

The Hebrew Corner

This month we will discuss an unpleasant, but ultimately rewarding part of the life of a woman, that of the pain of giving birth to children, and references to it in the Tanach. Specifically we will look at how references to childbirth and the pain associated with it are used descriptively in prophecy.

The initial reference in the Tanach to the pain of childbirth is given in Genesis 3:16, where God decrees the consequences to Eve after Adam and Eve had eaten the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden:

“Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.”

The Hebrew words translated as sorrow are in the first instance itsabown (**עֲצֹבָן**, eets-tsah-VOHN), and in the second instance etseb (**עַצֵּב**, EH-tsehv), both derived from the Hebrew root atsab (**עַצֵּב**, ah-TSAHV) to hurt, be in pain, or grieve.

Prophetic references to childbirth are used to give graphic imagery to the prophet's message. An example of this is in the prophecy of Isaiah concerning the fall of Babylon (Isaiah 21:1-3):

“The burden of the desert of the sea. As whirlwinds in the south pass through; so it cometh from the desert, from a terrible land. A grievous vision is declared unto me; the treacherous dealer dealeth treacherously, and the spoiler spoileth. Go up, O Elam: besiege, O Media; all the sighing thereof have I made to cease. Therefore are my loins filled with pain: pangs have taken hold upon me, as the

pangs of a woman that travaileth. I was bowed down at the hearing of it; I was dismayed at the seeing of it."

The vision that Isaiah saw concerning the destruction of Babylon by the Medes and Persians, was so disturbing to him that he likened it to the pain of childbirth. The phrase translated pangs of a woman that travaileth, is in Hebrew tsiyre yoleda (צִירֵי יוֹלֶדָה, tsee-ray yoh-lay-DAH). This use of the imagery of childbirth allows the reader to grasp the pain that the prophet experienced in seeing the vision. Apparently the revelation of the destruction of Babylon was so vivid and real to him, that it caused him intense pain as a result.

Jeremiah uses this illustration in describing the judgment of Moab (Jeremiah 48:41):

"Kerioth is taken, and the strongholds are surprised, and the mighty men's hearts in Moab at that day shall be as the heart of a woman in her pangs."

Here even the warriors of Moab are pictured as being in the pain of labor. In the passage, the word pangs is from the Hebrew root tsarar (צַרָּר, tsah-RAHR), to suffer distress.

In Isaiah 26, a song for the kingdom of Israel, we are presented with the pain of an entire nation in need of God's mercy (Isaiah 26:17):

"Like as a woman with child, that draweth near the time of her delivery, is in pain, and crieth out in her pangs; so have we been in thy sight, O LORD."

The prophet uses some graphic vocabulary here to describe what Israel is experiencing. The word translated as pangs is from the Hebrew word chebel (חֶבֶל, CHEH-vehl) which, in addition to pangs,

can mean pain or sorrow. The phrase is in pain is from the Hebrew word chiyl (חִיל, CHEEL) which means to twist or writhe, be in severe pain or anguish. Yet the song goes on to say that the people of Israel were yet to see any fruit from their labor pains (Isaiah 26:18):

“We have been with child, we have been in pain, we have as it were brought forth wind; we have not wrought any deliverance in the earth; neither have the inhabitants of the world fallen.”

The prophet Micah uses the childbirth experience to unveil a picture of what is in store for Israel (Micah 4:8-10):

“And thou, O tower of the flock, the strong hold of the daughter of Zion, unto thee shall it come, even the first dominion; the kingdom shall come to the daughter of Jerusalem. Now why dost thou cry out aloud? is there no king in thee? is thy counsellor perished? for pangs have taken thee as a woman in travail. Be in pain, and labour to bring forth, O daughter of Zion, like a woman in travail: for now shalt thou go forth out of the city, and thou shalt dwell in the field, and thou shalt go even to Babylon; there shalt thou be delivered; there the LORD shall redeem thee from the hand of thine enemies.”

As in the above passage from Micah, Isaiah uses the childbirth theme to prophesy a glorious future for Israel (Isaiah 66:6-13):

“A voice of noise from the city, a voice from the temple, a voice of the LORD that rendereth recompense to his enemies. Before she travailed, she brought forth; before her pain came, she was delivered of a man child. Who hath heard such a thing? Who hath seen such things? Shall the earth be made to bring forth in one day? or shall a nation be born at once? for as soon as Zion travailed, she brought forth her children. Shall I bring to the birth, and not cause

to bring forth? saith the LORD: shall I cause to bring forth, and shut the womb? saith thy God. Rejoice ye with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all ye that love her: rejoice for joy with her, all ye that mourn for her: That ye may suck, and be satisfied with the breasts of her consolations; that ye may milk out, and be delighted with the abundance of her glory. For thus saith the LORD, Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the Gentiles like a flowing stream: then shall ye suck, ye shall be borne upon her sides, and be dandled upon her knees. As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you; and ye shall be comforted in Jerusalem."

So just as the pain of the mother in labor leads to joy when the child is born, the pain and tribulation of the people of Israel, who have been persecuted and scattered throughout the world, will lead to their joy when Israel triumphs over those who would destroy her, and will give birth to a nation and city of Jerusalem to whom God extends peace and protection forever.

May the peace and protection of God extend to you and your family also, and many blessings to you in the coming year!