

Eve's Curse Revisited: An Increase of "Sorrowful Conceptions"

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Translators have rendered Eve's curse in Gen 3:16a in various ways. Taking into account lexical, syntactical, and rhetorical considerations, we propose that the phrase עֲצוֹנוֹךְ וְהִרְנָךְ should be translated "your sorrowful conceptions." YHWH's curse on Eve, therefore, was an increase in the rate of barrenness and infertility, and the emotional turmoil that engendered. As a result of the curse, YHWH makes a descriptive (not prescriptive) observation that Eve would "desire" (תִּשְׁקֶה) her husband to help remove the stigma of the curse—something the man would seek to exploit. Syntactically, interpreting Eve's curse as the emotional anguish that accompanies infertility and barrenness parallels Adam's emotional toil over the now-cursed and unproductive earth. Rhetorically, the curse of infertility may explain why the author(s) of Genesis chose to include the motif of matriarchal barrenness as well as the "barrenness" of the land (famine) with which the Patriarchs had to contend.

Key Words: Eve, curse, barrenness, Adam, infertility, famine

It is self-evident that giving birth is one of the most painful experiences that a woman can go through. Indeed, the facile conclusion by some scholars is that Gen 3:16 serves an etiological function to explain this experience—an event that can result in the death of the mother, the child, or both (cf. Gen 35:16–18; 1 Sam 4:19–22).¹ Therefore, most people look to Gen 3:16 as the primary evidence that childbearing will be harrowing because of YHWH's decree. A quick survey of modern translations of the text in question substantiates this claim: אל-ה'אשה אמר הרבה ארבה עצבונך והרנך בעצב תלדי בנים ואל-אישך תשוקתך והוא ימשל-בך

1. Note, for example, the words of H. Gunkel: "Der Erzähler denkt an die vielen Nöte und Schmerzen, von denen das Weib in seinem Geschlechtsleben geplagt ist, besonders an die Schwangerschaft und Geburt—Geburtsschmerzen sind im alten Israel sprichwörtlich—, und fragt nach dem Grunde aller dieser Not" (*Genesis* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966] 21). See also J. A. Bailey, "Initiation and the Primal Woman in Gilgamesh and Genesis 2–3," *JBL* 89 (1970) 149; Joel Lohr, "Sexual Desire? Eve, Genesis 3:16, and *hqwt*," *JBL* 130 (2011) 246; Joel W. Rosenberg, "The Garden Story Forward and Backward: The Non-narrative Dimension of Gen. 2–3," *Proof* 1/1 (1981) 5–6; or Jerome T. Walsh, "Genesis 2:4b–3:24: A Synchronic Approach," *JBL* 96 (1977) 173.

To the woman He said, "I will greatly multiply Your pain in childbirth, In pain you shall bring forth children; Yet your desire shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you." (NASB)

Then he said to the woman, "You will bear children with intense pain and suffering. And though your desire will be for your husband, he will be your master." (NLT)

To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." (NRS)

And to the woman He said, "I will make most severe Your pangs in child-bearing; In pain shall you bear children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you." (TNK)

And to the woman he said, "I will greatly multiply thy pains and thy groanings; in pain thou shalt bring forth children, and thy submission shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." (LXX)²

It is safe to say that no other 16 Hebrew words in the MT have been so used/abused by segments of society to put "women in their place" and to validate men's claims of "lordship" over females. Now, while one short paper can never quell all these age-old conflicts, we will try to ameliorate—if only slightly—this centuries-old power struggle by offering a new interpretation for one part of this verse—*הרבה ארבה עצבונך והרנך*. As just noted, scholars have offered various renderings of this phrase.³ However, few take into consideration the larger literary implications of their translations vis-à-vis the author's rhetorical agenda (more on this below).⁴ This is particularly true of the rhetorical importance of 3:16a in light of v. 17, within the larger context of Gen 3, and the book of Genesis as a whole.

Therefore, instead of following these traditional translations of 3:16a with the general gist of something along the lines of "I shall increase your pain in childbearing," we propose that the text should be translated "I will greatly increase your sorrowful conceptions." This, we will argue, depicts the curse of emotional turmoil that accompanies problematic conceptions

2. For a brief discussion on the LXX variations of the passage, see R. Bergmeier, "Zur Septuagintaübersetzung von Gen 3,16," *ZAW* 79 (1967) 77–79. However for a defense of the MT reading, see Walter Vogels, "The Power Struggle between Man and Woman (Gen 3,16b)," *Bib* 77 (1996) 202.

3. Note also the difficulty that French, German, and Spanish translators have had with the phrase. E.g., R. de Vaux: "je multiplierai les peines de tes grossesses" (*La Genèse*, La Sainte Bible [Paris: Petrus Brot, 1962] 48); E. Fleg: "Je multiplierai et multiplierai ta peine et ta grossesse" (*La Livre* [Paris: Minuit, 1959] 16); J. Chaine: "Je multiplierai tes souffrances [et celles] de ta grossesse" (*Le Livre de la Genèse* [Paris: du Cerf, 1949] 49); H. Gunkel: "Viel will ich dir Mühsal und Seufzer bereiten" (*Genesis*, 21); A. D. Macho: "Multiplicaré abundantemente tus aflicciones en la sangre de la virginidad y tu preñez" (*Biblia Polyglotta Matritensis*, series 4, *Targum Palaestinense in Pentateuchum L.1: Genesis* [Madrid: CSIC, 1988] 23).

4. We use the term *rhetorical* here as a means of reflecting the reality that the author(s) of Genesis desired to connect the curse of Eve (and Adam) with the greater message/argument of Genesis. One could also see this as part of the author's theological or thematic agenda. We use the term *author* in the sense of the final editor, be that a singular person or a group of editors.

and barrenness in all its forms.⁵ By focusing on the issue of infertility and barrenness, our reading not only resonates with the biblical narrative in which all the matriarchs struggle with this curse (Gen 11:30; 25:21; 29:31; cf. also 1 Sam 1:2; 2 Kgs 4:14)—something they must rely on God to overcome (Gen 17:16; 20:17; 21:1; 25:21; 29:31; 30:22; 1 Sam 1:19; 2 Kgs 4:17)⁶—but it also mitigates the issues of hierarchy many see in the next clause of v. 16—*ואל-אישה תשוקתך והוא ימשל-בך*.

We will support this translation in three ways. First, we will offer a linguistic/lexical analysis of *עצבון* and *הריון* to determine their semantic range in relation to the text of Gen 3:16. Second, we will show syntactically how our translation meshes with the curse on Adam in v. 17. Third, we will demonstrate how our proposed translation fits best with the author's apparent rhetorical agenda in the immediate and broader context of Genesis. We will finish our study by briefly addressing some of the implications of our thesis for a modern context.

THE SEMANTIC RANGE OF *עצבון* AND *הריון*

The interpretive crux of Gen 3:16a hinges on two words: *עצבון*—often translated “pain/toil”; and *הריון*—frequently rendered as “childbearing/labor pains.” These words are regularly translated in a manner either to push forward a centuries-old agenda (women are the reason for all of men's woes and thus they are going to have painful child deliveries) or to keep consistency within the history of interpretation. Now while many translators are perhaps correct in reading this verse as a hendiadys (e.g., NASB, NRSV, NIV, etc.; more on this below), they nonetheless mistakenly place the emphasis on the *physical* pain of childbirth at the expense of the immediate context and the author's rhetorical purposes to show that something as basic as conceiving is now cursed. Instead of the traditional meaning of physical pain in childbearing,⁷ these two words together can actually connote sorrow in conception, namely, the emotional sorrow that accompanies barrenness/infertility.

*The Semantic Range of *עצבון**

The substantive *עצבון*⁸ is used only three times in this form in the OT: Gen 3:16, 17, and 5:29 (all within the putative J source). Carol Meyers, who has written extensively on Gen 3:16, insists that the use of *עצבון* in the context does not mean physical pain.⁹ She notes that *עצב*, the root of *עצבון*,

5. Included in this would be miscarriages and the general problems associated with conceiving a child.

6. So too M. Ottosson, “הרדה,” *TDOT* 3:458–61 at p. 460.

7. See, for example, the words of M. Noth, *Überlieferungsgeschichte des Pentateuch* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1948) 257.

8. In what follows we will interact, in some detail, with the works of Carol Meyers due to her extensive, and insightful, research on Gen 3, especially 3:16.

9. C. Meyers, “עצב,” *TDOT* 11:278–80 at 280. See also idem, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). U. Cassuto suggests that

“indicates a state of mental or emotional distress . . . [and is often] used in contrast to great ‘joy’” (cf. Neh 8:10–11; 1 Chr 4:10).¹⁰ Unfortunately, Meyers rejects the idea of “mental suffering” in Gen 3:16a and opts for the idea of increased toil/work. However, despite Meyers’s rejection of the emotive angle, Ps 16:4 does set a precedent for understanding the substantive form of עֲצָב along with the use of the verb רָבָה (“to increase”), which also appears in 3:16a, as increased emotional turmoil. Moreover, there are no fewer than six other cases in the MT where the root עֲצָב carries with it the nuance of emotional distress (Job 9:28; Prov 10:10; 15:1, 13; Isa 50:11; Ps 139:24).

The second appearance of עֲצָבוֹן is used in the curse of Adam in Gen 3:17. The relevant clause reads: אֲרוּרָה הָאֲדָמָה בְּעִבְרוֹךְ בְּעֲצָבוֹן תֹּאכְלֶנָּה כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ “cursed is the ground because of you, in pain/sorrow you will eat from it all the days of your life.” Here, עֲצָבוֹן can once again refer to the emotional toil Adam will experience in “bringing forth” fruit/food for his family. It is no longer an easy and delightful undertaking to bring forth food but one that is marked with קָוֶץ and דִּרְדָר (“thorns and thistles”) accompanied by both physical and emotional heartache.¹¹ Thus, in one sense, both Eve and Adam feel emotional pain due to the curse (we will return to a fuller discussion of v. 17 below).¹²

The last appearance of עֲצָבוֹן is in Gen 5:29. Here the author reiterates the original curse on Adam: זֶה יִנְחַמְנוּ מִמַּעֲשֵׂנוּ וּמִעֲצָבוֹן יִדְּנוּ מִן־הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר אָרְרָה יְהוָה “This one [Noah] will give us rest from our work and from the toil of our hands; from the earth which YHWH has cursed.” According to the traditional interpretation, the words מִמַּעֲשֵׂנוּ (“from our work”) and וּמִעֲצָבוֹן (“and from our toil”) describe the same thing—physical work; however, based upon our understanding of the usage of עֲצָבוֹן in Gen 3:16 and 17 the author appears to be nuancing these words to mean both the physical and emotional toil associated with the curse. Thus, Lamech hoped that Noah would bring the people relief from the physical and emotional pain of the original curse on the ground. To summarize then, of the three times where עֲצָבוֹן is used in the MT, both physical *and* emotional aspects of the curse on humanity resulting from the fall seem to be implied.

Now to be sure some may argue that this is a “circular” argument deriving from a “biased” interpretation of both 3:16a and 5:29. However,

עֲצָבוֹן has been deliberately chosen by way of a pun on the tree (עֵץ) of good and evil “as if to say the tree brought trauma” (*A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, part 1: *From Adam to Noah*, trans. Israel Abrahams [Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961] 81).

10. Meyers, “עֲצָב,” 279. Ironically, childbearing is supposed to bring emotional “joy.”

11. Meyers rightly points out that in unproductive areas such as the Palestinian highlands, toil was more often than not associated with the emotional pain of not seeing one’s labors come to fruition (*ibid.*, 280).

12. See a similar conclusion by Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis* (NCBC; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 71. Similarly, John A. Bailey argues that both deal with fertility of some sort: either from the body or the land (“Initiation and the Primal Woman in Gilgamesh and Genesis 2–3,” *JBL* 89 [1970] 137–50 at 150). So too Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (rev. ed., Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 93–94.

various lexemes deriving from the root עֶצַב—often reflecting the emotive nuance—are attested throughout the MT (e.g., Gen 3:16; 1 Chr 4:9; Ps 127:2; 139:24; Prov 5:10; 10:22; 15:1 [adjectival force]; Isa 14:3).¹³ Moreover, verbal forms of עֶצַב appear 16 times in the MT.¹⁴ Of these verbal forms, all but 3 depict emotional pain/grief, or as John Parkhurst puts it, “labour or travail of mind.”¹⁵ The emotional nuance is exemplified in Gen 34:7, where the author notes that the sons of Jacob were יתעצבו (“grieved”) when they heard that their sister had been raped. Clearly they did not feel any physical pain due to the rape, but they did feel emotional pain. What is more, in every case where the verbal form of עֶצַב is used in Genesis, it has the meaning of emotional grief (cf. Gen 6:6; 34:7; 45:5). Even in the Primeval History of Gen 1–11 the only appearance of the verbal form of עֶצַב in Gen 6:6 means emotional pain. Here, YHWH experiences emotional pain due to the sinfulness of humanity (cf. Ps 78:40). Based on these verbal and nominative examples, we can see that עֶצַב in Gen 3:16 does not have to mean physical pain but can just as legitimately, and more rightly, be translated as emotional sorrow or grief.

The Semantic Range of הָרֵוּן

The second problematic word in Gen 3:16 is הָרֵוּן from the root הָרָה. Typically the verbal form of הָרָה is translated “to conceive” (e.g., Gen 4:1, 17; 16:4, 5, 11; 19:36; 21:2; 25:21; 1 Chr 4:17, etc.) as is the adjectival form, which is often used metaphorically (Job 15:35; Ps 7:15; Isa 26:18; 33:11). Again Meyers rightly rejects the notion of increased pain in labor/childbirth opting to translate הָרֵוּן as increased “pregnancies.”¹⁶ However, in each of the three contexts where the noun הָרֵוּן appears, the range of meaning is more isolated to the act of conception (cf. Gen 3:16; Ruth 4:13; Hos 9:11) as opposed to the general understanding of the *duration* of a nine-month pregnancy.¹⁷ This nuance is best demonstrated in Hos 9:11. Here, the prophet

13. Prov 14:23 is an example where עֶצַב clearly means “to work.” On the suggested roots of עֶצַב, see G. R. Driver, “Supposed Arabisms in the Old Testament,” *JBL* 55 (1936) 101–20 at pp. 115–17.

14. Seven times in the Niphal—Gen 45:5; 1 Sam 20:3, 34; 2 Sam 19:3; Neh 8:10–11; Ecc 10:9; twice in the Hithpael—Gen 6:6; 34:7; three times in the Qal—1 Kgs 1:6; 1 Chr 4:10; Isa 54:6; once in the Hiphil—Ps 78:40; and three times in the Piel—Isa 63:10; Job 10:8; Ps 56:6 [Heb.]. Meyers notes that “the tendency to prefer reflexive forms may be due to the verb’s introspective, personal, and emotional semantic content” (“עֶצַב,” 279).

15. J. Parkhurst, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon* (London: Davison, 1823) 519.

16. Meyers, “עֶצַב,” 279–80; idem, “Gender Roles and Genesis 3:16 Revisited,” in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. C. Meyers and M. O’Connor (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983) 337–54 at pp. 344–45.

17. Cf. Matityahu Clark, *Etymological Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew* (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1999) 61; William Gesenius, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. Edward Robinson (New York: Houghton & Mifflin, 1906) 248. So too Meyers, “Gender Roles,” 345. Meyers notes both “conception” and “pregnancies” as viable translations even though she opts for the latter. See also idem, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 88–91 esp. p. 90.

actually works backwards in the entire pregnancy process when he uses the phrase *מלדה ומבטן ומהריון* “No birth, no pregnancy, and no conception!” In this context, the Qal infinitive construct of the verb *ילד* is used followed by the nouns *בטן* (best understood here as “belly”) and *הריון* (an alternate form of *הרון*) rendered as “conception.” One could just as easily translate the phrase as, “no giving birth, no belly (that is, being pregnant), and no conception” (NASB).¹⁸ As with the passage in Ruth 4:13, here *הרון* clearly means “to conceive.” While some may suggest that there is no difference between “conception” and “pregnancy;” based on Ruth 4:13 and Hos 9:11 the authors of the biblical text did make a distinction especially when they used the nominal form.

To be sure, the verbal forms of *הרה* indeed carry the idea of conception *and* the gestational period of pregnancy. But even then, within Genesis we find examples of *הרה* being used to highlight the actual act of conception in extraordinary circumstances. This is true of Hagar and Lot’s daughters who “conceive” with men who were aged, with Rebekah and Leah who were barren, and with Tamar who was widowed. Indeed, the emotive responses of all these women when they find they have conceived intimates this (cf. Gen 16:4–5; 19:36; 21:2; 25:21; 29:32–35; 30:17, 19, 23; 38:18).

Another argument against *הרון* being rendered as labor/childbirth is the general means by which the authors of the MT expressed the idea of giving birth. Throughout the MT, the normal way to express this idea is to use the verb *ילד* (as in Gen 3:16).¹⁹ If an author wanted to say that someone conceived and then gave birth, *ילד* and some form of *הרה* could be used together as evinced in Gen 4:1. This clarification and distinction is also seen in Ruth 4:13. The verb *ילד* is used in conjunction with the noun *הרון* to present the idea of Ruth’s conceiving and giving birth to Obed. Here, conceiving and childbirth are two separate concepts, which should not be circumscribed into one.

We may summarize our discussion thus far by noting that, based on the general usage of both *עצבון* and *הרון* it is best to translate these terms as “sorrow” (in the emotional sense) and “conception” respectively. The traditional interpretation of “pain in childbirth” (e.g., NASB), does justice neither to the general usage of these words elsewhere nor to the immediate context as we will demonstrate below. Finally, some may ask, if the author(s) of Genesis really wanted to stress the idea of barrenness, why not just use the term *עקר* and remove all ambiguity. To be sure, this would have been helpful *if* that were the *only* intent of the author in Gen 3:16. The curse is by far more than just barrenness. As we will see below, all the issues related to conception are in play by the phrase “sorrowful conceptions,” not just barrenness. For example, this could include miscarriages, impotence, and the unwillingness of men to impregnate their wives.²⁰ The

18. So too Iain Provan, *Seriously Dangerous Religion* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014) 117.

19. So too Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 90.

20. Infertility is generally defined as the inability to conceive and bear a live child within a year—something that has plagued many women.

latter makes sense of the second part of the curse, "your desire will be for your husband" as demonstrated by Rachel and Leah's bartering for Jacob's sexual "attention" (Gen 30). Interestingly, the author of Exodus actually makes a distinction between miscarriages and barrenness when he notes that as part of the blessings of the Mosaic covenant, YHWH would reverse *both* aspects of the curse (Exod 23:26)!

עצבונך והרנך as a *Hendiadys*?²¹

Having presented alternate translations for *עצבון* ("sorrow") and *הרנן* ("conception") in their context, we now turn to their syntactical arrangement as a possible hendiadys.²² Prototypical of the hendiadys approach is Claus Westermann, who notes that, "The construction 'I will greatly multiply your pain and your childbearing' is a typical hendiadys; it means: the pains that childbearing will bring you."²³ Not surprisingly, Westermann's conclusion is parroted in many of the modern English translations (e.g., NIV, NRSV, NASB, etc.). Conversely, Meyers rejects the idea of a hendiadys in the context and opts for the translation "I will greatly increase your work and your pregnancies."²⁴ She argues that, based on social-scientific studies, women carried a large portion of the workload in agrarian societies, especially in Iron Age I Israel. However, as we have already demonstrated above, *עצבון* is best rendered as emotional grief, not literal physical work. Second, Meyers's interpretation of *הרנן* as increased "pregnancies" is not convincing in a world where increased pregnancies would have been desired, especially in an agrarian society. This is particularly true in Genesis where both Leah and Rachel desired increased pregnancies as a means to please their husband—it was not a curse for them. Moreover, Tzvi Novick rightly notes that nowhere in Genesis do we see Eve associated with working in the fields.²⁵ As a matter of fact, none of the matriarchs after they are married appear working in the fields. What they do participate in is the emotional struggle for children as our theory supports.

Next, David Tsumura, arguing for the root *הרר* instead of *הרה* renders *עצבונך והרנך* as a hendiadys meaning "your pain and trembling" (that is,

21. The phrase *תהו ובהו* ("formless and void") in Gen 1:2 can also be translated as the hendiadys "formless void." Cf. Ronald J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004) 16 §72; or Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 148.

22. Whether or not the words *עצבון* and *הרנן* constitute a hendiadys does not cause our theory to rise or fall. We address this issue because of the almost near consensus within biblical translations.

23. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 262. See also Gordon J. Wenham, who renders the hendiadys as "your pains of pregnancy" (*Genesis 1–15*, WBC 1 [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987] 81).

24. Meyer, "Gender Roles," 337–54 at p. 345. So too the conclusion of Tianna Russouw, "'I Will Greatly Increase Your Toil and Your Pregnancies': Alternative Perspectives on Genesis 3:16," *OTE* 15 (2002) 149–63.

25. Tzvi Novick, "Pain and Production in Eden: Some Philological Reflections on Genesis iii 16," *VT* 58 (2008) 235–44 at p. 240.

“your trembling pain”).²⁶ On the surface this makes sense. Women endure great pain in the act of labor, as well as the pain later in life when a parent must let the child leave the home.²⁷ However, once again arguments like that of Tsumura’s focus too heavily on the birthing of children as opposed to the act of conception, which הָרִין seems to connote.²⁸ Novick also misses the strength of our above conclusions when he proposes “forming”/“shaping” as an alternate meaning for the noun עֲצֹבוֹן, thus rendering the hendiadys as an increase of “the shaping of your conception.”²⁹ On this view, God will elongate the gestational period for women, during which time they will endure pain/discomfort. While Novick’s lexical work is very insightful, his translation does not mesh with the larger rhetorical presentation of the author of Genesis, which our theory takes into account (more below). Furthermore, are we to assume that women once had a shorter gestational period than nine months? How much did it increase after the fall? A week? A month? Certainly not long enough to be a major curse. And Jacques Gruot rightly points up that Eve is “ignore encore ce que sont les grossesses”!³⁰

None of these hendiadal proposals, whether using the traditional understandings of עֲצֹבוֹן and הָרִין or with alternate roots, really satisfies the immediate or larger contexts. However, if עֲצֹבוֹן וְהָרִין is rendered as the hendiadys “your sorrowful conceptions,” then the translation satisfies the immediate and larger context. Even if one rejects the hendiadys, the translation “your sorrow *in* your conception” also suits the context well.³¹ Either of these translations takes seriously the emotional pain experienced by women when faced with the inability to have children. As we will see in a moment, this works well within the context of Genesis.

26. David T. Tsumura, “A Note on הָרִין (Gen 3,16),” *Bib* 75 (1994) 398–400. See also Chaim Rabin, “Etymological Miscellanea,” *ScrHier* 8 (1961) 390; Mitchell Dahood, “Hebrew-Ugaritic Lexicography II,” *Bib* 45 (1964) 393–412 at p. 404. Dahood translates הָרִין as “to desire” or “yearn.” Rabin suggests הָרִין is from the root הָרַר similar to Ugaritic *hrr* (“to desire sexually”) or possibly the Arabic root *harra* (“to howl”) (“Egyptological Miscellanea,” 390). He concludes that in the context, הָרִין should be translated “sexual desire” or “whining.” Gunkel renders the term as “Seufzer” (“sighing”; *Genesis*, 21).

27. This type of emotional pain is exemplified by Rebekah’s actions with Jacob and her anxiety over Esau’s choice of wives (Gen 27:42–46).

28. See also the cogent rebuttal of Tsumura’s argument by Novick, “Pain and Production,” 238–40.

29. *Ibid.*, 241. Shamai Gelernder also follows this secondary meaning of עֲצֹב but suggests that it is to be understood as “an unceasing process of making choices and decisions leading to design and creation” in the long and arduous process of “shaping” children throughout their lives (*The Good Creator: Literature and Theology in Genesis 1–11* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997] 31).

30. Jacques Gruot, *La Genèse: Une lecture littéraire* (France: L’Harmattan, 2002) 37.

31. Note that the second term הָרִין is singular, which can also reflect a collective concept of “conceptions,” which is followed by most translators. Church father the Venerable Bede (AD 673–735) rightly understood these two words to mean “sorrow” and “conceptions” but opted for the translation “I will multiply your sorrows and your conceptions” (*On Genesis Bede: Translated Texts for Historians*, vol. 48, trans. Calvin B. Kendall [Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008] 134).

SYNTACTICAL PARALLELISM IN GENESIS 3:16–17

Also supporting our proposed reading is the parallelism in Gen 3:16–17. These two verses contain parallel couplets describing the sin of the woman and the man, respectively. In this regard, James Kugel's definition of the parallelistic line obtains here. He notes, "biblical lines are parallelistic not because B is meant to be a parallel of A, but because B typically supports A, carries it further, backs it up, completes it, goes beyond it" (emphasis added).³² This is exactly what we find in Gen 3:16 and 17. Once the opening statement is given (אל-האשה אמר), the curse on the woman in Gen 3:16 can be divided as follows:

הרבה ארבה עצבותך והרנך A
בעצב תלדי בנים B

And what is the result of this declaration of the curse? The descriptive, not prescriptive, statement, ואל-אישך תשוקתך והוא ימשל-בך "and to your husband will be your desire and he will rule over you."³³ Following Kugel's definition, the "B" clause "goes beyond" or "carries forward" the "A" clause. As such, "A" would read: "I will greatly increase your sorrowful conceptions" with the "B" clause carrying "A" further by commenting on the actual event of childbirth after a woman does conceive: "in toil/pain you will bring forth children."³⁴ Therefore, contextually, the aspect of the curse of "pain in childbirth" is already handled in the "B" clause whereas the preceding clause points to something *before* the actual delivery, namely, sorrowful conceptions.³⁵

In Gen 3:17 we find an analogous poetic device used to articulate the results of the man's disobedience. After the similar opening statement vis-à-vis v. 16 (ולאדם אמר), which includes the reason for Adam's punishment (כי-שמעת לקול אשתך ותאכל מן-העץ אשר צייתך לאמר לא תאכל ממנו), YHWH's curse to Adam appears as a parallelistic couplet,

ארורה האדמה בעבורך A
בעצבך תאכלנה כל ימי חייך B

"Cursed is the ground on account of you" // "In sorrow you will eat from it all the days of your life." Again, Kugel's assertion that the "B" clause moves

32. James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) 52. Kugel (p. 58) summarizes this formula in the refrain, "A, and what's more, B."

33. Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," *JAAR* 41 (1973) 30–48 at p. 41. See also J. Abraham, *Eve: Accused or Acquitted? A Reconsideration of Feminist Readings of the Creation Narrative Texts in Genesis 1–3* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2002) 203; and Phyllis Bird, "Images of Women in the Old Testament," in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman K. Gottwald (New York: Orbis, 1983) 252–306 at p. 278.

34. Again, the root עצב can carry both the physical and emotive pain of labor and childbirth.

35. Some suggest that עצבון can include morning sickness, labor pains, and general discomfort. For example, Lothar Ruppert intimates some of this by his use of the word "Schwangerschaftsbeschwerden" (*Genesis: Ein kritischer und theologischer Kommentar, 1. Teilband: Gen 1,1–11,26* [Germany: Echter, 1992] 160).

beyond the "A" clause in parallelistic lines obtains for v. 17. Because the ground is cursed, as with the woman's womb, the man will not only have physical toil to bring forth food to sustain his family, a reality delineated in vv. 18–19 (more below), but he will also eat his food in emotional turmoil as seen in clause "B" of v. 17. Interestingly, unlike for the woman, the curse against the man (and the ground) is presented in extended form by the qualifiers and explanations found in vv. 17a and 18–19. Here, the cursing of the "ground" (אדמה) noted in clause "A" should be understood in the same vein as the cursing of the metaphorical "ground" (the womb) of the woman in clause "A" of v. 16.³⁶ In both cases, the "ground" that should produce plentiful "fruit" is hindered in some way. For the woman it is an inability to conceive (e.g., the problem of miscarriages). For the man, קוצ and דרדר ("thorns" and "thistles") hinder the "conception" of the fruit of the ground.

Objections to the Emotional Pain Interpretation

Scholars have rejected translating עצבונך והרנך as either emotional pain in conception, or some level of restricted conceptions, for two main reasons. First, many commentators (and we need to point out that they are generally male) argue that conception is supposed to be a happy and enjoyable experience.³⁷ Thus, it is argued, there is "no pain" for the woman in the act of conception, or sexual intercourse.³⁸ Without going into specifics,

36. So too the conclusion of Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) 161. Ronald A. Simkins avers that the "woman is like the arable land in that the fecundity of both is linked to the man's sowing of seed; but, whereas the land had given birth to the first man due to Yahweh's activity, all future generations will be birthed from the woman" ("Gender Construction in the Yahwist Creation Myth," in *Genesis: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998] 32–52 at p. 49).

37. Generally speaking, the two main groups who have translated and offered commentary on Gen 3 are men and feminist interpreters—the former being the group having done so for millennia. Neither group may be as in tune with the typical female response to barrenness. The first group because it is not something that necessarily affects them on a psychological or a physiological level the same way as it affects women. For example, Kristen Kvam points up that "Martin Luther goes as far as to say that Eve was happy with her punishment, imagining her saying: I have sinned. But see what a merciful God we have. How many privileges, both temporal and spiritual, He is leaving for us sinners! Therefore we women should bear the hardship and wretchedness of conceiving, of giving birth, and of obeying you husbands" (Kristen E. Kvam, Linda S. Schearing, and Valarie H. Ziegler, eds., *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999] 274). The second group has often stood against the patriarchal idea of women "having" to give birth (see for example comments by Christine Froula, "Writing Genesis: Gender and Culture in Twentieth-Century Texts," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 7/2 [1988] 197–220 at p. 199).

38. Allen P. Ross is a proponent of this view (*Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988] 146). He argues, "First, since there is no pain in conception, the word 'conception' must be taken as a synecdoche representing the whole process that begins with conception." However, he goes on to note correctly that, "the word for 'pain' (‘iṣṣ’bôn) may not be limited to physical suffering in the process of childbirth. It basically means 'painful toil' but can be applied to emotional as well as physical pain. The woman's susceptibility to the emotion and physical pain associated with the process of, and

we think it can be agreed on that this is not always the case. Further, we also need to keep in mind that women for many years were married to husbands through arranged marriages—a continuing reality in certain cultures. A sexual act that brought forth progeny could just as easily be construed as fulfilling a duty, rather than partaking in pleasure.

The second and stronger argument is the one presented by Umberto Cassuto. He insists that limiting Eve's reproduction would go against the divine imperative of fruitfulness found in Gen 1 (cf. Gen 1:28; 9:1, 7).³⁹ This does seem to be problematic on the first reading. Indeed, it would seem counterproductive for God to limit humanity's ability to fulfill the command. In this vein, fourth-century churchman, Severian of Gabala, argued that God "does not deliver a curse, that she would be childless, since previously he had blessed her."⁴⁰ However, the curse as we have argued is a logical result of disobedience. The reality is that things that were supposed to be easy and enjoyable before the fall now are marked with obstacles.⁴¹ Moreover, those making this second objection neglect to see that throughout Genesis there is a pattern of promise, threat to promise, and then the reinstatement of the promise (e.g., [1] Gen 12:1–3//12:10–20//13:14–18; [2] 13:14–18//14:1–24//15:1; [3] 15:1//15:2–3//15:4–7; [4] 15:4–7//16:1–16//17:1–16, etc.).⁴² Just because God has decreed for people to do something does not mean that it will be easy.⁴³ And, as we shall argue below, when women in Genesis do conceive after bearing the shame of barrenness, they recognize more fully the role of God in the conception process. Therefore, arguments pitting the divine imperative to be fruitful against failed conceptions/infertility do not hold up in light of the greater context of the creation and fall narratives, or Genesis as a whole.

EVE'S CURSE AND THE AUTHOR'S RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF GENESIS

While no one can be certain of all the rhetorical agendas of the author(s) of Genesis, one of the repeated motifs is certainly the desire for progeny and the continuation of the godly line (e.g., 4:1; 11:30; 15:2; 17:6; 26:22; 28:3; 30:1). The divine command to "be fruitful and multiply" only bolsters this

ability for, childbearing may have been what Peter had in mind in his description of 'weaker vessels' (1 Peter 3:7)."

39. Cassuto, *Genesis Part I*, 163.

40. Severian of Gabala, *Ancient Christian Texts: Commentaries on Genesis 1–3: Severian of Gabala and Bede the Venerable*, trans. Robert C. Hill and Carmen S. Hardin, ed. Michael Glerup (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010) 85.

41. Walter Brueggemann argues that the punishment is that they should die and therefore not fulfill any of the divine commands. The miracle is that they live (*Genesis* [Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Atlanta: John Knox, 1973] 49).

42. There is actually a linking pattern here whereby the reinstated promise becomes the nexus of the next threat.

43. A good example of this is God's promise for the children of Israel to enter the land of Canaan. This promise was indeed conditional as was Adam and Eve's life in the Garden (cf. Gen 2:16–17).

conclusion (1:28; 9:1, 7; 35:11; 48:4). In what follows, we will further this discussion by noting the barrenness motif as a direct threat not only to the divine command to procreate but also for the very continuation of the Abrahamic line.

The Curse of the Matriarchs and Other Cases of Problematic "Conceptions" in Genesis

To be sure, any number of arguments could be marshaled against our proposed translation if only viewed from the immediate context; however, how it fits within the larger context of Genesis (and the OT) only bolsters our position. Not surprisingly, the common malady that the matriarchs face is either barrenness or the lack of a suitable male to aid in procreation/conception. While the reader may immediately think of Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel as bearing the brunt of barrenness, we will argue that Eve, Leah, Tamar, and Lot's daughters also faced, at some level, the issue of "barrenness."⁴⁴ Not surprisingly, it is in the context of barrenness that we see these matriarchs "turning" to the men in their lives to remove this "disgrace." The resultative aspect of Eve's curse noted in 3:16b thus comes to fruition as these "barren" women go to great lengths to have children.

To begin, after being expelled from the Garden, Eve bears a son—Cain. However, in Gen 4:1, Eve utters the cryptic phrase: קניתי איש את־יהוה, "I have acquired a man *child* with the help of YHWH." It would seem that in the aftermath of the fall and curse, Eve struggled to conceive and only through divine intervention did she become pregnant. Understandably, this is an argument from silence. Nowhere does Eve say that she waited a long time for a child. However, in light of the continued theme of barrenness among the matriarchs, this obscure comment takes on a new understanding and may support our thesis.

Leah also endured the shame of delayed conceptions. In Gen 29:31, the text says, וירא יהוה כי־שנואה לאה ויפתח את־רחמה ורחל עקרה, "Now YHWH saw that Leah was not loved so he opened her womb; now Rachel was barren." The fact that God opens (פתח) Leah's womb seems to indicate that beforehand it had been closed. Perhaps this is a clue that Leah struggled with barrenness, or at the very least, had trouble conceiving. This interpretation is strengthened by the clear statement within the same verse that Rachel was "barren" (עקרה). In what is perhaps one of the saddest passages of Genesis, Leah names her four eldest sons by linking the arrival of a son with the hope that she will be loved and adored: Reuben, "now the Lord has looked upon my affliction and my husband will love me"; Simeon, "God saw I was hated and he gave me another son"; Levi, "now this time my husband will be joined to me"; and Judah, "now I will praise the Lord" (cf. Gen 29:32–35). Note especially that Reuben means that God looked on her *affliction*—which could mean either her barrenness or the fact that her

44. See also James M. Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010) 85.

husband did not love her. In each case, the new son brought hope of not only taking away her shame of not bearing children, but more importantly for Leah, it brought the hope that maybe her husband would love her—an allusion back to the second part of the curse in Gen 3:16b.

In two cases in Genesis, women practiced incest in order to conceive. First, Judah's daughter-in-law, Tamar, a Canaanite, is unable to conceive and bear a child with two different husbands (Gen 38:6–11). And after Judah sent her back to her father's home, Tamar lacked a suitable man even for the hope of conceiving. Desperation drives her to pretend to be a prostitute and have sex with her father-in-law in order to have a child. She has no husband to desire or turn to, but that does not stop her in her quest for offspring (Gen 38:14–30). She turns her desire to the next able-bodied male relative. Similarly, Lot's two daughters, in desperation for children, turn to the only man in their life—their father Lot. After getting him drunk they become pregnant by him (Gen 19:31–38). While there are possible etiological implications in the latter case (the negative origins of Moab and Ammon), one should not miss the greater rhetorical agenda of the author vis-à-vis the curse. Thus, one could argue that a form of enforced/situational "barrenness" was the compelling factor for all three women. Moreover, their desire for a man to aid them in conception drove them to extraordinary lengths.

The three other matriarchs have well-documented stories about their barrenness and how God overcame this. As previously noted, Sarah was so desirous of a child that she gave her handmaiden Hagar to Abraham in order to have children. However, God proves God's faithfulness to the covenant God made with Abraham by having Sarah conceive when there is no possibility that it could happen, other than by God's intervention (Gen 21:1–2). Next, Rebekah is grieved over the lack of children causing Isaac to entreat the Lord to allow her to bear children (Gen 25:21). Finally, after Leah gives birth to her children, Rachel demands that Jacob give (יָדָה) her children lest she die (Gen 30:1). Clearly, the lack of children drives the matriarchs to desperate measures and is much more at the center of the drama than the pain in the actual childbearing. While it is true that Rebekah had a hard pregnancy since she is carrying twins (Gen 25:22), and Rachel dies in childbirth with Benjamin (Gen 35:18), it is still evident that neither of these unfortunate events carries the rhetorical import that lack of children does.

Finally, the actions of the women in these narratives answer the descriptive aspect that follows the curse in 3:16b—*וְאֵל-אִשְׁךָ תְּשׁוּקָתְךָ*—"and your desire will be for your man."⁴⁵ Each matriarch goes to great lengths to conceive by the men in their lives: Sarah was willing to give Hagar to her husband (Gen 16:1–6); Isaac had to intercede on behalf of Rebekah's barrenness (Gen 25:21); Rachel and Leah bartered for Jacob's attention so they could conceive (Gen 30:14–16); Tamar played the prostitute and cheated

45. For an extended bibliography on this portion of 3:16, see Vogels, "Power Struggle," 197 n. 1.

death to conceive (Gen 38:14–23); and the two daughters of Lot practiced incest in order to bear children (Gen 19:31–38). The curse (3:16a), and its result (3:16b), in some way, affected every prominent woman of Genesis; it was only through intercession, avarice, deception, and negotiation that they had children.

The Patriarchal Curse in Light of Eve's Curse

Closely linked to the author's rhetorical agenda promoting the motif of progeny, or the lack thereof, is the motif of "barrenness" of the land (i.e., famine). In this vein, our reading of Gen 3:16–17 helps explain the frequency of this motif within the ancestral narratives directly related to the patriarchs.⁴⁶ Abraham (and Lot), Isaac, Jacob (and his sons including Joseph) all face famine. Abraham and Jacob both move their families to Egypt from Canaan, the promised land, to escape famines. For Abraham, this is a temporary venture, but for Jacob, his family stays for generations (cf. Gen 12:10–20; chs. 42–50). Isaac also attempts to move to Egypt due to a famine but is forbidden by God and is given provision in Canaan (Gen 26:1–2). The land, which was supposed to be fruitful and easy to tend, withheld its yield. It brought "barrenness" to the men and emotional turmoil (cf. Gen 12:10–13; 26:1–9; 42:2; 43:1–12; 45:1–11). It is also a double punishment since this is the land God had promised to the patriarchs—a land that is later described as flowing with milk and honey (Exod 3:8,17; 13:5; 33:3; Lev 20:23; Num 13:27; 14:8 etc.). While the land offered a level of freedom from want, for both the men and the women, the land did not offer respite from the punishment of the fall.⁴⁷

EVE'S CURSE IN A MODERN CONTEXT⁴⁸

By using our suggested translation, it becomes evident that what is being brought to the forefront is not the actual pain in labor but the emotional pain that many women face when dealing with infertility or miscarriages.⁴⁹ The curse was a direct attack on Eve's motherhood—indeed it is a psychological burden as well as a physical burden.⁵⁰ This is a phenomenon that still affects women despite advances in medicine. Today, infertility is defined as the inability to conceive in a year, or the inability to carry a pregnancy to a live birth. The term is a wide umbrella for understanding the issue of what is often seen in the Bible as barrenness.

46. The word for famine, רָעָב, appears 25 times in Genesis; this is the second highest rate next to Jeremiah, which has 33 instances.

47. The story of Ruth also follows a similar pattern as that found in Genesis. Barrenness and famine play a central role throughout the book.

48. In the anecdotes that follow we are not suggesting that infertility issues would evoke the exact same responses from women in *every* culture and context across the centuries. Instead, we are only attempting to show the emotional turmoil associated with infertility that exists even today.

49. So Ruppert, *Genesis*, 160.

50. *Ibid.*

With the rise of infertility treatments, there have been a number of psychological and sociological studies done on the impact of infertility on couples. These studies have found that women, rather than their male partners, take the lead in addressing the issue of infertility. Men are often seen as supporters and not initiators. More importantly, these studies show that women feel the emotional impact of barrenness more acutely than the men. For the most part, men view infertility as a setback, and while sad, it is not viewed as devastating. Conversely, in many cases, women viewed infertility as identity shaking. For example, one study dealing with the effects of infertility conducted by sociologists Arthur Greil, Thomas A. Leitko, and Karen L. Porter, reported that 19 of 22 women who were interviewed experienced great emotional pain over their infertility whereas "only 9 of the husbands felt that infertility had personally affected them a great deal."⁵¹

Based on similar accounts, many infertile women feel that the inability to bear children eats away at what it means to be a woman.⁵² Women of all walks of life feel that the plight of infertility has the ability to distance them from women who are mothers. For example, one self-identified feminist in the Greil, Leitko, and Porter study stated, "It makes me feel confused, you know, because I'm a little surprised at how I've taken all this. Because the way that I was, I wouldn't have thought that it would have thrown me for such a loop."⁵³ It appears that in *some* cases, especially in pronatalist cultures (e.g., Israel, Sweden, Iran) that ideologies are not stronger than what seems to be innate psychological drives. Indeed, infertility issues and the problems they create cuts across cultures and eras.⁵⁴ In extreme cases, some infertile women could simply not overcome the idea that they were not "true women."⁵⁵ Based on these anecdotes alone, is clear that the emotional pain of not being able to bear a child obtains even today.

51. Arthur Greil, Thomas A. Leitko, and Karen L. Porter, "Infertility: His and Hers," *Gender and Society* 2/2 (1988) 172-99 here p. 180.

52. See for example Carolyn McLeod and Julie Ponesse, "Infertility and Moral Luck: The Politics of Women Blaming Themselves for Infertility," *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* 1/1 (2008) 126-44 esp. p. 127; Charlene E. Miall, "Perceptions of Informal Sanctioning and the Stigma of Involuntary Childlessness," *Deviant Behavior* 6 (1985) 383-403 esp. p. 387; Lise Motherwell and Suze Prudent, "Childlessness and Group Psychotherapy: Psychological and Sociological Perspectives," *Group* 22/3 (1998) 145-57 esp. p. 149; Margaret J. Sandelowski, "Failures of Volition: Female Agency and Infertility in Historical Perspective," *Signs* 15 (1990) 475-99 esp. p. 495.

53. Greil, Leitko, and Porter, "Infertility," 181.

54. McLeod and Ponesse, "Infertility and Moral Luck," 136, note that issues of infertility even in non-pronatalist cultures can have negative effects on women. Note also the comments by Sandelowski, "Failures of Volition," 499.

55. Hilla Haelyon comments that "Infertility, as a barrier to motherhood . . . throws into question a woman's gender identity, her sexual identity and her very sense of selfhood. Thus the particular situation of infertile women illumines the social construction of gender and politics of identity" (" 'Longing for a Child': Perceptions of Motherhood among Israeli-Jewish Women Undergoing In Vitro Fertilization Treatments," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues* 12 [5767/2006] 177-202 at p. 181 n. 11).

CONCLUSION

Our study has shown that Gen 3:16 should be read in light of not only v. 17, but also the rhetorical agenda of the author(s) of Genesis, namely, to show how the matriarchs and patriarchs overcame the curse with the aid of God in order to bring forth progeny. By reading the phrase *עצבונך והריוך* in 3:16a as “your sorrowful conceptions” / “your sorrow *in* your conceptions,” we found that the cursing of Eve’s womb through increased infertility paralleled that of the cursed ground for Adam. Both the man and the woman found themselves in a struggle to bring forth “fruit,” which would sustain and allow the human race to continue.⁵⁶ For both, physical and emotional/psychological toil (*עצבוןך*) became the hallmark of the curse. In a way, the curse of psychological turmoil was a fitting punishment due to the first couple’s attempt to usurp godly wisdom—a cerebral endeavor (Gen 3:6). At a secondary level, in 3:16b, YHWH goes on to declare, *not prescribe*, that due to the issues of barrenness, the woman would now desire her husband in order to help remove the stigma. However, the man would exploit this “need” for his own purposes—broken relationship being another effect of the fall.⁵⁷ YHWH’s statement was not directed toward the man but rather was part of the punishment of the woman.⁵⁸ Therefore, men are not called to enforce hierarchy but rather God is telling Eve where she will start to put her trust for fulfillment in life.⁵⁹ This does not mean that she will have an overactive sexual appetite or that she will seek to dominate her husband or assert her independence.⁶⁰ Rather, this means that she will be drawn to Adam because of this internal desire for children that cannot otherwise be quenched. The author of Genesis used the motifs of barrenness/infertility and desire found within Gen 3:16 as a unifying thread for the accounts of the matriarchs. Similarly, Gen 3:17 served a similar function for the patriarchs. Sadly, the curse of barrenness of the “womb” is found beyond the pages of Genesis—affecting men and women to this day.

56. R. R. Reno argues that both curses are “tinged with death, because both are central to the project of physical survival” (*Genesis* [Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010] 93).

57. So too Vogels, “Power Struggle,” 200, 207–9.

58. Interestingly, J. Baskin points out that according to rabbinic teaching, the imperative to have children rests with the men of the marriage and not the women. The rabbis give the duty to procreate to men, since they saw the natural in-born desire for women to have children and did not need to legislate it (“Rabbinic Reflections of the Barren Wife,” *HTR* 82 [1989] 101–14 esp. pp. 102, 105).

59. On the understanding of the woman “turning” to her husband, see the argument of Lohr, “Sexual Desire?” 227–46.

60. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 161.



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