

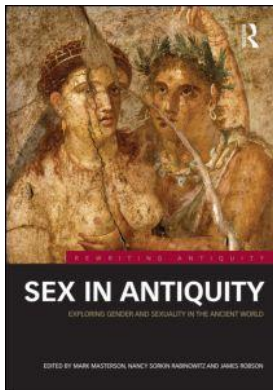
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Sex in Antiquity

Exploring Gender and Sexuality in the Ancient World

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Fertility and Gender in the Ancient Near East

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2

FERTILITY AND GENDER IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Stephanie Lynn Budin

Human females and males make very different contributions to the process of reproduction. Females conceive and incubate the embryo/fetus within their bodies for nine months, with concomitant inconveniences and health risks such as pica, high blood pressure, hemorrhoids, and potential death during pregnancy (especially in cases of incompatible, positive/negative blood types) or parturition. Should the infant be born healthy, the female might make an additional multi-year physical investment in breast-feeding. Males ejaculate. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this is a wholly positive experience.¹

In modern times, this imbalance in contributions combined with the discovery of the ovum in 1827 has led to the belief that fertility and reproduction are essentially *feminine* attributes, that the sex responsible for life is the female.² This ideology then has been cast back onto the past to the great detriment of gender studies in ancient history: While it might seem that our view of the process stems from older paradigms, I would argue instead that we have imposed our own perspective onto the past. The “female = fertility” paradigm obscures studies of both ancient women and goddesses, with the result that all images of the female throughout antiquity have been interpreted as symbols of fecundity and maternity.³ For example, James Mellaart interpreted his finds from Çatal Höyük as evidence of a Bachofen-style early matriarchy, complete with Mother Goddess.⁴ Jacqueline Karageorghis’s analysis of Cypriot cruciform figurines concluded that, “It is difficult to say whether this is the representation of a goddess of fertility or simply a magic image of the forces of fertility, but the main point is that the image of fertility is identified as a woman.”⁵ In her discussion of the Minoan “mother goddess” Nanno Marinatos affirms (2010: 151):

[T]he mother goddess is still very much alive in both popular and specialized scholarship, although she has taken various guises. She has been linked to Babylonian Ishtar or Syro-Palestinian Astarte by scholars who rightly acknowledge Near Eastern influence on Crete. But even so, she remains the great mother of vegetation and fertility.

The pendulum is now swinging the other way concerning the “female = fertility” equation. The innately sexist implications of the theory that somehow females are nothing but wombs was questioned by JoAnn Hackett in her 1989 article “Can a Sexist Model Liberate Us? Ancient Near

Eastern ‘Fertility’ Goddesses.” In her critique of androcentric tendencies in biblical studies Peggy Day noted,

Generally speaking, traditional Hebrew Bible scholarship characterized the major Canaanite goddesses almost exclusively in terms of their alleged sexual and/or reproductive functions, labelled them as fertility goddesses and characterized worship of them as fertility cult worship ... As this ... characterization was so firmly embedded and widely accepted prior to the advent of feminist engagement, it is simply impossible to cite all of its proponents.⁶

In an earlier essay concerning the apparently abundant maternal iconography from the Bronze Age Aegean, I have noted that (Budin 2014: 93):

An insufficiently recognized problem in the study of ancient iconographies is the tendency to assume that any female in the proximity of a child or infant is a mother, and the icon itself is a symbol of maternity and fertility. Not only do such blanket assessments fail to recognize culturally specific semantics, they also discourage careful analysis of the female in question.

Critics are now interested in exploring associations for women other than the merely reproductive, and at the same time there has been an incipient interest in male fertility. Scholars such as John Baines and Jerry Cooper have published on the masculine role in fertility in Egyptian iconography and Sumerian literature respectively.⁷ However, much of this recent scholarship focuses on non-reproductive fertility—the fertility of field or stream—rather than on sexual reproduction *per se*. Furthermore, and perhaps oddly, there is a general tendency in scholarship to divide notions of fertility along gendered lines: One studies female fertility (or not), or masculine fertility, but not the combined contributions of both.

As a result, our study of ancient reproduction has been incomplete so far, for in ideology as well as biology both male and female were necessary to reproduce. In the Ancient Near East (ANE), it was men who were believed to be the founts of initial fertility: Men created new life (Asher-Greve 2002: 16):

Attributing the sole source of procreation to semen, man was seen as “creator” and became *first* gender. This Mesopotamian idea may have influenced Aristotle’s statement “sperma makes the man,” which spread over the Western world where it remained medical wisdom until the contributive role of the ovaries was recognized in the late 18th century.

By contrast, it was women’s role to receive that new life, to form it, and to nourish it.⁸ The division of the sexes in terms of sexual reproduction could basically be summarized as: Males created seed—progeny, children—whereas females incubated, nourished, and nurtured the seed given to them by the male. As a late second-millennium Babylonian incantation well expressed it, “My father begot me, my mother bore me” (Foster 1993: 554).

This essay is an examination of how the societies of the ANE—Bronze and Iron Age Mesopotamia, the Levant, Anatolia, and Egypt—engendered their notions of fertility and reproduction. The data show that most references to baseline fertility—the ability to create new life—involve male agents, whereas examples of human reproduction (the creation of human offspring) involve both sexes⁹—male and female. Birth itself fell mainly within the female

domain. Infertility was understood as impotence on the part of men, “barrenness” on the part of women, with concomitant cures for both. This division of reproductive “responsibilities” entailed different attitudes and appreciations for reproduction between the two sexes. It was men who, having established their primary role in the creation of progeny, more emphatically valued offspring in the documentary evidence. By contrast, outside of the Hebrew Bible, women were less likely to emphasize their maternal status, preferring to highlight other roles, such as occupation. In the end, it becomes clear that fertility and reproduction—both male and female aspects—are more highly valued and emphasized when presented from a male perspective. By contrast, when the female voice is explicit, issues of progeny and maternity pale. Although this in part might be explained by the patrilinear societies exclusive to the ANE, it might also be understood in light of the masculine emphasis placed on fertility in the process of creation as seen throughout all of the regions and periods covered in this survey.

Male fertility and “parthenogenesis” in Near Eastern mythology

Male sexuality is the dominant force for fertility in ANE mythology—it is associated with baseline creation, either of reality itself or of the natural phenomena constituting the world. In Egypt, the male instigation of cosmogony is expressed in the Old Egyptian Pyramid Text Spell 527, wherein creation commences with the god Atum (Allen 2003: 7): “Atum evolved growing ithyphallic, in Heliopolis. He put his penis in his grasp that he might make orgasm with it, and the two siblings were born—Shu (air) and Tefnut (moisture).”

In Mesopotamia, although cosmogony *per se* is consistently heterosexual (e.g. *Atrahasis*, *Enuma Eliš*, *Theogony of Dumnu*), the masculine nature of fertility is nevertheless expressed in the exploits of some particularly creative deities, most notably the god of fresh water, Enki. Enki was remarkable for his phallic fertility, giving rise to fertilizing waters, vegetal, animal, and human/divine abundance. This is most explicitly presented in the Sumerian hymn *Enki and the World Order*. Focusing on the passages which reference the god’s phallic fecundity (ll. 250–65), we read (Black *et al.* 2004: 220–1):

After he had turned his gaze from there, after father Enki had lifted his eyes across the Euphrates, he stood up full of lust like a rampant bull, lifted his penis, ejaculated and filled the Euphrates with flowing water ... The Tigris ... at his side like a rampant bull. By lifting his penis, he brought a bridal gift. The Tigris rejoiced in its heart like a great wild bull, when it was born ... It brought water, flowing water indeed: its wine will be sweet. It brought barley, mottled barley indeed: the people will eat it. It filled the E-kur, the house of Enlil, with all sorts of things.

Additional passages in the hymn refer to Enki’s control over fertility, although with less phallic language. Lines 18–30 note Enki’s control over vegetal fertility; lines 32–7 note that Enki makes young men and women sexually appealing and amorous; lines 52–60 and 326–34 establish the god’s ability to spark fertility in herd animals and the produce of the fields; and lines 193–205 even attribute to the god the birth of mortal kings. This is a deity with consummate control of fertility, often associated with the fertilizing “waters” of his penis.¹⁰

Perhaps the greatest font of masculine creation and fertility in the ANE corpus is the god of Genesis, who, in two separate accounts, creates all life on earth through the force of his word. In Genesis 1 we read how a transcendent male deity brought forth the earth from the *tohu wabohu*—the waste and void—while in Genesis 2 he brought rain, fertility, vegetal, and animal life to his “garden.”

Some ANE gods express their fertility functions through absence: The motif of the vanishing god includes descriptions of the earth's lack of fertility while the god is absent. When the Anatolian Rain/Storm god Telipinu disappeared (Hoffner 1998: 15):

Telipinu too went away and removed grain, animal fecundity, luxuriance, growth, and abundance to the steppe, to the meadow ... Therefore barley and wheat no longer ripen. Cattle, sheep, and humans no longer become pregnant. And those (already pregnant) cannot give birth. The mountains and trees dried up, so that the shoots do not come (forth). The pastures and springs dried up, so that famine broke out in the land. Humans and gods are dying of hunger.

A similar situation emerges when Baal, the Ugaritic storm god, was vanquished by Mot ("Death"). While the god is dead, "Parched are the furrows of the fields," but when he returns, "The heavens rain oil, the wadis run with honey" (Smith in Parker 1997: 158–9).¹¹

At the most extreme, in myths from Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Anatolia male deities can and do get pregnant. The New Kingdom Egyptian tale *The Contendings of Horus and Seth* relates how Seth's attempts to bugger Horus were reversed by Isis, leading to Seth's impregnation (Simpson 1972: 120 (= 11,4–10)):

Now afterward, at evening time, bed was prepared for them, and they both lay down. But during the night Seth caused his phallus to become stiff and inserted it between Horus's thighs. Then Horus placed his hands between his thighs and received Seth's semen. Horus / went to tell his mother Isis: "Help me, Isis, my mother, come and see what Seth has done to me." And he opened his hand and let her see Seth's semen. She let out a loud shriek, seized her copper knife, and cut off his hands ... Then she fetched some fragrant ointment and applied it to Horus's phallus. She caused it to become stiff and inserted it into a pot, and he caused his semen to flow down into it.

Isis at morning time went carrying the semen of Horus to the garden of Seth and said to Seth's gardener: "What sort of vegetable / is it that Seth eats here in your company?" So, the gardener told her: "He doesn't eat any vegetable here in my company except lettuce." And Isis added the semen of Horus onto it. Seth returned according to his daily habit and ate the lettuce, which he regularly ate. Thereupon he became pregnant with the semen of Horus.

In the Sumerian tale *Enki and Ninhursag*, Enki eats a large quantity of his own semen that the mother goddess Ninhursag had placed in a variety of plants. Although the text is damaged, it appears that Enki gets quite sick from this, as he becomes impregnated with plant deities which he cannot remove from his body. The deities call for Ninhursag, who functions as a surrogate birth canal for Enki (Jacobsen 1987: 202–3):

Ninhursagâ laid Enki in her vulva,
[placed cool hands. ...
"My brother, what part of you hurts you?"
"My brainpan hurts me!"
She gave birth to Abu out of it.
"My brother, what part of you hurts you?"
"The top of my hair hurts me!"
She gave birth to Ninsikila out of it. ...¹²

In the Hurrian *Song of Kumarbi*, the god Kumarbi becomes pregnant after biting off the loins of the sky-deity Anu, whom he is attempting to overthrow.

Kumarbi bit Anu's loins, and his "manhood" united with Kumarbi's insides like bronze. When Kumarbi had swallowed the "manhood" of Anu, he rejoiced and laughed out loud. Anu turned around and spoke to Kumarbi: "Are you rejoicing within yourself because you have swallowed my manhood?"

"Stop rejoicing within yourself! I have placed inside you a burden. First, I have impregnated you with the noble Storm God. Second, I have impregnated you with the irresistible Aranzah River. Third, I have impregnated you with the noble Tasmisu. And two additional terrible gods I have placed inside you as burdens. In the future you will end up striking the boulders of Mount Tassa with your head!

(Hoffner 1998: 42–3 (= A I 25–36)).¹³

Heterosexual reproduction

Males, then, are the source of new life in ANE ideologies, be that vegetal life or (divine) reproduction. Nevertheless, the basic understanding was that *both* sexes were required for human creation or reproduction. Male seed/semens gave the "spark" of new life, but the female body was needed to mold that seed into a human being. This notion comes across strongly in two Mesopotamian myths featuring, once again, the god Enki—*Atrahasis* and *Enki and Ninmah*. In the former, dating to the Old Babylonian period (c. 1800 BCE), the deities decide to create humans to labor for them. Enki summons Nintu the womb goddess to create humanity, but the goddess counters that Enki must first provide her with purified clay. In this act, Enki infuses his "water," the Mesopotamian equivalent of semen, into the matter of creation. Furthermore, the god Geštu-e is slaughtered, and his blood is mixed with the clay, also infusing it with life. Thus, male liquids cause the inert clay to live. However, once the clay is properly invigorated, Nintu, either by herself or with the help of birth goddesses, forms the clay into human females and males who henceforth will reproduce themselves sexually (Dalley 1989: 16–17):¹⁴

She pinched off fourteen pieces (of clay)
(And set) seven pieces on the right, seven on the left,
Between them she put down a mud brick.¹⁵
She made use of a reed, opened it to cut the umbilical cord,
Called up the wise and knowledgeable
Womb-goddesses, seven and seven
Seven created males,
Seven created females,
For the womb-goddess is creator of fate.

The importance of the female's molding of the seed into a human comes across even more emphatically in the Sumerian tale of *Enki and Ninmah* ("Great Lady," a Mesopotamian mother goddess). Here, after having created humankind, these two deities get a bit tipsy while celebrating and devise a bet that no matter how bad a human the one can make, the other will find a place for it in society. Ninmah begins, creating humans who are blind, incontinent, paralyzed, or stupid. In every instance, wise Enki can find an employment for the disabled individual, even if it is merely "standing by the king." But when Enki must form a human himself, he creates:

Umul (= “My day is far off”): its head was afflicted, its place of... was afflicted, its eyes were afflicted, its neck was afflicted. It could hardly breathe, its ribs were shaky, its lungs were afflicted, its heart was afflicted, its bowels were afflicted. With its hand and its lolling head it could not put bread into its mouth; its spine and head were dislocated. The weak hips and the shaky feet could not carry (?) it on the field.¹⁶

Put simply, Enki created not the standard, adult human, but an infant, possibly a fetus, for which no independent occupation might be found. Ninmah lost the bet, but the point was that a male alone could not form a human. He could, and did, provide the seed for the being, but a human could only be fully formed with the participation of a female.

Our limited Canaanite/Ugaritic repertoire offers a similar understanding of this paradigm. In the *Birth of the Gracious Gods* (CAT 1.23), the focus is on the father god El whose phallic activities give rise to a pair of voracious deities who suckle at the breasts of Athirat, the Canaanite mother goddess. Once again, we have the division of male as engenderer and female as bearer and nourisher (T.J. Lewis in Parker 1997: 210–13):

El’s “hand” grows long as the sea,¹⁷
El’s “hand” is the ocean.
...
El charms the pair of maids.
If the maiden pair cries out:
“O husband! husband!
Lowered is your scepter,
Generous the ‘staff’ in your hand.”
...
He bows down to kiss their lips,
Ah! their lips are sweet,
Sweet as succulent fruit.
In kissing, conception,
In embracing, pregnant heat.
The two travail and give birth
to the gods Dawn and Dusk.
...
Both travail and give birth,
Birth to the gracious gods.
Paired devourers of the day that bore them,
Who suck the teats of the Lady’s breasts.¹⁸

Counter examples come from both Israel and Egypt. In Israel, where our primary source is the Hebrew Bible, masculine monotheism worked against any gender complementarity in the divine realm. Unlike the creation myths from the rest of the ANE, neither version of the creation of humanity in Genesis has a female creatrix complementing the creator. Nevertheless, there are some data which suggest a feminine *aspect* to the god of the Jews. Genesis 1:27 may indicate a dual-sexed nature to the creator deity:

So God created humankind in his image,
In the image of God he created them;
Male and female he created them.¹⁹

This notion reflects what we saw in the creation of humanity in *Atrahasis*, where the birth goddesses made seven males and seven females, reflecting the genders of the deities themselves and allowing for future sexual reproduction. Another passage cited for suggesting a feminine element in the Hebrew god is Genesis 49:25, wherein, among other blessings, Jacob blesses his sons:

“By the God your father, who will help you,
By the Almighty who will bless you
With blessings of heaven above,
Blessings of the deep that lies beneath,
Blessings of the breasts and of the womb.”²⁰

The idea of God’s assumption of female characteristics also plays out in the realm of reproduction, where God is credited with forming the fetus in the womb. Thus in Psalm 139 (ll. 13–14):

For it was you who formed my inward parts;
You knit me together in my mother’s womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works.

Likewise, the lord claims to the prophet Jeremiah (l. 5):

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
And before you were born I consecrated you ... ”

The archaeological evidence combined with the close cognates between the ancient Israelite and Canaanite religions suggest that the ancient Israelites were originally polytheistic, with female goddesses such as Asherah (Ugaritic Athirat) complementing male gods such as El and Baal. Although these goddesses and “extraneous” gods were removed in the process of creating Israel’s monotheism, the texts seem to indicate an original feminine presence, especially those involving reproduction.²¹

In Egypt, humans were understood to be modeled by the god Khnum, the potter deity. He moistened his clay with waters from the Nile, which was understood to be the male deity Hapy. As such, we see a continuation of the ANE motif that water is a masculine attribute that provides fertility. What is odd is that Khnum alone makes humans, without a female complement. For example, the Middle Kingdom *Admonitions of Ipuwer* laments (Lichtheim 2006, Vol. I: 151) that:

“Lo, women are barren, none conceive,
Khnum does not fashion because of the state of the land.”

Likewise, in the New Kingdom *Tale of Two Brothers* (Lichtheim 2006, Vol. II: 207):

Pre-Harakhti said to Khnum: “Fashion a wife for Bata, that he not live alone!” Then Khnum made a companion for him who was more beautiful in body than any woman in the whole land, for (the fluid of) every god was in her.

Nevertheless, when the deities themselves reproduced, it was done in standard heterosexual fashion. The paradigmatic union is that between Osiris and his sister/spouse Isis, as recounted in Pyramid Text §§632–3 (Faulkner 2007: 120–1):

Your sister Isis comes to you rejoicing for love of you. You have placed her on your phallus and your seed issues into her, she being ready as Sothis, and Ḥar-Sopd has come forth from you as Horus who is in Sothis. It is well with you through him in his name of “Spirit who is in the *Dndru*-bark”; and he protects you in his name of Horus, the son who protects his father.

In general, then, reproductive fertility required both sexes, excluding, for the most part, those tales of male impregnation mentioned above. The roles were fixed: Males provided the fluid seed of life; females incubated, molded, and ultimately nourished that new life. But the masculine element was considered dominant in this process of creation: It was the male who created new life which he then “gave” to the female. Thus as Ann Macy Roth comments on Egypt (Roth 2000: 189):

If we define fertility specifically as the act of creation itself, it can be argued that in ancient Egypt, women were not credited with creating new life. Instead, the creative role is attached exclusively to the male sex. This association can be seen clearly in the language, where the verb that we translate as “to conceive a child” is the same as the Egyptian verb used for “to receive” or “to take.” In the Egyptian view, the woman “receives” the child, already fully created, from the man. This view is stated explicitly in Akhenaton’s Hymn to the Aton: praising the god as creator of human life, the hymn says that he has “placed seed in a woman and made the sperm into a person.”

Similar understandings for Iron Age Israel are expressed by Baruch Levine (Levine 2002: 341–2):

The womb provides the same nutrients to the embryo as the mother earth does to vegetation that grows in it. There is, however, no indication in the Hebrew Bible, as far as we can ascertain, that the female contributes a life essence, an egg, to the embryo; the role of the female is entirely that of nurturer. The seed is provided by the male, and it grows inside the womb.

Birth goddesses

When the infant is ready to be born, the feminine role becomes dominant. With the obvious exception of the Bible, ANE pantheons had named mother goddesses in charge of childbirth, as well as groups of semi-anonymous goddesses known by various collective names and understood in modern scholarship as birth goddesses. These latter goddesses helped the dominant mother goddess to create humankind (as above: *Atrahasis*), or assisted mortal women during parturition.

In Mesopotamia, the mother goddesses are known by several names: Ninhursag, Nintu, Aruru, Belet-ili, Ninmah, Dingir-maḥ, Mami. As noted above, they are responsible not so much for divine reproduction (which the deities do themselves, heterosexually for the most part), but for the creation of humans. In this aspect they are often shown making or sculpting human beings out of clay, and their epithets reflect this role in reproduction. Three epithets of the Sumerian Mother Goddess are “Lady Potter” (^dNIN-BAHAR), “Sculptor of the Land” (^dTIBIRA-KALAM.MA), and “Sculptor of the Gods” (^dTIBIRA-DINGIR.RE.E.NE) (Stol 2000: 74 and no. 158). In Akkadian-language texts Dingir-maḥ is “the great mother who molds creatures” (Stol 2000: 76). An Old Babylonian hymn to Belet-ili calls her the “one who molds the

creature” (Stol 2000: 77–8). These goddesses may also serve as midwives, and the reference above to Nintu making “use of a reed, opened it to cut the umbilical cord” shows how they cared for the neonate as would a mortal *femme sage*.

More typically, the role of midwife went to the anonymous collective of birth goddesses, those goddesses who assisted Nintu in the creation of humanity in the Assyrian version of *Atrahasis*. They specifically appear during scenes of mortal parturition. An incantation from the first half of the second millennium has Sin (the Mesopotamian lunar deity) sending assistance to the parturient woman, calling on, “the daughters of Anu, seven [and seven],/ [May] they [] their pots of []. May they bring this baby straight forth!” (Foster 1993: 135) The first-millennium tale of “Sin and the Cow” refers to the birth of the moon god’s bovine offspring. At the critical time (ll.18–27; Foster 1993: 891–2):

He sent down the daughters of Anu from heaven.
One brought a jar of oil,
The other brought water of labor.
She rubbed oil from the jar on her brow,
She sprinkled her whole body with water of labor.
A second time she rubbed oil from the jar on her brow,
She sprinkled her whole body with water of labor.
A third time she rubbed oil from the jar on her brow,
As she sprinkled the front of her body.
The calf fell like a (running) gazelle to the ground.

In spite of the obvious importance of females in the birthing process, both in terms of the mother herself and the consistently female midwives present to assist her, there is evidence that the role of the birth goddesses diminished in the official literature of late second-millennium Babylon. As noted by Tikva Frymer-Kenski and Marten Stol, by the time of the composition of the later Mesopotamian account of creation—*Enuma Eliš*—females no longer had any role in the creation of humanity.²² Marduk, god of Babylon and head of the pantheon, commands the creation of humankind, and it is Ea/Enki²³ alone who creates them, once again with the blood of a slaughtered god—Qingu (Dalley 1989: 261–2):

He (Ea) created mankind from his blood,
Imposed the toil of the gods (on man) and released the gods from it.
When Ea the wise had created mankind,
Had imposed the toil of the gods on them—
That deed is impossible to describe,
For Nudimmud²⁴ performed it with the miracles of Marduk.

In this myth, the primary mother goddess is Tiamat, who turns against her children and engages them in war with an army of demons and monsters. It is by slaughtering her that Marduk is made king. As such, there is a very different take on maternity in the *Enuma Eliš*, and the feminine is wholly removed from the process of human creation.

Such a patriarchal takeover in this myth notwithstanding, the role of mother and birth goddesses remains significant in the other ANE societies. In Anatolia, the wisest deity is the mother goddess H̄annahanna, who, among other things, was the one to find and return Telipinu when he disappeared and wrought havoc on the fertility of the land. Her name in the Hittite

repertoire can be written syllabically, or with the Sumerogram DINGIR.MAḪ, sometimes in alternation with the signs for ^dNIN.TU (Beckman 1983: 239). In the syncretistic tendencies of the Late Bronze Age, Ḫannaḫanna was deemed the equivalent of Akkadian Nintu, and in later Anatolian religion she is seen as one of the forerunners (or at least a contributor) to the Phrygian goddess Kybele (Beckman 1983: 240).

Ḫannaḫanna was understood to be present at births and to have all of humanity as her domain. Thus a Hittite birth spell reveals (*KUB XXX 29*; Beckman 1983: 23, Text A):

[When] a woman is giving birth, then the midwife prepa[re]s the following:
 [two sto]ols (and) three cushions. On each
 Stool is placed one cushion.
 And one spreads out [on]e cushion between the stools
 On the ground. When the child begins to fall,
 [then] the woman seats herself on the stools. And the midwife
 Holds the receiving blanket with (her) [ha]nd.
 [And] you shall repeatedly conjure as follows:
 To the [go]ds allotments are given. The Sun-goddess in Arinna
 Has [se]ated herself, and Halmašuit in Harpiša likewise,
 And Hatepi < nu > in Maliluha likewise, ^dLAMA in Krarhna likewise,
 The [awe]some Telepinu in Taw(i)niya likewise,
 And Huzziya in Hakmiš likewise.
 But for Ḫannaḫanna there did not remain a place; so for her, man < kind >
 Remained (as) a [pl]ace.

Likewise, when a child was born (*KUB XXX 30*; Beckman 1983: 201, Text M):

When a male child [... is born.]
 Then let her (Ḫannaḫanna) make (him) str[ong ...]
 When a female child [... is born,]
 Then let her (Ḫannaḫanna) [...].

All the data suggest that Ḫannaḫanna was responsible for mother and child after the birth of the infant. Once again, the female was responsible for the new life after it had been provided by the male; the female's role was that of molder and nurturer.

Often mentioned alongside this DINGIR.MAḪ were the DINGIR.MAḪ^{mes}—the plural birth goddesses. Like Ḫannaḫanna, these goddesses were present at the birth of a child, and along with the Gilšeš—fate goddesses—were responsible for decreeing a fate for the neonate. Thus at the birth of the god Kumarbi's son in the *Song of Ullikummi* (A iii 10–15):

[The ...] women made her give birth. The Fate Goddesses and the Mother Goddesses [lifted the child] and cradled [him] on Kumarbi's knees. Kumarbi began [to amuse] that boy, and he began to clean him, and he gave [to the child] a fitting name. Kumarbi began to say to himself: "What name [shall I put on] the child whom the Fate Goddesses and Mother Goddesses have given to me?"

(Hoffner 1998: 57–8)

These two sets of goddesses were also worshipped together in birth rituals. According to a Hittite ritual prescription (*KBo XXX 4*, 3'–11'; Beckman 1983: 243):

And a woman who is pregnant breaks three [thin loaves] for the Mother-goddesses. Thereupon she places a liver (and) a heart, cooked. And on top she scatters mutton-fat cake (and) meal. And she places (it all) before the Mother-goddesses.

But three thin loaves she breaks for the Fate-deities. Thereupon she places a li[ver (and) a heart, cooked]. And on top she scat[ters mutton-fat cake (and) meal. And she places (it all) before the Fate-deities].

In Ugarit, the mother goddess of the pantheon was Athirat. Her role as mother goddess is confirmed by an epithet of the gods themselves, who are known as “Athirat’s sons” (*bn. atrt*). In the literature she is notable for her nursing abilities, suckling the “Gracious Gods” born to her husband El. She resumes this role in the *Kirta Epic*, nursing Yassib, the late-born son of King Kirta.

The collective birth goddesses in Ugarit are the Katharat (or Kotharat), daughters of the moon god. They play their most prominent role in the extant literature in the *Tale of Aqhat*, which in many ways exemplifies the engendered roles of fertility (and infertility) in the ANE. In the beginning of the tale, the wise man Danel is without an heir. He makes offerings to the deities and performs a seven-day incubation ritual, ultimately drawing the attention of Baal. Baal intercedes on Danel’s behalf with El, and they both agree that they will provide Danel with a son. Thus, the initial problem of (in)fertility is a masculine matter. The gods tell Danel to go home (*CAT* 1.17, col. i, 38–40; Parker 1997: 53–4):

Let him mount his couch [...]
In kissing his wife, [conception]!
In embracing her, pregnancy!

Thus, heterosexual intercourse leads to birth. However, before he engages in these *rites du plaisir* with his wife, the Katharat come to his home to be feasted for seven days, after which come “[...] the joys of the bed [...]/ The delights of the bed of childbirth” (Parker 1997: 57). Their role in the story at this point is atypical, as birth goddesses normally attend to the mother upon parturition, not before conception. In this instance, these “moon’s radiant daughters” might be understood as erotic stimulators—goddesses who arouse and intensify Danel’s passions so that his lovemaking with his wife proves fruitful.²⁵ Unfortunately, the text is badly abraded, so the portion containing the birth of Danel’s son Aqhat is not preserved; we cannot know if the birth goddesses or Athirat were present.

This arrival of birth deities before the conception of a desired, late-born son is reflected in the Biblical narratives of Isaac (Genesis 18:1–15) and Samson (Judges 13:2–24). In the former, three strangers approach Abraham as he sits beneath the oaks of Mamre. Abraham, the perfect host, takes them in and slaughters a calf for them to eat, while bidding Sarah to make them bread. After their meal the three strangers:

said to him [Abraham], “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself saying, “After I have grown old and my husband has grown old, shall I have pleasure?”

In Judges 13:

There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of Danaites, whose name was Manoah. His wife was barren, having born no children. And the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, “Although you are barren, having born no children, you shall conceive and bear a son ...” Then the woman came and told her husband, “A man of God came to me, and his appearance was like that of an angel of God, most awe-inspiring ...”

Manoah tracks down this “man of God” and offers him a feast. The man, being an angel, declines, but bids Manoah and his wife to offer the feast as a burnt sacrifice to God.

In both instances we have either God and his “assistants” or merely one of those assistants visiting an old, barren couple, receiving a feast from them, and prophesying that the old woman would bear a son. As James Kugel notes, such scenes of “Unrecognized Angels” reflect back on the more polytheistic times of Israel’s past, before the roles and responsibilities of all the deities were absorbed by the single god YHWH (Kugel 2007: Ch. 7). With these specific scenes we get an echo of the tales of Kirta and especially Aqhat, where the father god El promises a child to an heirless old man, and where unnamed birth divinities (the Katherat in Ugaritic, the unnamed angels in the Bible) are feasted before the desired conception. Thus, even in monotheistic Israel there are echoes of birth goddesses in the preserved narratives.

Egypt, too, had its birth divinities. The god Bes and the goddess Taweret are those best known for protecting new mothers and infants, and Bes imagery is especially prominent on paraphernalia belonging to women. However, even the more prominent deities, including the creator god Khnum, could take part in the rites of childbirth. The Westcar Papyrus (= P. Berlin 3033) tells the story of the birth of the first three kings of the Fifth Dynasty (presented here as triplets):

On one of those days Ruddedet felt the pangs and her labor was difficult. Then the majesty of Re, lord of Sakhbu, (said) to Isis, Nephtys, Meskhenet, and Khnum: “Please go, deliver Ruddedet of the three children who are in her womb, who will assume this beneficent office in this whole land. ...”

These gods set out, having changed their appearance to dancing girls, with Khnum as their porter. When they reached the house of Rawoser, they found him standing with his loincloth upside down. They held out to him their necklaces and sistra. He said to them: “My ladies, look, it is the woman who is in pain; her labor is difficult.” They said “Let us see her. We understand childbirth.” He said to them, “Come in!” They went in to Ruddedet. They locked the room behind themselves and her.

(Lichtheim 2006, Vol. I: 220).

In all cases, the standard paradigm manifests itself. The actual creation of offspring is in the hands of a male deity, be he Enki/Ea, El or Baal, Khnum or YHWH. For the birth of mortals, a goddess is invoked to shape, nourish, and most importantly deliver the infant, as with Nintu or Ninmah, Hhannaḥanna, Athirat, or the various collectives of birth goddesses, including angels.

Infertility

Most of the texts presented above are mythological. They pertain to the actions of the deities, both among each other and in dealing with the affairs of humankind. These are the texts that produce the majority of our evidence concerning ANE understandings of fertility. By contrast, when dealing with infertility, workaday mortals suddenly come into sharp relief. This is because the process of reproduction is never so important as when it is not functioning. That is the point at which mortals seek out the experts, invoking deities and performing rituals to allow their organs to function and their offspring to emerge. We have already seen numerous tales of infertile couples—Abraham and Sarah, Manoaah and his wife, Danel, and Kirta. The problem of infertility, especially at the royal level, was critical in the ANE.

Considering the gendered divide in the understandings of ancient fertility, it is not surprising that two separate avenues of approach existed regarding the diagnosis of infertility. For men, the problem was impotence, either because of magic or insufficient manliness. Either way, he is incapable of getting his seed, the new life, into the female body. For women, the problem was barrenness, the inability to hold the seed given them by a man. Magical, medical, and psychological treatments existed for both.

Concerning male impotence, the ŠĀ.ZI.GA, or “rising of the ‘heart’” texts were extensive.²⁶ They date to the Middle Babylonian period and have come to light in both Mesopotamia and the Hittite capital at Boğazköy. From a medical perspective, therapy might include rubbing the penis and lower body with an ointment made of plant oil and iron. Other concoctions were made with animal parts, preferably those engaged in mating or of known sexual potency. Thus the saliva of aroused animals; dried, copulating lizards; or stag penis.²⁷ More psychological aspects involved women “talking dirty” to their men, sometimes with props. To quote Robert Biggs (Biggs 2002: 72–3, excerpted):

A striking feature of these incantations is that they are mostly ostensibly recited by women to increase the sexual ability of men ... Some incantations are quite explicit, as, for example, the one that says, “My vagina is the vagina of a female dog. His penis is the penis of a dog. Just as the vagina of a female dog holds fast the penis of a dog, (so may my vagina hold fast his penis!)”

...

“Get an erection like a wild bull!” and “At the head of my bed is tied a buck. At the foot of my bed is tied a ram. The one at the head of my bed, get an erection, make love to me! The one at the foot of my bed, get an erection, caress me!” In a similar text we have “Buck, caress me! [Ram], copulate with me!” and “[At the head] of my bed a ram is tied. [At the foot of my bed] a weaned sheep is tied. Around my waist their wool is tied. [Like a ram eleven times], like a weaned sheep twelve times, like a bat thirteen times [make love to me, and like a pig] fourteen times, like a wild bull fifty times, like a s[ta]g fifty times!” And in another text we have “Make love to me with the love-making of a wolf!”

While such prescriptions were used in Anatolia, the Hittites also had their own means of dealing with erectile dysfunction. The most detailed ritual we have is Paškuwatti’s ritual to the goddess Uliliyassi against impotence. The ultimate purpose of this ritual is to take away a man’s femininity

and replace it with masculinity. As such, there is some debate as to whether this is a rite to cure impotence, or a rite to cure male effeminacy/passivity.²⁸ In either event, the stated aims are for the man to impregnate his wife. In this ritual the female functionary Paškuwatti explicitly uses sympathetic magic to “cure” the man of femininity (l. 4); it results in the production of children (Hoffner 1987: 277):

I place a spindle and distaff in the patient’s [hand], and he comes under the gates. When he steps forward through the gates, I take the spindle and distaff away from him. I give him a bow (and) [arro]w(s), and say (to him) all the while: “I have just taken femininity away from you and given you masculinity in return. You have cast off the (sexual) behavior expected [of women]; [you have taken] to yourself the behavior expected of men!”

The man performs a three-day long ritual involving incubation, invoking the goddess’ presence by his side (l.8; Hoffner 1987: 278):

“Come to this man! You are his ‘wife of children’ for him! So look after him! Turn to him (in favor) and speak to him! Turn your maidservant (his wife) over to him, and he will become a yoke. Let him take his wife and produce for himself sons and daughters!”

The Egyptians used both medicine and magic in curing erectile dysfunction. One recipe from the end of the Middle Kingdom recommends (*P. Ram.* V no. XII): “Leaves of Christ thorn, 1; leaves of acacia, 1; honey, 1. Grind (the leaves) in this honey, and apply as a bandage” (Manniche 1997: 103). On the more magical side we have a spell from circa 1000 BCE (*P. Chester Beatty X*; Manniche 1997: 103):

“Hail to you great god, who created the upper class, you, Khnum, who established the lower class. May you test the mouth of every vulva ... be erect, be not soft; be strong, be not weak ... You strengthen your testicles with Seth, son of Nut.” To be recited over ... the member to be anointed with it.

Even our comparably limited corpus from Ugarit has a ritual for curing impotence. Text RIH 78/20 cites sorcery for the “pain of your rod” (Pardee 2002: 160–1, excerpted):

This recitation casts out the tormentors of a young man:
The pain of your rod it has banished,
The producers of the pain of your rod.
It goes forth at the voice of the ta’iyu priest
Like smoke from a window,
Like a serpent from a pillar,
Like mountain goats to a summit,
Like lions to a lair.
The rod has recovered.
...
Then, as for the sorcerers, the tormentors,
Ḥôranu will drive them out,
Even the companions and the “lads of wisdom” he will drive out for you.
With respect to heat, do not sag,

May your tongue not stutter,
May your canal not be decanalized.²⁹

...

For the man, descend from the rod to the earth, O flow;
For the son of man, from illness he is delivered.

Matters could be more difficult for barren women. The easiest way to deal with barrenness, from a male perspective, was simply to get another woman. The ancient documents are full of such attestations. The *Codex Hammurabi* (§§144–7) regulates the process by which non-reproducing *naditu*-priestesses provide a *šugitu* to their husbands for the bearing of children. According to the final statute, “If she does not bear children, her mistress may sell her” (Roth 2003: 344–5). Two legal texts from the Late Bronze Age Syrian city of Alalakh (Level IV) document the replacement of female bodies for producing children. Document AT 92 (3.101B) is a marriage contract between Naidu (wife) and Iri-halpa (husband). According to lines 15’–16’ of the contract, “If Naidu does not give birth to an heir, then the daughter of her brother, Iwaššura, will be given (to Iri-halpa)” (Hess 2003: 252). Document AT 93 (3.101C) is a similar contract between Zonzuri and Idatti (ll.2–9; Hess 2003: 252):

From this day, before [Niqmepa the king:]
The daughter of Ilimili,
Zonzuri, Idat[ti]
Has taken for a wife.
Two hundred shekels of silver and thirty shekels of gold
He has given as a bride price.
[I]f she has not given birth after seven years,
He may take a second wife.

A papyrus from New Kingdom Egypt relates how Rennefer allowed her younger brother Padiu to marry Taiemniut, the eldest of three children born to a slave girl bought by her husband Nebnefer. Gay Robins suggests that, since the couple had no recorded children of their own, Nebnefer may have bought the slave girl specifically for reproduction, and that the three children were, in fact, his own.³⁰

Perhaps the most famous story of a woman providing her husband with a surrogate is the narrative of Abram, Sarai,³¹ and Hagar (Genesis 16: 1–4):

Abram’s wife Sarai had borne him no children. Now she had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, and she said to Abram, “You see that the LORD has not allowed me to bear a child. Take my slave-girl; perhaps I shall found a family through her.” Abram agreed to what his wife said; so Sarai, Abram’s wife, brought her slave-girl, Hagar the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife/concubine ... He lay with Hagar and she conceived.

Women were at pains to avoid such replacement. “Fixing” her body consisted of practices such as using magical incantations and/or objects and/or the use of specific plants to promote fertility. One Babylonian text prescribes “Silver, gold, iron, copper, in total 21 (amulet) stones, in order that a woman who is not pregnant become pregnant: you string it on a linen yarn, you put it on her neck” (Stol 2000: 35). Another (really horrible) prescription was:

To make a not child-bearing woman pregnant: You flay an edible mouse, open it up, and fill it with myrrh; you dry it in the shade, crush and grind it up, and mix it with fat; you place it in her vagina, and she will become pregnant.

(*Stol 2000: 53*).

In the Bible, barrenness is seen as having been sent by God so that he might later intervene and bless the woman with a late-born son. One such example was Sarai/Sarah, discussed above. The quintessential example of a woman coping with barrenness is Jacob's wife Rachel. In Genesis 30 we read:

When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister; and she said to Jacob, "Give me children or I shall die!" Jacob became very angry with Rachel and said, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of your womb?" Then she said, "Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her that she may bear upon my knees and that I too may have children through her." ... In the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes³² in the field, and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes." ... Then God remembered Rachel, and God heeded her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son.

Here we see the use of a replacement female body, use of medicinal herbs, and finally divine intervention from a father deity.

In cases where the male is convinced that it is he who is "barren," the adoption of heirs emerges as a solution. A Twentieth-Dynasty personal letter from Deir el-Medina to the scribe Nekhemmut reads (Robins 1993: 77–8):

You are not a man since you are unable to make your wives pregnant like your fellow men. A further matter: You abound in being exceedingly stingy. You give no one anything. As for him who has no children, he adopts an orphan instead [to] bring him up. It is his responsibility to pour water onto your hands as one's own eldest son.

Adoption did occur for reasons other than infertility, including the adoption of one's own children born to slaves (as with Nebnefer above), or the adoption of a new spouse's children from a previous marriage, or to settle a debt (the bride price acquired by adopted daughters could be quite high in some areas, such as Mesopotamian Nuzi), or simply through pity for an orphaned child. A late-second-millennium legal training exercise from Mesopotamia—*ana ittišu* (VII iii, 9–10)—records, "This *qadištu* (a cultic midwife) took in a child from the street; at the breast with human milk [she nursed him]" (Westenholz 1989: 251). However, adoption as a remedy for infertility specifically appears as a solution only once the infertility can be ascribed to the male; no female body would "work" for him.

Sex, gender, and voice

These data reveal important aspects of the gender dynamic in the ANE. They show that gender is indeed relative and socially constructed, varying over time and place. In contrast to modern conceptions, in the ANE fertility was seen to be a masculine quality: The source of life was male. The role of the female was not creatrix of new life, be that human, divine, or even vegetal, but as the molder and nourisher of the life created by the male. As a consequence, men were anxious to

advertise their paternal status: To have children was an ideal in all the societies here considered (*Bilgames and the Netherworld*, ll. 255–69; George 1999: 187–8):

“Did you see the man with one son?” “I saw him.” “How does he fare?”
“For the peg built into his wall bitterly he laments.”
“Did you see the man with two sons?” “I saw him.” “How does he fare?”
“Seated on two bricks he eats a bread-loaf.”
“Did you see the man with three sons?” “I saw him.” “How does he fare?”
“He drinks water from the waterskin slung on the saddle.”
“Did you see the man with four sons?” “I saw him.” “How does he fare?”
“Like a man with a team of four donkeys his heart rejoices.”
“Did you see the man with five sons?” “I saw him.” “How does he fare?”
“Like a fine scribe with a nimble hand he enters the palace with ease.”
“Did you see the man with six sons?” “I saw him.” “How does he fare?”
“Like a man with ploughs in harness his heart rejoices.”
“Did you see the man with seven sons?” “I saw him.” “How does he fare?”
“Among the junior deities he sits on a throne and listens to the proceedings.”
“Did you see the man with no heir?” “I saw him.” “How does he fare?”
“He eats a bread-loaf like a kiln-fired brick.”

Women were also concerned about having children, of course, especially as, unlike the males, they could be replaced if thought to be barren. The emotional strain must have been considerable, especially evident in the Biblical texts, where no man is ever presented as sterile.

Nevertheless, women in the ANE seem rarely to have *vaunted* their maternal status. For them, there was a greater sense of the difficulties involved, rather than an apparently effortless flow of offspring. The same Sumerian society that composed the above quotation from *Bilgames* also had a proverb, “A mother who has given birth to eight youths lies down in weakness” (Alster 1997: 72). Such a statement expresses perfectly the dichotomy presented at the start of this essay. For males, reproduction is simple, almost effortless. There is no downside to a plethora of offspring, merely the pride of being of proven fertility and potency.

For females, reproduction was dangerous, stressful, and exhausting. Not credited with the creation of new life, women bore the full drudgery of childbirth and rearing. Perhaps then it is not surprising that in much of the ANE their prestige came not from (their husbands’) offspring, but from lineage and occupation.³³ The women who appeared in early art portrayed themselves in positions of status that derived either from lineage or profession. Queens, princesses, and nobility derived and portrayed status *vis-à-vis* their fathers and husbands. Priestesses did the same with their cultic positions. Servants who had any status acquired it through their more noble connections, and these connections were emphasized in the inscriptions and iconography. As Julia Asher-Greve has noted (Asher-Greve 2006: 74):³⁴

... independent women worked for queens or other court women, some were priestesses, or daughters of priestesses. Apart from marriage, court and temple offered positions that apparently gave women at least some independence as well as the means to donate votive gifts or acquire high quality seals of expensive materials. Imagery rarely shows women with husband or children but primarily in religious, ceremonial and/or public contexts.

The exceptions to this pattern come only when a woman’s status is directly linked to her role as mother. A prime example is Queen Uqnitum of Urkeš, modern Tell Mozan.³⁵ The queen’s

personal seal that uses her longest title—Wife of (King) Tupkiš—shows the queen in the midst of the royal family, with one child on her lap, another standing before the king. Here Uqnitum emphasizes her role as Queen Mother and with that title, that of Chief Royal Consort. By contrast, the queen and royal consort of the next generation—Tar'am-Agade—was the daughter of Naram-Sîn of Akkad, a lineage of sufficient importance that the queen felt no need to portray herself as a mother in her iconography, but instead took status from her father. Her seals show combat scenes, and her inscription reads: “(Of) Naram-Sîn, the king of Akkad, Tar'am-Agade, his daughter.”³⁶

The emphasis on maternity comes across most strongly in the Hebrew Bible. Here, the Biblical matriarchs, denied any access to the religious or political hierarchy available to women in other ANE societies, wielded power and status *exclusively* through their male offspring, offspring pointedly given by a male deity and recorded in a text voiced and penned exclusively by males.

Ultimately it is a matter of voice. As the male voice dominates the ancient texts, male concerns come to the fore, such as children and the masculine credit for them. In wholly male-voice texts such as the Bible, women are valued almost exclusively for their ability to give men sons. When the woman's voice slips through, especially in societies that had greater opportunities for women, women *may* self-identify as mothers, but they are more likely to highlight their less reproductive accomplishments. Perhaps that gender construct is not so different from our own, after all.

Notes

- 1 This is not to discount the extensive non-biological contributions males make to the rearing of offspring, such as bathing and feeding.
- 2 Roth 2000: 188.
- 3 Budin 2011: 12; Keel and Schroer 2004: 17–19.
- 4 Keel and Schroer 2004: 17.
- 5 Karageorghis 1992: 19.
- 6 Day 2012: 299.
- 7 Baines 1985; Cooper 1989.
- 8 A similar sentiment is expressed in the Greek repertoire in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, ll. 657–62.
- 9 It is clear that male and female were deemed the standard sexes and genders in all the regions under discussion, and that those two sexes were understood as necessary for reproduction, especially human reproduction. This fact remains valid even if some members of the various communities felt themselves to be, or were perceived as, of a different gender-orientation than the one normally associated with their sex, thus effeminate men, masculine women, transvestites, eunuchs, or otherwise. On such categories, especially what might be dubbed “effeminate males” in ancient Mesopotamia, see Nissinen 1998: 28–36. On alternate genders (if not sexes) in the ANE, see McCaffrey 2002: *passim*. On normative and non-normative sex and gender in Mesopotamia, see Asher-Greve 2002: *passim*.
- 10 On the translation of the Sumerian A as “water,” “urine,” or “sperm” see Leick 1994: 25.
- 11 Similar dynamics occur when the Hittite birth goddess H̄annaḥanna disappears, and one might compare this to the flight and return of Demeter in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*.
- 12 With several more lines of similar aches, pains, and births.
- 13 In the later Greek tradition, the sky god Zeus becomes “pregnant” twice. In Hesiod's *Theogony* (l. 924), upon swallowing his pregnant first wife Metis, Zeus incubates his future daughter Athena in his head. According to Euripides' *Bakkhai* (ll. 95–6), Zeus seized the immortal fetus Dionysos from the burning remains of his mother Semele and sewed him into his thigh until he was ready for birth. Both deities—Athena and Dionysos—were recognized as inverting the normal gender paradigms of ancient Greece, and this inversion began with their birth from a male.
- 14 Stol emphasizes that this passage is only preserved in two later, Assyrian versions of the text discovered in Assurbanipal's library. Thus, they may be later additions to an earlier text, and not part of the original conception of the origins of humanity (Stol 2000: 113–14).
- 15 A reference to the mud bricks upon which women in labor in Mesopotamia and Egypt kneeled or crouched during parturition.

- 16 ETCSL translation t.1.1.2, available online at <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.1.2#> (accessed 27 June 2014). It is interesting to note here the contrast with Greek mythology, where it is the *females*, notably Gaia and Hera, who parthenogenically produce monstrous offspring, such as the Cyclopes, Typhaon, and the lame god Hephaistos. My thanks to Aislinn Melchior for this insight.
- 17 On the euphemism “hand” for penis, see Paul 2002.
- 18 The “Lady” is identified as Athirat in an earlier stanza.
- 19 All translations are *NRSV*.
- 20 On this “breast and womb” passage see Smith 2002: 48–52.
- 21 On the archaeological evidence for “pre-Biblical” polytheism, see especially Keel and Uehlinger 1998. On the deities of ancient Israel, see Smith 2002.
- 22 Frymer-Kensky 1992: 70–80; Stol 2000: 71–2, 78.
- 23 Enki is the Sumerian form of the god’s name, Ea is the Akkadian.
- 24 An epithet of Ea.
- 25 On the role of female as erotic stimulator, see Budin 2011: 20–5.
- 26 “Heart” is a euphemism here.
- 27 Biggs 2002: 76.
- 28 On this interpretation of the ritual, see J.L. Miller 2010: *passim*. According to Miller, the ritual was intended to “cure its patient of his proclivity for passive sexual acquiescence and to replace it with an inclination toward normative male, i.e. penetrative behavior.”
- 29 May liquid continue to flow through.
- 30 Robins 1993: 58.
- 31 Abraham and Sarah before their names were changed.
- 32 Believed to be a cure for barrenness.
- 33 On maternity and status in the ancient world, see Budin 2011: ch. 7.
- 34 See also Asher-Greve 2002: 16–17.
- 35 Kelly-Buccellati 2010: 191–3.
- 36 Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 2002: 13.

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