

INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 57 · 2023 · Pages 209 - 218

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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MOSES AS MIDWIFE: WHAT THE EXODUS BIRTH STORY TEACHES ABOUT MOTHERHOOD AND CHRIST

Becky Holderness Tilton

Abstract: *This work explores an alternative interpretation of the Exodus narrative as a metaphor for childbirth. Gleaning from Old Testament and Judaic sources, we find rich female birth and salvific imagery in the saga of the migration of the children of Israel and the Passover itself. This perspective of sacred childbirth, when coupled with traditional Christian interpretations of the first Passover, ultimately paints an enhanced picture of the Atonement of Jesus Christ.*

The Exodus account of the birth of the Israelite nation is an allegorical masterpiece, inspiring scripture and sacred worship the world over. The narrative acquaints us with the personal journey of Moses, from his ignominious beginning in a slave dwelling to his triumphant delivery of thousands from bondage — a tale venerated by Judaism, Islam, and Christianity alike. Though many iterations of the Exodus story focus on Moses as the heroic protagonist in the miraculous military victory over Egypt, the story can also be explored from a different vantage point: Moses as figurative midwife, delivering the children of Israel from the confines of the womb.

Childbearing in the time of the Exodus, as in any pre-modern period, was a perilous endeavor. According to conservative estimates, around one in three infants and one in forty mothers did not survive the birth process anciently.¹ Experienced midwives who could mitigate

1. Donald Todman, "Childbirth in Ancient Rome: From Traditional Folklore to Obstetrics," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Obstetrics & Gynaecology* 47, no. 2 (2007): 82–85, <https://obgyn.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1479-828X.2007.00691.x>.

the dangers of childbirth held a prestigious place in early societies, as entire nations thrived or declined depending on their birth rates. The role of midwife is honored in several Old Testament texts where God is described as performing the duties of a midwife. God delivers a newborn (Job 10:18–19, 38:8; Isaiah 66:8–9), clothes it (Job 10:10–12, 38:8–9), and places it in its mother’s arms (Psalm 22:9–10).²

The concept of the Exodus as a birth metaphor has been cited by many contemporary Jewish scholars as well as medieval³ and renaissance-era⁴ Biblical commentators. Viewing the Exodus story from a childbirth perspective has the potential to illuminate many aspects of birth and motherhood that are perhaps underrepresented in traditional western religious thought. These sacred principles regarding birth nevertheless play an essential part in ultimate exaltation. The Exodus story resolutely champions the divine commission of women through the actions of its female cast. The story also entwines sacred motherhood with the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ through the symbolism of the migration of the children of Israel and the Passover itself.

The Women of the Exodus

Throughout the Exodus narrative, powerful women are portrayed in remarkable ways. The book of Exodus unfolds, as many stories do, with birth — and where there is birth, there are mothers. The fertile women of the family of Israel bore many children, outpacing the population growth of the Egyptians and causing national security concerns (Exodus 1:7–9). When the king of Egypt commanded midwives to slay newborn Israelite males, the midwives refused to comply. It was through the courageous actions of these midwives that the rebellion against Egypt began (Exodus 1:15–17). Moses’s mother Jochebed acted as protectress, risking

2. For a list of references to God as mother, midwife, and nursemaid, see Don C. Benjamin, “Israel’s God: Mother and Midwife,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 19, no. 4 (November 1989): 115, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249840367_Israel%27s_God_Mother_and_Midwife.

3. Rabbi Yitzchak Luria (The Holy Ari), 14th-century father of Kabbalism, proposes this idea. See Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky, ed. and trans., “Exodus: Birth of the Soul,” *Chabad* (blog), *Chabad-Lubavitch Media Center*, https://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/379810/jewish/Exodus-Birth-of-the-Soul.htm.

4. Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer [Baal Shem Tov], 16th-century founder of Hasidic Judaism, proposes this idea. See “Thirty-Six Aphorisms of the Baal Shem Tov,” Jewish History, *Chabad* (blog), *Chabad-Lubavitch Media Center*, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/3073/jewish/36-Aphorisms-of-the-Baal-Shem-Tov.htm.

her life to hide her child with faith that he would be preserved from danger (Exodus 2:2–3), and Pharaoh’s daughter became his adoptive mother (Exodus 2:5–10). Moses’ wife Zipporah took upon herself the role of priestess when she administered the rite of circumcision to their son (Exodus 4:26).⁵ Moses’ sister Miriam, who assists him in leading Israel, is described as a prophetess (Exodus 15:20).

Women shape the Exodus account as mothers, rebels, protectresses, nurturers, priestesses, and prophetesses. Unlike many other Old Testament histories that often depict women on the sidelines, these women are active participants in the salvation of Israel, moving the story forward in important ways. Their deeds indicate that rather than receiving direction from an outside authority, each acted under personal moral authority. According to Rav Avira’s Talmudic commentary, “In the merit of the righteous women that were in that generation, the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt.”⁶

Egypt as the Womb

In addition to the compelling contributions of the individual female actors in the Biblical account, a broader theme of childbirth subtly permeates its pages. The Exodus story is widely regarded as the birth of the Israelite nation, the transformation of a subjugated family tribe into a sovereign people.⁷ As midwife or deliverer, Moses received heavenly help to guide the fledgling Israelites out of Egypt. In the Hebrew language, the word for Egypt is *Mitzrayim* (מצרים),⁸ which can be translated as a “narrow place” and may have reference to the birth canal. Related to *Mitzrayim* is the root “צַר” (*tsar*), which, while it can mean “narrow straits,” can

5. Genesis accounts portraying circumcision as a requisite for males entering the Abrahamic covenant — in fact, perhaps the *only* requisite for covenant males — underscore its religious necessity during the time of Zipporah (see Genesis 17:26). As such, I assert that this rite was a priestly obligation rather than a familial or medical obligation.

6. *The William Davidson Talmud*, Sotah 11b:4, Sefaria (website), <http://sefaria.org/Sotah.11b.4>.

7. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, “Maggid: The First Passover Story,” in *Hebrew College Passover Companion*, ed. Rachel Adelman, Jane L. Kanarek, and Gail Twersky Reimer (Newton Center, MA: Hebrew College, 2020), 25, https://hebrewcollege.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Passover-Companion-2020_Digital.pdf.

8. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), s.v. “מצרים,” 595.

also mean “enemy” or “adversary.”⁹ A verb from a related root means “to suffer distress” and can refer to the distress of labor pains, as in Jeremiah 48:41 and 49:22, both mentioning “a woman in her pangs.”¹⁰

The dual *Mitzrayim* (מצרים) is derived from the singular *matsor* (מצור),¹¹ which is likely derived from *tsur* (צור), meaning “to bind, tie up, encircle.”¹² Though *Mitzrayim* may be related to the Israelites’ captivity or bondage in Egypt, this binding and encircling language may also describe enclosure in the womb. If so, the Exodus from Egypt may be viewed as a deliverance from the binding or constraint of the womb. The Book of Mormon might suggest a connection to Egypt with the idea of binding or bondage. Nephi₁ speaks of “the God of our fathers, who were led out of Egypt, out of bondage” (1 Nephi 19:10). References to both Egypt and “bondage” are also found in Mosiah 12:34 (quoting Exodus 20:2), Alma 29:12, and Alma 36:28. The latter passage is interesting, for it comes after Alma₂ describes his miraculous conversion and deliverance from the pains of hell, declaring several times that he has been *born of God* (vv. 5, 23, 24, and 26) and stating that God has delivered him and will still deliver him (v. 27). Then Alma₂ speaks of Egypt and bondage:

And I know that he will raise me up at the last day, to dwell with him in glory; yea, and I will praise him forever, for he has brought our fathers out of Egypt, and he has swallowed up the Egyptians in the Red Sea; and he led them by his power into the promised land; yea, and he has delivered them out of bondage and captivity from time to time. (Alma 36:28)

The parting of the waters of the Red Sea also brings strong birth imagery: the waters miraculously make way for the children of Israel, as amniotic waters make way for the birth of a newborn child.

When viewing Egypt as the confined place of the womb from which the Israelite nation is born, an interesting pattern emerges that reflects a woman’s journey from childhood to motherhood. Kabbalistic and contemporary Judaic teachings indicate that the first and final plagues

9. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Lexicon*, s.v. “צַר,” 865.

10. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Lexicon*, s.v. “צַרַר,” 865. Like *tsur*, *tsarar* (צָרַר) is principally translated as “to bind or treat with hostility.”

11. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Lexicon*, s.v. “מִצּוֹר,” 848. This word is used in 2 Kings 19:24, which in the KJV has “my feet have I dried up all the rivers of besieged places,” with *matsor* (מִצּוֹר) translated as “besieged places,” while the NASB20 (New American Standard Bible 2020) has “with the soles of my feet I dried up / All the streams of Egypt.”

12. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Lexicon*, s.v. “צוֹר,” [848].

act as bookends to the female reproductive process, possibly symbolizing menarche¹³ and childbirth, and it is the opinion of this author that this concept deserves exploration.

The first plague to afflict the land of Egypt was the transformation of the rivers and pools of water into blood, causing the fish to die and the water to become undrinkable (Exodus 7:19–21). This plague could have a metaphorical connection to female reproductive development.¹⁴ The primary sign of female maturation is a transformation of “water” to blood during first menstruation. When stripped to its essence, menstruation signals the death of potential life. One Talmudic commentary frames the first plague with these words: “God does all at once; kills and gives life at once, harms and heals at once. [God hears the prayers of] a woman on the birthing stool. . . . And all the waters in the Nile were turned to blood, and returned blood to water. Living flesh is turned to a corpse, and the corpse is returned to life. The staff is turned to a snake, and the snake is returned to a staff. The sea is turned to dry land, and the dry land is returned to sea.”¹⁵ These natural cycles of life and death are evident in a temporarily bloodied river that can no longer sustain life and in a womb outpouring undeveloped life, only to be restored and begin the cycle afresh.

The final plague to torment Egypt, or the first Passover, contains many parallels to the childbirth process. When Moses instructed the Israelite households to slaughter a young lamb and paint the doorposts of their dwellings with its blood, each family created a figurative womb, or place of safety (Exodus 12:5–7). The Israelites then gathered together in this sanctified space, and only covenant (or circumcised) males were allowed entrance (Exodus 12:44).¹⁶ They were commanded to stay in this protected place until a prescribed amount of time had passed (or they

13. *Menarche* is a term for the first occurrence of menstruation.

14. The correlation of the first plague with menarche was taught by Kabbalist Yitzchak Luria in the 14th century CE. See Moshe Wisnefsky (translator), *Apples from the Orchard: Gleanings from the Mystical Teachings of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria* (Malibu, CA: Thirty Seven Books, 2006), <http://www.yeshshem.com/ari-shemot-5779.htm>.

15. *Shemot Rabbah* is a Talmudic commentary of unknown authorship that is thought to have been compiled in the twelfth century CE *Shemot Rabbah*, 28:4, Sefaria (website), https://www.sefaria.org/Shemot_Rabbah.28.4?lang=bi.

16. The significance of the womb space being reserved for circumcised males may correlate with the strict observance of covenant-only sexual relations among the children of Israel, as portrayed in the story of Dinah (Genesis 34:1–26). Other sanctified spaces, such as temples, are also reserved for those in the covenant.

had come to term), after which they could emerge unharmed (Exodus 12:13, 22).

On the fateful morning following the first Passover, each Egyptian household mourned the death of their firstborn, who would not emerge from the dwelling alive, similar to an infant who had perished in the womb. Conversely, the firstborn of the Israelite families were spared, like an infant who survives birth (Exodus 11:4–6). From that time forward, Israelites were commanded to sanctify their firstborn,¹⁷ for they belonged to the Lord. The focal point of this practice appears to be the sanctification of the child rather than the mother. However, the inauguration of first motherhood and the wonder of birth are suggested by the story's use of phraseology such as "openeth the womb" and "openeth the matrix" (Exodus 13:2, 12). The command to sanctify the firstborn occurs in the Exodus text immediately following the Passover account and before the flight from Pharaoh, indicating a direct connection between the Passover event and firstborn sanctification. Ancient Israelites kept the custom of painting their doorposts with blood during each annual Passover celebration, a possible recreation of the sacred act of childbirth.

From the Hebrew terminology used to describe Egypt to the symbolic action of painting the door frame with blood, the Exodus story is infused with the metaphor of birth. In the words of Rabbi Dov Linzer:

The blood on the doorframe does more than protect. It also makes the house into the womb of the nation. ... The people will be pushed out of their houses, out of their protective womb, the next morning, but the birthing process will only be complete seven days later. It is then that the people will pass through the narrow straits of the split sea. It is then that they will exit the amniotic fluid, move down the birthing canal, and exit a new people on the other side. Theirs will be a birth from the soft, cleansing water. They will be washed of the

17. In the Hebrew text, the word *bekor* (בכור) is used to distinguish the firstborn (see Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Lexicon*, s.v. "בכור," 114). This word is used interchangeably to indicate a male firstborn child and a firstborn child who is either male or female. Many subsequent readings by Jewish and Christian scholars, including Joseph Smith, have emphasized the maleness of the firstborn, though the original text is ambiguous. As my interpretation attempts to emphasize motherhood rather than the gender of the first child, I have chosen to use language that is inclusive of both sons and daughters. When it comes to the Passover as a foreshadowing of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, does it matter that the Savior is male? While there is significance in His being a son, this significance is perhaps surpassed by His being the only begotten *child* of God.

blood and filth of the Egyptians, their umbilical cord will be cut, and they will be free to become a strong and independent nation.¹⁸

Once the Israelites had reached the safety of the far shore, Miriam led the women in a jubilee of song and dance, just as midwives rejoiced anciently when a child was safely born (Exodus 15:20).¹⁹ As a modern continuation of this tradition, many Jewish women throughout the Near East honor life's celebratory moments, including birth, with a distinctive piercing cry or ululation.²⁰ When the dangers of their confinement had passed, the children of Israel were then free to develop themselves as a sovereign people.

A lamentation of Moses recorded in the book of Numbers clearly invokes the childbirth metaphor. Moses, having been tasked with the leadership of the obstinate nation of Israel, writes these words: "Have I conceived this people? have I begotten them, that thou shouldst say to me, Carry them in thy bosom, as a nursing father beareth the sucking child, unto the land which thou swarest unto their fathers?" (Numbers 11:12). Moses appears to be reminding God that the conception, birth, and nurturance of the children of Israel is God's obligation and pleads for help in sustaining them. His language is that of a desperate midwife who must enlist the help of a mother to nourish a fledgling infant.

Redemption and Motherhood

The miracle of the Exodus is in the deliverance of thousands of enslaved families from physical bondage, a storyline that parallels the miracle through which the human family is spiritually delivered from sin and death, the Atonement of Jesus Christ. In order for someone who is enslaved to become free, he or she must be purchased, or redeemed, by someone who has the power to offer that freedom. Freedom from sin and death is offered by the Savior, Jesus Christ. Freedom from the

18. Dov Linzer, "Birthing a Nation," YCTorah Library, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, <https://library.yctorah.org/2015/12/birthing-a-nation/>.

19. Danya Ruttenberg, "The Rebellion Began with Two Midwives," in *The Kveller Haggadah: A Seder for Curious Kids (And Their Grownups)*, ed. Elissa Strauss and Gabrielle Birkner (Las Vegas, NV: 70 Faces Media, 2019), 28.

20. Levi Y. Heber, "Additional Sephardic Circumcision Customs: The Customs of Sephardim and Oriental Jews at a Brit Milah," *Chabad* (blog), *Chabad-Lubavitch Media Center*, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/144126/jewish/Aadditional-Sephardic-Circumcision-Customs.htm.

womb, another act of delivery and an absolute imperative for our eternal development, is offered by mothers.

According to the teachings of Jesus Christ, the redemption of mankind and the physical birth of mankind are linked together — emblematic of each other. See how beautifully redemption and motherhood are intertwined in a revelation given to the family of Adam. God teaches, “Inasmuch as ye were born into the world by water, and blood, and the spirit, which I have made, and so become of the dust a living soul, even so ye must be born again into the kingdom of heaven, of water, and of the Spirit, and be cleansed by blood, even the blood of mine Only Begotten” (Moses 6:59). Here God makes a clear connection between motherhood and redemption, associating the waters of motherhood with the waters of baptism, the blood of motherhood with the blood of the Savior.

Understanding the Exodus story as a birth story is not to discard the verity of the Atonement of Jesus Christ; rather, it enforces and enshrines the eternal act of redemption. There is no alternative route to receiving a physical body than being birthed by a woman. Likewise, Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by (or through) Him (John 14:6). Exodus womb creation and birth reenactment may have a familiar feel to the many Christian groups that practice baptism. The words of a Catholic liturgy for the blessing of baptismal water evokes this connection elegantly: “... to the end that a heavenly offspring, conceived by sanctification, may emerge from the immaculate womb of this divine font, reborn a new creature: and may all, however distinguished either by sex in body, or by age in time, be brought forth to the same infancy by grace, their mother.”²¹ Indeed, each time a baptismal font is filled with water in preparation for immersion, a figurative womb is being created through which an initiate experiences spiritual rebirth (John 3:3–7).²²

According to Ilana Pardes’ *The Biography of Ancient Israel*, “The Israelites are delivered collectively out of the womb of Egypt. National

21. “Holy Saturday-Vigil,” Daily Mass, The Fatima Center, April 8, 2023, <https://fatima.org/fatima-messages/daily-mass/holy-saturday-vigil/>.

22. Though a Latter-day Saint audience may be more familiar with the baptismal imagery of death and resurrection (D&C 76:51, Romans 6:4), the understanding of being buried and rising with Christ does not nullify His teachings about baptism as a rebirth in Christ (Moses 6:59, John 1:12–13, 3:3–7). Birth and resurrection are necessary events for our ultimate exaltation, each representing a new beginning and a step toward godliness. What wisdom in God to use our human experiences with both birth and death to help illustrate the spiritual transformation of the baptismal covenant.

birth, much like individual births, takes place on a delicate border between life and death. It involves the transformation of blood from a signifier of death to a signifier of life. It also involves the successful opening of the womb, the prevention of the womb's turning into a tomb."²³ How like the miracle of birth is Christ's atoning sacrifice, each occurring on the border between life and death, where blood transforms from a sign of death to a sign of life, successfully opening a way beyond the tomb! This correlation may lead one to reconsider Gethsemane as a holy birthing place, where Jesus Christ acted as birthmother, shedding his blood to deliver each of us (John 1:12–13).

Conclusion

The Exodus narrative is a powerful place to discover the salvific elements inherent in the feminine, from the actions of the women in the story to the rebirth practices it evokes. The masculine and feminine stand side by side in Isaiah's description of the Lord going forth as a mighty man of war, crying and prevailing against his enemies, like a woman in labor (Isaiah 42:13–14). The influence of our western heritage perhaps makes us more comfortable adopting male role models like king, warrior, bridegroom and craftsman as symbols of God. However, a God patterned after exemplars such as mother, midwife, and nursemaid are prolific in Old Testament prophetic writings. As we seek a more complete knowledge of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, we do well to faithfully examine the salvific contributions made by women and encourage female perspectives to be part of the dialogue, for all are alike unto God (2 Nephi 26:33).

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23. Ilana Pardes, *The Biography of Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 26.

