

# Pregnancy & Motherhood in the Biblical World

JENNIFER STILES

## Reminders

This past Saturday I found myself sitting on a crowded church pew, admiring a bride's wedding dress and thinking about pregnancy and motherhood in the biblical world. Seated among the congregation I was one of at least a hundred other people admiring the long train of the bride's wedding dress as she stood with her mother and father and soon-to-be-husband—backs to the congregation—at the front of the country church. The daughter of a seamstress myself, I couldn't help but notice the exquisite detail and hours of work that surely went into making the beautiful, elaborate dress. As I thought about the dress, the hours of intricate work and thousands of tiny stitches, everything I had been reading about pregnancy and motherhood in the biblical world began to come together in my mind.

Seeing the bride in her beautiful dress standing beside her mother brought to my mind recent memories of my own wedding, just six months ago. What I remembered were conversations with my own mother about my wedding dress. I came to understand—though she never said it—that my mom had imagined herself making my wedding dress for quite some time. Being the practical person that I am, my side of the conversations usually included comments about how I would only wear the dress for a single day—time-consuming embellishments and ornate stitching were unnecessary. When my mom drove 845 miles and presented me with the hand-stitched wedding dress, I realized that my comments were unheeded. The dress and its delicate linen and subtle, yet intricate bead work and design revealed the many hours that my mom had spent making this amazing dress—a dress, that I couldn't help but realize I would wear for just a few hours.

The day I saw my wedding dress I was far too excited to wonder why my mom would go to such great lengths, take so many precious hours, to make a dress that I would only wear for a single day. But as I sat in the church this past Saturday—with thoughts of pregnancy and motherhood in the back of my mind—I couldn't help but ask myself that question. As I looked ahead at the bride and her mother, both clutching handkerchiefs and—though I couldn't see their faces—surely dropping tears, I realized the answer to my question: motherhood.



Jennifer Stiles (maiden: Mueller) wore the wedding dress her mother made last October. She now lives in Virginia, USA where she studies Theology and anticipates motherhood as she and her husband await the birth of their first child this coming November. She is a former copy editor of *Mosaic*.



## Historical Reflections and Implications

Throughout time motherhood has been associated with obstacles and difficulties. In premodern times the physical risks associated with childbearing constituted a significant threat to the lives of women.<sup>1</sup> In her book *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, Carol Meyers explains that, while archeology in Palestine is not extensively revealing in the investigation of skeletal remains, the results of limited studies correspond well to the results of similar studies on all pre-modern populations.<sup>2</sup> That is, in the study of ancient Palestinian burials there is evidence that the death rate was highest among the pre-adult population, with a high infant mortality rate and a mortality rate of females in childbearing years greatly exceeding that of males of the same age bracket.<sup>3</sup> Pregnancy in premodern times carried the risk of death—a threat that would have been understood in the perspectives and world views of pre-modern women.

Likewise, in the time of the house churches of early Christianity, the obstacles and risks of pregnancy and motherhood were known and intimately understood by women. Children were typically born at home and the birthing process was essentially managed by women—both slave and free.<sup>4</sup> While there is some evidence that suggests male doctors may have offered advice from an adjacent room, midwives were very important to the birthing process in early Christian times (54-55). In their discussion of labor and delivery in *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Early Christianity*, Osiek and MacDonald reference folk medicine traditions recorded in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, which reports the high risk of infection for both mother and child associated with many common birthing practices.<sup>5</sup> Infant mortality was also high at this time. Osiek and MacDonald report that “scholars estimate that about 30 percent of infants died in their first year.”<sup>6</sup> High infant mortality rates are likely behind Roman mourning trends, which prescribed no formal mourning for children less than one year old and reserved full mourning only for children of ten years or more.<sup>7</sup>

Because early Christian churches met in homes, birthing realities were surely a part of the early church context. Imagining how Paul's metaphors of birth and infancy may have been received during the early Christian era, Osiek and MacDonald write, “[within] the family atmosphere of house churches, where, for example, women might well have been nursing during meetings of the *ekklesia*, the power of the metaphors as encoding feminine experience...becomes strongly apparent.”<sup>8</sup> While discussing the story of the birth of Jesus within this same setting, Osiek and MacDonald note that this story contains an account of a woman's labor and delivery as well as theological messages. They write, “It is valuable to reflect upon how such narratives would have been heard in a house-church setting, where infants were being born and nurtured but were also dying—often along with

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their mothers—at a rate that for us seems unfathomable.”<sup>9</sup> The realities of pregnancy and motherhood were certainly realized within the house church setting of the early Christian church.

Carol Meyers takes a close look at Genesis 3:16 in *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*. She identifies this verse as the most troublesome, from a feminist perspective, than any other verse in scripture.<sup>10</sup> Meyers analyzes the syntax and lexical nuance of Genesis 3:16 against the backdrop of the societal conditions which “best suit the thrust of the poetic oracles to the female and male in Genesis 3:16-19.”<sup>11</sup> She identifies this backdrop as the scene of the Israelite highlanders in the earliest period of their corporate existence, a time period that called for an outpouring of labor and a growth of population that would have exceeded preceding or succeeding eras.<sup>12</sup> Because of the peasant lifestyle of this time—when large families provided for parental labor needs—and in light of high infant mortality rates, families would have to produce nearly twice the number of children desired in order to achieve “optimal family size.”<sup>13</sup> Large families, multiple births, and therefore multiple pregnancies, were a societal necessity of this time period.

It is against this backdrop and these realities that Meyers explores the language of Genesis 3:16. Meyers discusses the history of the translation of these verses into English<sup>14</sup> and the “persistent beliefs” that they perpetuate about female existence. She identifies two core beliefs propagated by traditional English renderings of these verses, “first, women are associated with severe pain in childbirth; second, they are portrayed in a relationship subordinate to men.”<sup>15</sup> Tracing the history of English translation of this verse of Hebrew text, Meyers identifies a key problem, “For Genesis 3:16, as for many biblical texts, the earliest versions seem to have consistently influenced the later ones.”<sup>16</sup> Lexical and syntactical aspects of traditional translation of this verse into English have shaped teaching and preaching about women, pregnancy, and childbirth for hundreds of years.

Meyers unfolds several key lexical and syntactical nuances of this verse that have been traditionally overlooked or misinterpreted. In doing so, Meyers clears up some important misconceptions. For example, Meyers explains that the Hebrew language contains a “semantic field of birth language” that is significantly developed.<sup>17</sup> She writes, “Not only are there discrete terms for the various phases of the process of conception, pregnancy, and childbirth; there are also semantically similar but less common synonyms for the words that constitute the core of the childbirth vocabulary.”<sup>18</sup> The Hebrew word that is often translated “childbirth”, in fact, refers to the period of pregnancy—not to the process of childbirth which terminates pregnancy.<sup>19</sup> Given



these and other analyses, Meyers concludes, “the first line of the oracle to the woman has God greatly increasing a female’s conceptions, or pregnancies.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, while English translations for years have been proclaiming that women’s pain in childbirth would be divinely increased, the Hebrew text consistently expresses an increase in the number of pregnancies experienced by women.

Meyers also clears up the misconception surrounding the English translation of the word “labor.” She explains that in the Hebrew text Genesis 3:16 makes no reference to “labor” in the sense of childbirth/delivery.<sup>21</sup> Meyers considers five uses of the Hebrew word “*eseb*” in the biblical text and concludes that this word “clearly refers to productive physical labor.”<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Meyers writes, “The audience of the oracle is not simply being reminded that women work and have children. Rather, they are learning that the work is unremitting and is not mitigated by the procreative demands placed on female existence.”<sup>23</sup> Summarizing this and her analysis of the concluding lines of Genesis 3:16, Meyers writes:

Lines 3 and 4 together should be understood as responses to the situation established by lines 1 and 2. Women have to work hard and have many children, as lines 1 and 2 proclaim; their reluctance to conform, which is not explicitly stated but can be reconstructed by looking at the biological and socioeconomic realities of ancient Palestine, had to be overcome. Lines 3 and 4 tell us how: female reluctance is overcome by the passion they feel toward their men, and that allows them to accede to the males’ sexual advances even though they realize that undesired pregnancies (with the accompanying risks) might be the consequence.<sup>24</sup>

Writing in light of social realities of the Israelite highlanders in the early period of their corporate existence, and an understandable reluctance of women to enter into the risks of pregnancy and birth, Meyers rereads Genesis

3:16 and offers a new English translation that more precisely communicates the Hebrew text.<sup>25</sup>

Like the Genesis text, birth-prophecy stories have influenced Christian dialogue on pregnancy and motherhood for centuries. In *A People’s History of Christianity*, Antoinette Clark Wire writes “Women’s History from Birth-

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Prophecy Stories," which explains the role of birth-prophecies in Christian women's history. She begins by acknowledging the long tradition of birth-prophecy telling in ancient Israel, spanning the centuries before and after the time of Jesus.<sup>26</sup> These stories provide an intimate view of the "assumptions, perspectives, and values" of the people who tell them.<sup>27</sup> They are essential because they highlight the key roles women play in the stories.<sup>28</sup> Wire considers twenty-six birth-prophecy stories, including the song of Hannah, Mary's song, the account of Rabbi Ishmael the High Priest, Elijah's birth prophecy, Zechariah's praise of God, an account of Miriam at Moses' birth, and many others.

These birth-prophecy stories provide valuable insight into pregnancy and aspects of motherhood. For example, they express women's fears and challenges including fears for the life of the newborn child, interminable delays in childbirth, the intensity of labor pains, "the dripping breasts and constant nursing of the child," and practices of ritual purity through bathing and sacrifices associated with women's birthing experiences.<sup>29</sup> Birth prophecy stories also offer a peek into the delivery room by attesting to who was present—and absent—during childbirth. Midwives, close female relatives, and older generations of women are all mentioned as present during various birth accounts, while men are notably absent.<sup>30</sup>

Birth-prophecy stories also provide insights into contemporary ideas about God's way with the world. Wire notes that several birth-prophecies include notions of the child overcoming the corruption of the world and reestablishing good order, righteousness, and peace.<sup>31</sup> They also include undertones

that reveal ideas that God works through births to ameliorate the lives of God's people, for "Storytellers told about God's promises at past births that had been fulfilled in each stage of the people's history, freeing them from their enemies, meeting their physical needs, and bringing their hearts back to God."<sup>32</sup> At the same time, however, these stories ignore the major threat to the mother's life that she risked in childbirth. Instead, Wire writes, "the stories are so much centered on what the child means for the destiny of the people that the mother's survival does not get attention, even when her physical experience is mirrored and her struggle magnified."<sup>33</sup> Several birth-prophecy stories encounter and entertain the theme of barrenness. They depict the struggles of women like the mother of Samson, who are accused of barrenness, and women like Hannah and Elizabeth, who struggle against barrenness.<sup>34</sup> These stories depict God as hearing prayer, opening wombs, and overpowering oppressors—acting through the birth of children to accomplish political objectives.

While barrenness is universally overcome in these birth-prophecy stories, real-life stories depict a different reality. In her article *A Coming Home to Myself*, Mercy Oduyoye tells her own story as a "childless woman in the West African space." The Bible has several stories about women who have passed through childlessness en route to motherhood. Oduyoye remarks on the Bible's chronicling of "notable patriarchal, priestly, and



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prophetic names [that] refer to the sons of women who passed through the agonies of childlessness to have baby boys—Isaac, Samuel, and John the Baptizer.”<sup>35</sup> However, Scripture is remarkably silent on the topic of childless women who remain childless despite equally fervent prayers as those of women like Hannah. Oduyoye writes, “[A] worse shame is that Christianity does not seem to have stories from which the childless can draw strength. If there are such stories, we must find them, for the sake of many who suffer in silence.”<sup>36</sup> Oduyoye’s urgent message is remarkably relevant for the church today.

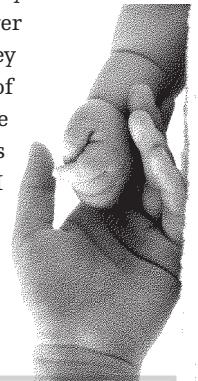
In her discussion of the position of the Christian church, Oduyoye notes the changed perspective from that of the Christians in the early church. Convinced that the “end times” were imminent, the early church expected Jesus at any moment and was not “preoccupied with biological fruitfulness” but was instead focused on bringing forth “the fruits of the Spirit in the faith community and in the life of the individual Christian.”<sup>37</sup> In contrast, Oduyoye describes traditional African wedding ceremonies that proceed with a “basic assumption within the whole of the marriage transaction” of “fruitfulness [in childbirth].”<sup>38</sup> She describes how there is “no empowering word and no ceremony to strengthen what may, for many reasons, turn out to be a childless marriage” and how the “general taunting of the community is reflected in sermons from our pulpits” (Oduyoye). Oduyoye’s call—for the church to find stories to strengthen and encourage the childless—is real challenge to the church of every age, to make its ministry relevant to the lives of its community.

Oduyoye is right. Christianity does seem to lack a sufficient repertoire of stories from which the childless can be strengthened. And Carol Meyers is right when she exposes the two persistent beliefs about female existence that are perpetuated by inarticulate translations of Genesis 3:16. These shortcomings, along with the realities of the risks

and challenges inherent in pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood, paint a bleak picture. On one side, women face various societal pressures to fulfill expectations of motherhood. On the other side, women throughout time face scores of different obstacles that stand in the way of successfully fulfilling these expectations. Women seem to be trapped between a rock and a very hard place. Christianity seems to lack a sufficient repertoire of stories in which many women, in a variety of tight circumstances, can find strength.

## Applications

That thought was what met me at Saturday’s wedding. As I sat in the pew and thought about my mom—the beautiful wedding dress she handmade, and the fewness and fleetingness of the dress’s moments—I had two new insights. First, I realized that my mom was motivated by something hidden as she spent hours with a needle and thread, carefully creating an elaborately lovely dress that she very well knew I would cherish, but would only wear for a half of a precious day. There is something very special about mothers and this hidden motivation. They overcome countless obstacles to deliver babies, then care for those babies as they grow into the continued neediness of childhood, and continue to care for those children when they become teenagers and are still challenging and needy. I realized that there is something special enabling mothers to have these children and provide this care. It’s not a need or desire for gratitude. While I don’t know what this is, I think I may have some idea as to what its substance may be.



At almost exactly the same time, I had a second new insight. I realized that my life is like that dress. My days are surely fleeting. Yet for some reason I have been wonderfully and intricately made by a creative parent. And while I don't know by what that Parent was motivated, I have an idea that it was not by a need for my gratitude.

#### SUGGESTED READING

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#### (ENDNOTES)

1 Meyers, Carol. *The Genesis Paradigms for Female*

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2 Meyers, C. P.112

3 Meyers, C. P.112

4 Osiek, Carol & Margaret Y. MacDonald. *Giving Birth: Labor, Nursing, and the Care of Infants in House-Church Communities. A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity.* Fortress Press:

Minneapolis, 2006 P.53-4

5-9 Osiek, C. & MacDonald, M. P.55-66

10-13 Meyers, C. P.95-120

14 Meyers also includes in her discussion the translation of Genesis 3:16 in the Septuagint translation and the Vulgate (Latin) translation (95-96).

15-24 Meyers, C. P.95-117

25 Meyers' translation of Genesis 3:16 reads: "I will greatly increase your toil and your pregnancies; / (Along) with travail shall you beget children. / For to your man is your desire, /

And he shall predominate over you" (118).

26 Wire, Antoinette Clark.

"Women's History from Birth-Prophecy Stories."

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1. Richard A. Horsley, ed. Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2005 P.71

27-34 Wire, A. C. P.72-91

35 Oduyoye, Mercy Amba. *A Coming Home to Myself: The Childless Woman in the West African Space. Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell.*

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36-38 Oduyoye, M. A. P.115-116

