

# Reproductive issues in the Torah

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## Abstract

Fertility was the basis of primitive man's economy. It is therefore not surprising to find that various facets of fertility and reproduction are mentioned and commented upon in connection to religious based texts from the period. The stories related to fertility and reproduction in these religious text compliment comments from other contemporary texts and archaeology to give an indication of the prevalent thoughts and beliefs of that age. The Torah serves as a compilation of Jewish historical religious oriented folk-tales predating the Iron Age. Its stories reflect the developing relationship and increasing dependence for survival between the Jewish people and Yahweh – a dependence inherently linked to fertility of the settled land to provide sustenance and of the people to provide for an increase in the population and communal strength.

## Keywords

Fertility, reproduction, birth, Torah, Jewish, Egyptian,

## Introduction

The Torah [Hebrew: תּוֹרָה], meaning instruction, is a compendium of Judaism's founding legal and ethical religious texts written during the Babylonian exile circa 600 BCE and completed during the Persian period circa 400 BCE. The Torah consists of the first five books of the Jewish biblical canon and has been adopted by Christianity being incorporated as part of the Old Testament. Known as the Pentateuch, the books include: the Bereshit – Genesis; Shemot – Exodus; Vayikra – Leviticus; Bamidbar – Numbers; and Devarim – Deuteronomy. The Torah is written in the form of a narrative starting with the creation of the world, the early history of the people of Israel, their Egyptian sojourn, the Egyptian exodus and the giving of the law at Mount Sinai, and ending with the death of Moses just before the people of Israel reach the promised land. The Torah thus recounts earlier historical folktales of the Hebrew [or Khabiru] population predating the Iron Age [before 1400 BCE].

The Khabiru moved in the Palestinian region as mercenaries, casual labourers or brigands from the desert margin to the east. They have often been equated with the Hebrew tribe returning through the desert from their sojourn in Egypt.<sup>1-2</sup>

The books are however not simply a historical narrative, but contain specific teachings related to religious obligations and civil laws of this community. Supplemented by the Jewish Apocrypha and later books of the Old Testament together with archaeological remains in the region, these writings have a wealth of reflections that deal with the various human lifecycles as perceived by human society at the time. These cycles include Birth-Sexuality-Death, Puberty-Fertility-Menopause, and Conception-Pregnancy-Parturition. This corpus thus reflects on fertility and its control, on concepts relating to aetiology of miscarriages and malformations, and further relate the contemporary management of labour and delivery besides describing a number of abnormal obstetric cases. These concepts can be compared and contrasted with the contemporary archaeological records and medical papyri found in the adjoining land of Egypt. The Ancient Egyptians with their belief in the afterlife left detailed representations of their way of life in the various contemporary inscriptions and pictograms left in their tombs and temples. Gynaecological problems and their management in Ancient Egypt are mainly documented in the *Kahun Gynaecological Papyrus*. The Kahun Papyrus, housed in the University College London, is dated to this period by a note on the recto which states the date as being the 29<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Amenemhat III (c. 1825 B.C.E.).<sup>3</sup>

## Fertility and Infertility

Fertility was a central theme of many Neolithic cultures prevalent around the Mediterranean basin. It served also as the basis of the extended family's economy. Fertility was particularly directed towards the agricultural and husbandry gifts of the so-called fertility deity that enable the survival of the community. In the Semitic mythology, the Semitic mother goddess refers to Asherah (Hebrew: אֲשֶׁרָה). It appears the Hebrews continued to worship Asherah even after their supposed adoption of monotheism, and 'the worship of Baal and Asherah persisted among the Israelites for over seven centuries, from the period after the conquest and settlement of Canaan, which most biblical scholars place at around 1400 BC, to the time of the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and the exile of the Israelites in Babylon in the 6th century BC'.<sup>4</sup> The

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abrogation of the cult of Asherah was strongly advocated in the Torah books. *Exodus* 34:13 states: 'But ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves' [referring to the Asherah poles]; while *Deuteronomy* 16:21-22 states 'Thou shalt not plant thee a grove [Asherah pole] of any trees near unto the altar of the LORD thy God, which thou shalt make thee. Neither shalt thou set thee up any image; which the LORD thy God hateth.' The term 'groves' in the King James Version refers to the Asherah pole, a sacred tree or pole that stood near the Canaanite religious locations to honour Asherah.<sup>5-6</sup> Further reference to the cult of Asherah [or Ashtoreth] within Hebrew culture is made in later books of the Old Testament. King Manasseh [reign circa 687 – 643 BCE] is reported to have placed an Asherah pole in the Jewish Holy Temple at Jerusalem. *2 Kings* 21:7 states that 'he [Manasseh] set a graven image of the grove that he had made in the house, of which the LORD said to David, and to Solomon his son, In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all tribes of Israel, will I put my name for ever.'<sup>7</sup> These were subsequently destroyed and removed by King Josiah [reign circa 641–609 BCE] with *2 Kings* 23:6 stating that 'he [Josiah] brought out the grove from the house of the LORD, without Jerusalem, unto the brook Kidron, and burned it at the brook Kidron, and stamped it small to powder, and cast the powder thereof upon the graves of the children of the people'.<sup>8</sup> Asherah was considered to be the deity responsible for fertility and infertile Hebrew women may have resorted to this deity to overcome their problem. The previously infertile Rachel is known to have taken the pagan household deity images from her father's house sited in Haran and 'put them in the camel's furniture, and sat upon them. And Laban searched all the tent, but found them not'.<sup>9</sup> Haran is almost universally identified with Harran, an Assyrian city in Upper Mesopotamia whose ruins lie within present-day Turkey. The Assyrians followed the polytheistic Assyro-Babylonian religion. Their pantheon included Ishtar, equated with the Ugarit Asherah, who was the goddess of fertility, war, love, and sex.<sup>10</sup>

High fertility was thus strongly desired being viewed as an enrichment of the extended family group in both nomadic and farming societies. The birth of a child, particularly a son, was considered to be a gift from Yahweh reflecting his benevolence on the woman and family or simply in compensation. 'And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.'<sup>11</sup> 'And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD.'<sup>12</sup> 'And when the LORD saw that Leah

was hated, he opened her womb...'.<sup>13</sup> Fertile women were honoured while the barren were to be pitted. Thus 'And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.'<sup>14</sup> The Kahun Papyrus gives a number of features one should look for to assess whether the woman is fertile or infertile. These varied methods range from a simple examination of the breasts to placing an onion bulb in the vagina overnight and identifying the odour in the patient's nose the next day. One could also determine the number of children she would bear by assessing the number of times the woman vomits after being made to sit on the ground smeared with dregs of beer and given fruit [?dates].<sup>3</sup>

Very grand multiparity was however not the norm. The majority of families mentioned in the Torah had six to seven children [Japheth – 7 children; Cush – 6 children; Mizraim – 7 children; Keturah – 6 children; Milcah – 7 children; Eliphae – 7 children; Leah – 6 children]. Others had less. Only Joktan and Ismael had 13 and 14 children respectively, though the text does not define whether these were from one spouse or more. Fertility throughout a woman's reproductive life, without the facility of contraception, would have been controlled by the prolonged lactation period and delayed infant weaning common in earlier practices even though wet-nursing was apparently practiced especially in the higher social strata. Thus when the Pharaoh's daughter discovered Moses in the basket among the reeds, the first thought was of finding a wet nurse to care for the child. 'Then said his sister to Pharaoh's daughter, Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee?'.<sup>15</sup> The wet nurse became an important feature of the child's eventual life accompanying the child in adulthood so that 'they sent away Rebekah their sister, and her nurse, and Abraham's servant, and his men'.<sup>16</sup>

Active forms of contraception were not generally desired or the norm. However coitus interruptus was practiced by Onan to deprive his sister-in-law Tamar the opportunity to continue his dead brother's family line, an obligation placed upon him by his father Judah. Onan was punished for his actions. Thus 'Judah said unto Onan, Go in unto thy brother's wife, and marry her, and raise up seed to thy brother. And Onan knew that the seed should not be his; and it came to pass, when he went in unto his brother's wife, that he spilled it on the ground, lest that he should give seed to his brother. And the thing which he did displeased the LORD: wherefore he slew him also.'<sup>17</sup> The importance of maintaining and propagating the family line occasionally led to drastic measures to achieve impregnation by the head of the family. Tamar eventually resorted to subterfuge to achieve a pregnancy. Disguising herself as a prostitute, she enticed her father-in-law to impregnate her to

become pregnant with twins.<sup>18</sup> Similarly Lot's daughters resorted to incest getting themselves impregnated by their father after getting him drunk to 'preserve seed of our father'.<sup>19</sup> Both daughters thus became pregnant by their father. The use of a hand-maid or slave-girl as a form of surrogacy was also resorted to. In the light of her apparent infertility, Rachel offered her spouse Jacob her maid Bilhah to serve as an alternative surrogate spouse to carry a child stating 'Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees that I may also have children by her'.<sup>20</sup> Similarly Sarah offered the Egyptian slave girl Hagar for the same purpose telling Abram 'Behold now, the LORD hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai'.<sup>21</sup>

Other alternative means to achieve contraception in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE are described in the Kahun Papyrus. These include resorting to the use of a mixture of crocodile dung chopped over HsA and awyt-liquid; or sprinkling honey on the womb upon a bed of natron; or sprinkling the womb with HsA and awyt-liquid.<sup>3</sup> Other forms of contraception included male sterilization since eunuchs were apparently a feature of Jewish society described in later Old Testament books – 'Neither let the son of the stranger, that hath joined himself to the LORD, speak, saying, The LORD hath utterly separated me from his people: neither let the eunuch say, Behold, I am a dry tree. For thus saith the LORD unto the eunuchs that keep my sabbaths, and choose the things that please me, and take hold of my covenant; Even unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters: I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off'.<sup>22</sup>

Infertility was considered a punishment from Yahweh who closed the wombs of women considered sterile. Thus Jacob's rejoinder to his sterile wife's plea to impregnate her was "Am I in Yahweh's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?"<sup>23</sup> Rachel possibly had an obesity-related subfertility since we are told that 'Leah was tender eyed; but Rachel was beautiful and well favoured'.<sup>24</sup> In Semitic mentality, "well favoured" could very well have referred to generously endowed pelvic proportions as depicted in the pagan deity Asherah. Household infertility was also Yahweh's punishment to Abimelech who had unknowingly taken Abraham's spouse Sarah to his harem. In this episode, Yahweh is said to have closed the wombs of all women in Abimelech's household – or was this a case of self-limiting male infertility? Being the result of a misdemeanour, the curse of infertility was removed after 'Abraham prayed unto Yahweh: and Yahweh healed Abimelech, and his wife, and his maidservants; and they bore children. For the LORD had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech,

because of Sarah Abraham's wife'.<sup>25</sup> Sarah herself was infertile, though her infertility was attributed to age-related cessation of menses since the Genesis 18:11 reports that 'Now Abraham and Sarah were old and well stricken in age; and it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women'.<sup>26</sup>

Phytotherapy in the form of *duda'im* was also resorted to by Rachel in the management of her infertility. 'And Reuben went in the days of wheat harvest, and found *duda'im* in the field, and brought them unto his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, Give me, I pray thee, of thy son's *duda'im*. And she said unto her, Is it a small matter that thou hast taken my husband? and wouldest thou take away my son's *duda'im* also? And Rachel said, Therefore he shall lie with thee to night for thy son's *duda'im*'.<sup>27</sup> It is difficult to botanically identify the *duda'im*, which seemingly is available at the time of the harvest. Most biblical commentators identify the plant as the mandrake based on the fact that the word *duda'im* has the same numerical value as *ke'adam* meaning 'like man'. The mandrake root resembles the human form with head, hands and feet. Because of the human shape of its root, mandrake was universally associated with fertility.<sup>28</sup> Rachel eventually conceived and normally delivered a healthy normal male infant, the conception attributed as a gift from God. 'And Yahweh remembered Rachel, and Yahweh hearkened to her, and opened her womb. And she conceived, and bare a son; and said, Yahweh hath taken away my reproach: And she called his name Joseph; and said, The LORD shall add to me another son'.<sup>29</sup> Her second pregnancy conceived spontaneously was to terminate in a complicated labour and delivery resulting in her death. The Kahun papyrus further gives a recipe to assist pregnancy: after ceases the return ..... pound, grind fine, [strain] in cloth on gruel ayt, pour mehuyu ..... Incense, fresh fat, dates, sweet beer, put inside a rack (of wood) in the flame; thou shalt fumigate ..... as a sweetener of the mouth.<sup>3</sup> A diagnosis of pregnancy was made on the ability of pregnant urine to germinate cereals: 'Another test for woman who will bear or a woman who will not bear. Wheat and spelt: let the woman water them daily with her urine like dates and like sh'at seeds in two bags. If they both grow, she will bear; if the wheat grows, it will be a boy; if the spelt grows, it will be a girl. If neither grows, she will not bear'. Investigations to assess whether there is any truth in this diagnostic test have suggested that it may actually be useful to detect pregnancy but not identify the foetal gender.<sup>30</sup>

### Pregnancy and childbirth

Pregnancy is fraught with a number of complications during the antenatal period and the during the delivery process. One cause for miscarriages or early

pregnancy interruption mentioned in the Torah is physical trauma – ‘If men strive, and hurt a woman with child, so that her fruit depart from her, and yet no mischief follow: he shall be surely punished, according as the woman's husband will lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life, Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe’.<sup>31</sup> The Ebers Papyrus gives an abortive remedy, using a ground mixture of the acanthus fruit, onion and dates pulverized in a vessel containing honey. The mixture is sprinkled on a cloth and applied to the vulva [or inserted into the vagina]. The Ebers Papyrus was said to have been found in the Assasif district of the Theben necropolis. It is dated by a passage on the verso to the 9<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Amenhotep I (c. 1534 B.C.E.).<sup>32</sup>

Foetal development was seen as dependant on the male element with the womb acting a nourishing moulding receptacle for the child. This is clearly described in the Wisdom of Solomon, a later text of the Old Testament: ‘I myself also am a mortal man, like to all, and the offspring of him that was first made of the earth, And in my mother's womb was fashioned to be flesh in the time of ten months, being compacted in blood, of the seed of man, and the pleasure that came with sleep. And when I was born, I drew in the common air, and fell upon the earth, which is of like nature, and the first voice which I uttered was crying, as all others do. I was nursed in swaddling clothes, and that with cares. For there is no king that had any other beginning of birth. For all men have one entrance into life, and the like going out’. The mentioned ten months refer to the ten lunar months required for foetal development.<sup>33</sup>

Foetal development within the maternal womb was believed in the Torah to be affected by visual impressions – ‘And Jacob took him rods of green poplar, and of the hazel and chestnut tree; and pilled white strakes in them, and made the white appear which was in the rods. And he set the rods which he had pilled before the flocks in the gutters in the watering troughs when the flocks came to drink, that they should conceive when they came to drink. And the flocks conceived before the rods, and brought forth cattle ringstraked, speckled, and spotted’.<sup>34</sup> There can be no doubt that ancient like modern human society was affected with all forms of congenital anomalies. These included lethal abnormalities such as the spina bifida affecting one of the embalmed fetuses discovered in Tutankhamen's tomb in 1926.<sup>35</sup> Other abnormalities reported from various mummies included clubfoot, cleft palate, and hydrocephalus. Tolerance towards malformed individuals was taught in the Instruction of Amenemope dated to the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC: ‘Do not laugh at a blind man nor scorn a dwarf nor spoil the plan of a lame man. Do not scorn a

man who is the hand of god nor be fierce of countenance towards him when he has erred’.<sup>36</sup> Malformed individuals who survived were accepted in society and could advance themselves in the social hierarchy. A relief in the tomb of Mereruka at Saqqara [ca.2330 BCE] depicts dwarves involved in metallurgical works. At least another 200 depictions of dwarves are found in other tombs at Gaza and Saqqara.<sup>37</sup> Some dwarfs reached the pinnacle of the social strata as evidenced by the VI Dynasty limestone-painted statue depicting the achondroplastic dwarf Seneb and his normal family who was honoured with a lavish tomb in a royal cemetery close to the pyramids. Seneb was the overseer of the palace dwarves, chief of the royal wardrobe and priest of the funerary cults of Khufu. A fine statue in the Cairo Museum depicts him with his family, including his wife who was of normal stature, and two children. His wife was known to have been a lady of the court and a priestess.<sup>38</sup>

The antenatal period could be a very uncomfortable one especially when the pregnancy was a twin gestation – ‘..Rebekah his wife conceived. And the children struggled together within her; and she said, If it be so, why am I thus?’<sup>39</sup> Twin pregnancies could be monozygotic or dizygotic. The twin brothers Pharez and Zarah born to Tamar appear to have been monozygotic sharing the same amniotic cavity. During the delivery, Zarah had a prolapsed arm that was pulled back into the uterus allowing the eventual birth of his twin. – ‘And it came to pass in the time of her travail, that, behold, twins were in her womb. And it came to pass, when she travailed, that the one put out his hand: and the midwife took and bound upon his hand a scarlet thread, saying, This came out first, And it came to pass, as he drew back his hand, that, behold, his brother came out: and she said, How hast thou broken forth? this breach be upon thee: therefore his name was called Pharez. And afterward came out his brother, that had the scarlet thread upon his hand: and his name was called Zarah’.<sup>40</sup> The twin brothers Esau and Jacob were on the other hand dizygotic and non-identical twins – ‘And Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, Behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man’.<sup>41</sup> The birth of the non-identical twin birth of Esau and Jacob to Rebekah, wife of Isaac is described in Genesis 25:24-26 – ‘And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. And the first came out red, all over like an hairy garment; and they called his name Esau. And after that came his brother out, and his hand took hold on Esau's heel; and his name was called Jacob: and Isaac was threescore years old when she bare them’.<sup>42</sup>

Parturition as described in the Torah was managed by midwives or traditional birth attendants who used birthing stools to achieve delivery. ‘Then the king of

Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiph'rah and the other Pu'ah, "When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women, and see them upon the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him; but if it is a daughter, she shall live." But the midwives feared Yahweh, and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live.<sup>43</sup> Birthing stools were widespread tools throughout the eastern Mediterranean with archaeological evidence for their use being described in Egypt – e.g. relief at the Temple of Hathor at Dendera. An alternative method of delivery may have been with the woman sitting on her haunches with legs raised on bricks/stones with an assistant supporting the back. This may have the meaning of Rachel's comment relating to her maid's delivery when she states that '... she may bear upon my knees....'.<sup>20</sup> Birthing bricks have been excavated from the archaeological site at Abydos in Egypt, while a Ptolemaic Period statuette depicting a parturient woman sitting on her haunches with legs raised has been excavated from Egypt. Alternative birthing positions noted in Egyptian archaeology appears to be the squatting position as evident in the relief showing the parturient woman at Sobek Temple at Kom Ombo. Egyptian women appear to have withdrawn to birth huts outside the house for the birth and for a ritual purification period of at least two weeks. These birth huts may have been the precursors of the birth houses or mammisi annexed to Ptolemaic period temples, e.g. at Dendera, Edfu and Philae. These mammisi may have also been extant in temples from the New Kingdom such as the temples of Mut at Karnak, the temple of Luxor, and Deir el-Bahari. These birth houses served to request divine help by pregnant women rather than being a birthing place. Egyptian deities commonly associated with the protection of mother and child such as Bes and Taueret were often depicted in these houses.<sup>44</sup> Bes was depicted as a dwarf with ugly features. The appearance was meant to frighten off any spirits that might be harmful to the child. Taueret was depicted with the head of a hippopotamus, the legs and arms of a lion, the tail of a crocodile, human breasts, and a swollen belly. She was often depicted holding the Sa amulet symbolizing protection.<sup>10</sup>

The birthing process was reported to be generally smooth and quick in Hebrew women preceding the arrival of the midwife so that "The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and are delivered before the midwife comes to them."".<sup>45</sup> Labour pains were assumed to be a punishment from Yahweh based on the comment that "To the woman he said, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children """.<sup>46</sup> While the midwives comments to the Pharaoh suggest a generally smooth

delivery, this was not always the case. The Jewish Apocrypha test states that "Then were the entrances of this world made narrow, full of sorrow and travail: they are but few and evil, full of perils, and very painful".<sup>47</sup> A number of complicated deliveries are described in the Torah. The worst obstetric case scenario was the birth of Benjamin to Rachel. This was the second pregnancy of Rachel, having previously given birth without mishap to Joseph. This pregnancy was apparently spontaneous probably conceived during the undertaking an arduous journey since she was apparently menstruating in the early phase of the journey since on encountering her father, Rachel "said to her father, "Let it not displease my lord that I cannot rise up before thee; for the custom of women is upon me"". <sup>9</sup> The 'custom of women' generally refers to menstruation when used in the Torah books, it could also possibly refer to pregnancy in this instance. During the journey she started labour, possibly prematurely. The labour was difficult and prolonged. The foetus was presenting in the breech enabling the midwife to determine the gender prior to its delivery. Rachel passed away soon after the delivery of her son possibly as a result of postpartum haemorrhage resulting from uterine atonia following the prolonged labour.<sup>48</sup> Uterine inertia from atonia is further mentioned in a later book of the Old Testament with the statement "...for the children are come to the birth, and there is not strength to bring forth".<sup>49</sup> Other described intrapartum problems described in the Torah is the case of prolapsed arm of the presumably monoamniotic second twin with spontaneous resolution and delivery mentioned earlier. The prognostic signs of survival of the newborn were detailed by the Ebers Papyrus: "Another way of knowing about a child the day he is born: If he says ni, it will live. If he says ba, it will die." Another way of knowing: "If it let a loud lamentation be heard, it will die. If it looks down its face it will thereupon die."<sup>32</sup>

The Torah fails to detail management options in cases of obstructed labour. According to the Ebers papyrus labours could be aided by applying peppermint to the buttocks, or pouring crushed pot of a new hennu vessel in warm oil to the genitals. Another recipe included plastering a mixture of sea salt, wheat grain and female reed onto the abdomen. A mixture of salt and honey taken orally was also supposed to help.<sup>32</sup> The Hebrew Talmud makes reference to resorting to post-mortem Caesarean section when discussing whether undertaking to perform the procedure during the Sabbath was permissible – "Only cutting flesh? Rabbah said: It is necessary [to permit the] fetching of the knife by way of a public thoroughfare? But what is he informing us? That in case of doubt one may desecrate the Sabbath! .... Here where it [the embryo] did not have such original presumption of life, one might say no [desecration of the Sabbath shall be permitted], therefore

we are informed [that it is]’.<sup>50</sup> Intra-uterine foetal destruction to manage obstructed labour was considered an acceptable option – ‘If a woman has difficulty in childbirth, we cut up the offspring in her womb and remove it limb by limb, because her life comes before its life. If most of it [the child] has come out, we do not touch it, because we do not push aside one life for another’.<sup>51</sup> Prolonged labour could have dire consequences leading to a maternal death as in the case of Rachel or maternal anatomical damage. The mummy of Pharaoh's Queen Henhenit dated circa 2050 BCE discovered in Thebes was found to have a vesicovaginal fistula. The mummy had an abnormally shaped pelvis with a reduced transverse diameter and a high sacral promontory. Obstructed labour probably caused her death as the baby was likely to have been delivered with force, causing the bladder tear.<sup>52</sup>

### Management of the Puerperium

The Hebrews had very strict hygienic laws that detailed the period of time the woman was considered unclean because of her lochial discharge. The duration depended on the gender of the child lasting 40 days after the birth of a son and 80 days after the birth of a daughter – ‘And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, If a woman have conceived seed, and born a man child: then she shall be unclean seven days; according to the days of the separation for her infirmity shall she be unclean. And in the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. And she shall then continue in the blood of her purifying three and thirty days; she shall touch no hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying be fulfilled. But if she bore a maid child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her separation: and she shall continue in the blood of her purifying threescore and six days’.<sup>53</sup> In addition, ‘if a woman have an issue of her blood many days out of the time of her separation, or if it run beyond the time of her separation; all the days of the issue of her uncleanness shall be as the days of her separation: she shall be unclean. Every bed whereon she lieth all the days of her issue shall be unto her as the bed of her separation: and whatsoever she sitteth upon shall be unclean, as the uncleanness of her separation. And whosoever toucheth those things shall be unclean, and shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the evening’.<sup>54</sup>

Infants were breastfed up to their third year of life, though high-ranking women and queens delegated this task to wet nurses who became an integral part of the family. The mother deity Isis herself was repeatedly depicted breastfeeding her son Horus.<sup>37</sup> The Ebers Papyrus describes the use of milk stimulant recipes including smearing the back with a mixture of ground

Nile-perch bones fried in oil. Alternatively the nursing mother ate bread made from soured durra with poppy plant.<sup>32</sup> The breastfeeding mother of course had further recourse to the deity Taueret.<sup>10</sup>

### Conclusion

The basis of the economy and thus survival in the nomadic and agricultural tribes living in the Eastern Mediterranean was highly dependent on the size of the extended family or community. Numbers ensured that the community could produce sufficient resources for its survival and ensured its safety from attack from other neighbouring communities. Children were needed to ensure the parents’ care in later life and ensure the performance of required burial rites to enable the enjoyment of everlasting life in the afterlife. It is no wonder that fertility was a highly prized “gift from the deities” who needed to be appeased and obeyed to retain their continuing benevolence.

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