

# Pain in Childbirth

Gen 3:16 in Inner-Biblical Exegesis

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## I. Introduction: Pain, an Indispensable Presupposition in Female Anthropology

Before I examine the distress of birth motif from an inner-biblical perspective, I shall speak about the study of pain in a historical and an anthropological context.

Childbirth is today still one of the mysteries of human existence because it is a complex situation where the health and wellbeing of two living beings is implicated. Since time immemorial, it has been accepted that pain is an inevitable fact of giving life. Ancient Near Eastern literature often depicts the experiences of childbirth in a metaphorical way, describing birth as a journey on the ocean or a battle in war. It is regarded as being a liminal experience.

Furthermore, birth is regarded as an act of creation. In Mesopotamian literature, mother goddesses give birth without toil: In the Sumerian myth *Enki and Ninḫursaga*, Enki impregnates the goddess Nindu/Nintur through an incestuous act, and her pregnancy lasts only nine days: “In the month of womanhood [like juniper oil,] like [juni]per oil, like a prince’s sweet butter, did Nintur, mother of the country, [like junip]er [oil,] give birth [to Ninisiga]” (I, 86–88).<sup>1</sup> The simile “like juniper oil” signifies that she gave birth virtually without pain. The myth *Enki and Ninmaḫ* emphasizes that the act of birth depends on the cooperation of both gods. The mother goddess needs the intervention of Enki before the newly created being becomes a human being without any disability.<sup>2</sup> Mother goddesses give birth themselves or perform the tasks of a midwife, combining both medical and magical procedures (cf. Nintu in *Atr. I*, 281–295, where the birth process itself

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<sup>1</sup> T. Jacobsen, *The Harps that Once ... Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 192.

<sup>2</sup> For painless birth by goddesses in Mesopotamian literature, see K. Volk, “Vom Dunkel in die Helligkeit. Schwangerschaft, Geburt und frühe Kindheit in Babylonien und Assyrien,” in *Naissance et petite enfance dans l’Antiquité. Actes du colloque de Fribourg, 28 novembre – 1<sup>er</sup> décembre 2001* (ed. V. Dasen; OBO 203; Fribourg: University Press / Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 71–92, here 79, note 46; for *Enki and Ninḫursaga*, l. 75–86; concerning the birth of the gods Nabu and Man, see A. Livingstone, *Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Works of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 118–119, 159, l. 8 with commentary).

is skipped).<sup>3</sup> The conjunction of mother goddess and midwife becomes evident in a prayer of a woman in delivery (K. 890):

“1 Why are you adrift, like a boat, in the midst of the river, 2 your thwarts in pieces, your mooring rope cut? [...] 5 The day I bore the fruit, how happy I was, 6 happy was I, happy my husband. 7 The day of my going into labor, my face became darkened, 8 the day of my giving birth, my eyes became clouded. 9 With open hands I prayed to Belet-ili: 10 ‘You are the mother of the ones who give birth, save my life!’ 11 Hearing this, Belet-ili veiled her face. 12 ‘[...] why do you keep praying to me?’ [...]”<sup>4</sup>

Obviously, human women had no chance of escaping from a painful birth. Abortions<sup>5</sup>, stillbirths,<sup>6</sup> and long and hard travail during delivery<sup>7</sup> are often mentioned in Mesopotamian incantations and medical texts, which aim to give practical support; an example of this is the Neo-Assyrian text, BAM 3 248 IV 13–15:

“If a woman gives birth and has hard labor, you crush [plants such as] Fox Wine, Dog’s Tongue, *tuchlu*, you fill a jug with brewer’s beer, and you stir these herbs in it. She shall drink it on an empty stomach and she will give birth quickly.”<sup>8</sup>

Certain plants support women experiencing difficult labor (*pušqu/pašāqu* Št), and ensure that delivery is straightforward (*ešēru* Št). A “sealed woman” (*rēmu kangatu*) is afflicted with hard labor.<sup>9</sup> Other texts compare the child to a small snake when describing an easy birth.<sup>10</sup> Stillborn children are usually considered the result of demonic attacks by *Lamaštu*, also called *Pašittu*, the “exterminator”, who

<sup>3</sup> See C. Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis: Evidence from the Ancient Near East, the Hebrew Bible, and IQH XI, 1–18* (BZAW 382; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 35–43 concerning several mother goddesses with a supporting, preparatory role and Nintu/Ninḫursag/Ninmah (and the male god Asahuli) in the role of a midwife. Male gods can send other assistants.

<sup>4</sup> Cited by Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 12–13; see A. Livingstone, *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea* (SAA 3; Helsinki: University Press, 1989), no. 15; see also R. Albertz, *Persönliche Frömmigkeit und offizielle Religion. Religionsinterner Pluralismus in Israel und Babylon* (CTM 9; Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1978), 51–54. The prayer is close to motifs of the small mythological narrative “Cow of Šin” (BAM 248, III, 10–35) transmitted by several manuscripts (Bergmann, *Childbirth*, 18–28); and E. E. Kozlova, *Maternal Grief in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: University Press, 2017), 17.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. BM 42333+ or VAT 8577+, cited by B. Böck, “Konzeption, Kontrazeption, Geburt, Frauenkrankheiten,” in *Texte zur Heilkunde* (ed. B. Janowski/D. Schwemer; TUAT N. F. 5; Gütersloher: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2010), 111.

<sup>6</sup> A. al-Zebari, TIM I,15, Vs. 7–11; cited by Volk, “Vom Dunkel” (see n. 2), 80 note 55.

<sup>7</sup> VAT 8869; W 22649; cf. Böck, “Konzeption” (see n. 5), 112–113.

<sup>8</sup> Cited by M. Stol/F. A. M. Wiggermann, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible. Its Mediterranean Setting* (CM 14; Groningen: Styx, 2000), 133; cf. 70–75 for the broader context.

<sup>9</sup> Stol/Wiggermann, *Birth* (see n. 8), 129; about a special category of incantations, see Albertz, *Persönliche Frömmigkeit* (see n. 4), 52–53; B. Foster, *Before the Muses. An Anthology of Akkadian Literature, Vol. II* (Bethesda/MD: CDL, 1993.2005), 875.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 45–46 and 26: VAT 8869-3, l. 44 “may he coe out like a snake, may he glide like a little snake.”

“snatch[es] the baby from the lap of her who bore it” (Atr. VI,3 f.).<sup>11</sup> These attacks are prevented by specific incantations.<sup>12</sup>

Generally, pain is considered as a constitutive element of human childbirth. However, the feelings of an infertile woman lacking these dangerous experiences is equally “painful.” We have a lot of incantations intended to prevent barrenness and infertility, and these combine medical knowledge with magical utterances.<sup>13</sup> The Egyptian Pap. Kahun is a prominent example of medical support and divinatory insight in such a case:

“A crushed plant is mixed with the milk of a woman who has given birth to a boy. If another woman drinks it and vomits, she will give birth. If she emits wind, she will never give birth.”<sup>14</sup>

The notion of pain in childbirth is omnipresent; however, the experience of it is rarely reported in detail: Women are described as “sobbing, crying, or screaming.”<sup>15</sup>

What is particularly remarkable is an incantation to Marduk (Ligabue 33–50) presenting an elaborate description of delivery by means of battle imagery:<sup>16</sup>

33 The woman in childbirth has pains at delivery, 34 at delivery she has pains, the babe is stuck, 35 the babe is stuck. The bolt is secure – to bring life to an end, 36 the door is made fast – against the suckling kid [...] 37 The mother is enveloped in the dust of death. 38 Like a chariot, she is enveloped in the dust of battle, 39 like a plough, she is enveloped in the dust of the woods, 40 like a warrior in the fray, she is cast down in her blood. 41 Her eyes are diminished, she cannot see; her lips are covered, [...] 46 Be present and [...], merciful Marduk. 47 Now is the battle on, I am surrounded! Reach me! 48 Bring forth that sealed-up one, a creation of the gods, 49 a creation of man. Let him come out to see the light. 50 Enenuru, an incantation for a woman in childbirth.”

This description compares the womb to a closed door through which the baby cannot pass, and the mother to a warrior who does not see anything in midst of the

<sup>11</sup> W.G. Lambert/A. R. Millard, *Atra-ḫasis. The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), 102.

<sup>12</sup> K. Volk, “Kinderkrankheiten nach der Darstellung babylonisch-assyrischer Keilschrifttexte,” *OrNS* 19 (1990): 1–30, here 3–6; cf. F.A.M. Wiggermann, “Lamaštu, daughter of Anu. A profile,” in: Stol/Wiggermann, *Birth* (see n. 8), 217–249.

<sup>13</sup> VAT 8007+ or BM 42333, cited by Böck, “Konzeption” (see n. 5), 108–109.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. P. Galpaz-Feller, “Pregnancy and Birth in the Bible and Ancient Egypt (Comparative Study),” *BN* 102 (2000): 42–53, here 45 who cites Bln 193, Rs. 1,3–4; R. Hannig/O. Witthuhn, “Gynäkologie,” in *Texte zur Heilkunde* (ed. B. Janowski/D. Schwemer; TUAT N. F. 5; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2010), 266–271, here 268–269 (KAH 26, 3,12–14; 27, 3,15–17; Bln 193, Rs. 1,3–4; 194, Rs. 1,5–6; 197, Rs. 1,11–13; 199, Rs. 2,2–5).

<sup>15</sup> Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 49 with reference to UM 29-15-367; VAT 8869-2; VAT 8869-3; Nimrud bRm 376, and Ligabue 51–62.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 49, and 31 for transcription of the text and translation (with W.G. Lambert, “A Middle Assyrian Medical Text,” *Iraq* 31 [1969]: 28–39, here 31). See K. Pfisterer Darr, *Isaiah's Vision and the Family of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 98.

battle he/she is fighting. The intention is that the newborn baby will see the light of day (cf. Ps 139:13–15). The incantation ends with a plea to Marduk for a successful delivery. L. 50 refers to the magic formula ÉN.É.NU.RU “incantation” and to its use during childbirth.

The simile comparing a mother’s delivery to the experience of a warrior in battle can be inverted and applied to other crises, i. e., a political crisis can be characterized as “like a woman giving birth.” This expression can be used as a kind of shorthand that evokes the imagery of birth and especially of pain in a completely different context: Ištar screamed like a woman giving birth, when she saw that the people she initially bore were destroyed by the flood (see Gilg. XI,III 117–127; Atr. III.iii.32; iv.10, 15–18); this simile expresses her profound anguish.<sup>17</sup> The lamentation over the destruction of Ur focuses on the dead bodies of soldiers lining the streets who are compared to women giving birth.<sup>18</sup> Here, birth is a real life experience whose imagery can be used metaphorically to describe experiences in a war context, as well as in the context of devastation.

## II. Traces of Pain in Childbirth: Narrative Evidence in the Hebrew Bible

In Gen 3:20, the first woman is called Ḥawwah, mother of all the living. In the etiological context of the narrative, she is the woman *par excellence*, characterized as one who will give birth. Hence, several barren women (עִקְרָה) or women with sealed wombs (סגור) in 1 Sam 1:5)<sup>19</sup> in Genesis – such as Sarah in Gen 11:30; 18:11; Rebecca in Gen 25:21; Rachel in Gen 30:1 – wish desperately to become mothers (see also 1 Sam 1:2, 5, regarding Hannah). These women are often contrasted with prolific mothers such as Hagar, Leah or Peninah (1 Sam 1). Potions from mandrakes (דִּדְרָאִים) see Gen 30:14<sup>20</sup>) and, especially, divine intervention (Gen 21:1; 25:21; 30:22) can eliminate

<sup>17</sup> “The goddess, screaming like a woman in childbirth [*kīma ālitti*], Bēlet ilī [= Ishtar] the sweet-voiced wailed aloud: ‘Indeed the past has truly turned to clay, because I spoke evil in the assembly of the gods. How was it I spoke evil in the assembly of the gods, (and) declared a war to destroy my people? It is I that give birth (to them)! They are my people!’” translated by A. R. George, *The Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Text, Vol. I* (Oxford: University Press, 2003), 711; for this passage, see Darr, *Isaiah’s Vision* (see n. 16), 101, and Kozlova, *Maternal Grief* (see n. 4), 19–20.

<sup>18</sup> Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 51; compare Euripides, *Medea* V, 248–251, and Homer, *Iliad* XI, 69–272.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. עָצַר to be prevented from having children (Gen 16:2; 20:18). On this see C. R. Moss/J. S. Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility. Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), 21–24.

<sup>20</sup> Or (water)melon cf. the demotic tale of Setne’s wife (M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Vol. III* [Berkeley: University Press, 1980], 138; Galpaz-Feller, “Pregnancy” [see n. 14], 45); see Stol/Wiggermann, *Birth* (see n. 8), 56–57 who underline primarily the aphrodisiac and narcotic function.

infertility. God opens (Gen 30:22) and seals the womb (רָחַם = uterus<sup>21</sup>; Gen 20:18; 1 Sam 1:5). Although offspring are perceived as a person's pride (Prov 17:6) and a reward from God (Ps 127:3), pain in childbirth is emphasized as an unavoidable aspect of female anthropology.<sup>22</sup> This fact may be the reason why pain in childbirth could be interpreted as a prominent metaphor of crisis in other biblical contexts such as prophetic texts.<sup>23</sup>

The risks of maternity and unusually difficult births are emphasized several times in narrative texts. The birth narrative of Jacob and Esau depicts complications during pregnancy (Gen 25:21–26): Rebecca, when pregnant, felt uncomfortable and turned to God who gave an oracular answer. We have in v. 21 an inquiry (שָׁדַר) – Rebecca's question is not reported – responded to by God in a short oracle in poetic form (v. 23).<sup>24</sup> Rebecca conceived only after Isaac's intercession with YHWH (v. 22):

“22 The children smashed each other inside her, so that she said: ‘If it is like this, why I am here?’ So she went to consult [Arnold: inquire of] the LORD. 23 The LORD said to her: ‘Two nations are in your womb [בְּבֶטְנֶךָ]. Two peoples will be divided [פָּרַד nif.] even as they come out of you [מִמֶּעֶד: “from your belly”]. One people will be stronger than the other. The older will be a slave of the younger.’ 24 When the time for her to give birth was up, there were indeed twins in her womb. 25 The first came out all reddish, like a hairy cloak, so they called him Esau. 26 Afterwards his brother came out with his hand clutching Esau's heel, so they called him Jacob. [...]”<sup>25</sup>

God's speech assigns the future mother an unusual experience of birth: she will not only have twins but they will have an aberrant appearance at birth (v. 23). The notice of delivery does not report further physical complications for the mother (v. 24). In fact, we perceive an irregularity concerning the status of the firstborn (primogeniture): in the birth canal, Jacob “comes out with his hand clutching Esau's heel [עָקַב], so they called him Jacob” (cf. Hos 12:3). The cause of the clash (רִצְוֹ hitpol. Hap.leg.; v. 21) is not explained by a pregnancy with twins, but is

<sup>21</sup> Generally, רָחַם signifies the female organ; in Ps 110:3 the noun is used for the beginning of the dawn by God. The plural is regularly used for God's compassion (see Exod 34:6; Ps 25:6; 40:12 for word plays with both terms). Cf. M. Grohmann, “Der Anfang des Lebens. Anthropologische Aspekte der Rede von Geburt im Alten Testament,” in *Der Mensch im Alten Testament. Neue Forschungen zur alttestamentlichen Anthropologie* (ed. B. Janowski/K. Liess; HBS 59; Freiburg: Herder, 2009), 265–399, here 372–375.

<sup>22</sup> See A. Kunz, “Die Vorstellung von Zeugung und Schwangerschaft im antiken Israel,” *ZAW* 111 (1999): 561–582, here 573–574 referring to Gen 16:4–12 and the new status of Hagar; see also Darr, *Isaiah's Vision* (see n. 16), 98–100.

<sup>23</sup> See Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 67–163; A. Kalmanofsky, “Israel's Baby. The Horror of Childbirth in the Biblical Prophets,” *BibInt* 16 (2008): 60–82.

<sup>24</sup> See E. J. Hamori, “Heavenly Bodies. Birth Omens in Israel,” *HeBAI* 2 (2008): 479–499, 485–490 who relates the oracle in v. 23 to the Babylonian Omen Series *Šumma izbu* I 83–131 concerning birth anomalies in regard to multiple births.

<sup>25</sup> Translated by G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC; Waco/TX: Word Books, 1987), 171–172; see Stol/Wiggermann, *Birth* (see n. 8), 134–135; B. T. Arnold, *Genesis* (NCBC; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 228, 232.

considered a divine omen adumbrating the relationship of the brothers and their significance as patriarchs and nation builders. Furthermore, the story explains the name of the ancestor of Israel, Jacob, by עֶקֶב “heel,” and adds an etymology of the two nations, Israel and Edom/Seir (alluded to by the folk etymology “all reddish אָדוּם, like a hairy cloak [שֵׁעָר]” in v. 25<sup>26</sup>).

Physical labor pains and an abnormal delivery are reported for Rachel in Gen 35:16–17:<sup>27</sup>

“16 They then journeyed from Bethel, and when they were still about two hours distance from Ephrata, Rachel went into labor (וַתֵּלֶד), and it became difficult (וַתִּקַּשׁ). 17 When her labor (לֵדָת) was at its hardest [relative use of infinitive hiphil הַשֵּׁק], the midwife said to her, ‘Don’t be afraid, for this is another son for you.’ And as her soul was going out of her, for she was dying, she named him Ben-Oni [son of my sorrow], but his father called him Benjamin [son of the right hand].”<sup>28</sup>

Rachel died in childbirth after she had had hard labor (וַיְהִי בְצָאֹת נִפְשָׁהּ כִּי מָתָהּ). When her labor was at its hardest (וַיְהִי בְהַקְשָׁתָהּ בְּלִדְתָהּ) – perhaps a case of breech birth – the midwife encouraged her by announcing the second son as she had wished for (Gen 30:24; cf. 2 Kgs 19:3; Hos 13:13) before the delivery was accomplished.<sup>29</sup> However, the life of the newborn requires Rachel’s death.

A similar procedure is reported in 1 Sam 4:19 f., when the daughter-in-law of the priest Eli died in delivery. After being overwhelmed by bad news concerning the death of her father-in-law and of her husband, she gives birth immediately:

“19b And she crouched down and gave birth, for her pains came suddenly over her (וַתִּכְרַע וַתֵּלֶד כִּי־נִהְפְכוּ עָלֶיהָ צָרִיחָהּ) 20 And at her time she died [the time of her death], and the women standing near her said, “Don’t be afraid, for a son you have borne.” And she did not answer and did not give her attention. 21 And she called the lad [...] [Ichabod, saying, “Glory has gone for Israel”], because of [the taking of] the ark of the deity and because of her father-in-law and her husband.”<sup>30</sup>

In this text, the description of the delivery is more explicit because the position of birth (כָּרַע “crouch”)<sup>31</sup> and the mother’s contractions (צִיר “writhing, pang”) are

<sup>26</sup> Hamori (“Heavenly Bodies” [see n. 24], 490) thinks that the name of Esau is an implicitly induced word play with *śah*<sub>2</sub> “to squeeze,” alluding to the delivery (hap.leg. Ezek 23:3, 21).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. M. Häusl, “Geburt – Kampf um Leben und gegen den Tod. Alttestamentliche Vorstellungen und Rituale für Mutter und Kind am Anfang des Lebens,” in *An den Schwellen des Lebens – Zur Geschlechterdifferenz in Ritualen des Übergangs* (ed. B. Heininger; Geschlecht – Symbol – Religion 5; Münster: LIT, 2008), 119–134, here 125–126; Stol/Wiggermann, *Birth* (see n. 8), 140.

<sup>28</sup> Translation Wenham, *Genesis* (see n. 25), 320.

<sup>29</sup> See Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 64. Häusl thinks that v. 17 reports a spell of midwives announcing divine support that is introduced by the typical formula “Don’t be afraid” (“Geburt” [see n. 27], 125).

<sup>30</sup> G. Auld, *1&2 Samuel. A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster Knox Press, 2012), 67–68; cf. Stol/Wiggermann, *Birth* (see n. 8), 140.

<sup>31</sup> Presumably we are dealing with the support of birth stones which enable a better delivery; cf. Exod 1,16: עֲלֵהָ־אֲבָנִים; for archaeological evidences see U. Winter, *Frau und Göttin* (OBO 53;

explicitly stated. As in the case of Rachel, Pinchas' wife receives encouragement from the midwife in this text.

After having completed the task of delivering and after having named the son, both mothers die. Their proper names reflect the contextual situation of a personal (Rebecca) or political (Pinchas' wife) crisis. 1 Sam 4:19 mentions the pangs of childbirth, but the verb utilized (פָּדַח *nif.* + בּוּ "to turn against sb.") emphasizes the destructive character of pain.<sup>32</sup>

A further example is Tamar, whose delivery of twins was engendered by Judah (Gen 38:27–30). The narrative refers vaguely to several obstetrical problems. After the midwife had already flagged Zerah as the first-born, the second son prevailed and came into the world first. His name Perez could allude to a "perineal laceration."<sup>33</sup> The narrative emphasizes that the second son opened the birth canal. Obviously, we are dealing with a persiflage of the birth story of Jacob and Esau in Gen 35 here, referring to a conflict of primogeniture.

Another word play related to the naming of a son after a hard delivery is apparent in 1 Chr 4:9–10: Jabez (יָבֵז) is a member of the Judah genealogy named and is burdened by the report that his mother bore him in pain (בְּעֵצָב). Hence, he asks God to keep him from pain, and God does so. It is widely debated whether his name is an omen ("he causes pain") that has to be counteracted, or if it "is expressive of Jabez' life from the moment of his birth until he prays."<sup>34</sup> Calling God by his name (cf. 2 Chr 7:13–14) seems to engender a "reversal of fortune" corresponding to a "theology of immediate retribution."<sup>35</sup>

In this case, the relationship between עֵצָב and עֲבָיָה would not allude to the birth pangs of Jabez's mother, but to the transformation of sorrow because of the confident prayer of the son. The *hapax legomenon* 'oṣāb<sub>2</sub> (cf. Isa 14:3; Ps 139:24) is close to the *hapax legomenon* 'āṣāb<sub>2</sub>, which is encountered in Prov 15:1 as "a harsh word," which stirs up anger. In Prov 10:22, 14:23, 5:10, and Ps 127:2 the noun signifies "toil" more generally, and in Isa 14:3 or Ps 139:24, it means "grief." The meaning of "birth pang" emerges from the use of the verb יָלַד "to give birth" and the traditional interpretation of Gen 3:16, where we find עֵצָב again, within a more general meaning of reproduction. However, we run the risk of circular reasoning here.

Fribourg: University Press and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 39–40 and Stol/Wiggermann, *Birth* (see n. 8), 118–122.

<sup>32</sup> Concerning the presence of midwives see Gen 35:17; 38:28; Exod 1:15.17–21; for their function Ezek 16:4; 2 Sam 4:19–20; Ruth 4:14; cf. Grohmann, "Anfang" (see n. 21), 380–381; D. Bester, *Körperbilder in den Psalmen. Studien zu Ps 22 und anverwandten Texten* (FAT 2/24; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2007), 136–140; see below concerning Ps 22:10.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Stol/Wiggermann, *Birth* (see n. 8), 135 concerning פָּרַץ "to break through (a wall)," and Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 64, concerning the different possibilities for explaining this unusual birth act medically.

<sup>34</sup> I. Provan, "Pain in Childbirth? Further Thoughts on 'an Attractive Fragment' (1 Chronicles 4:9–10)," in *Let Us Go up to Zion. Essays in Honour of H. G. M. Williamson on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (ed. id./M. J. Boda; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 285–296, here 287.

<sup>35</sup> Provan, "Pain in Childbirth?" (see n. 34), 295–296.

Gen 3:16 is one of the most debated texts that deals with the topic of pain in childbirth. The text also evokes numerous discussions about semantics. The verse includes the judgment of the woman after the so-called “fall,” which stands out because of its shortness (only one verse instead of two verses for the serpent and the man). Reasoning and curse formula do not appear:

אֶל-הָאִשָּׁה אָמַר הַרְבָּה אֲרַבָּה עֲצֹבוֹנְךָ וְהָרַגְךָ בְּעֵצֶב תֵּלְדִי בָנִים וְאֶל-אִישׁךָ תִּשְׁוֹקֶתְךָ וְהוּא יִמְשָׁל-בְּךָ

We have various possibilities for the translation:

– A very common, influential translation is: “To the woman he said: ‘I will intensify your pregnancy pains [hendiadys; verbatim: your pain *and* your pregnancies]. In pain shall you bear children. [...]” (cf. V.P. Hamilton).<sup>36</sup>

– “I will greatly multiply your suffering, especially of your childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, [...]” (cf. U. Cassuto, *Genesis*, 150);

– LXX: And to the woman he said, “Multiplying I will multiply *your pains* (λύπη Pl. means physical and psychical pain) and your groaning (στεναγμός); in pains (λύπη; Pl.) you will bear children” (cf. Brayford, *Genesis*, 41);<sup>37</sup>

– “I will make great your toil and many your pregnancies; with hardship shall you have children [...]” (cf. C. Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 102);

– I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in sorrow and hardship you shall bring forth children (cf. I. Provan, “Pain,” 294).

In the translation of Carol Meyers, the reader is surprised by the rendering “toil” for עֲצֹבוֹן, a word that bears no fundamental relation to childbirth. However, עֲצֹבוֹן is also encountered in v.17, the judgment of the man; here, it refers to the hard working necessary to cultivate the land:

אֲרֻרָה הָאֲדָמָה בְּעִבּוֹרְךָ בְּעֵצֵבוֹן תֹּאכְלֶנָּה כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ:

“cursed is the ground / because of you; / in suffering you shall eat of it / all the days of your life.” (cf. Cassuto, *Genesis*, 150)

The noun is also used in Gen 5:29, Noah’s name-etiology, which includes a folk etymology:

<sup>36</sup> V.P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1–17* (NICOT; Grand Rapids/MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 195 (cf. Arnold, *Genesis* [see n. 25], 70–71: “pangs in childbearing;” Wenham, *Genesis* (see n. 25), 81: “pains of pregnancy.”). He does not reflect upon the semantic and syntactical problems of the first half of the verse. Critically D. Dieckmann, “Viel vervielfachen werde ich deine Mühsal – und deine Schwangerschaft. Mit Mühe wirst du Kinder gebären” in “*Du hast mich aus meiner Mutter Leib gezogen.*” *Beiträge zur Geburt im Alten Testament* (ed. ead./D. Erbele-Küster; BThS 75; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2006), 11–38, here 20. See furthermore S. Brayford, *Genesis* (SEPT; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 242–245; U. Cassuto, *From Adam to Noah. A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Vol. I* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1964), 165; C. Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve. Ancient Israel Women in Context* (Oxford: University Press, 2013), 84–93.

<sup>37</sup> See J. van Ruiten, “Eve’s Pain in Childbearing? Interpretations of Gen 3:16A,” in *Biblical and Early Jewish Texts, in Eve’s Children. The Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions* (ed. G. P. Luttikhuisen; TBN 5; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 3–26, here 12–13.



זֶה יִנְחַמְנוּ מִמַּעֲשָׂנוּ וּמִעֲצָבוֹן יְדִינֵנוּ מִזֶּה אֲרָרָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת:

“This one shall bring us comfort from our labor / and from the toil of our hands, arising from the ground / which the Lord has cursed.” (cf. Cassuto, *Genesis*, 287)

On the basis of this text and Gen 3:17, it becomes evident that the term עֲצָבוֹן does not necessarily refer to physical pain as such. The translation of Umberto Cassuto suggests, when he chooses the term “toil” three times, that we have a term different from physical pain, a term which emphasizes effort and labor. The association with physical pain is erroneously introduced by the understanding of the second noun in Gen 3:16, טָעַב. In fact, it can also mean “effort, toil” (Prov 10:22; 14:23; Ps 27:2) or “grief” (Prov 15:21). Only in the spelling of Qoh 10:9 do we have the more concrete meaning of laceration<sup>38</sup>, which suggests physical pain, in fact, but the majority of biblical evidence suggests grief, heartache or psychical pain for טָעַב.<sup>39</sup> Both nouns could etymologically belong to the verbal stem  $\text{ʿ}sb_1$ , which is often used in connection with human labor<sup>40</sup> (cf. Job 10:8 pi and Jer 44:19, hif). Or they are derived from  $\text{ʿ}sb_2$  with the meaning “to grieve, to afflict” (qal.), “to grow sad” (nif.).

Therefore, T. Novick<sup>41</sup> recently proposed that טָעַב in Gen 3:16 is not at all synonymous with עֲצָבוֹן in the same verse, which is more likely associated with  $\text{ʿ}sb_1$ , “to form, shape” and the fashioning of bodies as it is used in Job 10:8, where עֲצָבּ pi. is used in parallel to עָשָׂה “to do, create.” However, the other references for עֲצָבוֹן in Gen 3:17 and 5:29 concern – based on their contexts and comparable to טָעַב in 3:16 – the aspect of toil combined with labor, linguistically derived from  $\text{ʿ}sb_2$ .<sup>42</sup> In the view of Novick, both nouns oscillate and could theoretically have both meanings. From this perspective, Gen 3:16 would mean: I will make very great “the shaping of your conception (i. e., the shaping following your conception, or, in other words, your gestational period) [...], in pain you shall bear children.”<sup>43</sup> Hence, v. 16 would allude to three stages in the formation of the child: conception (הַרְבָּה), gestation (עֲצָבוֹן), and birth (יָלַד), which are combined to represent a complex series of events.<sup>44</sup> D. Dieckmann underlines the aspect of promise that corresponds to

<sup>38</sup> He who quarries stones is hurt by them (יִטְעַב בְּהֵם). Otherwise we know טָעַב “pain, torture” (Isa 14:3).

<sup>39</sup> See J. Scharbert, *Der Schmerz im Alten Testament* (BBB 8; Bonn: Hanstein Verlag, 1955), 28; see by contrast Provan, “Pain in childbirth” (see n. 34), 290–294; Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve* (see n. 36), 90–92.

<sup>40</sup> See Scharbert, *Schmerz* (see n. 39), 27–32, who argues that pain is the physical result of labor and can be transferred to mental perception.

<sup>41</sup> See T. Novick, “Pain and Production in Eden. Some Philological Reflections on Gen III 16,” *VT* 58 (2008): 235–244, here 243; she inverts the stems (240):  $\text{ʿ}sb_2$  involves “wrapping, shaping, fashioning;”  $\text{ʿ}sb_1$  has to do with “pain, anxiety, and toil.”

<sup>42</sup> Novick (“Pain and Production” [see n. 41], 242) refers to A. B. Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel. Textkritisches, Sprachliches und Sachliches, Vol. 1* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1908), 27; critically Provan, “Pain in childbirth?” (see n. 34), 288 with note 17.

<sup>43</sup> Novick, “Pain and Production” (see n. 41), 241–242.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Hos 9:11 and Job 15:35.

the emphasis of the verb (*infinitivus absolutus* + imperfect). The whole phrase does not form a synonymous parallelism, but gives complementary information. Verse 16a $\beta$  speaks about the increase of labor, and in particular, of pregnancies, which are a positive divine engagement (fertility), whereas v. 16 $\gamma$  focuses on the labor in delivery which transforms the experience into an ambiguous one.<sup>45</sup>

I want to emphasize that the terminology used in Gen 3:16 is not representative for childbirth. Generally, birth pangs and suffering in childbirth are expressed in other biblical texts using terms such as חבל “pain,” חיל “writhing, anguish,” ציר “writhing, pangs,” צָרָה “distress,” that are often related to יולדת “woman in labor.”<sup>46</sup> For these reasons, C. Meyers proposes that the “context of this verse is peasant life in the Iron Age, when female labor and fecundity were essential for the subsistence farming practiced by most Israelites. [...] Eve initiates the productivity and procreativity of Everywoman Eve.”<sup>47</sup>

Meyers departs from the translation of the Vulgate, which understood the verse as not assigning childbirth pain to the woman: *mutiplicabo aerumnas tuas et conceptus tuos in dolore paries filios*, “I will multiply your toils and your conceptions; in grief you will bear children.”<sup>48</sup> Likewise the Targumim do not understand הַרְבָּה as childbirth, but translate with the expression “pregnancies” (TO: עדויכי). The noun עֲצָבוֹן (sg.) is rendered in v. 16 by צער Pl. (“pains”), in v. 17 by עמל “toil” (TNeof.). Otherwise TO uses צער in the woman’s address twice: “I will greatly increase your pains and your pregnancies. In pain you shall bring forth [...]” TO interprets עֲצָבוֹן / עֲצָב as synonyms for pain and therefore strengthens the association of pain and *procreation*. TNeof differentiates the words for pain and does not allude to pregnancies, but to the multiplying of *periods*. The association of pain and menstruation is common, however that of pain and pregnancy is not.<sup>49</sup> The trend of the Targumic translations is to narrow the meaning of the text down to female troubles with regard to progeny.

In my opinion, the proposition of C. Meyers that the first half of v. 16a deals with the effort required in working the soil by the woman and the second half with the efforts involved in pregnancy is only partly convincing. Several nouns derive from the verb הָרָה: the cited הַרְבָּה is a *hapax legomenon*, probably a biform<sup>50</sup> of הָרִיזֵן

<sup>45</sup> Dieckmann, “Viel vervielfachen” (see n. 36), 32–38.

<sup>46</sup> U. Cassuto supposes a word play with עץ “tree”: in respect of עץ the couple sinned, with עֲשָׂב and עֲצָבוֹן they are punished (Genesis [see n. 36], 165). Wenham suggests that the tree brought trauma (Genesis [see n. 25], 81).

<sup>47</sup> Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve* (see n. 36), 102.

<sup>48</sup> Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve* (see n. 36), 85; cf. H. Reuling, *After Eden. Church Fathers and Rabbis on Genesis 3:16–21* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 38–39 “potentially [the wording] indicates the troubles of woman’s pregnancy.”

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Reuling, *After Eden* (see n. 48), 41.

<sup>50</sup> See Novick, “Pain and Production” (see n. 41), 239 emphasizes that a sole exception may Job 3:3, where the meaning of “parturition” is suggested by the context (cf. Job 3:6–10), but the translation of “conception” also makes sense – see e.g., N.C. Habel, *The Book of Job* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 98, 107.

(cf. Hos 9:11; Ruth 4:13), used in combination with the noun הָרָה. Both terms are linked with conception (Gen 16:4) or pregnancy (16:4, too).<sup>51</sup> I agree with her that we have to understand that Gen 3:16 refers to “conception” but not to “delivery”. However, I am not sure that we should dissociate מַעֲבֹר from the birth-context in favor of economical toil. It seems, however, evident to me that we have no description of birth pangs in the first utterance of the verse, but an allusion to the required efforts and the risks that characterize pregnancy and conception.<sup>52</sup>

“The irony of this punishment, what makes it so effective, is that child-bearing is nonetheless necessary. Just as the man must farm the cursed earth to eat, the woman must have children. Her desire for children will not only be social or economic; it will be biological as well (her ‘desire’ for her husband).”<sup>53</sup>

Woman’s destiny is depicted in this context as a gendered “psychological pain”. As we have seen, partnership and children are emphasized in biblical narratives about women. A woman without a man and children is – from a sociological perspective – incomplete. Nevertheless, her intended position as wife and mother is experienced in an ambivalent way because of her dependent status regarding her husband (v. 16b) *and* because of the crucial experience of life-giving (v. 16a). Conception is not painful, but its consequences are. In my opinion, the social reality that men and women worked in the fields of ancient Israel has no impact in this context. In fact, the divine verdict focuses on three important aspects of human reality: hostility between animals and human beings, fertility and its downside for women, and agricultural labor for men. We have no description of physical pain in childbirth in this narrative, but an etiology of human standard experiences (“*conditio humana*”).

### III. Pain in Childbirth as a Metaphor of Crisis and Restoration in Prophetic Literature

At first glance, birth and political crisis seem to be unrelated concepts. However, Claudia Bergmann states correctly that

“When birth is used as a metaphor to describe crisis, the concept of birth is re-described. Applying to birth the concept of crisis and not the concept of new beginnings, for example, puts a certain twist on birth because it highlights the possibility of tragedy and death and focuses on the threshold between life and death rather than on joyful expectation.”<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Novick, “Pain and Production” (see n. 41), 236–237.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Stol/Wiggermann, *Birth* (see n. 8), 137–148 with note 167.

<sup>53</sup> S. Shectman, *Women in the Pentateuch. A Feminist and Source Critical Analysis* (HBM 23; Sheffield: University Press, 2009), 95, who agrees with the interpretation of Meyers, *Redecovering Eve* (see n. 36), 91.

<sup>54</sup> Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 6.

Biblical texts often use the birth pang motif in a metaphorical way. The motif associates the potential for distress and death with the potential for a (new) beginning after the crisis has passed. We saw that narrative texts underscore the tragic dimension of the birth motif. Even the etiologically formed judgment of Gen 3:16 does not give a “realistic” description of birth after the so-called “fall,” but becomes a metaphorical expression of *conditio humana* and of ambivalent experiences from a female perspective. In the cultural context of the Ancient Near East, the birth metaphor is a basic conceptual metaphor<sup>55</sup>, similar to “life is a journey” or “birth is an arrival” in modern linguistics. Formally, birth is a theme either in hymns and (creation) myths describing the activities of goddesses and gods in human life or in magico-medical texts, i. e., prayers and incantations assisting in pregnancy and birth. Unfortunately the latter genre is absent from the biblical corpus (except for Gen 23:23).<sup>56</sup> The incantations are particularly rich in image metaphors and similes such as “birth as a boat journey” or “delivery as the passage through a [closed] door,” in contrast to delivery associated with “oil,” “butter” or a “snake” to describe the favored process of childbirth.<sup>57</sup>

In biblical texts, the birth metaphor for crisis is extremely common and reflects the widespread fact of danger and potential death in childbirth. Surprisingly, it focuses mostly on the destiny of the mother and not on that of the child.<sup>58</sup> It is not the entire process of birth that becomes a metaphor, but the moment of labor and delivery, in which mother and child are implicated in an existential way.<sup>59</sup>

Generally, we will see that in the prophetic context, the semantic of pain in childbirth is manifest in a more concrete, but less individual, way.<sup>60</sup> Prophetic passages focus on the context of crisis, blending the physical and cultural roots of the perception of pain. The stems of ציר “physical effects of mental distress,”<sup>61</sup> חבלpiel “to bind; to be in labor, to give birth”<sup>62</sup> or חִבֵּל<sub>2</sub> “contraction,”<sup>63</sup> and חיל “writhe, to be in labor”<sup>64</sup> allude to a woman in labor. Furthermore, the metaphorical use

<sup>55</sup> Cf. G. Lakoff/M. Turner, *More than Cool Reason. A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: University Press, 1989), 89: “birth is arrival” as a basic conceptual metaphor (+ boat-motif as image metaphor).

<sup>56</sup> See Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 79–59, further adding some rare legal texts, and Hamori, “Heavenly Bodies” (see n. 24), 486–488, concerning the omen that was cast on Rebecca (see supra with n. 25).

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 19–20, 28–29 (A Cow of Sin; Ligabue 51–62 concerning the door/knot motif; cf. AUAM 73.3094), 31–32 (Ligabue 33–50 concerning the door- and war-motif), 23–24 (VAT 8869; concerning the boat-arrival-motif). All the images describe the irreversibility of the travail of the woman.

<sup>58</sup> Häusl, “Geburt” (see n. 27), 128 cites as exceptions Hos 13:13 and Isa 37:3; see infra p. 42.

<sup>59</sup> Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 8.

<sup>60</sup> See already Scharbert, *Schmerz* (see n. 39), 17–27.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. 1Sam 4:19; Isa 13:8; 21:3; Dan 10:16.

<sup>62</sup> Ps 7:15; Job 39:3; Isa 29:17; 66:7.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. in similes + חִלְדָּה: Isa 13:8; 26:17; Jer 13:21; 22:23; 49:24; Hos 13:3.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. in similes + חִלְדָּה: Isa 26:17 f.; Jer 6:24; 22:23; 50:43; Mic 4:9–10; Ps 48:7; Sir 48:19.

is encountered either in historical narratives or in poetic lamentations, which describe pain as the violence of war, judgment and punishment, theophany, or other situations characterized by conflict (see below). In this context, pain means first and foremost grief. Conspicuously, we clearly have evidence for the use of the terms concerning birth to a much lesser extent in the narratives about birth than in prophetic texts.<sup>65</sup>

Joseph Scharbert has listed Gen 3:16, 1 Sam 4:19, and 1 Chr 4:9 as three examples of descriptions of concrete birth pangs in the Hebrew Bible<sup>66</sup>, but we saw that the case is ambiguous for Gen 3:16 and 1 Chr 4:9, and not very explicit in 1 Sam 4:19. In prophetic literature, the simile “like a woman in labor” (יִלְדָה כַּאֲשֶׁר) often depicts the anguish and dismay of people in war. The most explicit descriptions of birth pangs are encountered in prophetic speech, which uses the birth motif in a metaphorical way to express the experience of shock and to describe “the psychological anguish and physiological reactions of persons facing impending doom, or anticipating the destruction of others.”<sup>67</sup> I now want to focus on several texts from the book of Isaiah, where the birth motif carries a positive resonance due to its relationship to salvation and restoration.

### 1. Pain in Childbirth as a Metaphor of Crisis

Bergmann underlines three arguments as to why the birth motif is a perfect metaphor for crisis according to ancient thinking:

“(a) the birth process is unstoppable once it is underway, (b) there is no other option for the woman undergoing childbirth than to bear the child, and (c) childbirth is a situation where mother and child can be at a crossroads between life and death, which is especially but not exclusively true for ancient societies.”<sup>68</sup>

Hence, the birth motif focuses on absolute vulnerability and irreversibility.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, the simile “like a woman giving birth” becomes commonplace in prophetic texts.<sup>70</sup> However, Maria Häusl has pointed out that the evidence varies with respect

<sup>65</sup> Exceptions: צִיָּרִים in 1 Sam 4:19; חֵיל and חֲבָלִים in Job 39:1, 3.

<sup>66</sup> Scharbert, Schmerz (see n. 39), 78.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Darr, *Isaiah's Vision* (see n. 16), 102; see M. Häusl, *Bilder der Not. Weiblichkeits- und Geschlechtermetaphorik im Buch Jeremia* (HBS 37; Freiburg: Herder, 2003), 104–109.

<sup>68</sup> Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 68.

<sup>69</sup> Female metaphors are common in the book of Isaiah: the pride and haughtiness of the daughters of Zion results in disgrace from God (Isa 2:11–17, 3:16–4:1); see Darr, *Isaiah's Vision* (see n. 16), 89–90.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. e. g., Ezek 21:11–12 etc. (description of writhing); see D. R. Hillers, “A convention in Hebrew Literature. The Reaction to Bad News,” *ZAW* 77 (1965): 86–90; Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 68–71 (history of scholarship), 71–81 (Isa 42:14 etc.), and above the references in notes 63 and 64. Kalmanofsky assigns the childbirth metaphor to a category “horror text,” which includes a certain vocabulary and set of images (“Israel’s Baby,” 60–82).

to focus.<sup>71</sup> In the book of Isaiah, the motif often takes on a cosmic and universal dimension, as in the first of the oracles against the nations (Isa 13:1–22), in which v. 5–8 contain typical birth terminology.<sup>72</sup>

“5 Coming from a distant land, from the end of the heavens, Yahweh and instruments of his indignation to destroy (לְחַבֵּל; *hbl*<sub>2</sub>) the whole land. 6 Lament for the day of Yahweh is near, / it approaches like destruction from Shaddai! 7 All hands will then fall limp, / all hearts dissolve in fear, 8 [they will be terrified בַּהֵל *nif.*] / Convulsions and pains (צִירִים וְהַבְלִים; *hbl*<sub>3</sub>) will seize them, / they will writhe (חָיל) <sup>73</sup> like a woman in labor (וְיִלְדָה+כּ), / they will look aghast at each other, / their faces aflame.”<sup>74</sup>

Isaiah 13 is part of a series of ten oracles (13:1–23:18) and refers, foremost, to Babylon (13:1, 19), but is finally transformed into a cosmic and universal judgment (especially v. 9–13). It is therefore likely that the cited verses must be dated to the post-exilic period.<sup>75</sup> The oracle compares the physiological and psychological anguish experienced during the divine invasion to the hard labor involved in childbirth.<sup>76</sup> Within a series of metaphors, which describe the divine “war machine,”<sup>77</sup> the double use of the verb חָבַל (v. 5, 7) blends destruction imagery with that of a woman in travail to describe a catastrophe of cosmic dimensions that is depicted with the motif of a flood in v. 9 as well as earthquakes and other cosmic disasters in v. 13. The universal perspective of judgment is evident because God is referred to as a warrior by the epithet of YHWH Sebaoth (v. 4), who initiates the day of YHWH (v. 6; see 2:6–22; Joel 1:15; 2:6 against Jerusalem). The day is described as a reversal of creation and humanity. Joseph Blenkinsopp emphasizes that the

<sup>71</sup> See Häusl, *Bilder der Not* (see n. 67), 101 listing Isa 26:17–18, 37:3, 42:14, and 66:7–9 (cf. Hos 13:13; Mic 5:2).

<sup>72</sup> However, several pieces of evidence in other books describe local crises – Bergmann lists, in addition to Isa 37:7/2 Kgs 19:3, several texts from the book of Jeremiah (13:21–23 48:40 f.; 49:20–22), Hos 13:12–13, and Mic 4:9–10 as well as some related texts (*Childbirth* [see n. 3], 82–114).

<sup>73</sup> Jer 30:6; 6:24; 48:41; 49:22; Isa 21: 3–4; 26:17–18.

<sup>74</sup> J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39* (AB 19/1; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 24; see also Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 118–121; Darr, *Isaiah’s Vision* (see n. 16), 102–103. She emphasizes that it is possible to see here either the Judeans’ panic at the Babylonian attack or the Babylonians’ panic at the Persian.

<sup>75</sup> For a dating in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., see U. Sals, *Die Biographie der “Hure Babylon.” Studien zur Intertextualität der Babylon-Texte in der Bibel* (FAT 2/6; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 227 with reference to O. H. Steck, *Der Abschluss der Prophetie im Alten Testament. Ein Versuch zur Frage der Vorgeschichte des Kanons* (BThS 17; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1991), 83 concerning Diodorus’ peace treaty of 311 B.C.E. In contrast, see U. Berges/W. Beuken (*Das Buch Jesaja. Eine Einführung* [utb 4647; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016], 150–155, 363) who propose a date just after 484 B.C.E., on the basis of the destruction of Babylon by Xerxes I., while K. Schmid (*Jesaja 1–23* [ZBK; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2011], 130–131) dates the text before 539 B.C.E.

<sup>76</sup> Concerning the convention of comparing war with labor, see Häusl, *Bilder der Not* (see n. 67), 86–112 (with bibliography).

<sup>77</sup> Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 119.

“allusion to limp hands, fearful hearts, convulsions like a woman in labor pains (cf. 26:17–18; Jer 50:43), faces flushed with excitement and terror (Ezek 21:7 adds loss of sphincter control), corresponds to a conventional and obviously hyperbolic way of describing a reaction to receiving really bad news.”<sup>78</sup>

The day of YHWH is compared to the “life-threatening crisis of giving birth.”<sup>79</sup>

In a second oracle within the cycle of oracles against the nations, Isa 21:3–4, which is also dated to post-exilic times<sup>80</sup>, the motif of birth pain is related to the prophet’s vision of the geo-political situation of the occupation of Babylon by the Persian kings.<sup>81</sup>

3 At this my loins are filled with anguish (חֲלָהָהּ hap. leg.), / pangs (צִירִים) have seized me / like the pangs of woman in labor (בְּצִירֵי יוֹלֵדָה). / I am so bent double (עוֹה) I cannot hear; / I am so dumbfounded (בְּהֵל; cf. 13:8) I cannot see. 4 My mind reels. / Shuddering, I am filled with dread; / the cool of the evening I longed for / has been turned for me into trembling.<sup>82</sup>

While the quoted verses of Isaiah 13 reflect the universalistic view of the divine judgment (“day of YHWH”), Isaiah 21 takes the perspective of the prophet and his personal crisis because of a prophetic mission and its futility. The birth-pang-metaphors in the cited texts are semantically different, but the hapax legomenon in v. 3 חֲלָהָהּ (trembling loins, which suggest anguish; cf. Nah 2:11) hints at חֵיל qal. (“writhe”; cf. Isa 13:4).<sup>83</sup> The plural noun צִירִים is used otherwise for hard labor pains (cf. 1 Sam 4:9) and its allusion to birth is made clear in the immediate context by the simile בְּיוֹלֵדָה “like the woman in labor,” the standard expression for childbirth (v. 8).<sup>84</sup> The next expression remains unclear, but בְּהֵל nif. is encountered in 13:8, too. Perhaps we are dealing with a metaphorical connection between a disturbed mental state (עוֹה) and its physical manifestation.<sup>85</sup> On the one hand, the diminished ability to see is mentioned also in Ligabue 41 as being a result of the birth process. On the other, it could be a reaction of fear as a consequence of a warning of the approaching catastrophe (cf. v. 2: “a stern vision is told me [...])). Source and target are intermingled. The verb בִּעַת (nif. or pi.) “to be filled with

<sup>78</sup> Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39* (see n. 74), 279 with reference to Hillers. For limp hands in a birth context, see Jer 6:24 and 50:43 for a slightly variant expression; for the melting heart, see Ps 22:5 (cf. Bergmann, *Childbirth* [see n. 3], 120).

<sup>79</sup> Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 118.

<sup>80</sup> Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39* (see n. 74), 326 describes a palimpsest that reflects several historical falls of Babylon, but primarily the occupation by Cyrus II. before 539 B.C.E.; cf. Schmid, *Jesaja 1–23* (see n. 75), 152–153.

<sup>81</sup> See Sals, *Biographie* (see n. 75), 281–292; Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 142–146.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39* (see n. 74), 323.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Scharbert, *Schmerz* (see n. 39), 25 with reference to Isa 21:3; Ezek 30:4.9; Nah 2:11 and Esth 4:4; Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 143; Darr, *Isaiah’s Vision* (see n. 16), 102–104.

<sup>84</sup> See Mic 4:10; Ps 48:7; Sir 48:19 and also the parallelism of יָלַד and חֵיל in Isa 23:4; 26:18; 45:10; 54:1; 66:7 (without ke); see Häusel, *Bilder der Not* (see n. 67), 97–101.

<sup>85</sup> See R. Knierim, *Die Hauptbegriffe für Sünde im Alten Testament* (Gütersloh: G. Mohn, 1965), 237 quoted by Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 144; cf. W.A.M. Beuken, *Jesaja 13–27* (HThK; Freiburg: Herder, 2007), 225.

dread, appall” denotes a terrible fear caused by demonic or divine powers.<sup>86</sup> The noun הַרְדָּה “horror” is used twice with the simile “like a woman in labor” (Isa 21:4; Jer 30:5; cf. Dan 10:11). Verse 4 does not have typical birth vocabulary, but its content is similar to expressions that are used in other contexts making use of the birth motif. In this text, the prophet describes his own (physical) reactions relating to the oracle against Media and Elam (addressees in v. 2).

In the midst of the so-called apocalypse of Isaiah (Isaiah 24–27)<sup>87</sup>, a text from Hellenistic times, we have a third example of crisis expressed through a birth metaphor. Isa 26:16–18 is part of a communal lament directed to God (26:7–19):

“16 Yahweh, in distress we sought you; your chastening has been a burden for us. 17 *As a* [כְּמוֹ] pregnant woman, when her time (לְלִדָּתָהּ = birth, delivery) is at hand, / writhes (חִיל) and cries out (זַעַק) in pain (contraction; חֲבָלָה), / so Yahweh, *were we* in your presence; 18 we were with child, we were in labor, / *but* [literally כְּמוֹ: *as we*] brought forth nothing but wind; / we do nothing to redeem the earth, / no one is born to people of the world (תִּבְלֵ).”<sup>88</sup>

The lament reflects past failures and present problems of God’s people with a dominant note of regret. The cited passage is littered with standard terms of pregnancy and birth, which dominate either the target (v. 18; tenor) or the source (v. 17; vehicle): The noun צָר in v. 16 (see צָרָה in Jer 6:24; 49:24; 50:43) is the first term alluding to birth. Verbs linked to the same theme follow such as הָרָה “to be pregnant” (17), יָלַד “to bear, to be in labor” (18), the participle qal. לֹדֶת + l (for לִדָּה “birth;” 17–18), as well as חִיל qal. “writhe” (17–18) and חֲבָלָה “contraction” (17). The verb זַעַק is less specific, but fits perfectly into this context. Verse 17–18 display syntactic chiasm in an A-B-A pattern expressed by the conjunctions כְּמוֹ [...], כִּי [...], כְּמוֹ.<sup>89</sup> The metaphoric speech focuses on the moment of delivery and underlines the incapacity of the “we-speaker” to bring salvation (שְׁוִיעָתָהּ; v. 18). The context suggests a phantom pregnancy (cf. Isa 37:3/2 Kgs 19:3; Jer 30:6): Finally, the labor produces only wind (רוּחַ instead of חֲבָלָה “contraction”), and no one is born to inhabit the world (v. 18b). Childbirth is portrayed here in terms of feeling vulnerable, weak, and helpless and sometimes does not take place (v. 18e: “no one is born”).<sup>90</sup> Therefore, the image of the woman in labor captures the feelings associated with military aggression and war. The difference is that the birth of a child leads to joy, whereas war does not. Notably the painful sensation of labor becomes a metaphor for violence and political destruction. An individual perception turns into a collective sensation.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Ps 18:5; 2 Sam 22:5; Job 15:24, including the “birth” as crisis metaphor; Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 145 lists 1 Sam 16:14–15 (pi.); 1 Chr 21:30, Dan 8:17 (nif.), and eight references in the book of Job, such as Job 9:34; 13:21; 18:11; 33:7 + פְּלִצוֹת “horror.”

<sup>87</sup> See critically Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 121–123, referring to Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39* (see n. 74), 346.

<sup>88</sup> Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39* (see n. 74), 366.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 123.

<sup>90</sup> See Häusl, *Bilder der Not* (see n. 67), 101–102.



## 2. Pain and Violence in Childbirth as a Metaphor of Restoration

Pain metaphors regarding God become a positive way of speaking about divine initiative. It is not unusual that God is described as a writhing woman who “was in labor with the earth and the world,” as in Ps 90:2. In Ps 22:10, God is presented as a mother or midwife who extracted the I-speaker from the womb (פִּי־אֶתָּה גָּחִי מִבֶּטֶן).<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, God is presented as a midwife (מִי־לֶדֶת) who cut the cord (Ps 71:5–6).<sup>92</sup>

Isa 42:13–14 is the only biblical text in which the simile “like a woman giving birth” is applied to God.<sup>93</sup> Instead of functioning as a way of speaking of human panic, the simile of the travailing woman announces salvation. The verses are included in a psalm-like context (42:10–17)<sup>94</sup> which alludes to universal events that appear to be reversals of the created order (v. 16). The psalm is introduced by the invocation in v. 10: “Sing a new song to Yahweh.”

13 Yahweh goes forth as a hero, / as a warrior he fires up his fury; / raising the battle cry, he shouts aloud; / he prevails over his enemies.

14 ‘Too long have I held my peace, / kept silent and held myself back; / but now I cry out like a woman giving birth, / breathlessly panting.’<sup>95</sup>

After a period of inactivity (v. 14), represented in terms of gestation<sup>96</sup>, YHWH is depicted as a woman starting the process of birth (“like a woman giving birth”; v. 14), going forth, and announcing salvation by turning the darkness to light (v. 16). When YHWH becomes the subject of childbirth, we are confronted with a radical transformation of the simile. The three *hapax legomena* אֶפְעָה “outcry, groaning,” נָשַׁם “to gasp for air/breath”, and שָׂאף “to pant” form an alliteration, perhaps even an onomatopoeic expression of the birth act.<sup>97</sup> The metaphor emphasizes that

<sup>91</sup> The verb גָּח is often in parallelism with רָחַם (cf. Job 38:8 regarding the sea; Ps 110:3 / גִּחַ גָּחַ). Bester (*Körperbilder* [see note 32], 134) emphasizes that, referring to לֶדֶת pi. fem., God is cast here as a midwife, not a womb/mother (136); cf. Ps 71:5–9 and note 92.

<sup>92</sup> Concerning the qal-participle גָּחַ “to cut; to give birth” (hap. leg.), see Bester (*Körperbilder* [see note 32], 141–144), and Grohmann (“Anfang” [see n. 21], 380–382), who refer to the divine midwife in Isa 66:9; Mic 4:10.

<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, see references to the thematic field of maternal compassion in Isa 46:3–4 relating to God, who sustained Israel/Jacob since he left the womb, and in Isa 49:14–15, relating to God who cannot forget Zion as a woman cannot forget her baby; see Darr, *Isaiah’s Vision* (see n. 16), 104–105, 110; ead., “Like Warrior, like Woman. Destruction and Deliverance in Isaiah 42:10–17,” *CBQ* 49 (1987): 560–571, and C. Maier, *Daughter Zion, Mother Zion. Gender, Space, and the Sacred in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 164–167 regarding Isa 49:14–21, a prophecy concerning the transformation of the ruined city into a rebuilt city.

<sup>94</sup> J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55* (AB 19/2; New York: Doubleday, 2002), 214; see Darr, *Isaiah’s Vision* (see n. 16), 104–105; Berges, *Jesaja 40–48* (HThK; Freiburg: Herder, 2008), 252–253, who argues for the beginning of a new unit in Isa 42:13–43:13.

<sup>95</sup> Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55* (see n. 94), 213.

<sup>96</sup> The expression אָפַק hitpaal “to hold himself back” is encountered a second time in Isa 63:15 in the context of a collective lament directed at God that invites God to change his behavior toward his people.

<sup>97</sup> See Darr, “Like Warrior, like Woman” (see n. 93), 567–568.

God is able to remain inactive in view of his people, but after a certain delay, the crisis has to be “resolved by the labor-like crying and breathing that occurs when intentional divine inactivity finally turns into divine action. If seen within the context of the birth metaphor, YHWH first tries to hold back labor and giving birth. But as any woman who has given birth knows, labor cannot be stopped once it has begun. [...] Now labor can progress and newness, a new beginning, a radically different world, can begin.”<sup>98</sup>

In contrast, we could interpret the image differently: since God intentionally decided to stop his activities in sustaining Israel, he could thus intentionally decide to become active again in its favor. His action is not bound to a natural process like delivery, but results from his intentional decision.<sup>99</sup> Birth is used as a simile for God’s powerful action and the restoration project among his people. He ceases his absence in the past. Childbirth imagery depicts a creative act of God (cf. Jer 1:5; Job 10:8 f.; Ps 139:13–16). Describing God’s behavior and its enormous effects, the parallelism of warrior and birth motifs creates hope for Israel’s future.

In Trito-Isaiah, the birth metaphor is also present in different contexts. The imagery fits perfectly with the presentation of Jerusalem/Zion as a space and as a woman who often represents the inhabitants of this space. Hence, the city is depicted as symbol of faith that unites all those who trust in YHWH. Zion emerges as a religious symbol of salvation. The most striking and very positive, yet miraculous, description of Zion concludes the book in Isa 66:7–9, 12–13:

“7 Before she went into labor (חיל), she gave birth (ילד), / before the birth pangs (חבל) came on her, she bore (מלט hif. hap. leg. from מלט “escape”) a son.

8 Who ever heard the like? / Who ever witnessed such events? / Can a land come to birth (חיל hof.) in a single day? / Can a nation be born all at once? / Yet, as soon as Zion was in labor, / she gave birth (ילד) to her children!

9 Shall I open the womb (שבר hif. hap. leg. from שבר break [out]; cf. Isa 37:3b) and not bring to birth? (ילד hif.) [YHVH says] Shall I, who bring to birth (ילד hif.), close up the womb (עצר)? [says your God]

10 Rejoice with Jerusalem, take delight in her! Be exceedingly joyful with her, all you who now mourn over her;

11 that you may nurse (ינק qal) and be satisfied at her consoling breast (שד; here שד); that you may drink deeply with delight at her splendid (קבוד) bosom (זי “nipple;” hap. leg.).

12 For this is what YHVH says: I will extend prosperity to her like a river, the wealth (קבוד) of nations like a torrent in full spate. Your infants will be carried on the hip, dandled on the knees.

13 As a mother comforts her son, so will I comfort you; you will find comfort in Jerusalem.

14 You will witness it, your hearts will rejoice, your bones will flourish like grass. YHVH’s power will be known among his servants and his indignation (זעם) among his enemies.”<sup>100</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Cf. Bergmann, *Childbirth* (see n. 3), 141–142.

<sup>99</sup> See Berges, *Jesaja 40–48* (see n. 94), 256–257.

<sup>100</sup> J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56–66* (AB 19/3; New York: Doubleday, 2003), 302.

For Blenkinsopp, Isa 66:7–14 form a conclusion that identifies the “servants” as the beneficiaries of the promises about Jerusalem (cf. Isa 54:1–17b).<sup>101</sup> Verse 12 identifies the consolation of the arriving “new people” in Jerusalem – who are not equal to the returnees from exile – with a loved and nourished child. God’s activity is compared to the comforting attitude of a mother (v. 13). The womb of the mother is described as the principal place of God’s activity (cf. Jer 1:5 and Ps 139:13) and receives the guarantee of divine care and protection (cf. Ps 22:10).<sup>102</sup> We have no simile in this text. Zion is designated as a mother whose children return from far away (Isa 60:4, 9), a strong metaphor for the restoration of Jerusalem as a direct divine activity. They are supported by the nations (Isa 49:22), who carry them on the hip and dandle them on the knees (v. 12). While v. 7 emphasizes that Zion gave birth to Jerusalem and its inhabitants before she was in labor (חיל) and felt birth pangs (חבל), v. 9 expresses in synonymous parallelism how implausible it would be if God did not support the delivery of the child. In opposition to people’s labor that “brought forth nothing but wind” (Isa 26:18) or Hezekiah’s dread that the people are “like women who do not have the strength to bring forth their children as they are about to be born” (Isa 37:3b), God has personified Zion to bear her children (Isa 66:7).<sup>103</sup> Therefore, birth without pain is limited only to those who respect God.<sup>104</sup> The quoted passage takes on a different meaning in Isa 54:1–8,<sup>105</sup> where

<sup>101</sup> Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56–66* (see n. 100), 304–305 emphasizes the double issue of servants and enemies (v. 14); cf. C. Maier, “Zion’s Body as a Site of God’s Motherhood in Isaiah 66: 7–14,” in *Daughter Zion. Her Portrait, her Response* (ed. M. J. Boda/C. J. Dempsey/L. S. Flesher; Atlanta: SBL, 2012), 225–242, here 228–229; Maier, *Daughter Zion* (see n. 93), 171–180. Darr pleads that Zion is a barren, “for a brief moment” abandoned, and lastly reconciled woman in Isa 54:1–17 (*Isaiah’s Vision* [see n. 16], 177–182). J. Gärtner, *Jesaja 66 und Sacharja 14 als Summe der Prophetie. Eine traditions- und redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zum Abschluss des Jesaja- und des Zwölfprophetenbuchs* (WMANT 114; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2006), 25–32, examines Isa 66:5–14 and the limited addressees of the promise: the key words כבוד (v. 5, 11, 12), ראה (v. 5, 8, 14), and שמח (v. 5, 10) reveal that the ironic petition of the opponents “‘May YHVH reveal his glory, that we may witness your joy!’ But it is they who will be put to shame” will not be realized. At the end, the servants’ part is joy, the opponents’ indignation.

<sup>102</sup> Bester, *Körperbilder* (n. 32), 145–150 compares the motherly consolation of Isa 66:12b–13 with the womb being the place of confidence: the baby’s “break out of the womb” (גיו/גוח); see Job 38:8; supra note 91) in Ps 22:10 is set in parallelism with its first position על־שָׁדַי “upon the breasts” identifying maternity with confidence in God (cf. Ps 22:11a).

<sup>103</sup> Possibly the childbirth imagery of Isa 66:1–16 is composed with Isa 37:3b and 26:18 in mind; see Darr, *Isaiah’s Vision* (see n. 16), 206–210, here 223. Only in 66:9 and 37:3 is the verb שָׁבַר is encountered. The allusions to Gen 3:16 and 4:1 seem to be exaggerated to me.

<sup>104</sup> The texts of Trito-Isaiah do not proclaim the universal reconciliation, but advocate a concept of an “elected people,” the “children of Zion,” or the “servants of YHWH”. They are distinct from the opponents within Israel who disagree with the reign of YHWH and are therefore destined to judgment and perdition (cf. Is 66:15–17, 24); cf. Gärtner, *Jesaja 66* (see n. 101), 31–38.

<sup>105</sup> Blenkinsopp argues that Isa 66:7–14 forms the epilogue to Isa 56–66 just as Isa 54:1–17 serves in this for former Isa 40–54 (*Isaiah 56–66* [see n. 100], 293; see Maier, *Daughter Zion* [see n. 93], 201–202.).

Cf. van Ruiten, “Eve’s Pain” (see n. 37), 9–11 concerning Isa 65:23 and Gen 3:16. The snake of Gen 3:14b is quoted in 65:25.

Zion is presented as YHWH's abandoned wife (or daughter; see Isa 52:2; 62:11), "a barren woman, who has born no child and never been in labor" (v.1), whom YHWH has summoned back, and pitied after having hidden his face for a while (v. 6, 8). The text continues "that Noah's floodwater would never again pour over the earth, so now I swear an oath no longer to be angry with you or rebuke you" (cf. Gen 8:21). This thematic context corresponds to another salvation oracle in Isa 65:17–25, referring to the new heaven and the new earth: here it is emphasized that they [the people of Jerusalem] "will not toil [עָבַד] in vain or bear children destined to disaster; they will be a race blessed by YHWH, they and their offspring [בְּרִיָּוָה] with them"<sup>106</sup> (v. 23). These oracles concluding the Isaiah scroll may be understood as an inversion of the message of Gen 3:16aβ, emphasizing that reproduction and childbirth are *unrelated* to effort and pain.<sup>107</sup> YHWH is presented as the perfect midwife who eliminates the dolorous birth process. When he himself becomes the comforting mother<sup>108</sup> of the elected people of Jerusalem in Isa 66:13, Zion and YHWH are not only paralleled, but entangled.<sup>109</sup>

Christl Maier examines the blending process in Isaiah 66 and states that the "relationship between God and Zion is not explicitly stated, yet verse 9 characterizes the Deity as master of the womb in the role of a midwife who assists in a smooth birth. Interestingly, God is not named as either the father of the infants or the husband of female Zion."<sup>110</sup> Hence, Zion is both spatial (a city) *and* an individual figure; Zion does not refer only to a restored city (lived space), but also to the perceived space of "an ideal space for humans to live and to prosper" and the conceived space "reminding the audience of their own experience with motherhood [...] and parental love."<sup>111</sup> Isa 66:11–12 suggests that the promise of Zion sucking the milk of nations and foreign kings nursing Jerusalem (Isa 60:16; see 49:20–23) is accomplished here. Finally, Zion's role changes from addressee to mediator of the promise. The expression *be-Jerusalem* in v. 13 can be read as a statement of locus and not translated by "to be comforted *in* Jerusalem," but instrumentally in the sense of "to be comforted *by*

<sup>106</sup> Translation of Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56–66* (see n. 100), 284.

<sup>107</sup> Cf. van Ruiten, "Eve's Pain" (see n. 37), 9–11 concerning Isa 65:23 and Gen 3:16. The snake of Gen 3:14b is quoted in 65:25.

<sup>108</sup> God's motherhood is stated in Isa 42:14, 45:10, and 49:15 (Maier, *Daughter Zion* [see n. 93], 203), see also Num 11:12; Deut 32:18 (Winter, *Frau* [see n. 31], 535–538).

<sup>109</sup> I. Fischer, "Das Buch Jesaja," in *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung* (ed. L. Schottruff/M.-T. Wacker; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998), 249, 256; cf. Gärtner, *Jesaja 66* (see n. 101), 28; Maier, *Daughter Zion* (see n. 93), 203–205.

<sup>110</sup> Maier, *Daughter Zion* (see n. 93), 232.

<sup>111</sup> Cf. Maier, *Daughter Zion* (see n. 93), 204, and 10–17, 227 about "the geographical dimension of space – with its cultural evaluation or ideology and with the human experience of space" (referring to Henri Lefebvre); see also A. Spans, *Die Stadtfrau Zion im Zentrum der Welt. Exegese und Theologie von Jes 60–62* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 367–372, concerning the spatial (YHWH's presence) and social (God's salvation) aspect of the figure; her study is limited to Isa 60–62.

through Jerusalem.” Hence Zion is considered as mediator of divine blessing and salvation<sup>112</sup> for all those who follow God and are part of the servants of God and of the new creation of Zion/Jerusalem.<sup>113</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

In contrast to Mesopotamian incantations such as Ligabue 33–50, concrete descriptions of the problems of childbirth are lacking in biblical texts. Narrative texts have at most etiological purposes, and therefore, they do not give any historical-anthropological insight into the ancient perception of pain. In the biblical narratives that this article investigates biological matters become a means of thinking about non-biological emphases. They cannot be used to reconstruct pain in historical anthropology. The most extensive description can be found in 1 Sam 4:19–20. Even the anthropological key-text of childbirth, Genesis 2–3, develops etiologies for the preconditions of human life and does not use any concrete birth language. Labor in daily life *and* travail to produce progeny are of substantial importance here in describing the *conditio humana*. The so-called “judgments” against the serpent, woman, and man in Gen 3:15–19 concern three domains of the human world and are cast negatively: relationships with other creatures, the ambivalent relationships of man, woman, and daily labor as well as the harsh aspects of reproduction. The perception of pain is not only physiological, but also psychological when the human being discovers the ambiguity of life.

However, prophetic texts give more information about the pains, fears, and feelings of women giving birth. They use birth metaphors more concretely, but no less metaphorically. The drastic language in the context of human and national calamity emphasizes the existentiality of the description of divine judgment. Male behavior during times of crisis is linked to female experiences during childbirth, when people in war are described as acting and feeling like women in labor (Isa 13:5–7; Isa 21:3–4). The oracles of salvation use the language of pain in a positive way and adapt it to God as protagonist (Isa 42:13–14). Isa 65:13 and 66:7–13 are interpreted as prototypes of an inversion of the judgment of Gen 3:16, providing ambiguous experiences for woman as a life-giver. From an eschatological perspective, these texts promise that the ambiguity must disappear and that the *conditio humana* must change for the better. Like a mother, God will birth a new world, but without pain and labor. Indeed, this destiny is reserved for the faithful people of YHWH, the children of Zion.

<sup>112</sup> Maier, *Daughter Zion* (see n. 93), 235.

<sup>113</sup> Concerning the bifurcation in servants and enemies of God, who do not follow him (cf. Is 65:8–16a, 66:6, 14), see Berges/de Beuken, *Jesaja* (see n. 75), 222–232; Maier, *Daughter Zion* (see n. 93), 204.