

## Infant, Infancy

- I. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament
- II. New Testament

### I. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

“Infancy” can be defined as “the period of life between birth and the acquisition of language approximately one to two years later” (*EBrit*, s.v.). In Hebrew, the closest terms relate to the period of breast-feeding, which biblical and comparative evidence suggests to have lasted for two to three years (2 Macc 7:27; Gruber: 73–74, 94–95; Stol: 181).

The four nouns *yōnēq*, *’ōlēl*, *’ōlāl*, and *’ūl* are derived from roots meaning “to suck/suckle” and can refer to babies. The only word that is strictly used for small babies, who are not yet able to walk (or perhaps even crawl) is *yōnēq*, which LXX usually renders θηλάζων “suckling” (but νήπιος in Isa 11:8; 53:2). While the *yōnēq* is associated with the mother’s breast (Song 8:1; Joel 2:16) and expected to be carried in the bosom (Num 11:12), the *’ōlāl* can be found on the street (Jer 6:11; 9:20). While the *yōnēq* suffers from “thirst,” the *’ōlāl* may demand “bread” (Lam 4:4). Accordingly, LXX translates *’ōlēl* and *’ōlāl* generally by νήπιος “infant, child” (but Hos 14:1 [Engl. 13:16] ὑποτίθησις, literally “breastling”). Words of wider meaning can also refer to babies: e.g., “son/daughter” (*ben/bat*; Exod 1:16), “child” or “boy” (*yeled/na’ar*; Exod 2:6–10; 2 Sam 12:15–22; Ruth 4:16). The collective term *ṯap* refers to both infants and other young children (e.g., Gen 34:29; Exod 12:37). Hosea

9:16 employs “the beloved of the womb” for newborn babies, while the more frequent expression “fruit of the womb” clearly evokes the imagery of pregnancy and birth (e.g., Gen 30:2), but refers more generally to children or descendants (Deut 7:13; Ps 127:3).

Birth may take place with or without the help of midwives (*mēyalledet*; Gen 35:17; 38:28; Exod 1:19; on their tasks Stol: 171–76). Infants are most frequently mentioned in genealogical lists, birth reports and, more elaborately, in birth narratives (for the relevant texts see Finlay: 24). The actions of infants are rarely mentioned, such as the struggling of the twins in the womb (Gen 25:22), Jacob’s gripping Esau’s heel during birth (v.26) or Zerah’s stretching out his hand before Perez’s “breaching” through before him (Gen 38:28–29). Even babies of symbolic significance are not portrayed as performing actions (Isa 8:1–4; Hos 1). A lucky birth causes joy (Gen 21:6; 30:13). The name is given by either the mother (Gen 4:25; 16:11; 1 Sam 1:20) or the father (Gen 4:26; Exod 2:22; Isa 8:3). As to the treatment of an infant immediately after birth, the fullest description is given in Ezek 16:4: cutting the umbilical cord, washing with water, rubbing with salt, wrapping in cloths (Stol: 141–44, 176–77). While we lack lullabies sung to babies in the Bible, there are several examples preserved in incantations from Babylonia (Farber).

The formal acceptance of a newborn baby into the family may be legally confirmed by an act of placing the baby “on the knee” (Stol: 178–79) of the legal mother (Gen 30:3), a father (Gen 48:12), or a grandfather (Gen 50:23). If a baby suffers the fate of being abandoned immediately after birth (Kuntz-Lübcke: 114–21), the expression “in its blood” (Ezek 16:6) legally refers to exposure for adoption. Thus, Codex Hamurapi (185) declares: “If a man has taken in adoption an infant while still (bathed in) his amniotic fluid and raised him up, that adopted child shall not be (re)claimed” (Malul: 106).

The baby may be breastfed by the natural mother (Song 8:1) or by a wet nurse (Stol: 181, 184–90). Ample evidence from Egypt and Mesopotamia suggests that employing a wet nurse was common practice among the wealthy (Gruber: 88–100). In Egypt, the wet nurse lived together with the child’s family (Feucht: 150). The HB/OT tells about a “wet nurse” (*mēneqet*) of Rebekah (Gen 24:59; 35:8), Moses (his own mother: Exod 2:7), Joash (2 Chr 22:11), and Israel (metaphorically: Isa 49:23). Moreover, the five-year-old Mephibosheth has a “nurse” (2 Sam 4:4) and Naomi becomes the nurse of her grandson (Ruth 4:16).

Boys are circumcised on the eighth day according to Gen 17 and Lev 12:3 (cf. Gen 21:4). The (male) firstborn belongs to God (Exod 13:2; 22:28; 34:19) and needs to be “redeemed” (Exod 13:13–15; 34:20; Num 18:15) by a gift of money (Num

3:46–47; 18:16; Luke 2:22–23). The sacrifice of infants however, which was apparently practised among the Phoenicians from the late 8th century BCE to the 1st centuries CE (Brown: 72–75), is strongly rejected in the HB as foreign practice (Deut 18:10; Jer 7:31; 19:5; 32:35), while some Israelites and Judaeans are accused of having adopted it (2 Kgs 17:17; 21:6; Isa 57:5; Ezek 16:20–21; 20:31).

The suckling's infancy ends with "weaning" (*g-m-l*), the child is "taken from the breast" (Isa 28:9), which may be marked by a feast (Gen 21:8). The former *yōnēq* enters a new stage of childhood. The "weaned child" (*gāmūl*) is considered to be able to live without its mother or its wet nurse and may be separated from them (Exod 2:10; 1 Sam 1:22–24). After weaning, the mother is more likely to become pregnant again (Hos 1:8; Gruber: 72–73).

Moses is the only figure of the HB/OT about whose infancy a story is told that goes beyond the immediate circumstances of his birth (Exod 2:1–10). While Moses' life is threatened by Pharaoh's plan to kill all newborn male Israelites (Exod 1:16, 22), he is first hidden by his mother and then, at the age of three months, rescued through the cunning cooperation of his mother, his sister, Pharaoh's daughter, and her female attendants. This story needs to be read in the context of the common literary motif of the exposed and rescued hero (Lewis: 149–95; Bock: 101–12). If the story deliberately draws on the Sargon legend, it could be interpreted as taking an anti-Assyrian stance (Römer; Otto). Moses' infancy inspired the imagination of early commentators such as Philo (Feldman). The earliest examples of Moses' portrayal as an infant in the history of art are found in the Dura Europos synagogue paintings (3rd cent.CE) and in an ivory carving (a reliquary from the 4th century CE, Museo di Santa Giulia, Brescia). The theme became particularly popular from the 16th century onwards (e.g., paintings by Raffael, Tintoretto, Poussin, Tiepolo, Negri).

During infancy, the threat of death was omnipresent. We may have to assume a natural infant mortality rate as high as 50 percent (Hübner: 53; on the illness of babies Stol: 209–11; on Egyptian infant mummies: Dunand). The Atra-hasīs epos attributes infant mortality to divine intervention as a measure to reduce overpopulation (Stol: 213–14). It is an eschatological hope that there will be no "infant of (just few) days" any more (Isa 65:20). The most elaborate biblical account surrounding the illness and death of an infant follows the story of David's illegitimate intercourse with Bathseba (2 Sam 12:15–23). According to Nathan's oracle, the nameless child has to die because of David's sin (2 Sam 12:14; Stol: 168–70). Solomon's wise judgement (1 Kgs 3:16–28) concerns the death of a baby, and its point is the mother's compassion for her living baby (v. 26).

Beyond the natural risks that threatened the life of infants, they were also affected by wars (Kuntz-Lübcke: 183–93), starvation (Lam 2:11, 19; 4:4), murder (Num 31:17; Deut 32:25; 1 Sam 15:3; 22:19; 2 Kgs 8:12; Jer 9:20; 44:7; Hos 14:1; Nah 3:10), captivity (Deut 20:14), and deportation (Lam 1:5; Volk: 74–81). During the starvation caused by a siege, infants may even have become the victims of cannibalism by their own parents (Deut 28:53–57; Lam 2:20). The brutality experienced in war and deportation evoked fantasies about harming the babies of the enemy (Ps 137:9). Against the backdrop of this harsh reality, some texts involve even God, whose first concern is the abundance of offspring (Gen 1:28), in the killing of children (Exod 12:29; Jer 14:16; Michel: 193–96). Other passages show God's particular affinity with infants. Israel is metaphorically described as a newborn adopted and nourished by God (Ezek 16:3–7; Malul: 112–13; cf. Deut 32:10–14). God has a special love for Solomon already as a baby (2 Sam 12:24–25). God blesses Samson during his development as a child (Judg 13:24) and Samuel grows up "with YHWH" (1 Sam 2:21). Even infants, who do not yet understand, are supposed to hear the teaching of the Torah so that they may learn to fear God (Deut 31:12–13). God's power is made manifest "out of the mouth of babes and sucklings" (Ps 8:2–3), an image of humanity which, looking at the heavenly lights (v. 4), becomes aware of its infantile tenderness and thus praises God.

**Bibliography:** ■ Bock, U., "Von seiner Kindheit bis zum Erwachsenenalter": Die Darstellung der Kindheit des Herrschers in mesopotamischen und kleinasiatischen Herrscherinschriften und literarischen Texten (AOAT 383; Münster 2012). ■ Brown, S., *Late Carthaginian Child Sacrifice and Sacrificial Monuments in their Mediterranean Context* (Sheffield 1991). ■ Dunand, F., "Les enfants et la mort en Egypte," in *Naissance et petite enfance dans l'Antiquité* (ed. V. Dasen; OBO 203; Göttingen 2004). ■ Farber, W., *Schlaf Kindern, Schlaf! Mesopotamische Baby-Beschwörungen und -Rituale* (Winona Lake, Ind. 1989). ■ Feldman, L. H., "Philo's View of Moses' Birth and Upbringing," *CBQ* 64 (2002) 258–81. ■ Feucht, E., *Das Kind im Alten Ägypten* (Frankfurt a.M. 1995). ■ Finlay, T. D., *The Birth Report Genre in the Hebrew Bible* (FAT 2/12; Tübingen 2005). ■ Gruber, M. I., "Breast-Feeding Practices in Biblical Israel and in Old Babylonian Mesopotamia," in *The Motherhood of God and Other Studies* (Atlanta, Ga. 1992) 69–107. ■ Hübner, U., "Sterben, überleben, leben: Die Kinder und der Tod im antiken Palästina," in *Sprachen – Bilder – Klänge: Dimensionen der Theologie im Alten Testament und in seinem Umfeld* (ed. C. Karrer-Grube et al.; AOAT 359; Münster 2009) 49–73. ■ "Infancy," *Encyclopedia Britannica* (available at [www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com); accessed June 30, 2015). ■ Kuntz-Lübcke, A., *Das Kind in den antiken Kulturen des Mittelmeeres* (Neukirchen-Vluyn 2007). ■ Lewis, B., *The Sargon Legend: A Study of the Akkadian Text and the Tale of the Hero who was Exposed at Birth* (ASORDS 4; Cambridge 1980). ■ Malul, M., "Adoption of Foundlings in the Bible and Mesopotamian Documents," *JSOT* 46 (1990) 97–126. ■ Michel, A., *Gott und Gewalt gegen Kinder im Alten Testament* (FAT 37; Tübingen 2003). ■ Otto, E., "Mose und das Gesetz: Die Mose-Figur als Gegenentwurf Politischer Theologie zur neuassyrischen

Königsideologie im 7. Jh. v. Chr.," in *Mose: Ägypten und das Alte Testament* (SBS 189; Stuttgart 2000) 43–83. ■ Römer, T., "Moïse entre théologie et histoire," *LumVie* 237 (1998) 7–16. ■ Stol, M., *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible* (Cuneiform Monographs 14; Groningen 2000). ■ Volk, K., "Von Findel-, Waisen-, verkauften und deportierten Kindern: Notizen aus Babylonien und Assyrien," in *Schaffe mir Kinder ...: Beiträge zur Kindheit im alten Israel und in seinen Nachbarkulturen* (ed. A. Kuntz-Lübcke/R. Lux; Leipzig 2006) 48–87.

*Dominik Markl*