

THE CHARACTER OF CHILDBIRTH ACCORDING TO THE BIBLE

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THE study of the sensations of childbirth among a people may serve two purposes. Obstetrically, it may display a hitherto unknown or slightly regarded normal form which these sensations may take; anthropologically, it may throw light on the total culture of which the characteristics of midwifery are only a part. Ancient Israel provides a field of particular interest for such a study since, while distant in time from ourselves, the people of Israel and Judah had a civilized and literate culture, often troubled by ethical conflict, social tension and political problems, and have left us a written record not only of these difficulties and their achievements in handling them, but also of what they considered to be the customary sensations of parturition.

In 1910 Skinner (1) wrote that "the pangs of childbirth are proverbial in the Old Testament for the extremity of human anguish". The question to be examined here is whether such a statement represents the Biblical descriptions correctly and, if so, what meaning we must attach to "anguish" in this context. The matter has already been dealt with more briefly by Dick Read (63), who argued that the Bible did not associate physical pain with childbirth. In the present communication an attempt is made to see whether this view is correct and, if so, what sensations are in fact mentioned in biblical descriptions of parturition.

The word "travail", with its connotation of affliction, is used nineteen times by the King James translators to represent parts of the Hebrew verb *yalad*, which means simply "to bear a child" (2). In many passages, however, we may learn something about the actual sensations of parturition from the words used in the Hebrew text. Passing over two references to abnormal labour, in which the mother dies (3), we have to consider twenty-nine passages refer-

ring to childbirth, all of them falling into one or more of the following six groups:

- (a) The so-called "Curse of Eve".
- (b) Passages with the word *tsir*.
- (c) Passages with the word *hebhel*.
- (d) Passages with the word *tsarah*.
- (e) Passages with derivatives of the root *hul*.
- (f) Passages with the word *ke'ebh*.

THE CURSE OF EVE

The verse (4) in which Eve is given, as the result of her disobedience, the prospect of trouble in childbirth, has been commonly supposed to mean that the natural state of mankind after the Fall implies physical pain for women in childbed. The Authorized Version has: "Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." We have to consider the words *etsebh* and *itsabhon*, here rendered as "sorrow", (i) in this story in Genesis, (ii) elsewhere where they occur in the Bible, (iii) in relation to other derivatives of the same root, and (iv) in relation to traditions relevant to the story.

(i) The first word translated "sorrow" is *itsabhon*, the second, *etsebh*. The two words are related, the former being a longer form of the second. The next verse has the "Curse of Adam", which includes the sentence: "In sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life." Here again "sorrow" translates "*itsabhon*", and it is clear that this word may imply severe and unpleasant toil, but cannot mean, in this passage, the acute physical pain of bodily disorder. (It may be noted that the word "conception" here accurately translates the Hebrew, but that the

Septuagint Greek has *stenagmon*, “sighing”, a type of utterance as suitable to toil and trouble as to pain.)

(ii) In three passages (5) *etsebh* clearly has “toil” as its most likely meaning, and this seems true of a fourth (6). The King James translation has “sorrow” or “labour”, and the latter would seem the better. In none of these passages can *etsebh* readily be understood as physical pain. In Proverbs (7) “grievous words” translates, in the Authorized Version, “words of *etsebh*”; here one might understand physical pain, but only by supposing a metaphor. An apparently rhetorical question, in the book of Jeremiah (8), about Coniah, the crown prince, asks whether he is *etsebh*. The Authorized Version here has “idol”, while the Septuagint and Vulgate have “vessel” (*skeuos* and *vas* respectively); whatever the exact meaning, there are no grounds for reading pain into the sentence. The form *itsabhon* is found, apart from the story of the Fall, only in the account of the naming of Noah (9), which refers to the “*itsabhon* of our hands” in a context in which the Authorized Version, with “toil”, is clearly right.

(iii) Other derivatives of the same root are *otsebh* (10), *atsebheth* (11), *maatsebhah* (12), *atsebh* (13), and *atsabh* (14). The last of these may mean “idol” but, otherwise these words always mean “sorrow”, “grief”, or “toil”, the Authorized Version using the first two, but they are not readily translatable by “pain” in its clinical sense.

(iv) The rabbinical traditions handed down until their written compilation in the first half-millennium of the Christian era are not entirely consistent on pain in childbirth, but the general tendency indicates that, even after the times in which the biblical books were written, physical pain was not considered inevitable. On the “Curse of Eve” Rabbi Isaac ben Abdimi stated that the *etsebh* which was to be increased was that of bringing up children, while the *itsabhon* with which children were to be brought forth was “to be understood in its literal meaning” (15). What this literal meaning might be is at least partially elucidated by a saying of Rabbi Johanan (16), who argued that *itsabhon*, which occurs in the “Curse of Adam” to the exclusion of *etsebh*, is in form the more emphatic of the two words, and that therefore men were to

suffer more in their toil than women in childbed. Rabbi Judan ben Zebina maintained that righteous women were not included in the decree upon Eve (17) (cf. *I Timothy*, 2, 15), while a traditional tale about Rabbi Juda ha-Nasi indicates that parturition could be relieved vicariously by the suffering of the righteous (18). On the other hand, it is clear that childbirth was sometimes painful in rabbinical times (19), while some regarded it as regularly so (20).

It therefore seems that the evidence from the wording of the so-called “Curse of Eve” is in favour of its referring to toil and trouble, and almost incompatible with there being any reference to physical pain. Even as late as the early Christian era there was no unanimity in Jewish thought to support the view that childbirth was regularly painful and some considered that the decree on Eve, whatever it included, was made inapplicable by righteousness.

TSIR

The word *tsir* means “a hinge”. The plural *tsirim* is used three times as an obstetrical word: in the description of Ichabod’s birth (21), and twice in passages of Isaiah (22) using the sensations of childbirth by way of simile. Ichabod’s mother died in labour and the parturition must therefore be considered as abnormal. Nevertheless, this is the only description of an actual labour with the word *tsirim*, and is therefore worth quoting: “She bent herself and gave birth, for her *tsirim* came upon her.” This suggests that *tsirim* refers to some event which may occur soon before the end of the second stage of labour, perhaps to the hinging of the body itself as it doubles up. One Rabbi Eleazar (23) took this passage as referring literally to hinges of another kind: “As a house has hinges, so a woman’s body has hinges.” This remark is made in a discussion on the number of joints in the body, and the entire context suggests that the “hinges” are joints, including the joints by which are hinged flaps closing the womb. In the light of this post-Biblical comment *tsirim* may refer to the onset of the urge to bear down at the beginning of the second stage, and this moment is further indicated by the phrase “she bent herself”. In this

particular account the mother dies in labour, but neither the rabbinical commentary already mentioned nor the biblical passages to be discussed indicates that *tsirim* are abnormal.

Of the two passages of Isaiah (22), the first is a prophecy of the ruin of Babylon. The verse presents some textual problems, but the word *tsirim* is clearly part of a simile of parturition used to indicate the fear and amazement which is to take hold on the Babylonians. In the second passage the prophet speaks of how *tsirim* have taken hold on him, and he compares himself to a parturient woman as he brings forth his prophecy. The terror which possesses him seems to arise both from the act of giving birth to the prophecy and from the terrible character of the prophecy itself.

From these passages, then, the most probable inference seems to be that *tsirim* are anatomical structures, but that the term was used for one of the sensations of parturition because the sensation was felt to be due to movement in these structures. The sensation itself was possessing and terrifying. That it included pain is neither indicated nor excluded by the evidence of these three passages.

HEBHEL

The Hebrew verb *habhal* has two etymologically distinct uses,* to corrupt or destroy and to bind. From the root in its latter sense we have the noun, *hebhel*, meaning a cord or rope (24) and hence a snare (25), and also a boundary (26) or territory (27) and, in one passage, the Philistine coastal strip in particular (28). The word is used also for a company of prophets (29), while in some passages the meaning is not certain (30). In the phrase "sorrows of death" or "sorrows of hell" (31), "sorrows" translates the plural of *hebhel*; here the verbs indicate "surrounding" and the idea of a snare is again found. On the other hand, the Authorized Version translates *hebhel* or one of its plural forms by "travail", "sorrow", "pang" or "pain" in eight passages where the context is obstetric. These passages, in all of which parturition is mentioned by way of simile

or metaphor, must therefore be discussed further.

It can be inferred from widely differing texts that *hebhel* names some characteristic feature of parturition (32), that delivery without it is to be regarded as miraculous (33) and that it is a source of emotion akin to dread and amazement (34). It is a simile for the troubles that come to a people taken into exile (35). More particularly, *habhalim* occur near delivery and possess a woman so that she loses her womanly grace and cries out (36). It remains to be asked whether the woman in labour, shortly to give birth, is possessed by physical agony or some other inner distress. The Hebrew of the texts does not help us further, but the Greek of the Septuagint gives a strong indication. The words *tsir* and *hebhel*, in their obstetric uses, are invariably translated by words formed from the root *ōdín-*, with the exception of a single text (37) in which the Greek has *ōdýnas*. Now the verb *ōdínō* means most commonly "to be in labour" or "to have birth 'pangs'", and in this sense merely begs our question. Its further meanings however are "great pain", "worry", "fuss" and "travail", but its use with the sense of "great pain" is metaphorical according to Liddell and Scott, and the word is not normally used for physical suffering or pain. Thus the Septuagint suggests that the distress named by the word *hebhel* is not pain in the clinical sense.

TSARAH

The noun *tsarah* and the corresponding verb are used six times in the book of Jeremiah (38), in phrases in which parturition is a simile for distress. The word *tsarah* is in fact a very common word for "trouble" occurring seventy-one times in the Bible, but it never necessarily implies physical pain.

HUL

There are sixteen biblical passages (39) in which the verb *hul* or its derivatives are used in describing the sensations of parturition. In most of these passages the Authorized Version and the Vulgate Latin suggest physical pain, and in the rest they translate by terms indicating no more than the act of parturition itself. The Septuagint, however, invariably uses parts of the verb *ōdínō*

* My attention was drawn to this etymological distinction by the Rev. I. Blythin.

or related words, except once (37) when *ōdýnas* translates forms both of *hul* and of *hebhel*. As already mentioned, *ōdínō* is not normally used for physical pain, and the Latin and English are therefore not in accordance with the Greek.

An examination of the biblical use of *hul* indicates that the Greek translation of the word is better than the Latin or English, and that the word carries no necessary implication of physical pain. Two exceptional meanings of the word may be noted in passing: "wounding" (40) and "giving birth" (41) each appear in one passage only to be the best translation, the latter sense being probably transferred from the other obstetric use. For the rest, the verb has a spectrum of meanings, as have our own words "move" and "trouble", ranging from physical motion to disturbance of mental poise. Thus *hul* may be used for the motion of the whirlwind (42), for dancing (43), or for physical commotion (44). Hence it is a short step, perhaps by way of bodily trembling (45), to the meaning "to trouble at heart" (46) although it is not always certain whether physical or emotional stirrings are intended (47).

It therefore seems probable that *hul* has an implication not of physical pain but of inner turmoil.

KE'EBH

If none of the words used to indicate the sensations of parturition has a primary meaning of bodily pain, it may be asked what biblical word has such a meaning. If the Bible has no term for pain, there is less to be inferred from the absence of such a word in obstetrical contexts than if the term is to be found in other passages. In fact, there is such a Biblical word, the noun *ke'ebh* and its related verb. There are five examples of the word (48) in the Bible, if we exclude one textually obscure sentence (49). In all five examples the implication may be of mental anguish, but it remains to be ascertained whether such anguish is metaphorically suggested by a word with a primary meaning of physical pain, or whether it is present irrespective of such pain. The evidence may be summarized as follows:

(a) Three of our five examples describe Job, who is the only Biblical character with a painful bodily affliction described in clinical detail.

(b) In one passage the *ke'ebh* of the flesh is paired with the mourning of the soul, the parallel suggesting that *ke'ebh* is the form of suffering appropriate to the one as mourning is to the other.

(c) Except in one passage (51), where the *ke'ebh* is explicitly of the heart, the Septuagint translates the word by Greek terms which have a primary meaning of bodily lesion or pain, and which are never used in the translation of any reference to parturition.

It is evident then that the most probable primary meaning of *ke'ebh* is physical rather than mental suffering and this agrees with its use in post-biblical Hebrew, in which it is *the* word for physical pain. For the present purpose, the word is of interest in that neither it nor its grammatical variants occur in any of the thirty-one biblical passages which refer to the sensations of childbirth.

CHARACTER OF THE SENSATIONS

It is now possible to characterize the "anguish" for which, according to Skinner (1), childbirth is proverbial in the Bible. For reasons already given, the "Curse of Eve" (4) indicates suffering in parturition to a less degree than do many other passages, and it is certainly not a decree inflicting physical pain. From the remaining passages certain general conclusions arise.

(a) Childbirth was regarded as something alarming and fearful, and accompanied by sorrow (*tsarah*).

(b) This sorrow appears not to have been considered primarily as a result of pain (*ke'ebh*) and, if pain occurred, it was overshadowed by other sensations.

(c) These other sensations, or the events occasioning them, are denoted by *tsir*, *hebhel* and *hul*. *Hebhel* possesses (52) a woman, even causing terror (53), but may be used simply as a synonym for parturition (54). While *tsir* may have the same general implication as *hebhel*, it seems, for reasons already given, to refer particularly to a definite event, possibly at the onset of the second stage of labour. The verb *hul* and its grammatical derivatives are used either

for childbirth itself (55), for a bodily sensation of labour (56), for a state of possession (57), or for a mind troubled by confusion (58). As already discussed, *hul* implies movement, especially a rotating movement, and it may mean not merely a sensation, but actual writhing (59).

- (d) That parturition is something which brings a woman into a state of fearful possession is emphasized by the use of childbirth as a simile for the bringing forth of a terrible prophecy which the prophet must deliver in spite of himself.
- (e) The cries of a woman in childbed are vividly evoked in the Bible (61), but these seem to have been not simply the shouts and weepings of physical pain, but something with a terrifyingly non-human quality, for the Lord himself is described as saying that He will roar like a parturient woman in destroying and devouring the wickedness that has long affronted him (62).

The general picture of childbirth in the Bible is consistent, and is characterized by a fearful ecstasy with loud cries, more akin to prophetic possession than to being physically hurt. The Bible does not associate with parturition pain of the kind arising from bodily injury and disease. Such pain may, indeed, be considered as of minor importance against a background of total possession.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

In our own culture the sensations of childbirth are considered as variable between four pairs of extremes: (i) pain and painlessness, (ii) pleasure and indifference, (iii) effort and ease, and (iv) apprehension and self-assurance. This apprehension may be due to the anticipation of pain or, particularly in a primigravida, to the fear of the unknown; the Bible indicates another cause of apprehension, one which may well be present among women of our own time and country. If so, an appreciation of the possibility can increase the obstetrician's understanding of the woman he is helping. Whether the state described in the Bible is or is not important in contemporary obstetrics, there is clearly a difference of emphasis between Biblical and modern descriptions of parturition, and this

difference raises questions concerning the entire environment of individuals in the two cultures.

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