
PERINATAL LESSONS FROM THE PAST

The Holy Bible : insights into perinatal practice in ancient times

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“So God created man ... male and female created he them.” (*Genesis*, I, 27)

The Bible¹ contains a variety of references to sexual and reproductive practice and also to the care of the newborn infant. These references are of considerable interest in that they relate to human behaviour before the development of a medical culture.

On sexual hygiene and practice

Women were instructed to abstain from sex during menstruation and for seven days thereafter (*Leviticus*, XV, 19); following delivery sexual abstinence should be practised for 41 days for a male child and 66 for a female child (*Leviticus* XII, 2-5). Men were considered to be unclean for seven days following contact with menstrual blood. (*Leviticus* XV, 20-28)

An instruction to men with a venereal discharge must surely be the earliest attempt to prevent cross-infection and practise prophylactic medicine.

“When any man hath a running issue out of his flesh, because of his issue he is unclean ... and whomsoever he toucheth ... shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water ... And when he that hath an issue is cleansed of his issue, then he shall number to himself seven days for his cleansing, and wash his clothes and bathe his flesh in running water and shall be clean.” (*Leviticus*, XV, 2-13)

Leviticus also contains injunctions against sex between neighbours and near relatives, indicating an awareness of the consequences of consanguinity (*Leviticus* XIX, 6, 20). Sodomy and bestiality were also strictly forbidden (*Leviticus*, XVIII, 22-23).

On conception

It was clearly understood that a man's seed were required for conception, virgin birth being viewed, of course, as miraculous (*Isaiah*, VII, 14; *Matthew*, I, 18, 25). Thus Onan practised coitus interruptus in order to prevent conception:

“And Onan knew that the seed should not be his; and it came to pass, when he went in unto his brother's wife, that he spilled it on the ground ...” (*Genesis*, XXXVIII, 9)

Barren women were warned not to drink alcohol if they wished to conceive (*Judges*, XIII, 3-4) and there seems to have been awareness



Figure 1 Medallion of a swaddled baby by Andrea della Robbia (1437-1528), Hospice of the Innocents, Florence, one of the oldest founding hospitals in Europe.

that a mother was less likely to conceive while suckling an infant:

“Now when she had weaned Lo-ruhamah, she conceived and bare a son.” (*Hosea*, I, 8)

Surrogacy was also used to “overcome” infertility:

“And Sara said unto Abram, Behold now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I obtain children by her ... And he went in unto Hegar and she conceived ...” (*Genesis*, XVI, 1-16; see also XXX, 1-5)

Genesis XXX, 14-23 also contains an account of sexual misdemeanours which nowadays would appear to confirm the statement:

“Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? It hath been already of old time, which was before us.” (*Ecclesiastes*, I, 9-10)

On pregnancy

There is comment on the normal length of gestation:

“O my son, have pity upon me that bare thee nine months in my womb, and gave thee suck three years and nourished thee ...” (*Maccabees*, II, 7; see also *Job*, XXXIX, 1-3),

and there is also a reference to fetal movements (*Luke*, I, 36-41). Otherwise, there is little written about pregnancy except to deplore premature delivery (*Job*, III, 16; *Ecclesiastes*, VI, 3; *Psalms* LVIII, 8). In one instance the premature labour appeared to have been precipitated by a mental shock: "... when she (Phinehas' wife) heard the tidings that the ark of God was taken, and that her father in law and her husband were dead, she bowed herself and travailed; for her pains came upon her." (*I Samuel*, IV, 19)

On childbirth

Two references suggest that the upright sitting posture was normally adopted during labour and delivery:

"Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her ..." (*Genesis*, XXX, 3) and:

"When ye do the office of midwife to the Hebrew women, and see them upon the stools ..." (*Exodus*, I, 16)

There are brief references to rupture of the membranes (*Job*, XXXVIII, 8), to uterine inertia (*II Kings*, XIX, 3), to hard labour with maternal death (*Genesis*, XXXV, 16-19), and to the ease with which Hebrew women delivered:

"... for they are lively, and are delivered ere the midwives come unto them." (*Exodus*, I, 19)

With regard to pain in childbirth it was written in *Genesis* III, 16:

"Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children..."

For a long time this statement was interpreted as indicating that women were ordained to suffer physical pain during labour as a punishment for Eve's sin. It was even used as an argument against the use of anaesthesia and pain prophylaxis in the 19th century. Research suggests that the Hebrew word used in the original text referred to mental rather than physical pain,² but had been mistranslated. This contention is supported elsewhere. (*Isaiah*, XIII, 8; 21, 3; *LXVI*, 7; *Jeremiah*, L, 43)

"A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, the remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born unto the world." (*John*, XVI, 21)

In *Hosea* there is a suggestion that the husband should not stay long in the delivery room:

"The sorrows of the travailling woman shall come upon him: he is an unwise son; for he should not stay long in the place of the breaking forth of children." (*Hosea*, XIII, 13)

The nearest the Bible comes to describing actual delivery is to be found in two accounts of twin births:

"And when [Rebekah's] days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. And the first came out red, all over

like an hairy garment, and they called him Esau. And after that came his brother out, and his hand took hold Esau's heel; and his name was called Jacob..." (*Genesis*, XXV, 24-26) and:

"... behold, twins were in her womb. And it came to pass, when she travailed, that the one put out his hand: the midwife took and bound upon his hand a scarlet thread, saying, This came out first. And it came to pass, as he drew back his hand, that, behold, his brother came out: and she said, How hast thou broken forth?... And afterwards came out his brother, that had the scarlet thread upon his hand ..." (*Genesis*, XXXVIII 27-30)

Both sets of twin pregnancies were probably monoamniotic. In the first instance Esau may well have been polycythemic due to a twin-to-twin transfusion.

On neonatal and infant care

"And when Elisha was come into the house, behold the child was dead, and laid upon his bed ... And he went up, and lay upon the child, and put his mouth upon his mouth ... and the child waxed warm ... and the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes." (*II Kings*, IV, 32-35)

This account has often been claimed as the first instance of resuscitation using pulmonary insufflation. But of course the patient in this case was a child and there is no mention in the Bible of the technique being used at birth.

After the umbilical cord had been cut, the infant was washed in water, salted (perhaps to prevent infection), and swaddled (*Ezekiel*, XVI, 4; see also *Luke*, II, 6-7). Infants were breastfed (*I Samuel*, I, 23) for as long as three years (*Maccabees*, VII, 27). There are also references to wet nursing and relactation:

"And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash herself at the river ... she saw the ark among the flags ... and when she opened it, she saw the child: and behold, the babe wept. And she had compassion on him ... And Pharaoh's daughter said unto her, Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee wages. And the woman took the child, and nursed it." (*Exodus*, II, 5-10) and: "And Boaz took Ruth, and she was his wife ... and she bare him a son. And the women said unto Naomi ... thy daughter in law ... hath born him. And Naomi took the child, and laid it on her bosom, and became nurse to it." (*Ruth*, IV, 13-16).

Male infants were circumcised on the 8th day (*Genesis*, XVII, 9-14; *Leviticus*, XII, 3) using a sharp stone (*Exodus*, IV, 25).

Lastly, there is the story of the mother who overlaid her infant and then stole the baby of another mother. The tale has a modern ring, though the way in which Solomon cunningly solved the dispute that arose would hardly gain ethical approval. (*I Kings*, III, 16-28)

1 *The Holy Bible*. University Press, Oxford, 1889.

2 Kloosterman GJ. The universal aspects of childbirth; human birth as a socio-psychosomatic paradigm. *J Psychosomat Obstet Gynecol* 1982; 1: 35-41.