nursing child was considered paramount, even above cultic obligations. However, it is clear that other texts do not preclude nursing mothers from participation in the cult, but rather encourage mothers to attend with their nursing child.

SOCIALIZATION OF CHILDREN

Rich argued that motherhood is the institution that renews all other institutions, since mothers are often responsible for passing the values and beliefs of a society on to the next generation.[232] The biblical texts about motherhood indicate that one of the key tasks charged to the mother of young children would have been socialization. Although both mothers and fathers were involved in educating young children, mothers were the primary teachers of the youngest children. After age five, some gender division existed, though the nature of the household was such that mothers and fathers could have continued in their teaching roles. [233]

I have discussed the ways in which mothers and fathers are often paired in texts assigning authority over children. Parents as also paired as teachers: “Hear, my child, your father's instruction, and do not reject your mother's teaching; for they are a fair garland for your head, and pendants for your neck” (Prov 1:8-9). “My child, keep your father's commandment, and do not forsake your mother's teaching” (Prov 6: 20). Several texts in Proverbs celebrate the wise son (in contrast with the foolish son): Prov

232 Rich, *Of Women Born,* 13.
233 Meyers, "The Family in Early Israel," 31.

10:1 “a wise son makes a father glad, but a foolish son is a grief to his mother” (Prov 10:1; see also Prov. 15:20, 17:25). Offspring who do not learn from their parents are a source of a grief and bitterness to the mother and father, while a son who has been properly socialized and embodies the wisdom he has been taught bring gladness to mother and father.

Meyers notes that since households were an independent economic unit, socialization included providing technical skills needed for the next generation to take over productive and processing tasks, as well as social skills and cultural norms and values:

> There can be no doubt that women play a unique and critical role in the socializing process, broadly conceived. They not only bear the children who represent the future of the household and society, but are also the primary caretakers of the young and as such introduce them, especially in a household-centered society, to a sizable proportion of the tasks, modes of behavior, cultural forms, and norms and values of their society.[234]

Though the family household enabled children to come in frequent contact with both parents, it was the mother who had greater role in education. Though the teaching of the father is clearly valued, wisdom literature suggests that the mother actually has the primary role in teaching children. Bird notes that Prov 31:1-9 depicts the mother alone as the teacher: “The words of King Lemuel. An oracle that his mother taught him.”[235] Proverbs 29:15-17 also carries the idea of the mother as one who teaches, in this instance with the idea as one who disciplines: “The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a mother is disgraced by a neglected child...Discipline your children, and they will

234 Meyers, *Discovering Eve,* 149.
235 Bird, *Missing Persons,* 34.

give you rest; they will give delight to your heart." De Vaux notes that the mother's education is particularly emphasized in respect to moral formation.[236]

Other texts indicate that parents, and particularly mothers, were influential in language development. Tye first words of the child in Isa 8:4 are "My father" and "My mother." Although Neh 13 intends to condemn intermarriage, it suggests the significance of mothers for language development. "Jews had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab; as for their children, half spoke in the language of Ashdod, and none was able to speak in the language of Judah, but the language of his own people" (Neh 13:23). The children speak the language of their mothers—called here the language of the child's own people—while none are able to speak the language of their fathers.

Although coming from the end of the historical period described by the Bible, an embroidered wrapper found at Masada, likely intended for a scroll, may be one of the few examples from example material cultural that specifically show the way a mother would have taught her daughter practical skills:

> Along the wrapper's upper edge short edge is a special embroidery, consisting of seven double triangles, six of them large and distinct, but the seventh small and pinched in as if by force. . .The embroidery appears to have been executed by two people, one an expert embroiderer and the other someone learning the craft, perhaps a mother and daughter. One may speculate that the small even stitches were executed by the expert mother while the larger uneven stitches were done by her apprentice daughter[237]

236 *Ancient Israel,* 49.

237 Avigail Sheffer, "Needlework and Sewing in Israel" in *Fortunate the Eyes that See: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of his Seventieth Birthday* (ed. Astrid Beck, et al. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 527-559.

Mothers are depicted as the source of language development and practical skills that would have been essential for the next generation.

MOTHERHOOD AND GENDER SOCIALIZATION

Anthropologists suggest that the cultural expectation of Israelite mothers was that biological mothers would have had the primary responsibility for the care and socialization of young children. Fathers began to take more responsibility for sons by the time that the sons were old enough to be of help in the fields, while mothers continued to bear the responsibility of socializing girls.[238] The biblical texts construct the mother's role in ways that are in line with this anthropological understanding of maternal responsibility, though they also indicate a construction in which mothers continue to influence the education of boys as well as girls.

Blenkinsopp argues that children would have been socialized into their gender roles from an early age, with boys moving from the care of the mother to working in the fields with the father. For boys, passing from the care of the mother into working with the father would have signaled the end of childhood.[239] There is very little textual support for this idea. One apocryphal text connects fathers with the primary responsibility for sons while mothers are responsible for daughters: "Thus says the Lord Almighty: Have I not entreated you as a father entreats his sons or a mother her daughters or a nurse her children. . . ?" (4 Es 1:28). From the literature of one of

238 Blenkinsopp, "The Family in First Temple Israel," 57.

239 *Ibid,* 57. Blekinsopp suggests seven as the age of transition, with no apparent textual support, though as I have reviewed above, five is depicted as an age of transition in a variety of texts.

Israel's Mesopotamian neighbors, van der Toorn quotes a Sumerian hymn from Nippur, indicating that older siblings had childcare responsibilities along with the mother. He notes that the father is noticeably absent from the hymn, which he suggests that the father had little to do with rearing daughters:

> The oldest brother raises the younger,
> makes him into a civilized person...
> The child, who is entrusted to the mother,
> respects her and attains a ripe old age.[240]

Here the mother is associated with raising young children into adulthood, as she attains old age. As van der Toorn notes, the father is absent. However, the father is not associated with raising the sons either. The brother serves as the one to turn his younger brother "into a civilized person."

Meyers contends that while daughters would have always been with their mothers, sons would have continued to spend time with the mother as well as their father. [241] In Banning's discussion of house cites from the Neolithic Period, he notes that the movement from hunting to a more domesticated household, evident through cooking features such as ovens and the beginnings of pottery technology, meant that child-rearing also centered around the house. He notes that while older archaeological studies[242] assumed a fairly rigid, universal division of labor along gender lines, more

240 A. Falkenstein, Sumerische Götterlieder (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1959), I, p.12, ii. 32, 34. Quoted in Karel van der Toorn, *From her Cradle,* 27.

241 *"The Family in Early Israel,* 38.

242 See, e.g., J.K. Brown, "A Note on the Division of Labor by Sex," *American Anthropologist* 72 (1970), 1073-78, who argued that child care restricted women's labor to non-hazardous tasks near the house that could tolerate frequent interruption for childcare demands.

recent studies[243] have attended to pre-industrial societies where childcare does not fall completely on the biological mothers, nor does it prevent women from work in agriculture.[244] Peterson likewise argues for men's involvement with childcare. As men moved from hunting to agriculture, it is likely that they took part in food processing, such as grinding grain, and may have also taken part in watching over children.[245] The narrative of Rebekah's relationship with her sons may indicate this divided time with mother and father for sons. While Esau goes to the fields with his father, Jacob stays closer to the tents. Mothers, then, would have been responsible for boys and girls while they were young. Fathers would have taken on a larger role as sons grew older, but the mother would have continued to be an influence over sons, and fathers over daughters.

CONCLUSION

The division of labor along gender lines within the household was likely less rigid than some scholars have believed. The pairing of mother and father in texts indicates shared authority and shared responsibility over children. However, mothers still had the larger responsibility for the care of young children, including feeding, clothing, and protecting them from danger. The social construction of mothers of young children in the Hebrew Bible is closely tied to the society's understanding of the

243 See J. Peterson "Sexual Revolutions: Gender and Labor at the Dawn of Agriculture (Walnut Creek: Altamira, 2002), 140-45.
244 Banning, "Housing Neolithic Farmers," 17.
245 Peterson, "Sexual Revolutions," 111, 140-145.

nature of young children. Childhood was viewed as a time of vulnerability. Part of this vulnerability was related to the ignorance of the child, making the mother's role as teacher paramount. The vulnerability of children is also apparent in their physical and economic disadvantages. Mothers are depicted as protectors of young children, advocating for their children's safety. The messages about motherhood include the idea that mothers protect vulnerable children, yet a conflict arises in cases where the mother fails to protect, whether from the father, from death, or even from herself. On occasions in which children are in danger and the mother is absent, maternal authority is encoded in the mother's absence, since her presence meant that she would have protected her child and taken away from the father's authority.

The modern western social construction of the mothers of young children is focused on love and nurturing. This is not absent from the social construction in the Hebrew Bible, but it appears with less frequency than images of mother as teacher and disciplinarian. The lactating mother tends to be the locus of images of nurturing, including calming the child and depicting a mother who will never forsake or forget. The lactating mother symbolizes the care given by a woman to her infant.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Sociologists and anthropologists who have studied motherhood across cultures argue that societies construct views of motherhood. The expectations and values placed on motherhood vary widely across cultures based on the needs of that society, the sources of authoritative knowledge, and the views of children held by the society. Societies create "cultural scripts" that guide mothers through the experience of motherhood. Though constructions may be based on physiological assumptions about pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation, these physiological assumptions are culturally determined as well. Because social constructions are so pervasive in societies, cultural assumptions underlie textual presentations of motherhood. Though a combination of sociological and literary methodologies, I have analyzed the assumptions and attitudes about motherhood encoded within biblical texts. The social construction of motherhood in the Hebrew Bible presents mothers who have authority over their children, though the authority is limited by economic contingencies. Mothers served as teachers, advocates, protectors, and nurturers. However, the dependence of the mother on the children becomes apparent as well, as the status of the mother is only achieved by having children, and mothers are dependent on their sons as heirs.

MOTHER'S PLACE IN THE HOUSEHOLD

These competing social constructions of motherhood reflect the position of mothers within the *bêt ʾāb.* Family members within the household were interdependent, with every member working together for the survival of the

household. Some tasks would have been divided along gender lines, though these divisions may have been less rigid than is commonly assumed. Texts that pair mothers and fathers reflect this interdependence, giving each authority over young children (Exod 20:12). Still, mothers had the primary responsibility for the care of young children, hence the depictions of mothers as teachers and protectors. The interdependence of the household meant that mothers could also be in vulnerable positions. Should the institution of the *bêt ʾāb* break down, mothers lost their physical and financial security, placing them *en pair* with orphans and the poor. Women whose husbands have died are generally directed to return to their *bêt ʾāb* of origin, their own father's house (Gen 38:11). Like children, mothers had the potential to be hurt when their husbands broke the law (Num 16:27). However, in these instances, it is rare for women to be called "mothers." Instead, the are called wife/widow, or daughters/sisters in their own father's house. The role of mother all but disappears as the woman becomes vulnerable. Motherhood, then, more than a biological role, is a signifier of status within the *bêt ʾāb.*

Within the *bêt ʾāb,* the contribution of mothers to the economy of the household was invaluable. In addition to the mother's productive labor as household manger, mothers engaged in reproductive labor in giving birth and caring for the needs of young children. The mother's work in the household was valuable enough that mothers were excused from cultic duties in order to provide for the needs of their children and attend to the family's wealth (Exod 23:17). The economic needs that mothers fulfilled contributed to the respect commanded of mothers and the high value

placed on motherhood. The mother's importance within the household gave the mother authority over her children, though that right did not extend to authority over the distribution of land. Again, economic contingencies affect this limitation, since the land in the father's household needed to remain intact in order to have the greatest productivity.[246]

MOTHER'S AUTHORITY

Many scholars have assumed that the father is the equivalent of the Greek *paterfamilias*, with absolute authority over the life and even death of offspring, but the texts themselves do not support this contention.[247] The authority of the mother over the children, demonstrated in a variety of texts, indicates that the father is not an unrivaled authority figure. The motif of pairing the mother and father, frequent in legal material and wisdom traditions, indicates a shared authority over the children. Laws in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy afford the mother and father equal respect and command obedience to both fathers and mothers. The penalty for disrespecting a mother is the same as for a father; the blessings for honoring a mother are the same as for a father (Exod 20:12).

Part of the debate about whether mothers had authority within the household stems from questions about ancient Israel's physiological assumptions about conception. While scholars such as Levine and Delany argue that Israelites understood

246 Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis,* 23.
247 Delany, "The Legacy of Abraham," 28.

the child to be the seed or essence of the father, with the mother simply providing the fertile location for growth.[248] In this interpretation, the physiological assumption that fathers predominate in conception would lead society to accept fathers as the predominate parent vested with complete authority. I have shown that the use of "seed" throughout the Hebrew Bible does not support this contention; seed can emanate from mother or father, and generally refers to future generations rather than immediate offspring (Gen 24:60). In naming children, a right that mothers and fathers share, mothers frequently refer to their own role in creating the child (Gen 4:1). In the annunciation of Samson, God's messenger implicitly acknowledges the mother's authority over the child, for when Manoah asks about the instructions, the messenger directs him to follow his wife. The understanding of God's role in conception sets limitations on the authority of both fathers and mothers, since neither are able to create children without the help of the Lord.

The authority of mothers over their offspring extends beyond the bounds of the *bêt ʾāb.* The queen mothers, commonly listed in the books of Kings and Chronicles, are women who hold authority in the kingdom due to their status as mothers (2 Kgs 24:12). Mothers take part in the selection of wives for their offspring, negotiating marriage arrangements, and are even responsible for providing assurance of the daughter's virginity before marriage (Deut 22:14). Even when the father is absent, the mother maintains her authority to negotiate marriages (Gen 21:21).

The authority granted to the mother by the legal materials, as well as the ways

248 *Ibid,* 28, 35; Levine, " 'Seed' Versus 'Womb,' " 337-344.

in which the mother's authority extends beyond the bounds of the *bêt ʾāb*, indicates that mothers had socially assigned authority. Fathers, laws, other households, and townspeople accept the mother's authority over her children. The mother did not simply have powerless responsibility or unassigned power; she had authority.

As I have argued, the points at which the mother is missing from the text do not indicate a lack of maternal authority. Often in domestic scenes when the mother is missing, it is a point of danger for the child. In several of these cases, the offspring is in danger from the father. In the binding of Isaac, I have shown that the mother's authority as protector is apparent in the previous chapter (Gen 21). When her authority over Isaac's protection comes in conflict with Abraham's authority, the voice of God lends support to Sarah's position, and Abraham sends Ishmael away. In Gen 22, Abraham takes his son three days' journey away from the protective authority of the mother. Sarah is absent not because she is insignificant, but rather because her authority would rival the authority of the father.

ADVOCATE FOR THE HEIR

Even though the mother had authority over her children, that authority did not extend to all matters in the household. When mothers seek to assert influence, they often resort to surreptitious means in order to achieve their ends (Gen 27; 1 Kgs 1). Readers have suggested that these texts indicate a lack of authority for the mother.[249]

249 Bronner, *Stories of Biblical Mothers,* ix.

The stories in which mothers resort to trickery, however, almost always have an economic implication; they deal with the distribution of land or inheritance. This does not mean that mothers did not have any authority; it does mean that mothers did not have authority over inheritance. This limitation of authority is connected to economic needs. It was in the best interest of the household to have the land pass intact.[250] Even the father's authority is limited in this matter, though he had more authority than the mother (Deut 21: 15-17). Thus, it could not simply rest with the mother to determine how the land (or other signs of status and economic security) should be dispersed among offspring. The economic survival of the *bêt ʾāb* depended on land passed intact.

While mothers did not have authority over this economic issue, individual mothers in the Hebrew Bible try to influence decisions about land dispersement. When mothers want to advocate for their children, they assert power in other ways. Rebekah and Bathsheba's actions, though motivated by concern for their offspring, also recognize the dependence of the mother on the child; the fortunes of the mothers rise and fall with the fortunes of their children. In both of these cases, the husband is on his death bed. The family structure is about to change, with a son ascending as the head of the household (or state). The mothers want to ensure their economic security and position of respect.[251]

250 Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis,* 23.

251 See David J. Pleins comparison of these two narratives in "Murderous Fathers, Manipulative Mothers, and Rivalrous Siblings: Rethinking the Architecture of Genesis-Kings" Pages 121-136 in *Fortunate the Eyes that See* (ed. Astrid Beck, et al. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 126-128. He reads Rebekah's actions as an interpretive lens for Bathsheba's, arguing that the comparative reading confirms Bathsheba's

Economic contingencies are involved in Rachel and Leah's competition for children as well. Since up to this point in the narrative only one son has inherited the blessing, Fretheim sees issues of succession creating a strong undercurrent in the narrative.[252] Leah's children are set to inherit their father's fortune (which becomes quite massive in the next episode). If her sons have financial security, she will as well. Rachel wants sons to ensure not simply the family's security for the future, but security for herself as the mother of sons. Rachel's sons, whether adopted or biologically her own, are a threat to Leah's security precisely because of Jacob's preference for Rachel. Because of his love for Rachel, he might give all of his fortune to her sons.

MOTHERS WITH CHILDREN

The expectations a society places on mothers is closely linked to the attitudes toward children in society. In the Hebrew Bible, children are God's blessings, yet they are vulnerable, ignorant, and morally inferior. This understanding of childhood directly affects the status and actions of mothers. Because children are viewed as blessings, the women who give birth to them are valued. However, the status of motherhood comes less from this biological role and more from the mother's role as teacher and protector. Because children are vulnerable, mothers protect children. The expectation of mothers as a proctors begins in the womb, as the child's future is

complicity in deceiving David (128).
252 Fretheim, "Genesis," *NIB* 1:554.

affected by events in the womb. In the annunciation to Samson" mother, the mother accepts the authoritative knowledge of the messenger because she believes these instructions will protect her child's future (Judg 13: 3-5). When mothers feel that their children are in danger, they provide protection as well. Moses' mother places him in a basket in the Nile rather than throwing him into the water; the basket represent the mother's protective role (Exod 1:2-3). The prostitute who comes to Solomon for judgment chooses to protect the life of her child, even if it means that the son will be raised by another woman. It is in presenting herself as a protector that the king recognizes her as the truthful mother (1 Kgs 3:26-27). The mother Rizpah, Saul's concubine, protects the bodies of her sons and the sons Merab, Saul's' daughter. Though the sons are dead, Rizpah keeps birds and beasts from their dead bodies. David respects the mother's actions and properly buries the five sons, along with Saul and Johnathan (2 Sam 21:8 -14).

The connection between the ignorance of children and the mother's role is apparent in references to the mother as a teacher (Prov 31:1). Although the interdependent nature of the *bêt ʾāb* allowed for learning from both parents, as well as other members of the household, the primary responsibility of education of young children would have fallen on mothers. Mothers taught a variety of practical skills to their children, including language. However, the mother's role as moral guide in this theologically-driven book is paramount. The natural inclination of the mother of seven sons in 4 Macc 14:13-20 is to love and protect; however, she is upheld as a model of motherhood because she has taught her sons to remain faithful to God at all

costs.

Mothers of young children, rather than having "limited psychological attachment" to their children because they were vulnerable, instead create a close connection with the children. Bathsheba needs comfort at the death of her child (2 Sam 12:24). Moses' mother sees that he is a "fine baby," indicating maternal affection for this child less than three months old (Exod 2:2). For infants and toddlers, the image of the lactating mother encapsulates the love and compassion of the mother. The close bodily contact required for breast-feeding would have enabled mothers to provide comfort as well as protection for their children (Isa 66:13). Isaiah uses the commitment of a lactating mother to her child to depict God's commitment to Israel; mothers do not forget nursing children; God does not forget Israel (49:15). The positive connotations of breast-milk throughout the Hebrew Bible contributed to the fact that mothers breast-fed their own infants for a lengthy period of time.

Mother-love is a motivating factor in several stories of older offspring as well. Genesis 25:28 states that Isaac loved Esau because he brought game; Rebekah loves Jacob, but the narrator leaves her love unexplained, as though the love of a mother needs no explanation. Rabbinic tradition assumes that Lot's wife, escaping with her husband and two of her daughters, looks back to see if her other daughters are following them; mother-love makes her look back.[253] Texts that depict the death of a mother indicate a deep attachment between mothers and children. Though some texts simply acknowledge the mother's death as part of ritualized mourning (Lev 21:1; Deut

253 Jonathan Kirsch, *The Harlot by the Side of the Road,* 27, 57.

21:13), other texts use the death of the mother as a metaphor for deep sorrow: "I bowed down mourning as one who sorrows for a mother" (Ps 35:14). When Isaac's mother Sarah died, bringing Rebekah into his mother's tent was a source of comfort (Gen 24:67).

CHILDREN PROTECTING MOTHERS

The interdependence of the household is apparent in texts that cast mothers as vulnerable with their offspring in protective roles. Often this protection is not exclusive to the mother; adult children protect mothers, fathers, and the entire household. In Josh 2, Rahab protects her mother, father, and the household. Joshua repeats the mothers among this list three times, as Rahab asks for mercy for father's household (v. 13), gathers the household (v.18), and as the spies bring out Rahab and her family (6:23). In 1 Sam 22:3, David sends his mother and father to Moab in order to protect them from the possible revenge of Saul. The goal of mothers is to move their children out of the stage of vulnerability, ignorance and moral inferiority; the texts that depict children protecting mothers demonstrate the mother's achievement in raising children.

CONCLUSION

Two competing constructions of motherhood are at work in the Hebrew Bible. Some texts show mothers without power, resorting to trickery to affect outcomes, or

even missing completely from texts where mothers might be expected to appear. Other texts demonstrate that the mother is a central figure with authority over children. In narratives of domestic settings, mothers often are in control of the functioning of the household. Wisdom writings vest the mother with authority over her children. Mother and father are frequently paired in a variety of literary contexts, suggesting that the mother and father play complementary roles within the family household.

The competing social constructions indicate that mothers are the protectors in need of protection. They have authority over their children, yet they do not have full authority over their own lives. The Hebrew Bible acknowledges the creative power of the mother's ability to conceive, develop and give birth to a child, but limit the power of the mother's procreative power by depicting difficulties in getting pregnant, difficulties that the woman cannot overcome without divine intervention. These competing social constructions indicate the conflicting status of mothers in the Bible: they are central to the survival of the household, but they are also dependent on the structure of the household for their own status and survival.

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