

“Oh that you were like a brother to me, one who had nursed at my mother's breasts.” Breast Milk as a Kinship-Forging Substance

CYNTHIA R. CHAPMAN



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CYNTHIA R. CHAPMAN
OBERLIN COLLEGE

INTRODUCTION

The term “blood relatives” exists as an accepted and understood part of our English lexicon. It is only recently that anthropologists focusing on kinship studies have leveled a critique against the universal application of the metaphor of “blood” as a substance that establishes kinship relatedness. Adam Kuper, for example, argues that the notion of blood relatedness is culturally constrained, a uniquely European concept that finds its fullest articulation within British imperialism, an era that coincides with the development of the field of anthropology in Europe.¹ Likewise, Edouard Conte, who examines concepts of relatedness within Arab cultures, posits that the notion of kinship being determined by “blood” is a particularly western phenomenon and does not fit the self-understanding of Arabs.² He argues that Classical Arab physicians deal little with blood and do not see blood as passing on hereditary attributes.

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¹ A. Kuper, “Lineage Theory: A Critical Retrospect,” in D. Parkin and L. Stone (eds.), *Kinship and the Family. An Anthropological Reader* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 79–96.

² E. Conte, “Aganatic Illusions: The Element of Choice in Arab Kinship,” in F. Abdul-Jabar and H. Dawod (eds.), *Tribes and Power. Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Middle East* (London: Saqi, 2003), 16–17.

Inssofar as biblical scholars studying kinship based their work on British and American anthropologists throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries, using the language of blood relatedness in the analysis of ancient Israelite kinship organization was seen as natural and appropriate. Roland DeVaux defined the family in ancient Israel as consisting of “those who are united by common blood and common dwelling place.”³ More recent studies of kinship in ancient Israel have continued to use the language of “blood” in defining kinship relatedness. Shunya Bendor, for example, in his 1996 study of the social structure of ancient Israel describes incest prohibitions in the Bible as involving “a mixture of criteria of living together and of blood relationship.”⁴ As recently as 2001, Phillip King and Lawrence Stager defined the Hebrew term “house of the father” as a “multiple-family household consisting of blood relatives as well as the women connected through marriage.”⁵

The thoroughgoing anthropological critique of the generalized notion of blood relatedness requires biblical scholars to rethink the terms we use to describe kinship relatedness in the Bible. We need to begin using indigenous Hebrew terms to describe biblical conceptualizations of relatedness. The first assertion to be made in this regard is that the Hebrew word for “blood (דם)” is rarely if ever used as a substance that establishes a kinship relationship between people.⁶ Within biblical Hebrew, the most common substances that were understood to establish relatedness are “seed (זרע),” denoting semen and by extension the lineal relationship between parents and their descendants,⁷ and “bone and flesh עצם ובשר” a more ambiguous and malleable term for kinship relatedness.⁸

³ R. DeVaux, *Ancient Israel. Its Life and Institutions* (trans. J. McHugh; Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997 [republishing the 1961 translation of the 1958 French edition]), 20.

⁴ S. Bendor, *The Social Structure of Ancient Israel. The Institution of the Family (Beit 'Ab) From the Settlement to the End of the Monarchy* (Jerusalem Biblical Studies, 7; Jerusalem: Simor Ltd, 1996), 58.

⁵ P. King and L. E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 39.

⁶ Blood is primarily understood as a “basis of life” and as a substance poured out in sacrifice and shed through violence (see “דם,” in *HALOT* 1, 224–25 and Kedar-Kopfstein, “dam,” *TDOT* 3, 234–50).

⁷ As a word describing human kinship, the word זרע means male seed or semen and therefore designates the relationship between a father and his biological descendants. In three places, however, a woman’s offspring is referred to as her “seed” (Eve’s collective offspring in Gen 3:15; Hagar’s offspring in Gen 16:10; Rebekah’s offspring in Gen 24:60). See זרע in *HALOT* 1, 282 and Preuss, “zer’ah,” *TDOT* IV, 144.

⁸ Being of the same “bone and flesh” in the Bible can denote a sexual or marital relationship between a man and a woman (Gen 2:22–23); a relationship between a son and his mother’s male kin (Jacob and Laban, Gen 29:14–15; Abimelech and his mother’s brothers, Judg 9:1–3); a rela-

While “seed” and “bone and flesh” are by far the most common substance-based metaphors for kinship relatedness in the Bible, two separate types of evidence suggest that we investigate yet another substance, not yet considered, for its kinship-forging properties: breast milk. The first type of evidence comes from modern ethnographic and historical studies that have demonstrated a wide variety of cultures that understand breast milk as a substance that transmits physical and social traits. The second piece of evidence is the curious phrase from the Song of Songs in which the female lover wishes that her beloved were “like a brother,” “one who had nursed at my mother’s breasts.”⁹ The narrowing of the kinship term “brother” to the more intimate relationship of sharing the same mother’s breast milk suggests that nursing from the same source formed a particular kind of kinship bond.

This article will first provide an overview of ethnographic and historical literature that presents breast milk as a constitutive substance of kinship relatedness. I will then show that this same understanding of breast milk is evident in the common ancient Near Eastern literary trope that presents young royal males nursing at the breasts of goddesses. Turning to the biblical material, I will examine in detail the text from Song of Songs 8 in order to highlight the vocabulary of kinship that surrounds this reference to shared breastfeeding. Finally, I will provide a rereading of four familiar biblical narratives that feature breastfeeding in order to demonstrate that biblical narrative provides evidence for the ancient Israelite understanding of breast milk as a kinship-forging substance. Through breastfeeding, a mother or wet nurse was understood to confer upon an infant her own tribal identity and royal or priestly status. Biblical birth narratives of foundational male figures include breastfeeding episodes in order to bolster the hero’s royal or priestly credentials and to establish his insider ethnicity.

1. THE SOCIAL AND RITUAL IMPLICATIONS OF “MILK KINSHIP”

Several ethnographies and historical studies published in the last two decades attest to the understanding within a wide variety of cultures and across centuries of history that the act of breastfeeding and the substance of breast milk establish kinship relatedness. In this section, I will survey data from Arab-Muslim, Old Irish, Trobriand, and Abkhazian cultures to show that their indigenous conceptualizations of kinship include a focus on breast milk.

In a 1992 volume entitled *The Anthropology of Breast-Feeding: Natural Law or Social Construct*, Vanessa Maher noted the pro-

tionship between men of the same tribe (2 Sam 19:12–15); a relationship between men of allied tribes under a single leader (2 Sam 5:1).

⁹ Song 8:1.

nounced “social dimension” to breastfeeding in a wide variety of cultures. She asserted, “breast-feeding, like female sexuality and childbirth, is the subject of considerable cultural elaboration in most societies.”¹⁰ The act of breastfeeding was first and foremost an act understood to inculcate culturally defined personal boundaries in the child and to transmit maternal traits from mother or wet nurse to child.¹¹ In patrilineal societies, the recognized power of breast milk to transmit traits from mother to child resulted in laws that gave the father control over who provided breast milk to his child and for how long.¹² None of the cultures studied in this edited volume viewed breast milk simply in terms of nutrition.¹³

Edouard Conte in his 2003 study of Arab conceptualizations of kinship states that Arab texts do present kinship bonds in terms of shared substance, but the substance is not blood (*dam*), but rather meat or flesh (*lahma*). While blood imagery is used at times, it “has no claim to precedence.”¹⁴ Blood is used with regard to vengeance in that the “killer of a kinsman ‘cuts the blood’ (*yaqta’u al-dam*) and thereby ‘cuts (the bond of) the womb’ (*yaqta’u [silat] al-rahim*), a term semantically closer to ‘kinship’ than *dam*.”¹⁵

Conte asserts that the passing on of hereditary attributes as presented in Arab texts is understood “either in terms of perceived resemblance between males or the acquisition of traits, morphological or psychological, through the mother’s or wet nurse’s milk.”¹⁶ His examination of Islamic legal texts shows how “doctors of Law...broke down kinship into three component aspects”: *nasab* (descent), *musabara* (affinity), and *ridha’a*, which Conte identifies as “suckling and the relations derived therefrom.”¹⁷ The generic word for kinship in Arabic is *qaraba*, meaning “proximity” or “propinquity,” and Conte shows how this word can be associated with notions of agnatic descent (*nasab*). At the same time, however, he points to a related term *qurba*, which is commonly used in parallel with *rahim* (uterus), as a way to designate kinship in its “broadest sense.”¹⁸ Thus, Conte finds in Arabic writings an understanding of

¹⁰ V. Maher, “Breast-feeding in Cross-cultural Perspective: Paradoxes and Proposals,” in V. Maher (ed.), *The Anthropology of Breast-Feeding. Natural Law or Social Construct* (Oxford/Providence: Berg, 1992), 9.

¹¹ Maher, “Breast-feeding,” 28–29.

¹² Maher, “Breast-feeding,” 21–25.

¹³ Similar conclusions are reached in D. Valenze, *Milk. A Local and Global History* (New Haven/London: Yale Univ. Press, 2011), 1–33; M. Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1997), specifically on male control of breastfeeding, 107.

¹⁴ Conte, “Agnatic Illusions,” 17.

¹⁵ Conte, “Agnatic Illusions,” 17.

¹⁶ Conte, “Agnatic Illusions,” 17.

¹⁷ Conte, “Agnatic Illusions,” 20.

¹⁸ Conte, “Agnatic Illusions,” 20.

kinship based on breast milk, flesh, and “bonds of the womb” that are broken when one spills the blood of a kinsman.

In a 1999 study focusing on Islamic views of breastfeeding, Avner Giladi found that breast milk in Islamic societies establishes kinship ties with clear social implications.¹⁹ The Qur’an mentions “milk mothers” and “milk sisters” among a list of those women sexually prohibited to a man on account of incest.²⁰ The Haddith literature on this Qur’anic text is in agreement that breast milk forges a kinship bond that impedes marriage. Interpretations only vary on how much shared breast milk sufficiently establishes such a kinship bond, with opinions ranging from a single drop to two full years of nursing.²¹

While marital and sexual ties were prohibited to milk siblings, social access between the sexes became freer for those who had nursed at the same breast. For example, a Muslim woman could meet her milk brother unveiled.²² A wet nurse would have free, familial access to a male child whom she had once nursed for his entire life.²³ Finally, the symbolic nursing of an adult male provided him with social access to the women of the household.²⁴ Each of these examples shows that breast milk established a kinship tie that had a life-long social impact on a child.

In a 2004 study of the literature of the Irish and the Abkhazians of pre-modern Eurasia, Peter Parkes examined the role of shared breast milk in establishing a foster kin relationship between children and their wet nurses and also among “co-nurses” or “milk-siblings.”²⁵ In his study, Parkes documented an understanding of fosterage established through shared breast milk. Among the Abkhazians, suckling at the same breast established “consanguineal” relationships.²⁶ Parkes traces the roots of this view of breast milk to Aristotle and Galen, both of whom considered breast milk “a purified refinement of a woman’s uterine blood.”²⁷

¹⁹ A. Giladi, *Infants, Parents and Wet Nurses. Medieval Islamic Views on Breastfeeding and Their Social Implications* (Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 1999).

²⁰ Sura 4, verse 23, cited in Giladi, *Infants*, 21. See also, J. Khatib-Chahidi, “Milk Kinship in Shi’ite Islamic Iran,” in *The Anthropology of Breast-Feeding*, 109–32.

²¹ Giladi, *Infants*, 30–31. Khatib-Chahidi provides a full listing of the types of kinship relationships established through breast milk in Islamic Iran (“Milk Kinship,” 113–18).

²² Giladi, *Infants*, 30.

²³ Giladi, *Infants*, 27.

²⁴ Giladi, *Infants*, 28.

²⁵ P. Parkes, “Fosterage, Kinship, and Legend: When Milk was Thicker than Blood?” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46 (July 2004), 587–615.

²⁶ Parkes, “Fosterage,” 590.

²⁷ Parkes, “Fosterage,” 590, citing Aristotle *De generatione animalium* IV, vii.

Shared breast milk among “milk brothers” and “milk sons” resulted in ties that lasted a lifetime. Indeed, the bond fused through breast milk could entail lifelong protection and the prosecuting of internecine feuds on behalf of “milk-brothers” and “milk-sons.”²⁸ Similar to the findings of Giladi, Parkes notes that among the Abkhazian people “milk kinship” could even be forged between adults through “symbolic suckling at the breast” and that relationships thus established involved identical moral obligations and impediments on marriage to those created through infant fosterage.²⁹

Within Old Irish literature, Parkes found the sentiment that foster brothers who shared the same breast milk had a closer relationship and a greater sense of loyalty to each other than they did to their biological brothers who did not share the same breast milk. Among the Irish sources that he cited were William Good’s “Descriptions and Customs of the Wild Irish,” where we find the following sentiment: “All who have suck’d the same breasts are very kind and loving, and confide more in each other than if they were natural brothers, so that they will have an aversion even to their own brothers for the sake of these.”³⁰ A very similar belief is recorded in Fynes Moryson’s “Itinerary” where we find the following quotation: “The foster-brothers—I mean the children of the nurse and strangers that have sucked her milk—love one another better than natural brothers, and hate them in respect of the other...and some oppose their own brothers to death that they might save their foster brothers from dangers thereof.”³¹

²⁸ Parkes, “Fosterage,” 591 (citing S. D. Inal-Ipa, *The Social Reality of the Atalyk Fosterage Institution in 19th-century Abkhazija*, [Sukhum: Alashara Publishers, 1956], 80–86, 107–11; S. Benet, *Abkhazians. The Long-living People of the Caucasus* [New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974], 57–58).

²⁹ Parkes indicates that within Abkhazian culture “Ritual adoption by token suckling or ‘breast-biting’ (*ak’ukats’haru*) was deployed to defuse suspicions of adultery or to create milk-kinship after blood feud,” (“Fosterage,” 591). In the Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon, there is an obscure reference to men who might join together through “a mutually binding oath” with the intention of unseating the crown prince, Ashurbanipal. The treaty lists several known rituals through which men could bind themselves together in a pact of loyalty. Among rituals such as “setting a table,” “drinking from a cup,” and “kindling fire,” we find “grabbing onto the breasts (*sibit tulê*)” as a means through which men could swear loyalty to one another (“Esarhaddon’s Succession Treaty,” translated by Simo Parpola and Kazuko Watanabe [*SAI* II: 35, lines 152–61]). This is perhaps a reference to a similar kind of symbolic breastfeeding or breast-milk-related allegiance that we see in these historical studies of Islamic cultures.

³⁰ W. Good, “Descriptions and Customs of the Wild Irish” in *Camden* 1722, ii: 1418, cited in Parkes, “Fosterage,” 589–90.

³¹ F. Morysons, “Itinerary” [1592] in Falkiner 1904, 318 cited in Parkes, “Fosterage,” 590.

Susan Montague, an anthropologist whose fieldwork has focused on the Trobriand Island people, describes an experience she had when she told a group of Trobriand women that westerners understood relatedness in terms of “shared blood.” The women, she remembers, rolled on the ground laughing until one was able to tell her, “No! People are related through mother’s milk!” To the women in this group, the truth of this statement was obvious.³² Montague soon discovered that according to the Trobriand understanding, breast milk enters the bloodstream of a child through digestion, making a child’s blood “compositionally identical to that of the woman whose breast milk it consumes.”³³

The constitution of a mother’s breast milk has special importance for the ritual status of Trobriand boys because it transmits particular traits to the child. Trobriand mothers adhere to certain diets in order to contribute to the intended social identity and magical capabilities of their child. Trobriand boys are raised to be able to perform particular kinds of magic that are related to their class or tier, and each type of magic is associated with consuming the flesh of a particular bird. Therefore, in order to raise a boy who is able to perform the magic appropriate to him, his mother must consume the class of bird specific to her son in order to pass the substance of the bird on to the child through her breast milk. Moreover, the woman’s mother will have consumed the flesh of the same type of bird, meaning multiple generations of maternal dietary requirements result in the appropriate composition of breast milk for any child.³⁴

Cultures as diverse in time and place as the Trobriand Islanders, the Abkhazians of central Eurasia, the Irish, and the Arabs share a belief that breast milk forges kinship bonds that are as strong as, and sometimes stronger than, genetic relationships. In several of the examples, breast milk is the substantive conduit through which specific traits of the mother or wet nurse are transferred to the infant. In the Trobriand case, magical powers of select birds reach the child through the controlled diet of the mother and maternal grandmother. Biological or foster siblings who nurse from

³² S. P. Montague, “The Trobriand Kinship Classification and Schneider’s Cultural Relativism,” in R. Feinberg and M. Ottenheimer (eds.), *The Cultural Analysis of Kinship. The Legacy of David M. Schneider* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 174.

³³ Montague, “Trobriand Kinship,” 174.

³⁴ Montague, “Trobriand Kinship,” 169–70. Among the Malays of Southeast Asia a mother forges kinship bonds within her family first through her breast milk and then through her continued food preparation and serving at the family hearth (J. Carsten, “The Substance of Kinship and the Heat of the Hearth: Feeding, Personhood, and Relatedness among Malays in Pulau Langkawi,” in R. Parkin and L. Stone (eds.), *Kinship and Family. An Anthropological Reader* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 309–27.

the same mother or wet nurse establish bonds that imply intensified pacts of loyalty, and adults can form loyalty pacts through symbolic breastfeeding. None of these observations in and of themselves proves that breast milk had similar meaning in biblical narrative, but they point to a blind spot in modern biblical scholars' treatment of kinship and suggest that we investigate the cultural valence of breast milk in the Bible and the larger corpus of ancient near Eastern literature.

2. NURSING AT THE BREASTS OF GODDESSES: ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN PRESENTATIONS OF BREASTFEEDING

The literature of the ancient Near East attests to an understanding of breast milk as a kinship-forging substance that confers royal, divine, and often priestly status upon male children. In ancient Near Eastern literature, when divine and human kings are presented as those who have nursed at the breasts of goddesses it bolsters their royal legitimacy. In her comparative study of the folkloric pattern governing the foundational narrative of a hero, Susan Niditch noted one literary pattern where the hero was abandoned at birth and nursed by animals or a humble human woman.³⁵ In the foundational narratives of ancient Near Eastern kings, we find the recurring claim that royal heirs nursed at the breasts of goddesses, and those goddesses are frequently imagined with animal traits.

Among the human kings whose royal biography includes a breastfeeding notation, we find *Yašsubu*, the son and heir of the Ugaritic King Kirta, and Ashurbanipal, the designated heir of the Assyrian King Esarhaddon. In both cases these royal heirs are able to claim semi-divine status by virtue of having nursed at the breasts of goddesses.³⁶ *Yašsubu* is predicted to be one who will “drink the

³⁵ Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters. A Prelude to Biblical Folklore* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), 72–74, citing the comparative work of Alan Dundes, “The Hero Pattern and the Life of Jesus,” in *Interpreting Folklore* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 1980), 232–33.

³⁶ Peter Machinist discusses this trope in royal Assyrian narratives that describe “the king as a creature begotten, suckled, endowed with special talents by some deity or deities” (Machinist, “Kingship and Divinity in Imperial Assyria” in G. M. Beckman and T. J. Lewis (eds.), *Text, Artifact, Image. Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion* [Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2006], 163). A similar trope of kings suckling at the breasts of goddesses is found in Egyptian texts and iconography. Gay Robins asserts, “by the act of suckling, a goddess confirms the king as her son and thus ratifies his divinity” (*Women in Ancient Egypt* [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993], 91). Much more work needs to be done on this trope of nursing at the breasts of goddesses in order to determine whether divine

milk of ^ʾ*Atirat*, shall suckle at the breasts of girl [^ʾ*Anatu*].³⁷ As Susan Ackerman has noted, it is not any female divine figure who is assigned the role of *Yaṣṣubu*'s wet nurse, rather, the choice of *Atirat*, in particular, points to the child's royal status as heir.³⁸ What *Atirat* offers *Yaṣṣubu* through her breast milk is not simply generic divinity—she confers upon him both her divinity and her royal status.

Assyrian King Ashurbanipal is likewise said to have nursed at the breasts of *Ishtar*, here called “The Queen of Nineveh.” Her animal traits are apparent in the four teats she offers to Ashurbanipal:

You were a child, Assurbanipal, when I left you with the Queen of Nineveh; you were a baby, Assurbanipal, when you sat on the lap of the Queen of Nineveh! Her four teats were placed in your mouth: Two you would suckle and two you would milk before you!³⁹

For both of these human kings, divine breast milk served as the conduit for bestowing divine traits. In the case of Ashurbanipal,

breast milk is understood to establish, confirm, or ratify divinity and/or royalty in the suckling. Diachronic studies within single-language corpora would be most helpful.

³⁷ “The Kirta Epic” translated by D. Pardee (*COS* 1.102, 337); KTU 1:15, II 26–27. The text, however, is broken. Edward Greenstein reads the first divine name as “Astarte (= ^ʾ*Attart*)” rather than ^ʾ*Atirat* and transliterates the lines: *ynq ḥlb ʿttrt/ mṣṣ ṯd btl [ʿnt]/ mṣnq[t ilm]*, noting that CTA and CAT read the first divine name as “*a[ṯ]rt*” (“Kirta” translated by E. Greenstein in S.B. Parker [ed.], *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997], 25, 45, note 66). Nicholas Wyatt reads the first goddess's name as “^ʾ*A[thi]irat*” (*Religious Texts from Ugarit* [London/New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002 (2d rev ed.)], 209). The typical pairing of *Anat* with ^ʾ*Attart* rather than with ^ʾ*Atirat* would support the reading of this text as ^ʾ*Attart*. On this pairing see A. Caquot, M. Szyner and A. Herdner, eds., *Textes Ougaritiques* 1 (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1974), 92–94.

³⁸ I agree with Ackerman's view that the queen mother, Hurraya, likely served as “an earthly surrogate for Asherah,” (“The Queen Mother and the Cult in the Ancient Near East” in Karen L. King [ed.], *Women in Goddess Traditions in Antiquity and Today* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997], 186–87). Even with the earthly surrogate, the idea presented in the narrative is that breast milk transmits a measure of divinity to *Yaṣṣubu*.

³⁹ “Dialogue Between Assurbanipal and Nabu,” translated by A. Livingstone, (*COS* 1.145, 476, rev. lines 6–8). Machinist cites several additional Neo-Assyrian Sargonic kings who suck at the breasts of goddesses and concludes, “a deity, usually goddess, or deities can create or give birth to the king, can nurture him by giving him suck on her knees, can be called, thus mother and/or father, sometimes with the explicit denial of human parentage; and the king, in turn, can apparently be associated with the flesh of the gods” (Machinist, “Kingship and Divinity,” 168).

we can add that he was a king whose succession was anything but guaranteed. In the royal prayer to Nabu, where this breastfeeding notation is found, Ashurbanipal repeatedly entreats Nabu not to leave him among his “detractors.”⁴⁰ A lengthy succession treaty of Esarhaddon names Ashurbanipal as heir and reflects genuine concern that Ashurbanipal’s rule would be contested. The treaty repeatedly calls on the oath-takers, “You shall not depose him [Ashurbanipal] nor seat (any) one of his brothers, elder or younger, on the throne of Assyria instead of him.”⁴¹ Thus, the claim to have suckled at the breasts of a goddess may well have been part of a larger effort to bolster Ashurbanipal’s claim to the throne over against the claims of his brothers, especially Shamash-Shum-Ukin.⁴²

In the case of Gilgamesh, we have a king who is born of a human father, Lugalbanda, and a divine mother, Ninsun, but he ends up being declared more divine than human: “two thirds god and one third human.”⁴³ Perhaps he achieved this extra dose of divinity through nursing: “Wild bull of Lugalbanda, Gilgamesh, perfect of strength, suckling of the exalted cow (*ēniq arhi širti*), Wild-Cow Ninsun!”⁴⁴ Here again the divine mother and wet nurse has bovine traits, and the wild cow bears and nurses a son who is then lauded as the wild bull. Gilgamesh, the semi-divine king, is then contrasted to the man-beast Enkidu, who Gilgamesh mourns as one born of a gazelle and a wild donkey “whom the wild [asses] reared with their milk.”⁴⁵ The mix of human and divine parentage

⁴⁰ “Dialogue Between Assurbanipal and Nabu,” (*COS* 1.145, 476, obv., lines 6, 22, rev., lines 3, 4, 9).

⁴¹ “Esarhaddon’s Succession Treaty,” translated by S. Parpola and K. Watanabe (*JAA* II, 31, lines 55–56, cf 31, lines 68–72). The length and detail of this treaty speaks to the uncertainty of support for Ashurbanipal and the genuine fear that his rule would be challenged. Ashurbanipal’s succession to his father Esarhaddon’s throne is also supported by his grandmother’s treaty, “Zakutu Treaty,” in which she supports “her favorite grandson, [Assurba]nipal” and warns anyone who might plot an “ugly scheme” against him (“Zakutu Treaty,” translated by S. Parpola and K. Watanabe [*JAA* II, 62, lines 9–18]).

⁴² Shamash-Shum-Ukin was Ashurbanipal’s older brother who was dispatched to Babylon in an effort to remove him as a direct threat to Ashurbanipal. He did in fact rebel against Ashurbanipal in 652 BCE in an unsuccessful military campaign that nonetheless occupied Ashurbanipal for four years. See “Chronicle 1,” lines 30–38 (A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2000], 86).

⁴³ A. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic. Introduction* (Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts, vol. 1; Oxford/New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), 540–41, tablet 1, line 48.

⁴⁴ George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 540–41, tablet 2, lines 35–36.

⁴⁵ George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 651, tablet 8, lines 3–5. Humbaba, the forest monster, insults Enkidu by saying, “Come, Enkidu, (you) spawn of a fish, who knew not his father, hatchling of terrapin and

found in Gilgamesh also describes the birth of the Ugaritic pair of gods known as Shahar and Shalim (dawn and dusk). These gods were the result of a union of the god El with two human women; together the two children are called “the gracious gods,” and are said to suck the nipples of the breasts of Atirat.⁴⁶ In this case, the divinity of Shahar and Shalim begins with their divine father and is completed at the breast of a divine wet nurse, Atirat.

Even fully divine figures add to their royal credentials by claiming to have nursed at the breasts of goddesses. The Babylonian god Marduk fights to become “king of the gods” in the Babylonian creation story known as *Enuma Elish*. This story provides Marduk with a complete birth narrative, named parents, and status-conferring divine breast milk. His birth story reads as follows:

In the chamber of the destinies, the room of the archetypes,
The wisest of the wise, the sage of the gods, Bēl was conceived.
In Apsu was Marduk born, In pure Apsu was Marduk born.
Ea his father begat him, Damkina his mother bore him.
He sucked the breasts of goddesses, A nurse reared him and filled him with terror.⁴⁷

Royal male figures, whether human or divine, claim elevated divine status through the literary trope of nursing at the breasts of goddesses. Breast milk in these narratives is understood as the substance that transmits royalty and an elevated divinity to the suckling.

3. JERUSALEM AND THE BIBLICAL METAPHOR OF NURSING

While the Bible does not depict kings nursing at the breasts of goddesses, we find several post-exilic, prophetic texts that depict Jerusalem metaphorically as a redeemed woman who sucks the

turtle, who sucked not the milk of his mother!” (George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 607, Tablet 5, lines 87–88).

⁴⁶ KTU 1.23, lines 24, 59, 61. Scholars are divided on the identity of the two females impregnated by El and on the relationship between “the gracious gods” and the binomial pair Shahar and Shalim. I follow Dennis Pardee, who understands the two maids impregnated by El to be human and the “gracious gods” to refer to the divine pair called Shahar and Shalim (“Dawn and Dusk,” translated by D. Pardee [*COS* 1.87, 274–75, 281–82, notes 58 and 59]). T. Lewis takes the two maids to be goddesses, but he, like Pardee, sees “the gracious gods” to be a descriptive phrase for Shahar and Shalim (“The Birth of the Gracious Gods,” translated by Theodore Lewis, in S. B. Parker (ed.), *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 209–10).

⁴⁷ W. G. Lambert, trans., “Mesopotamian Creation Stories” in M. Geller and M. Schipper (eds), *Imagining Creation* (Boston: Brill, 2008), 39, lines 79–86. Akkadian transliteration from Ph. Talon, *The Standard Babylonian Creation Myth. Enuma Eliš* (SAACT, IV; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2005), 36, tablet 1, line 85.

milk of nations and as a mother who gives birth to the nation of Israel and breastfeeds the returning exiles. In Isaiah 60, the prophet uses breastfeeding as a literary trope designed to show the transformation of the city of Jerusalem from a woman abandoned by her god, to one who is “majestic” forever. The chapter begins with the prophet calling to Jerusalem, “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of Yahweh has risen upon you.”⁴⁸ Jerusalem’s transformation involves the rebuilding of the temple and the re-starting of the sacrificial cult; it includes the return of the exiles.⁴⁹ Finally, Isaiah imagines Jerusalem’s restoration in royal terms where kings and nations bring her tribute and bow at her feet.⁵⁰ The prophet then attributes the transformation of Jerusalem from abandoned to populated, from hated to majestic, to Yahweh’s redemptive power and to the status-conferring properties of royal breast milk.⁵¹ In this imagining, however, those who give suck are masculine:

וַיִּנְקֵת חֶלֶב גּוֹיִם וְשָׂדֵי מְלָכִים תִּינָקִי
וַיִּדְעֵתָ כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה מוֹשִׁיעֶדָּךְ וְגֹאֲלֶדָּךְ אֲבִיר יַעֲקֹב:

“You [Jerusalem] shall suck the milk of nations, you shall suck the breasts of kings, and you shall know that I, Yahweh, am your savior and your redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.”⁵²

When Zion sucks the milk of nations and sucks the breasts of kings, she acquires their traits and status, becoming royal and majestic herself.⁵³ In Isa 49, it is the exiles returning back from Babylonia who are made royal through breastfeeding with both kings and princesses serving as their wet nurses:

וְהָיוּ מְלָכִים אֲמִנִּיד
וְשָׂרוֹתֵיהֶם מִיִּנְקוֹתֶיךָ

Kings will be your wet nurses,
and their princesses will give you suck.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Isa 60:1.

⁴⁹ Isa 60:4–7, 13–14.

⁵⁰ Isa 60:8–14.

⁵¹ Isa 60:15–16.

⁵² Isa 60:16.

⁵³ Several New Testament texts refer to God giving Christians milk because they are not ready for solid food. 1 Peter 2:2 imagines a kind of spiritual breast milk that will allow the new believer to mature into full salvation: “Like newborn babies crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.” Perhaps the transformative nature of breast milk is so powerful that it is attributed to male kings in Isa 60 and to a male god in this New Testament text.

⁵⁴ Isa 49:23. NRSV renders the first phrase “kings will be your foster fathers.” JPS reads, “Kings shall tend your children.” The translation of

The result of this combined ingestion of royal breast milk is that the exiles will become like royals with those very same kings and princesses bowing down to them and licking the dust off their feet. In this text, Isaiah poetically evokes a metaphorical transfer of the trait of royalty through breast milk.

Isaiah 66 describes Jerusalem as a mother, giving birth fast and without labor pains like the Hebrew women were said to have done in Egypt: “Before she was in labor, she gave birth; before her pain came upon her she delivered a son.”⁵⁵ She births an entire nation in a day: “Who has ever heard of such a thing? Who has seen such things? Shall a land be born in one day?”⁵⁶ After she gives birth, the prophet-poet calls on the newly reborn nation of returned exiles to rejoice with Jerusalem “that you may suck and be satisfied from the breast of her consolations, that you may drink deeply with delight from the abundance of her glory.”⁵⁷ Isaiah 66 continues imagining both God and Jerusalem in feminine terms:

כִּי־כֹה אָמַר יְהוָה הַנְּנִי נִטָּה־אֵלַיָּהּ כְּנָהָר שְׁלֹמִים וְכַנְּחָל שׁוֹטֵף
 כְּבוֹד גּוֹיִם וַיִּנְקָתֶם עַל־צֵד תִּנְשְׂאוּ וְעַל־בְּרָכִים תִּשְׁעֶשְׂעוּ:
 כְּאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר אָמוּ תִנְחַמְנוּ בֵּן אֲנֹכִי אֲנַחֲמֶכֶם וּבִירוּשָׁלַם תִּנְחַמּוּ:

For thus says Yahweh, see, I will extend fullness to her like a river, and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall suck, you shall be carried upon [her] hip, and take delight upon her knees. As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.⁵⁸

Here, one might imagine that the exiles return to their homeland carrying the foreign stain of Babylonia. Only through a rebirth by their capital city and through ingesting the milk of Jerusalem’s breasts can they regain their ethnic status as the new Israelites marked by “glory,” a repeated epithet of Yahweh’s royal power. Yahweh and Jerusalem will co-parent the new Israel; she will give

the masculine form of the Hebrew term אָמוֹן as “wet nurse” is discussed fully below.

⁵⁵ Isa 66:7; cf Exod 1:19.

⁵⁶ Isa 66:8.

⁵⁷ Isa 66:11. Whybray suggests that the noun זֶזֶז should be read as “nipple” rather than “abundance,” and indicates that the phrase as a whole signifies “her [Jerusalem’s] rich supply of milk” (*Isaiah 40–66*. NCBC [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975], 285).

⁵⁸ Isa 66:12–13. Most scholars have understood the reference to breastfeeding in this text exclusively in terms of nourishment and emotional bonding between God and Jerusalem on the one side and the returning exiles on the other. For a summary of this scholarship, see H. Loland, *Silent or Salient Gender?* FAT 2 (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 188–90.

suck and carry, and he will comfort.⁵⁹ Zion's sons will be brought back to her with silver and gold. Yahweh has glorified her, foreigners will rebuild her walls, and kings will minister to her.⁶⁰ In each of these post-exilic imaginings, the rebuilding of a people and a nation involves sucking at the breasts of royalty, and for the returning exiles, it is the milk of their capital that will complete their rebirth as native Judeans dwelling in their homeland.

This post-exilic, biblical portrayal of the capital city, Jerusalem, as a queenly mother breastfeeding her newly reconstituted nation of exiles may find historical precedent in the Judean pillar figurines (JPFs). Dating to the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E., the period of Assyrian invasions and conquests, JPFs number about one thousand and were found almost exclusively within the geographic borders of ancient Judah.⁶¹ Nearly half were found in Jerusalem,⁶² and the type of clay and the use of molds suggest that many were mass-produced, possibly in Jerusalem.⁶³ In terms of archaeological context, they were found most frequently in domestic settings, followed by burial sites and cisterns.⁶⁴

While JPFs have been the subject of much scholarly debate, two recent studies connect the beginning of widespread production of JPFs in the eighth century to the national crisis Judah faced during the time of Assyrian aggression. Ryan Byrne has suggested that JPFs “reflected a specifically Judean preoccupation with social reproduction and, by implication, the survival of *national identity* [emphasis mine].”⁶⁵ After the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel to

⁵⁹ In both Isa 60 and 66, the qualities that are transferred to the exiles and to Zion respectively through breastfeeding are royal: *kābōd*, translated “glory” or “splendor” is a divine and royal attribute “embodied in the crown” (Weinfeld, “kabod” *TDOT* VII, 27–31); and *gā’ōn* is also specifically related to Yahweh’s kingship (D. Kellermann, “gā’ah” *TDOT* II, 347–48).

⁶⁰ Isa 60: 1–10.

⁶¹ R. Kletter, “Between Archaeology and Theology: The Pillar Figurines from Judah and the Asherah,” in A. Mazar (ed.), *Studies in the Archaeology of the Iron Age in Israel and Jordan* (JSOTSup, 331; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 181–88. See also his earlier catalogue, R. Kletter, *The Judean Pillar-Figurines and the Archaeology of Asherah* (BAR International Series, 636; Oxford: Tempus Reparatum, 1996). In this catalogue, Kletter documents 854 whole and fragmented Judean pillar figurines (95, fig. 15); the dating of the figurines is on pp. 41 and 94, fig. 12, and the geographical distribution of the figurines is found on pp. 45–46, 95–97, fig. 15, 16, and 17.

⁶² Kletter, *Judean Pillar-Figurines*, 97, fig. 17.

⁶³ Based on the type of clay used, Ryan Byrne has suggested the possibility that many of the figurines may have been produced in Jerusalem (“Lie Back and think of Judah: The Reproductive Politics of Pillar Figurines” *NEA*, 67:3 [2004], 139).

⁶⁴ Kletter, *Judean Pillar-Figurines*, 57–62, 106–7, fig. 31 and 32.

⁶⁵ Byrne, “Lie Back,” 143.

Assyria in 722 B.C.E. and the significant military losses suffered by Judah, Byrne suggests that there would have been a national need to repopulate Judah. In this context, he asserts, “the fertility/maternity archetype” of the JPFs would serve national interests:

[The JPFs] served to convey the ideological significance of women’s salient value to Judah as the producers of the persons necessary to replenish the state’s human resources in the form of laborers and soldiers, that is, to continue the people’s cultural legacy and genealogical integrity.⁶⁶

Ian Wilson agrees with Byrne’s proposal that the JPFs should be understood as “a response to the expansion of the Neo-Assyrian empire.”⁶⁷ But rather than seeing the JPFs as a “state-sponsored fertility program” as Byrne does, Wilson argues that the JPFs represent “a Judean attempt to maintain *ethnic identity*, not family lineage [emphasis mine].”⁶⁸ He sees the pillar figurines as a feature of Judean religion that was “popularized” and “materialized” in response to Assyrian imperialism in an “attempt to sustain particular features of their religious and cultural heritage, thus attempting to *maintain their ethnic boundaries* and protect elements of their social identity [emphasis mine].”⁶⁹ Wilson argues that during the eighth and seventh centuries, when production of these uniquely Judean figurines was at its height, the JPFs became “a uniquely Judean cultural marker.”

What is significant from my perspective is that both Byrne and Wilson associate the figurines with a need to maintain or reassert Judean “national identity” or “ethnic boundaries” against the foreign Assyrian incursion. Neither, however, includes in their theories any focus on the figurines’ breasts or their possible association with breastfeeding. The fact that two empires later, in a period of foreign imperial destabilization of the Judean homeland, we find the authors of Second and Third Isaiah deploying the metaphor of breastfeeding in contexts aimed at reclaiming the national pride of the capital city Jerusalem and the returning Judean exiles imagined as her children suggests that the importance of the breasts on the figurines should not be considered incidental. Byrne cites J. M. Hadley’s association of the JPFs with “lactation en-

⁶⁶ Byrne, 143. Focusing on a much later time period in Europe, Marilyn Yalom has documented several incidences from the 17th through the 20th centuries CE when nations appropriated the power of breastfeeding during times of war, (M. Yalom, “The Political Breast: Bosoms for the Nation,” in idem., *The History of the Breast* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997], 105–45).

⁶⁷ I. Wilson, “Judean Pillar Figurines and Ethnic Identity in the Shadow of Assyria,” *JOT* 36 (2012), 272.

⁶⁸ Wilson, “Judean Pillar Figurines,” 270, 272.

⁶⁹ Wilson, “Judean Pillar Figurines,” 275.

gorgement" and argues that this view deserves "serious consideration," but in his final analysis, he sees the function of the JPFs to be related to state-encouraged pregnancy and birth, not breastfeeding.⁷⁰ Wilson likewise cites the lactation theory for the JPFs but largely dismisses it in a footnote that suggests scholars who state, "the large breasts might suggest lactation after birth" reflect a "tendency in the scholarship on the JPFs to over-emphasize the size of the breasts as an iconographical feature." He then notes, "many of the extant JPFs do not have enlarged or exaggerated breasts."⁷¹

While I would not want to limit the JPFs' function to lactation, it seems misguided to ignore or dismiss the presence of articulated breasts on the JPFs. The JPFs feature a visual emphasis on the breasts that is communicated in several ways. First, many of the figures do have large, pronounced breasts, but whether large or small, further attention is drawn to the breasts by the figures' arms and hands that are cupped beneath the breasts. The breasts are also highlighted through the lack of definition given to other lower body parts. The body below the breasts remains completely unarticulated, a simple, unadorned pillar.⁷² In other words, the sculptor has put effort into forming two body parts below the head: a pair of breasts and a pair of arms, and the arms have been shaped to cup and thus draw attention to the breasts.

I would argue that at least one of the functions of the JPFs was to insure an adequate milk supply for a nursing mother. Already in 1992, Bloch-Smith argued that JPFs' "symbolic function was to beseech adequate lactation to sustain newborns and infants."⁷³ The presence of the figurines in burial sites, however, would indicate that their sympathetic magic went beyond the period of nursing and was enlisted for the benefit of the family left behind by the deceased in hopes of insuring the survival of the family unit.⁷⁴ More recently, Ziony Zevit has also associated the pillar figurines with "promoting pregnancy, lactation, and the general health of a woman's body."⁷⁵ A symbolic association of the

⁷⁰ Byrne, "Lie Back," 141, citing J. M. Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah. Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 196.

⁷¹ Wilson, "Judean Pillar Figurines," 265, note 16.

⁷² The lack of detail for the lower half of the body is one of the distinguishing features of Judean pillar figurines over and against the larger repertoire of Canaanite pillar figurines, which feature articulated pudenda.

⁷³ Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 98.

⁷⁴ Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices*, 98. While Byrne does not associate these figures with lactation, both he and Bloch-Smith note the fragility of life in Iron II Judah and the anxiety around infant mortality that these figurines might address (Bloch-Smith, 98; Byrne, "Lie Back," 143).

⁷⁵ Z. Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 273.

JPFs with breastfeeding does not limit their function to beseeching lactation. Instead, the image of the returning Judean exiles nursing at the breasts of their capital city suggests that breastfeeding could be the essential metaphorical link that allows the JPFs to function as “a uniquely Judean cultural marker” that asserts Judean “national identity” in the face of the foreign Assyrian threat. My analysis below of the role of breastfeeding narratives in the birth stories of Israel’s foundational males will strengthen this claim, and I will return to the JPFs in the conclusion of this article.

4. THE KINSHIP VALENCE OF THE NURSING REFERENCE IN SONG OF SONGS 8:1

In the Song of Songs, two lovers sing songs of praise and adoration celebrating each other’s beauty and sexual allure as they long for a place where they can meet. Song of Songs 8:1-2 fits this overall pattern. The preceding chapter begins with the male lover praising his beloved’s beauty; his poem uses the imagery of vineyards, the open steppe, and the walled city to describe both her beauty and her inaccessibility.⁷⁶ The woman responds to her lover’s praise by suggesting a number of potential meeting points: the fields, the villages, the vineyards.⁷⁷ The lover’s praise of his beloved’s beauty and her response suggesting anywhere and everywhere that they might meet creates an atmosphere of intense desperation to be together. In light of this unmet need, the woman says to her beloved:

מִי יִתְנֶה כְּאָח לִי יוֹנֵק שְׂדֵי אִמִּי אֲמַצְאָה בְּחוּץ אֲשָׁקֶךָ גַּם
לֹא יִבְזוּ לִי:

אֲנִהְיֶה אֲבִיאָה אֶל-בַּיִת אִמִּי תִלְמַדְנִי אֲשָׁקֶךָ מִיַּזְן הַרְקֹחַ מֵעֵסִיס
רְמִנִּי:

Oh that you were a like brother to me,
one who nursed at my mother’s breasts.
If I met you outside, I would kiss you,
and no one would despise me.
I would lead you and bring you into the house of my mother,
into the chamber of the one who bore me.
I would give you spiced wine to drink,
freshly pressed from my pomegranates.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Song 7:1–5.

⁷⁷ Song 7:10–12.

⁷⁸ Song 8:1–2. I am reading 8:2b, “into the chamber of the one who bore me” with LXX and the Syriac against MT, which reads “she [you] will instruct me.” The phrase “house of the mother” stands parallel to “the chamber of her who conceived me” in Song 3:4, and in Song 8:5 the lovers’ meeting place is associated with the location where the male lover’s mother labored and gave birth to him. I follow several commentators in

The kinship valence of the phrase, “one who had nursed at my mother’s breasts” is demonstrated by its standing in poetic parallelism with the phrase “my brother.” It is a variation on the more common biblical Hebrew phrase, “my brother, the son of my mother.”⁷⁹ Both phrases feature a parallelistic line in which the second term, or the “B line,” is a narrowing or a specification of the first term, the “A line.”⁸⁰ In biblical Hebrew, the term “brother (אָח)” is very elastic; it can refer to men of the same clan, men who have sworn loyalty to each other, half-brothers, and full brothers.⁸¹ Thus, the term “brother” often requires specification, and the poet in the Song chose to specify either a full sibling relationship or a milk-sibling relationship with the description of those who nurse at the same mother’s breasts.

The milk brother relationship described in 8:1 is an imagined relationship; the woman fantasizes that if her lover were her milk brother, several things would become possible.⁸² She insists that if he were a brother who had nursed at her mother’s breasts, she could kiss him in public and no one would censure the activity. This suggests that public displays of physical affection between milk siblings were an accepted societal norm.⁸³ She also claims that if he were a brother who had nursed at her mother’s breasts, she could take him to her “mother’s house,” and no one would prevent this private tryst. The fantasy element of this imagining becomes clear when we consider the incest prohibition that would prevent

translating Song 8:2b in this way; see e.g. M. Pope, *Song of Songs. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB, 7C; Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1977), 653; C. Exum, *Song of Songs* (OTL; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 244.

⁷⁹ Pope notes the parallelism of the phrase “brother, one who had nursed at my mother’s breasts” and connects it to the brothers referred to as “my mother’s sons” in Song 1:6 and to the parallel Ugaritic word pair “my brother”; “sons of my mother” (Pope, *Song*, 657).

⁸⁰ J. Kugel. *The Idea of Biblical Poetry. Parallelism and Its History* (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1998); originally published by Yale University Press, 1981. Kugel’s description of one form of the parallel line is especially appropriate here: “There are quite a few lines in which B is clearly a continuation of A, or a going-beyond A in force or specificity” thus “A is so, and *what’s more*, B is so” (Kugel, *The Idea*, 8).

⁸¹ See “אָח” HALOT 1, 29; Ringgren, “ach,” *TDOT* I, 188–93.

⁸² G. Barbero also sees in these verses an imagined, dreamlike quality and argues that Song 8:1–4 “describes the difficulties which society puts in the way of realizing the union of love: difficulties on the part of the family (8:1–2) and on the part of society (‘daughters of Jerusalem’, 8:4)” (Barbiero, *Song of Songs. A Close Reading*. Tr. Michael Tait [Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2011], 423–29, 433).

⁸³ Pope is probably correct in understanding the specification of the brother here to designate a “uterine brother,” though a milk sibling who is not a biological brother is also possible. He argues that uterine siblings of the opposite sex would be able to show affection publically (*Song*, 657).

brothers and sisters from having sex. The female speaker in this Song clearly wants to use the societal access granted to a milk brother in order to circumvent the rules.⁸⁴ The house of the mother, as a kinship designation and physical space specific to the mother, is precisely the location we would expect to find uterine and milk siblings residing together.⁸⁵ The female lover wishes her beloved were a milk sibling because, just as we saw in the much later Muslim social conventions, a milk sibling is one with whom she can imagine sharing the intimate space of the mother's house without supervision or censure.

Ugaritic texts may provide additional evidence for the concept of milk siblings articulated in the word pair, "brother, suckling of my mother" or "brother, suckling of my mother's clan." In the Aqhat epic, Pughat seeks a blessing from her father as she sets out to avenge the death of her brother Aqhat. She asks her father to let her go, "So that I may strike down him who struck down my brother, so that I may finish off him who finished off the (most important) child of my family."⁸⁶ Dennis Pardee, whose translation I have used here, notes that the phrase, "(most important) child of my family," is *ʿl.ʿumty*. The first word, he asserts, literally means "suckling,"⁸⁷ and the second word may be either "a bi-form of *ʿum*,

⁸⁴ This interpretation follows Pope, who argued that the bride wished that her lover were her uterine brother "so that she could love him more freely, in whatever place she might meet him" (*Song*, 657). The double entendre of the milk sibling/lover relationship is evident in the suggestive parallel between milk siblings who had sucked at the same mother's breasts and the woman's offering her lover a drink of "spiced wine, freshly pressed" from her "pomegranates."

⁸⁵ I am currently working on a monograph titled, *The House of the Mother. The Social Function of Maternal Kin in Biblical Hebrew Narrative*. In that work, I define the "house of the mother" as "a sub-unit nested within the larger house of the father and comprised of a mother, her maids, and her biological and adopted children. It is distinct within, yet supportive of the house of the father. The term 'house of the mother' is the biblical Hebrew designation for what anthropologists have called 'the uterine family.' Biblically, the uterine family finds meaningful social expression in a polygynous household like that of Jacob or David." An early formulation of my work on the house of the mother can be found in C. Chapman, "The House of the Mother and the Brokering of Marriage in the Bible: Economic Reciprocity Among Natal Siblings," in S. Holloway, J. Scurlock, R. Beal (eds.), *In the Wake of Tikva Frymer-Kensky* (Gorgias Press, 2009), 143–70.

⁸⁶ "The *ʿAqhatu* Legend," translated by D. Pardee (COS 1.108), 355. The Ugaritic text on this phrase is fragmented, but its two occurrences help to fill in the gaps. In its first occurrence, we find: *Imḥṣ.mḥṣ.ʿahy. ʿakl [m]/kl[y] ʿl.ʿumty* (KTU 1.19:IV: 34–35), and its second occurrence: *tmḥṣ.mḥṣ [ʾahh/ tkl.mkly. ʿl.ʿumt[h* (KTU 1.19:IV: 39–40).

⁸⁷ *ʿl* as a verb means "to be suckled, to nurse, to suck"; *ʿl* as a noun means "offspring" or "infant," (G. del Olmo Lete and J. Sanmartín, *A*

‘mother,’ or, as one would expect, the word for ‘tribe, clan’ (< ‘mother’s lineage’).”⁸⁸ Simon B. Parker translates the same phrase, “I would slay the slayer of my sibling, Finish [who] finished my brother,” but he also adds a note indicating that *l’umty*, which he translates as “my brother,” “literally means ‘my mother’s child.’”⁸⁹ Nicholas Wyatt translates, “that I might smite my brother’s smiter, that I may kill my sibling’s killer!”⁹⁰ Finally, in *Textes Ougaritiques*, the translation reads, “*Je frapperai celui qui a frappé mon frère, je détruirai celui qui a détruit l’enfant de ma famille*,” but the translation notes clarify that the final phrase actually means, “*l’enfant de ma famille maternelle*.”⁹¹ Each of these translators notes but decides against translating *l’umty* with a maternally specific kinship term that alludes to nursing. Only Baruch Margalit includes the maternally specific nursing language in his translation rather than in the notes: “For I would smite the one who smote my brother; who slew my mother’s suckling.”⁹² He also notes that the same phrase occurs in the Baal Cycle.⁹³ There Anat delivers a message from her father, El, to Shapshu, a solar deity. El wants Shapshu to find the recently revived Baal and convince him to start watering the fields again. Interestingly, at the beginning of this section Anat confronts Mot, Baal’s killer, and demands, “Give me *my brother*.”⁹⁴ Pardee notes, “For the first time in this text [The Baal Cycle], the relationship between Ba’alu and ‘Anatu is expressed in terms reflecting a sibling relationship.”⁹⁵ The shift to the language of siblings is significant because it is later in this section where we find Shapshu promising to find Ba’al for Anat and referring to Baal as “the suckling of your [Anat’s] mother’s clan (*l’umtk*).”⁹⁶ This means that in both the

Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in Alphabetic Tradition, vol. 2 [Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003], 154–55, 157–58).

⁸⁸ “The Aqhatu Legend,” (COS 1.108), 355, n. 126.

⁸⁹ “Aqhat,” translated by S. B. Parker in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 77 and 80, notes 36 and 38.

⁹⁰ N. Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit*, 309.

⁹¹ A. Caquot, M. Sznycer and A. Herdner, *Textes Ougaritiques* 1, 456, lines 196–97, cf lines 201–02. For the maternal family clarification, see n. v on p. 456.

⁹² B. Margalit, *The Ugaritic Poem of AQHT. Text, Translation, Commentary* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 165, lines 34–35.

⁹³ KTU 1.6:IV:19. Margalit, *The Ugaritic Poem of AQHT*, 449–50.

⁹⁴ “The Ba’alu Myth,” trans., D. Pardee (COS 1.86), 270.

⁹⁵ Pardee, COS 1.86, 270, n. 254.

⁹⁶ KTU 1.6:IV:19. Pardee translates Shapshu’s response to Anat as follows: “Pour sparkling wine in your tent, Put garlands on your kinfolk (*l’umtk*), For I will go looking for Ba’lu,” (COS 1.86), 271. A. Malamat also opts to translate the Ugaritic *umt* and the related Akkadian *ummatum* and Hebrew *ummāh* as “mother’s clan” or “mother unit” (Malamat, “*Ummatum* in Old Babylonian Texts and its Ugaritic and Biblical Counterparts,” UF 11 [1980], 527–36). Because the Ugaritic usage of the phrase

Aqhat Epic and the Baal Cycle, the killing of a brother evokes the language of co-nursing and maternal relatedness with regard to the sister who is his advocate.

Thus far we have seen that Ugaritic and Neo-Assyrian texts portray goddesses as wet nurses to royal male figures in order to bolster their divinely sanctioned royal legitimacy. In the biblical text, Jerusalem as a queen-like mother confers upon the returning exiles “glory (כבוד)” through the act of nursing. We also find that Jerusalem herself, in the figure of “Zion,” gains the royal attribute of “majesty (גאון)” through “sucking at the breasts of kings.” In addition to the relationship between wet nurse and child, we found that in the the Aqhat Legend, the Baal Cycle, and in the Song of Songs, nursing from the same mother or within the same maternal clan establishes a kinship bond; milk siblings form an alliance with one another against outsiders, and opposite-sex milk siblings enjoy social access to one another that extends into the private and intimate space of their mother’s house.

We now turn to four biblical narratives that feature human women who breastfeed foundational male figures. The story of Hannah nursing Samuel provides evidence for the understanding of breast milk as a substance that establishes the ritual status of one who is to be a “Nazirite from birth.” As such Hannah’s story is best understood in light of the law of the Nazirite in Num 6 and the parallel story of the birth of Samson in Judg 13. The remaining three narratives that feature breastfeeding mothers will be considered as a group because they each feature what is on the surface a preposterous story of breastfeeding that can only make sense if one understands breast milk as a substance that confers tribal identity and royal or priestly status. These three stories are Sarah’s nursing of Isaac, Moses’ mother nursing Moses, and Naomi’s nursing of Obed.

5. HANNAH AND SAMUEL: BREAST MILK AS A CONDUIT FOR THE RITUAL STATUS OF A NAZIRITE

Hannah’s story begins on the occasion of a pilgrimage festival meal at the temple when her husband Elkanah inadvertently slights Hannah by offering his fertile wife Peninah and each of her sons and daughters a portion of the sacrifice and offering Hannah some sort of preferred or prized portion meant to bring her honor.⁹⁷ Her

“suckling of my mother’s clan” emerges in a context where vengeance is sought, we might compare these texts to Judg 9:18–19 where Gideon captures the Midianite kings, Zebah and Zalmunah, and once he has learned that they have killed his brothers, he says, “They were my brothers, *the sons of my mother*, as the Lord lives, if you had saved them alive I would not kill you.”

⁹⁷ The Hebrew *maná ’ahat ’appáyim* literally means “one portion of (?) nose (or face).” Several alternative readings have been suggested to deal

special portion represents Elkanah's love for her but also his pity that "Yahweh had closed her womb."⁹⁸ Hannah could rightly see this meal apportionment as a foreshadowing of the division of Elkanah's estate at his death. Peninah and her many sons would receive multiple portions by right while Hannah's portion would be doled out based on pity. The ritual meal serves to accentuate her lack of children and her concomitant lack of a secure place in the household of Elkanah.

In her desperation, Hannah prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly. In her prayer she offers "a vow" (נדר) that if the Lord grants her a son, she will dedicate him to Yahweh and "no razor shall touch his head" (1 Sam 1:11). The Septuagint reads, "Then I shall set him before you as a Nazirite until the day of his death, and wine and strong drink he will not drink, and a razor will not touch his head."⁹⁹ P. Kyle McCarter argues that the MT of this verse is "corrupt" and that LXX and 4QSam^a can be used to reconstruct the text to read, "Then I shall set him before you all the days of his life: Wine or strong drink he will not drink, and no razor will touch his head."¹⁰⁰ All of these versions contain allusions to the law of the Nazirite in Numbers 6 where a person is required to take a vow (נדר) and then adopt a state of holiness for a specified period of time. The law stipulates that in order to stay holy or "set apart," one must "refrain from drinking any wine or strong drink (יין ושקר)" and from shaving or cutting one's hair.¹⁰¹ Thus, Hannah's vow, even in its sparest MT form, signals that her child will be set apart as a Nazirite from birth.

In order to understand the significance of an infant being set aside as a "Nazirite from birth," we need to read Hannah's story together with the story of Samson's mother. The story of Samson's mother describes the prescribed maternal diet for a mother carrying a Nazirite; while the story of Hannah adds details concerning breastfeeding a Nazirite infant. Both stories provide evidence for the belief that a gestating and nursing mother had to adhere to the ritually prescribed diet of her Nazirite son.

Several scholars have noted that in the story of Samson's birth, it is his mother who is first required to adhere to the ritually

with the difficulty of the text: "double portion," "choice portion," "a portion from the face." What is clear from the context is that the portion offered to Hannah is meant to honor her and to show Elkanah's love for her in spite of her lack of children (cf. P. K. McCarter, *I Samuel. A New Translation with Introduction, Notes & Commentary* [AB, 8; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980], 51–52; 60 and H. W. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*. Translated by J. S. Bowden [OTL; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964], 24).

⁹⁸ 1 Sam 1:4–5.

⁹⁹ LXX translation from McCarter, *I Samuel*, 53–54.

¹⁰⁰ Restored MT reading from McCarter, *I Samuel*, 53–54.

¹⁰¹ Num 6:3–4.

prescribed diet of a Nazirite.¹⁰² An angel of Yahweh announces the impending pregnancy and birth of a child who will be set apart as a Nazirite from birth and commands that the mother observe the diet of a Nazirite during the time of her pregnancy. The narrative cites the language of Numbers 6:1-5 explicitly:

Although you are barren, having borne no children, you are pregnant and will bear a son. Now be careful not to drink wine or strong drink (יין וְשֵׁכָר) or to eat anything unclean, for you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from birth.¹⁰³

The text repeats the restrictions on the mother's diet twice more (Judg 13:7, 14).¹⁰⁴ The mother is to adopt this diet during pregnancy, providing the fetal Samson with food appropriate to his Nazirite needs. There is no time limit prescribed for the mother's special diet. It is possible that the restrictions only apply up to the time of birth, but it could also extend through the period of nursing. The ritually prescribed maternal diet bears striking similarity to the Trobriand case where the mother and maternal grandmother had to eat the flesh of the bird associated with the son's (and grandson's) magic. If Samson is to be ritually set apart as a "Nazirite from birth," he apparently must emerge from the womb not having received any alcohol or unclean foods through his mother. It would follow logically that the mother would be required to observe the dietary restrictions through the period of nursing as well, but the text remains silent on this issue.

Hannah receives no divine instructions concerning her diet while pregnant, but the narrative goes to great lengths to show that she did in fact observe the diet of a Nazirite prior to conception and during pregnancy. When Hannah prayed for a son at the temple of Yahweh, the text reports that Eli the priest observed her lips moving but did not hear her words. He therefore concluded that she must be "a drunk (שכרה)." He reprimands her saying, "How long will you make yourself drunk? Put away your wine."¹⁰⁵ Through this curious accusation, the narrator provides Hannah's character with the opportunity to defend herself by asserting in language that replicates parts of Numbers 6, "No, my Lord, I am a woman with a troubled spirit, I have drunk neither wine nor strong

¹⁰² S. Niditch, *Judges* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 143; S. Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen. Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 113.

¹⁰³ Jdg 13:3b–5a.

¹⁰⁴ LXX Judg 13:14 has masculine verbs in place of the MT's feminine verbs suggesting that the last set of dietary restrictions are for Samson not his mother.

¹⁰⁵ 1 Sam 1:14.

drink (יין ושכר).¹⁰⁶ As Ackerman notes, a pilgrimage festival would be precisely the time when people would drink liberally.¹⁰⁷ Hannah's assertion that she had drunk nothing is an especially important clarification given the ambiguity of 1 Samuel 1:9, which reports that just prior to offering her prayer, "Hannah arose after eating in Shiloh and after drinking."¹⁰⁸ If this verse allows the reader to presume that Hannah partook of strong drink in the course of the sacrificial meal, Eli's questioning of her allows her to state emphatically to a priest in the Shiloh temple where the ark of Yahweh resides, "I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink."¹⁰⁹

Hannah's prayer is granted when Yahweh "remembered her," and she conceived and bore a son. Unlike the story of Samson, the story of Samuel narrates the infancy of Samuel to the point of his weaning making Hannah's nursing of Samuel explicit. We first hear of her nursing when Hannah tells her husband Elkanah that she will not go up to the temple with him, instead saying, "As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him that he may appear before Yahweh and dwell there forever."¹¹⁰ The next verse reiterates Hannah's nursing of Samuel: "And Elkanah said to his wife, 'Do what is good in your eyes. Stay until you wean him so that Yahweh may establish his word. So the woman remained and nursed her son until she weaned him.'¹¹¹

At the point of weaning, Hannah fulfills her vow and dedicates the boy to the service of Yahweh in the temple in Shiloh. She brings him to the temple together with an offering of a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour and a skin of wine.¹¹² The Bible under-

¹⁰⁶ 1 Sam 1:15. For a complete treatment of the relationship between 1 Sam 1 and the law of the Nazirite as related to Hannah's diet, see S. Ackerman, "Hannah's Tears," forthcoming in the Carol Meyers Festschrift. Ed. C. C. Carter, with S. Ackerman, Beth Alpert-Nakhai, and Franzvolker Greifenhagen. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2012 (?).

¹⁰⁷ Ackerman, *Warrior, Seductress*, 113–14.

¹⁰⁸ 1 Sam 1:9. LXX lacks the phrase "and after drinking," but this does not seem to reflect a concern with Hannah's drinking because LXX 1 Sam 1:18 indicates that after offering her prayer, Hannah returned to her husband and "they ate and drank." For a detailed examination of the textual variations between MT, LXX and 4QSam^a on this chapter, see McCarter, *I Samuel*, 51–58.

¹⁰⁹ While 1 Sam 1 does not mention the presence of the ark of Yahweh in the Shiloh temple, its presence at Shiloh is something a reader would have known (1 Sam 4:3). Ackerman notes that both Samson's mother and Hannah are required to "uphold Nazirite standards of sanctity" as they seek to bear "Nazirite sons" (Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer*, 114).

¹¹⁰ 1 Sam 1:22. LXX makes Hannah's nursing of Samuel even clearer by making the verb "wean" active rather than passive, "[I shall stay] until the child comes up, when I have weaned him..." (LXX translation from McCarter, *I Samuel*, 55).

¹¹¹ 1 Sam 1:23.

¹¹² 1 Sam 1:24.

stands the period of nursing to be the final stage in a child's formation.¹¹³ In fact, the Bible uses "breast and womb" as a poetic word pair suggesting a two-stage maternally focused fashioning process of an infant that begins in the womb and is completed at the breast.¹¹⁴ Mayer Gruber argues, based on several biblical references, that a child's weaning was associated with his ability to discern between "sweet and sour" and his ability to "receive instruction."¹¹⁵ Vanessa Maher reported on several cultures that understand the breastfeeding stage to be the final stage in the "formation of a completed person."¹¹⁶ In a sense, Hannah's work of conceiving, gestating, bearing and nursing Samuel is complete, such that she can present Samuel at the temple as a fully formed human being, and a fully compliant Nazirite. At that point, when she brings "a skin of wine" to the temple, the narrator does not find it necessary to specify whether she drank any or not; her ritual preparation of her son is complete.¹¹⁷

The story of Samuel's birth is careful to present Hannah as one who has observed the ritually prescribed dietary restrictions of a Nazirite from the time just preceding Samuel's conception through the point of weaning. Hannah and Samson's mother did not become Nazirites themselves. Instead, the narratives of Samson and Samuel show an understanding that what mothers eat is transmitted to their children in the womb and at the breast. The womb and breasts transmit to the child nourishment, but more important is the ritual specificity of the mother's diet that sets her child apart from conception through weaning. In order for the two boys to be "Nazirites from birth," their mothers observe one por-

¹¹³ Claus Westermann refers to the feast at the point of Isaac's weaning as celebrating "the close of life's first stage," "a rite of passage" (*Genesis 12–36* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995], 338).

¹¹⁴ See e.g. Ps 22:10–12 [Eng 22:9–11] and Isa 49:14–15.

¹¹⁵ M. Gruber, "Breast-feeding Practices in Biblical Israel and in Old Babylonian Mesopotamia," *JANES* 19 (1989), 68–69, citing Isa 7:14–16 and 28:9–10.

¹¹⁶ Maher, *The Anthropology of Breast-Feeding*, 26–27.

¹¹⁷ The author of the pseudepigraphical work, Pseudo-Philo, embellishes Hannah's celebratory song in 1 Sam 2 to include a reference to her breast milk. He attributes "testimonies" to Hannah's breast milk, which will in turn allow her son Samuel to speak enlightening words. The song reads, "Drip, my breasts, and tell your testimonies, because you have been commanded to give milk. For he who is milked from you will be raised up, and the people will be enlightened by his word, and he will show the nations the statutes, and his horn will be exalted very high" (Pseudo-Philo 51:3 from D. J. Harrington, tr. "Pseudo-Philo" in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 [New York: Doubleday, 1985], 365). This text reveals a clear connection between the substantive content of the breast milk and the character of the child that is nursed.

tion of the Nazirite requirements, the portion that ties them substantively to their sons.

6. THREE BIBLICAL NARRATIVES OF PREPOSTEROUS BREASTFEEDING

When one examines the three stories that feature Sarah, Moses' mother, and Naomi breastfeeding, it becomes clear that breast milk in these narratives is a substance understood to transmit ethnicity and social/ritual status from mother to child. The children whose birth stories include a reference to their breastfeeding are males; they are special children; they are foundational figures who become the eponymous ancestors of priests and kings. Their mothers or wet nurses are not simply vessels through which men procure heirs, rather, they are women of status and of native Israelite or Judean ethnicity. These breastfeeding mothers have ritual priestly or royal status, and this status together with their ethnicity is transferred to their sons in narrative contexts where those sons needed legitimating. Furthermore, these foundational male infants are born into households that include foreign fertile women who could serve as wet nurses. Therefore, in terms of redactional placement or sequencing, the breastfeeding episodes are immediately followed by narratives describing the ethnic and status differentiation of the weaned son over and against a foreign outsider. In this section, I will demonstrate that if one understands breast milk as a constitutive substance in the formation of the ethnic identity and ritual status of a child, the three seemingly preposterous breastfeeding narratives make perfect sense.

6.1 ISAAC AND SARAH

Sarah was at least ninety years old when “Yahweh visited Sarah as he had said and Yahweh did to Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age.”¹¹⁸ As one would expect at this advanced age, “the way of women had ceased for Sarah.”¹¹⁹ The birth itself is clearly presented as a divinely initiated miracle that provides Abraham with the promised heir through his primary wife.¹²⁰ Sarah's amazement over the birth of Isaac is articulated when she wonders aloud,

וְתֹאמַר מִי מָלַל לְאַבְרָהָם הַיְנִיקָהּ בָּנִים שָׂרָה בִּי־לְדֹתִי בֶן לְזִקְנִי

Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? And now, I have born him a son in his old age.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Gen 21:1–2.

¹¹⁹ Gen 18:11.

¹²⁰ Gen 17:15–19.

¹²¹ Gen 21:7.

Who indeed would have thought Sarah would nurse children at age 90? While we can understand why the child of the promise had to come from Sarah and not Hagar, and therefore we can understand the need for her miraculous conception and birthing of Isaac, what is the reason for including this brief verse that suggests Sarah is also the one who nursed him? The text continues and describes how Isaac grew up and “was weaned (ויגמל)” and that Abraham celebrated the day of his weaning with a “great feast.”¹²² What is the significance of further stretching credulity by insisting that not only did Sarah bear Isaac, but she nursed him to the point of weaning, normally three years?¹²³

Two factors become important in providing an answer to this question: the status and ethnicity of Sarah and the existence and foreignness of Hagar in her household. First, the biblical text introduces Sarah with a full homeland genealogy. She is “the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah.”¹²⁴ In another version of her genealogy, Abraham insists, “She is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife.”¹²⁵ In either version, Sarah’s Mesopotamian homeland genealogy is preserved, and she is closely related to Abraham and of the Genesis-preferred, Terahite stock.¹²⁶

In addition to her appropriate insider ethnicity, Sarah’s character is presented biblically with numerous allusions to royalty. Her covenantal name, Sarah, means “princess,” and the name of her close relative, Milcah, means “queen.”¹²⁷ When Sarah receives her divine name change, she also receives a royal blessing:

As for Sarai, your wife, you shall no longer call her by the name Sarai, for Sarah (princess) is her name. I will bless her

¹²² Gen 21: 8.

¹²³ Textual evidence from the ancient Near East suggests that a child was nursed for between two and three years (Gruber, “Breast-feeding,” 62–63, 66–68; G. Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993], 88–89).

¹²⁴ Gen 11:29.

¹²⁵ Gen 20:12; cf 12:19.

¹²⁶ N. Steinberg provides a detailed treatment of the “patrilineal endogamy” that governs the marriage patterns in Gen 11:10–50:26 and notes that “All of the women within the patrilineage of Abraham are ultimately members of the patrilineage of Terah,” (Naomi Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis. A Household Economics Perspective* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993], 12–14).

¹²⁷ Milcah is mentioned in Gen 11:29; 22:20, 23; 24:15, 24, 47. She is the daughter of Abraham’s brother and the grandmother of Rebekah. See N. Steinberg, “Milcah 1” in C. Meyers (ed.), *Women in Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 127.

and give you a son from her, and she will become nations,
kings of nations shall come forth from her.¹²⁸

Sarah's name change coupled with a royal blessing matches that of Abraham who is renamed and then told that as part of God's covenant with him "kings shall come from you."¹²⁹

This brings us to the consideration of the role of Hagar in the narrative that suggests Sarah's nursing of Isaac to the point of weaning. Because Sarah had a younger, fertile, Egyptian slave woman in her household at the time of Isaac's birth, one might assume that Hagar would become Isaac's wet nurse. Indeed, if breast milk were simply a substance of nourishment, Hagar would be an ideal solution to the problem of a ninety-year-old mother who needs to provide for her infant. Had the text said nothing about the nursing and weaning of Isaac, readers might have come to the conclusion on their own that Hagar, the Egyptian slave woman, must have nursed Isaac.

Mayer Gruber has shown that throughout the ancient Near East, procuring a wet nurse was the prerogative of wealthy, elite women.¹³⁰ Sarah is presented as the wife of a wealthy sheik, "rich in cattle, in silver, in gold,"¹³¹ an elite woman who owns her own slave woman, and a woman whose name and covenantal promise suggest royalty.¹³² If Sarah had insisted that Hagar serve as wet nurse to her son Isaac, the move would be consistent with presenting Sarah as an elite woman of status.¹³³ If, however, we consider the possibility that breast milk was understood as a substance that conferred ethnicity and status, then the audacious claim that a ninety-year-old Sarah not only conceived and bore Isaac but breastfed him to the point of weaning takes on added significance.

¹²⁸ Gen 17:15–16.

¹²⁹ Gen 17:6.

¹³⁰ Gruber, "Breast-feeding," 73–82. Gruber supports this assertion citing Mesopotamian, Egyptian, biblical, mishnaic, and Classical Greek texts.

¹³¹ Gen 13:2.

¹³² We could also add that Sarah's beauty is of a royal caliber as she attracts the attention of the Egyptian Pharaoh (Gen 12:13–14) and Abimelech, the king of Gerar (Gen 20:2).

¹³³ The fact that Rebekah's wet nurse is provided with a name, "Deborah," and that she accompanies Rebekah as an adult to the land of Canaan (Gen 24:59), speaks to the elite status of families who could procure a wet nurse and to the enduring nature of the relationship between a wet nurse and her charge. That the Bible would include notification of her death and burial further supports this view (Gen 35:8). Carol Meyers offers the compelling suggestion that the narrative's inclusion of the detail of Rebekah's wet nurse "may be a literary embellishment pointing to her prominence among the matriarchs" (Meyers, "Deborah 1" in *Women in Scripture*, 66).

Historically, source critics have been nearly unanimous in marking a source division here, at this breastfeeding notation, between verses seven and eight of chapter 21. The first seven verses are clearly tied to the priestly articulation of the Abrahamic covenant in Gen 17 in that they recollect and fulfill the promises made in Gen 17.¹³⁴ Verses 8–21, which narrate the expulsion of Ishmael, on the other hand, read as an independent narrative with no tie to Gen 17.¹³⁵ The single detail within verses 1–7 that does not have a direct tie back to language and promises made in Gen 17 is Sarah’s marveling, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children?”¹³⁶

This source division is important because it suggests that when Gen 21:1-5 was brought together with Gen 21:8-21, a redactor noted and sought to clarify the ambiguity concerning who had nursed Isaac. In verse 8, the verb for “wean” is passive: “The child grew and was weaned (ויגמל); and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned (הגמל).” This verse leaves open the possibility that Hagar, the young Egyptian slave woman of Sarah, served as wet nurse to Isaac. In fact, because of Sarah’s pronounced elite status, the most likely assumption on the part of the reader would be that Hagar had served as Isaac’s wet nurse. This in

¹³⁴ Note the use of the divine name, “Yahweh,” in Gen 17:1 and 21:1, both introducing priestly texts. Westermann explains this as P “passing on an ancient patriarchal promise that has come down in which the name of God was given as Yahweh” (Westermann, *Genesis*, 257).

¹³⁵ E. A. Speiser follows H. R. Driver in marking verses 1–5 as Priestly and 6–21 as a product of the Elohist (Speiser, *Genesis*, 154–56; Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 209–13). Von Rad marks a break after v 7 and argues that ch. 21 as a whole “lost its own literary unity in the final redaction of the Hexateuch, for obviously three documents [J, E, P] are brought together here” (Von Rad, *Genesis*, [OTL; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972], 231). Westermann sees 21:1–7 as “a highly and skillfully redacted composite of J, P, and other material, not E” and vv 8–21 as the product of an “interpolator” (Westermann, *Genesis*, 330–35; 338). Sarna also marks the break after v 7 (Sarna, *Genesis*, 145).

¹³⁶ Verses 1–7 recall the language and fulfill the promises of Gen 17 as follows: “yet I have born him a son in his old age” (Gen 21:7) fulfills God’s promise from Gen 17:16, “I will give you a son by her.” Sarah’s reference to Abraham’s “old age” (21:7) recalls Abraham’s reference to both of their ages in chapter 17:17. The naming of the son Isaac and his circumcision at eight days (Gen 21: 3–4) fulfills the requirements set out in Gen 17: 12, 19. Finally Sarah’s reference to “laughter” (Gen 21:6) echoes Abraham’s laughter at the time of the divine promise of Isaac’s birth (Gen 17:17). The only detail of vv 1–7 that does not fulfill promises made in Gen 17 is the note concerning Sarah’s “nursing sons.” Driver suggests on separate grounds that Gen 21:7, the breastfeeding verse, is a late interpolation into P based on the use of the verb *millel*. Driver identified this verb as “Aramaic” linking it to Dan 6:21 and noting its use in other late texts such as Ps 106:2; Job 8:2; 33:3 (Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 210).

turn explains why Sarah waited until the weaning feast to expel Hagar and her son. As soon as Hagar's services to Isaac were complete, Sarah removed her from the household.

In the redacted, canonical version of Gen 21, Isaac's weaning feast marks Sarah's completion of the nursing period. If through nursing, Isaac is understood to receive an ethnic- and status-conferring substance, then his weaning marks the completion of his formation as a Terahite boy with royal potential. On the occasion of his weaning feast, Abraham recognizes Isaac as a completed human being and a viable heir. The very real danger of infant mortality has been averted. Confident in the survival of her young son, Sarah looks upon "the son of Hagar the Egyptian whom she had born to Abraham,"¹³⁷ and as the phrasing suggests, she simultaneously perceives the foreignness of Ishmael's mother and the insider legitimacy of his father. This inside-outsider first son is found "playing" with Isaac.¹³⁸ With Isaac's survival on a sure footing, Sarah takes decisive steps to remove "the son of this slave woman" from her house fearing that he would inherit along with "my son Isaac." On a redactional level, verse 7 clarifies that Isaac, the patriarch, was not nursed by an Egyptian slave woman, but was instead nursed by his mother, an insider woman of status.¹³⁹

6.2 MOSES AND HIS MOTHER

The birth story of Moses bears all the hallmarks of miracle and legend that marked the birth of Isaac. He is born under a Pharaonic edict that calls for the death of "every boy that is born to the Hebrews."¹⁴⁰ His mother attempts to preserve his life by placing him in a basket and setting him afloat on the Nile in the hopes that he will be rescued and raised by someone else. As providence would have it, none other than Pharaoh's daughter rescues him, and Moses' sister is able to secure a paid position for her mother as Moses' wet nurse:

וְתֹאמַר אֶחָתוֹ אֶל־בֵּת־פַּרְעֹה
הָאֵלֶּךְ וְקִרְאתִי לָךְ אִשָּׁה מִיְּנֻקַּת מִן הָעִבְרִית
וְתִינֹק לָךְ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד:

¹³⁷ Gen 21:9.

¹³⁸ Gen 21:9. Nahum Sarna noted that chapter 21 uses or alludes to Isaac's name nine times while never naming Ishmael (Sarna, *Genesis*, 145; cf. Alter, *Genesis*, 99, n. 10).

¹³⁹ The idea that Isaac's status might be lowered had he nursed at the breasts of a slave woman finds an interesting correlate in an *Akkadian* text that reads: "my daughter is no slave girl, I (only) placed her in the charge of PN, a slave girl of your father-in-law's house, for nursing" (*CAD E*, "enequ," 166).

¹⁴⁰ Exod 1:22.

And his sister said to the daughter of Pharaoh, “Shall I go and call for you a wet nurse from among the Hebrew women so that she might nurse the boy for you?”¹⁴¹

Pharaoh’s daughter agrees, and Moses’ mother takes the child away and nurses the child until he has “grown up (ויגדל הילד).”¹⁴² At that point she returns Moses to Pharaoh’s daughter, and he becomes “her son.”¹⁴³ This ruse of presenting Moses’ own mother as a potential wet nurse such that she not only keeps and raises her son but is paid to do so is commonly understood as part of the literary trope of mocking the Egyptians.¹⁴⁴ The role of breastfeeding in this narrative, however, bears striking similarities to Isaac’s birth and breastfeeding story.

Moses’ mother, though unnamed in this narrative, is introduced first by her tribal affiliation; she and her husband are both of the priestly tribe of Levi. Their tribal affiliation headlines Moses’ birth narrative: “A man went forth from the house of Levi and took [as a wife] a daughter of Levi.”¹⁴⁵ The life story of Moses is punctuated repeatedly with questions concerning his Hebrew identity. He is raised by an Egyptian princess and given an Egyptian name. He marries a Midianite woman and enters her father’s household for a number of years.¹⁴⁶ It is possible that he was not circumcised at eight days and had to undergo the procedure before returning to Egypt to act as deliverer of the Hebrews.¹⁴⁷ He marries

¹⁴¹ Exod 2:7.

¹⁴² The root of the verb used here is גדל and should be understood as the point of his weaning based on the same root being used in conjunction with Isaac’s growing up (גדל) and being weaned (גמל) in Gen 21:8. So B. Childs, *The Book of Exodus. A Critical Theological Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1974), 7.

¹⁴³ Exod 2: 2-10.

¹⁴⁴ Propp labels the trope “the hoodwinked foreigner” (*Exodus 1–18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [New York: Doubleday, 1999], 154); G. W. Coats sees the wet nurse narrative as serving the literary purposes of “irony” (Coats, *Moses. Heroic Man, Man of God* [JSOTSup, 57; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988], 44).

¹⁴⁵ Exod 2:1. Carol Meyers notes that the explicit mention of the ethnicity of both Moses’ parents provides “the sacerdotal pedigree of Moses” (Meyers, *Exodus* [New Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995], 42). Several commentators have noted that Moses’ mother is identified as an actual daughter of Levi, בת־לוי, while the father is simply “from the house of Levi (מבית לוי),” meaning a member of the tribe (Propp, 148).

¹⁴⁶ Moses was in the house of Jethro/Reuel long enough for him to marry and have at least two sons (Exod 2:21–22; 4:20; 18:2–4).

¹⁴⁷ Exod 4:24–26. This text is notoriously difficult to interpret, but one of the possible readings is that Zipporah circumcises Moses, and another is that she circumcises Gershom in place of Moses. Whether it was Moses, Gershom, or both that were uncircumcised at the point of departure from

a Cushite woman, causing consternation for his brother and sister.¹⁴⁸ He never sets foot in the Promised Land of Israel.¹⁴⁹ The infancy story of the breastfeeding of Moses by his Levite mother is best understood against this backdrop of questions concerning his ethnic identity.¹⁵⁰

What we learn from Moses' birth story is that this foundational figure of the Israelite priesthood was conceived by a Levite father and a Levite mother. Like Isaac, he is doubly marked with the ethnicity appropriate to his later eponym. The story of Moses' mother securing the paid position as wet nurse to her own child is as preposterous as Sarah nursing a child from the age of ninety to ninety-three. Without this story, however, readers would likely assume that Pharaoh's daughter would have enlisted the help of one of her own slaves or palace wet nurses in order to feed the baby Moses.¹⁵¹ In fact, when Pharaoh's daughter discovers the infant, she refrains from going to him herself and instead dispatches one of her attendants to lift him from the water.¹⁵² Surely, she had internal palace resources for nursing Moses. Therefore, the story of Moses' mother nursing him is more than a clever ruse, it is a necessary component to the legitimating of Moses as a deliverer of the Hebrews and eponymous ancestor of the Levitical priests. Moses is not only conceived and carried within the womb of a Levite woman, his ethnic and status formation is completed through his ingestion of her breast milk. One might go so far as to say that he is raised in his "mother's house," because Moses' mother "took the child" and then "brought him back" to Pharaoh's daughter.¹⁵³

The narrative that follows Moses' transfer back to the house of Pharaoh demonstrates the substantive efficacy of the Hebrew, Levitical breast milk that completed his forming. Just after Phar-

Midian, Moses would be guilty of not following covenantal obligations.

¹⁴⁸ Num 12:1–3.

¹⁴⁹ Deut 34:4.

¹⁵⁰ Propp sees the entire narrative of 1:22–2:22 as being held together by "confusion over Moses' ethnic affiliation" (*Exodus*, 146).

¹⁵¹ The story of Hadad, the royal heir of the house of Edom, records precisely this practice. Like Moses under threat from Pharaoh, the boy Hadad flees Joab who seeks to kill "every male Edomite." He finds safety in the household of "Pharaoh, King of Egypt." Hadad grows up in Pharaoh's house, marries Pharaoh's sister-in-law, and has a son Genubath who unlike Moses, is "weaned in Pharaoh's house" (1 Kgs 11:14–22).

¹⁵² Exod 2:5.

¹⁵³ Exod 2:9–10. Again, as in other stories of the mother's house, there is no further mention of the father (Chapman, "Brokering Marriage," 143–70). For Propp, Exod 2:9 suggests that Moses grew up "under his mother's tutelage" (*Exodus 1–18*, 152).

aoh's daughter takes the boy as "her son" and gives him the Egyptian name, "Moses,"¹⁵⁴ we read:

וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָהֵם וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל־אֶחָיו
וַיֵּרָא בְּסַבְּלָתָם וַיֵּרָא אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם מַכֶּה אִישׁ־עִבְרִי מֵאֶחָיו:
וַיִּפֶן כֹּה וְכֹה וַיֵּרָא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ
וַיִּד אֶת־הַמִּצְרַיִם וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ בַחֹל:

And it happened at that time when Moses had grown up that he went out to his brothers and saw their forced labor, and he saw an Egyptian man beating a Hebrew man, one from among his brothers. And he looked here and there, and when he saw that there was no one, he smote the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.¹⁵⁵

This killing, which results in the second Pharaonic death threat pronounced against Moses, marks him as the Hebrew and the Levite that his mother raised him to be in her womb, in her house, and through her breast milk. He clearly recognizes who "his brothers" are, and he acts in solidarity with them. Just as the story of Isaac's weaning is followed by a story that announces and defends his homeland ethnic identity against an outsider Egyptian, so too is the story of Moses' weaning followed by a narrative in which he demonstrates his Hebrew ethnicity against an outsider Egyptian.

An additional redaction of Moses' birth story is found in Moses' genealogy in Exod 6 where Moses' parents are named as Amram and Jochabed, and his mother is identified as Amram's father's sister.¹⁵⁶ She is thus a literal daughter of Levi, elevating her status further.¹⁵⁷ If we read Exod 6 as a later redactional postscript to an existing Exod 2 narrative, the naming of Moses' mother, providing her with a genealogy, and placing her as a first-generation descendant of Levi elevates her status and heightens the endogamous nature of his parents' marriage. Isaac traces his parentage to a single homeland clan; Moses traces his parentage to a single and prominent Levitical clan.

¹⁵⁴ Carol Meyers sees the intentional signaling of Moses' two ethnic identities in his name. "Mose" means "child of" in Egyptian, but, Meyers notes, the name is given the Hebrew etymology of "to draw" out of water; this dual signification "symbolizes the youth's membership in two communities" (*Exodus*, 44).

¹⁵⁵ Exod 2:11–12.

¹⁵⁶ Exod 6:20. See Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 147.

¹⁵⁷ Exod 6:20 also adds Aaron as an older brother, but no sister is mentioned.

6.3 NAOMI AND OBED

Like the stories of Sarah and Moses' mother, the story of Naomi begins with her tribal identification and ends with that of her grandson. The book of Ruth opens by identifying "a certain man from Bethlehem of Judah" who

went to dwell in the fields of Moab, he, his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech, the name of his wife was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah, and they came to the fields of Moab and dwelt there.¹⁵⁸

This family narrative not only mentions the mother but provides her with a name and includes her under the tribal identification, "Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah." Like Sarah and Moses' mother, she is an insider woman with an appropriate insider tribal heritage.

One of the overarching themes of the Book of Ruth is Ruth's foreignness. She is consistently called "Ruth, the Moabite." Before being brought into the Judean homeland, Ruth swears an oath of loyalty to her mother-in-law, Naomi, saying,

Do not ask me to abandon you, to return from following after you, for where you go, I will go and where you lodge, I will lodge.
Your people will be my people, and your god will be my god.
Where you die, I will die and there I will be buried.
Thus may Yahweh do to me and more if even death separates me from you.¹⁵⁹

While this speech can be read as a kind of loyalty oath based on Ruth's emotional attachment to her mother-in-law, it can also be understood as a necessary step that Ruth must take prior to her entry into Naomi's village in Judah.¹⁶⁰ Her foreignness is an issue, and prior to their return, they partially resolve the issue through this oath of allegiance.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ Ruth 1:1.

¹⁵⁹ Ruth 1:16–17.

¹⁶⁰ Mark S. Smith correctly notes that Ruth's pledge to Naomi forges a kinship bond between the two women that was necessary in light of the death of Ruth's husband. I disagree, however, with his assertion that Ruth ultimately becomes one of Naomi's people (Smith, "Your People Shall Be My People: Family and Covenant in Ruth 1:16-17" *CBQ* 69 (2007), 252–57). Instead, I see Ruth gaining a place among Naomi's people, but remaining "Ruth, the Moabite." The role of breastfeeding in this story will support this assertion.

¹⁶¹ On the role of ethnic tensions in the story of Ruth, see E. P. Lee, "Ruth the Moabite: Identity, Kinship and Otherness," in L. Day and C.

The book of Ruth is not simply the birth story of Obed; it is the birth story of King David, two generations removed. I agree with Kirsten Nielsen's reading of the book as a whole as being written "in a given political situation where David's origins were under discussion and where there was a need for a defense of his family."¹⁶² There is no birth story for David in the book of Samuel; instead the generation for which we receive a birth story is precisely the one where King David has questionable foreign influence.

The book of Ruth centers on Naomi's need to find acceptance in the village of her dead husband, and ultimately to find security for her old age there by marrying Ruth into her husband's clan. Naomi's acceptance and security in Judah will become Ruth's, and so Ruth acts as a willing partner in Naomi's plans. Boaz, the Judean next-of-kin, acts as "the redeemer (גואל)" and redeems the property of Naomi's dead husband and takes Ruth as his wife.¹⁶³ The culmination of the book celebrates the birth of Obed, a son who will bring security to both women, and a son who is immediately identified as the grandfather of King David.¹⁶⁴

The birth story of Obed resembles those of Isaac and Moses for the simple reason that we once again have an outlandish story of breastfeeding in the context of a narrative about a foundational royal figure who could be viewed as tainted by foreignness. Obed's conception is the result of both human manipulation and divine intervention. Naomi, Ruth and Boaz have worked the tribal system in a variety of ways in the fields, on the threshing floor, and at the city gate in order to achieve the result of this marriage—a son. At the same time, Yahweh is the one who grants the conception: "So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he came into her, and Yahweh granted her a pregnancy, and she bore a son."¹⁶⁵ The women of the village respond to the birth with praise for Boaz, Naomi, and Ruth, and then we read:

וּתְקַח נְעָמִי אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד וְתִשְׁתְּהוּ בְּחִיקָהּ וְתֵהִי־לוֹ לְאִמָּתָּה:
וּתְקַרְאֶנָּה לוֹ הַשְּׂכֵנֹת שֵׁם לְאִמֵּר יֶלֶד־בֶּן לְנְעָמִי
וּתְקַרְאֶנָּה שְׁמוֹ עוֹבֵד הוּא אֲבִי־יֵשׁוּ אָבִי דָּוִד:

Naomi took the child and placed him at her breast, and she became his wet nurse, and the village women called out his name, saying, "A Son has been born to Naomi." And they [the

Pressler (eds.), *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World. An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 92.

¹⁶² Nielsen, *Ruth A Commentary* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 99.

¹⁶³ Ruth 4:3–11.

¹⁶⁴ Ruth 4:13–22.

¹⁶⁵ Ruth 4:13.

same village women] called his name Obed; he is the father of Jesse, the father of David.¹⁶⁶

This is the first example where the birth mother is not the one who breastfeeds the foundational child, and significantly, the birth mother is Moabite. Naomi, who like Sarah is post-menopausal, is presented as one who can act as wet nurse to Ruth's son.¹⁶⁷ Translations and commentaries often obscure the breastfeeding in this text preferring to understand Naomi as a kind of foster mother or doting grandmother. Kirsten Nielsen, for example, translates Ruth 4:16, "And Naomi took the boy and put him in her arms, and she cared for him like a mother."¹⁶⁸ Victor Fox and Andre LaCoque both follow the NRSV translation that preserves the Hebrew word for "breast," but refrains from translating **אִמָּנָה** as "wet nurse."¹⁶⁹ The NRSV translation reads: "Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom and became his nurse."

The difference in translations depends largely on the word **אִמָּנָה** from the root **אָמַן**. LaCoque has correctly noted that the term **אָמַן** "is not limited to suckling."¹⁷⁰ I would agree and suggest that **אָמַן** has greater semantic range than the other Hebrew term for wet nurse, **מִיִּנְקָה**, since the latter is only applied to women,¹⁷¹ and the former is applied to both men and women. Still, there is sufficient evidence for understanding **אָמַן**, even in its masculine form, to have a base meaning rooted in the idea of breastfeeding. The feminine noun **אִמָּנָה** is used only twice, once to refer to Naomi and once to refer to the wet nurse of Mephibosheth.¹⁷² When it refers to men, it can simply mean "guardian" as in 2 Kgs 10:1 where Jehu sends a letter to "the commanders in Jezreel, the elders and to the guardians (**אִמָּנִים**) of the sons of Ahab." In several other cases, however, the reference to a man as an **אָמַן** does not preclude the understanding of wet nurse. Isaiah's metaphorical use of the term cited above places it in poetic parallelism with **מִיִּנְקָה**:

¹⁶⁶ Ruth 4:16–17.

¹⁶⁷ In Ruth 1:11–13, Naomi insists that she is too old to have a husband and bear sons.

¹⁶⁸ K. Nielsen, *Ruth A Commentary*, 92.

¹⁶⁹ V. Matthews, *Judges and Ruth* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), 238; A. Lacocque, *Ruth. A Continental Commentary*, trans. K.C. Hanson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 140. C. Pressler also dismisses the idea that Naomi "nursed" Obed, arguing that the phrase simply means "she cradled" Obed "like any doting grandmother" (Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth* [Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002], 305).

¹⁷⁰ LaCoque, *Ruth*, 143.

¹⁷¹ Moses' mother in Exod 2:7; Rebekah's nurse (Gen 24:59; 35:8); Joash's wet nurse (2 Kgs 11:2; 2 Chron 22:11); female milch camels (Gen 32:16 [Eng 32:15]).

¹⁷² Ruth 4:16; 2 Sam 4:4.

וְהָיוּ מְלָכִים אֲמִנִּיךָ וְשָׂרוֹתֵיהֶם מִיִּנְקֹתֶיךָ

Kings will be your wet nurses,
and their princesses will give you suck.¹⁷³

A similar metaphorical application of the term wet nurse to a man is found when Moses applies the term to himself. Moses is angry with Yahweh on account of the excessive burden he carries in leading a rebellious people out of Egypt, and he laments his station in life using a series of female-identified terms:

הֲאֵנֹכִי הָרִיתִי אֶת כָּל־הָעָם הַזֶּה אִם־אֲנֹכִי יִלְדֵתִיהוּ
כִּי־תֹאמַר אֵלַי שָׂאֵהוּ בְּחִיקְךָ כְּאִשָּׁר יִשָּׂא הָאִמָּן אֶת־הַיֶּנֶק
עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לְאֲבֹתָיו:

Did I conceive this entire people, give birth to him, that you would say to me “carry him at your breast as a wet nurse carries a suckling all the way to the land that you swore to their fathers?”¹⁷⁴

Remarkably, this text presents the man who received his ethnic identity in part through the Hebrew Levitical breast milk of his mother as one who can now imagine himself offering that milk-sourced identity to a rebellious people who refuses to acknowledge their national deity, Yahweh.

Finally, Mordecai becomes אֲמִן to Esther when her mother and father die, and this term is usually translated “guardian,” “foster father,” or “adoptive father.”¹⁷⁵ Mordecai, however, plays the role of both mother and father to Esther, and the term אֲמִן is used in a literary context where Esther’s hidden Jewish identity is linked to the time she spent under Mordecai’s “guardianship (בְּאֲמִנָּה אֶתּוֹ).”¹⁷⁶ Moreover, the narrative that introduces Mordecai’s role as an אֲמִן who establishes the Jewish identity of his adoptive daughter Esther begins as do our other breastfeeding narratives by providing Mordecai’s complete genealogical credentials. He is identified as coming from the royal tribe, clan and father’s house of Saul: “In the fortress of Shushan lived a Jew by the name of Mordecai, son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite.”

¹⁷³ Isa 49:23. NRSV renders the first phrase “kings will be your foster fathers.” JPS reads, “Kings shall tend your children.”

¹⁷⁴ Num 11:12. This same imagery of a “nursing father” is found in the Thanksgiving Hymns (*Hodayot*) at Qumran, where the “righteous teacher” likens himself to a father and a wet nurse (J. Cherian, “The Moses at Qumran: The מורה הצדק as the Nursing-Father of the יחד” in J. H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Qumran Community*, [The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls 2; Waco, Tex.: Baylor Univ. Press, 2006], 351–62.

¹⁷⁵ Esth 2:7. NRSV and JPS read “Mordecai adopted her.”

¹⁷⁶ Esth 2:20.

So even without an explicit reference to breastfeeding, we have the related idea that Mordecai has acted in a role that conferred upon Esther her Jewish identity and her royal potential, and like Moses, she will be called upon to protect her own people against a foreign threat while residing as a dependent in the home of a foreign ruler.¹⁷⁷ The young Moses and the young Esther will both draw on the fortitude of their ethnic identity to stand up for their people against a foreign ruler.

The range of uses for the masculine and feminine forms of **יָדָא** suggests that this was the term one could use to signify a woman who literally served as a wet nurse or a man who served metaphorically as a wet nurse. It could also be used for men who served as guardians of minor royal sons. In light of Sarah, we could certainly read Naomi's act of taking her grandson Obed to her breast and becoming his wet nurse as a literal indication that she became his wet nurse. The symbolic breastfeeding that we found in the Islamic and Irish texts, however, offers the possibility that Naomi's breastfeeding could be read in a similar symbolic fashion. The act of Naomi taking her grandson to her breast as a wet nurse would then convey a transference of her Judean ethnicity to this child of a Moabite mother.¹⁷⁸ As soon as Ruth, the outsider Moabite, has given birth to the insider, foundational male figure, she disappears from the story. Until the moment of her marriage to Boaz, she has been repeatedly labeled, "Ruth the Moabite." At the moment of her marriage to Boaz, she very briefly becomes simply "Ruth."¹⁷⁹ Once the son is born, however, Ruth's name is never mentioned again. She is celebrated with a label rather than a name; she is a "daughter-in-law" to Naomi who is more valuable to Naomi "than seven sons."¹⁸⁰ While this is a positive description, it strips her of both her name and the title, "mother." While the name "Ruth" disappears, Naomi's name is repeated three times in the five verses that describe the birth of Obed. First, "Naomi" took the boy and "placed him at her breast and became his wet nurse." Then, the women proclaim, "a son has been born to Naomi."¹⁸¹ Immediately

¹⁷⁷ Esth 2:5.

¹⁷⁸ Several scholars have understood Naomi's action to signify her adoption of Obed, and G. Gerleman has said that Naomi's adoption is for the purpose of providing Obed with a Judahite mother (Gerleman, *Ruth, Das Hobe Lied* [BKAT 18; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1965], 37–38). No scholars that I am aware of have linked symbolic breastfeeding to an adoption that is meant to provide or shore up an infant's insider ethnicity.

¹⁷⁹ Ruth 4:13.

¹⁸⁰ Ruth 4:15.

¹⁸¹ Ruth 4:16–17. In all three breastfeeding narratives, naming serves as a literary cue of the chosen foundational male over and against the foreign outsider. Isaac is named repeatedly in Gen 21 while Ishmael is referred to as "the son of that slave woman." Moses is the only character

following the breastfeeding notation and the honorific naming of the boy as Naomi's, we find the patrilineal genealogy that links the boy Obed to King David. Whether literal or symbolic, Naomi's breastfeeding is the ritual action required to confer upon Obed unquestionable Judean ethnicity.

Ruth may have sworn loyalty to Naomi, to her people the Judahites, and to their god, Yahweh, but she is still "Ruth the Moabite." As part of the book's overall effort to simultaneously acknowledge and correct David's Moabite ancestry, a drastic if implausible breastfeeding intervention is staged in which an aging Judahite grandmother becomes Obed's wet nurse. This is why in the sequencing of the culminating chapter of the book, we find that immediately following Naomi's "placing him at her breast," we have the notation that this child grew up to become the grandfather of King David.¹⁸²

7. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Hebrew narrative provides evidence for the understanding of breastfeeding as a practice that conferred upon sons tribal identity, royal or priestly status, and ritual purity. In ancient Near Eastern myths and in the post-exilic writings of Second Isaiah, breast milk is a substance that transmits royalty and divinity from the wet nurse to the suckling. Human and divine princes are said to suck the breasts of goddesses, an act that prefigures their ascension to kingship. Returning exiles sucked at the breasts of their capital city Jerusalem on their return to the homeland and accrued the royal traits of majesty and splendor. Jerusalem herself sucks the breasts of kings and becomes royal. Breastfeeding narratives figure into the birth stories of three foundational male figures: Isaac, Moses, Obed (David), and one ritually set-apart priest, Samuel.¹⁸³ We do not find

named in his birth story. And, here, at the birth of Obed, the foreign outsider Ruth becomes "daughter-in-law," while Naomi and Obed are named.

¹⁸² In post-biblical literature Naomi's breastfeeding intervention ends up being only the first step in erasing the stain of Moabite ethnicity from the genealogy of King David. *Ruth Rabbah* adds to Ruth 4:13 the note that "She [Ruth] had no ovary, so the Holy One Blessed be He, formed an ovary for her" (*Ruth Rabbah* LXXX:I IB). This means that zygote Obed came from a combination of God-formed ovary and "strong (Boaz)" Judean seed, and infant Obed ingested the Judean breast milk of his grandmother Naomi. The Moabite Ruth has truly become simply the vessel. My thanks to my student, Benjamin Morrison for first directing my attention to the detail of the god-formed ovary in this text.

¹⁸³ If, as many have noted, the birth story of Samuel is actually that of Saul, then we have breastfeeding narratives figuring into the birth stories of four foundational males. First argued by I. Hylander, *Der literarische Samuel-Saulkomplex (I Sam. 1–15)* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wicksell, 1932),

breast milk source identification for lesser sons or for daughters.¹⁸⁴ We also do not have breast milk source identification when that identification would hurt or work against the desired ethnic presentation of the foundational male. Tamar, the Canaanite, is not described as nursing Perez. Joseph's Egyptian wife is not shown to nurse Ephraim. Bathsheba does not nurse Solomon.¹⁸⁵ In each of these households, there is no insider woman who could be brought into service as Naomi was for Obed. Breastfeeding interventions occur in birth narratives when the make-up of the household would lead the reader to assume that a foreigner had nursed the foundational male if it were not specified otherwise. Hagar, the Egyptian slave woman, would be the natural wet nurse for Isaac. An Egyptian wet nurse of Pharaoh's court would make the most sense for the foundling Moses. And certainly, Ruth, the Moabite mother of Obed, is the obvious choice for nursing him.¹⁸⁶ In the case of Rebekah, on the other hand, there is no mention of a foreign slave woman or secondary wife. As such, there is no need to explicitly describe her nursing Jacob. The presence of a young foreign woman in the household triggers the need for a narrative that specifies the insider status of the woman who nurses one of Israel's founding men.

The ethnicity-forming aspect of breastfeeding that I have shown to be operative within biblical narratives and in texts from the broader ancient Near East has implications for further study. First, Hebrew dictionaries and lexica need to show an awareness that in most cultures breast milk is not viewed simply as a substance of nourishment, but is in fact imbued with significant "cultural elaboration."¹⁸⁷ The word "breast" cannot be defined simply as "an organ of nourishment," in Hebrew, but rather "an organ through which ethnicity and status is transferred from the nursing mother to the suckling child." A second implication involves an integration of this biblical material on breastfeeding as an act that established a child's tribal identity with the newly emerging scholarship on Judean pillar figurines that identifies their function with the assertion of national identity in the face of a foreign outsider. Just as nursing at the breasts of an insider woman equipped Isaac, Mo-

and now supported by, among others, Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, 26; McCarter, *I Samuel*, 65–66.

¹⁸⁴ See n.133 above.

¹⁸⁵ Bathsheba's tribal identification is unclear. She is only identified as "daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite" (2 Sam 11:3).

¹⁸⁶ The only Judean king who is explicitly said to have his own wet nurse is Joash, the grandson of Athaliah. Athaliah is the paternal grandmother of Joash as Naomi is for Obed. In what could be labeled "the house of Athaliah," the Deuteronomist provides the subtle clue that breastfeeding was outsourced, thus protecting Joash from the stain of his heritage (2 Kgs 11:1–3; 2 Chron 22:10–12).

¹⁸⁷ Maher, *The Anthropology of Breastfeeding*, 9.

ses, and Obed to combat foreign influences in their households, the JPFs with their visual emphasis on breasts and their prevalence in Jerusalem, may well have bolstered the national identity of the Judeans who were living through a period of Assyrian aggression. The final and possibly most intriguing implication of this research concerns the debate over the origins of the matrilineal principle in Judaism. In Shaye Cohen's investigation of this question in *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, he concluded, "the matrilineal principle was not yet known in Second Temple times...The matrilineal principle is first attested in the Mishnah."¹⁸⁸ My research suggests that already in the pre-exilic period, there was a cultural understanding within the ancient Near East of breast milk as a substance that transferred traits from the mother or wet nurse to the suckling. Within the Bible, breastfeeding narratives are specifically associated with establishing a foundational male's tribal identity—suggesting that perhaps the beginnings of Jewishness are to be found at the breasts of Judean women.

¹⁸⁸ S. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness. Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of Calif. Press, 2001), 273.