

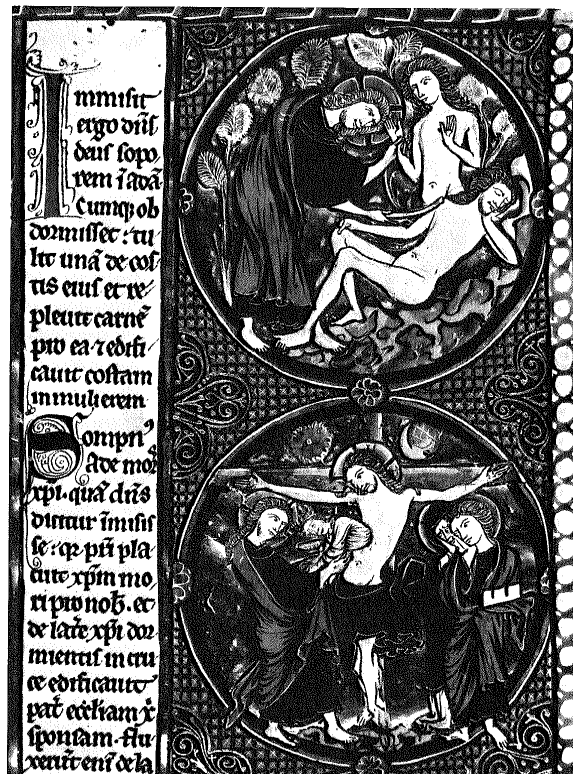
Tania Oldenhage

Jesus' Labor Pain: Rereading Birth and Crisis in the Passion Narratives

Zusammenfassung:

Dieser Aufsatz stellt kritische Fragen an das Motiv vom gebärenden Christus am Kreuz: Was bedeutet es, Folter und Hinrichtung mit einer Geburt in Verbindung zu bringen? Wie genau wird (Jesu) Wehenschmerz in Worte gefasst und in welchen Erzählstrukturen erlangt er Bedeutung? Wie können sich feministische Theologinnen auf das Motiv des gebärenden Christus beziehen, ohne dabei bestimmte Geburtserfahrungen normativ festzuschreiben? Der Artikel endet mit einem Plädoyer dafür, das Motiv vom gebärenden Christus in eine vergessen gegangene Tradition einzubinden, in der Wehenschmerz und Krise zusammengehören.

In 1986, Caroline Walker Bynum published an essay that included a series of highly unusual medieval representations of Christ. One of these images depicts Christ as he is giving birth on the cross.¹



With his hands stretched out and nailed to a wooden board, he looks down upon a figure that is about to emerge from the wound on his side. Next to the cross is a woman who receives the newborn with her hands like a midwife. What we see here, according to Bynum, is the birth of the church out of the wounded body of Christ. For Bynum, writing in the 1980s, this image served as one of several examples of the way in which medieval theology was able to imagine Christ's body through female imagery.

In our time, Christian feminist writers have picked up on the trope of the birthing Jesus in order to develop a variety of projects ranging from feminist pastoral care to exegetical recoveries of maternal imagery in the Bible. Pastoral theologians such as Margaret L. Hammer and Hanna Strack have argued that the figure of the birthing Jesus on the cross offers encouragement, strength, and affirmation to birthing women today.² Systematic theologians such as Colleen Carpenter Cullinan and Mary J. Streufert have pointed to the soteriological implications of this trope for contemporary theologies of the cross. Evoking the voices of medieval female writers, these authors seek to rewrite sacrificial theology in light of what they perceive to be an experience particular to birthing women:³ “Women who gestate, birth, and nurse babies are giving life for life,” Streufert writes.⁴ Cullinan suggests: “[T]he image of a woman in labor, struggling to give birth to a child, can be placed alongside the image of Jesus on the cross, suffering to give birth to graced, divinized humanity.”⁵

Feminist New Testament scholars, too, have become interested in the birthing Jesus.⁶ The gospel of John especially seems to lend itself to a reading of Jesus' crucifixion as a birthing process. Not only does this particular passion story open with a parable about the pain and the joy of a birthing woman⁷, John also offers a number of more subtle clues that have prompted feminist exegetes to write about Jesus' crucifixion in terms of birth. Water and blood, the fluids that flow out of Jesus' pierced side wound are, as Barbara E. Reid points out, “the same liquids that flow from an open womb and accompany the birth of a child.”⁸ Jesus' last words on the cross – “It is finished” (19:30) – can be understood, according to Reid, “as a cry of victory like that of a mother who cries out in joy when the birth pangs are over, and her child is born.”⁹

What does it mean to read an account of torture and death as a story of birth? I am trained to think about Jesus' crucifixion as a first century act of imperial terror. In my mind, Roman soldiers inflicted the wounds on Jesus' body and I find it hard to imagine them as a birthing womb. However, the trope of a crucified birthing Jesus has captivated me in other ways. Like the scholars just mentioned, I, too, have been drawn to the medieval birthing of Christ, which Caroline Walker Bynum

recovered more than two decades ago. My own point of engagement is not the trope's implications for feminist pastoral theology, or soteriology, or biblical exegesis, but a question of representation, and specifically the representation of birth pain. There is something about the medieval Christ giving birth on the cross that has haunted me since the first time I laid eyes on it. If I am to read this image as a birthing process, then I am confronted with a depiction of the final stage of labor. The head has emerged; the newborn is just about to be pushed from Christ's body. The final stage of labor, however, is, according to contemporary pregnancy books, the messiest and possibly also most painful phase of childbirth. *What to Expect When You're Expecting* describes what traditionally is called the "ring of fire": "a tingling, stretching, burning or stinging sensation at the vagina as your baby's head emerges".¹⁰ Yet, the face of the medieval Christ does not reflect any such sensation. He does not look anguished at all. Hard labor, according to feminist theologians of birth, combines the experience of intense pain with happiness, even bliss.¹¹ Perhaps the medieval Christ has already been overtaken by such bliss – like John's Jesus who gives birth on the cross with a "cry of victory" on his lips?

Hereafter, I want to work through the conflation of pain and bliss, of torture and new life, in both the New Testament representations of Jesus' crucifixion and in contemporary representations of childbirth. What I wish to accomplish is neither a recovery of spiritual or theological resources nor a recovery of birth imagery in the Bible, but an interrogation of feminist investments in the trope of the birthing Jesus – including my own. The following reading is an experiment with which I would like to complicate the ways in which feminist scholars – like myself – build linkages between childbirth and Jesus' passion.¹²

Representing (Labor) Pain

When a woman is pregnant with her first child and wants to know: "How does it feel to give birth" – what does she learn? Pregnancy handbooks offer words for the various stages of labor such as "burning" or "stinging" or sentences such as "You will feel that you are being stretched to your limits, literally."¹³ But what can those words and sentences communicate? How does it *really* feel? Asking this question means running against a wide spread conviction that the pain of birth can simply not be named. It is beyond language. Even Hannah Arendt – well known for arguing that birth is not a thing of nature but related to the world – denies the discursiveness of birth pain. The laboring human body, she says

“... is thrown back upon itself, concentrates upon nothing but its own being alive, and remains imprisoned in its metabolism with nature without ever transcending or freeing itself from the recurring cycle of its own functioning.”¹⁴

Birthing women, if one follows Arendt's lead, are somehow before culture, reduced to their bodies, and therefore at a loss when asked to share the pain of birthing through language. Likewise, the pain caused by crucifixion is arguably unspeakable. In fact, when it comes to experiences of torture, Elaine Scarry has famously developed an even stronger argument about the pre-discursiveness of pain:

“Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.”¹⁵

Scarry does not consider Jesus' crucifixion as a case in point¹⁶, but there is an argument to be made that the physical pain that first century torture victims suffered on the cross – not unlike the pain of Arendt's labouring female body – defied language and that this fact is reflected in Scripture's accounts of Jesus' crucifixion. None of the four gospel writers offers any graphic description of pain.¹⁷ If contemporary readers think they know about the physical aspects of this type of Roman torture practice, it is because modern historians, exegetes or filmmakers have filled in the gaps that the gospels leave open. “Stretching torment”¹⁸, “searing agony”¹⁹, or “severed nerves”²⁰ are words offered not by the canonical texts but by modern commentators. When 21st century Hollywood movies present the flogging of Jesus and the nailing of hands and feet, they may create the illusion of knowledge about things that are, according to Arendt and Scarry, ultimately not communicable.

Nevertheless, there are a couple of ways in which pain finds its way into language even in the most restrained New Testament account of Jesus' crucifixion and even in the most elliptical story of childbirth in the United States. One common way of telling pain is to focus not on its quality, but on its duration: “How long did it take?” Tracking time is one important narrative device for telling pain – and this is true for both contemporary birth storytelling and the passion narratives. “It was the third hour when they crucified him” (Mark 15:25). “It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour” (Luke 23:44). “About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice” (Matthew 27:46).

Confusing time references in the synoptic gospels have generated pages of commentary and blogs debating the question of how long Jesus really was on the cross.²¹ These debates can carry urgency because of what many perceive to be the dialectic between the scope of suffering and the power of redemption. I recall the vehement way in which some of my students in Ohio used to argue that Jesus suffered more than any other human being before or after him. Otherwise – in their view – Jesus would not have been able to redeem humankind. For these students, the amount of time Jesus was on the cross, mattered a great deal: “Was he long enough on the cross to pay for our sins?” The duration of pain may not be able to express its quality, but it still is able to fill pain with meaning.

In conventional birth storytelling, the tracking of time plays an important role as well: “Contraction began at 2 o’clock in the morning.” “At 11 o’clock my water finally broke.” “After 22 hours of labor I was moved to the operating room.” Sometimes the length of labor can serve as a summary of the entire event: “The baby came after four (or nine or eighteen) hours.” Here as well, time references can be filled with meanings, connoting different degrees of accomplishment or bravery, invoking admiration, horror or sympathy.

There is a second narrative device shared by the gospels and by countless birth stories in the United States. Pain can be narrated through a story of trial and contest. In Emily Martin’s classic account of US birthing culture or in Abby Epstein’s recent documentary *The Business of Being Born*, the birthing woman is both hero and victim in an antagonistic setting, confronted with adversaries as diverse as Jesus’ alleged “opponents” in the passion narratives: the medical system that deceives the pregnant woman about her options, the doctor who puts the birthing woman under time pressure and finally insists against her wish on a C-section; the midwife who doesn’t like the woman's breathing exercise, the mocking nurse who sings “now, where should I put the epidural?”, hospital administrators who establish the birthing woman’s identity according to race and class – “medicaid recipient”, “teenage mother” – producing public knowledge among staff members through her medical chart, just like Jesus’ identity is established by Pontius Pilate who marks him as the “King of the Jews”. Those who in this hostile environment are supposed to stand by – under the cross or in the delivery room – often fail miserably, the would-be father in the waiting area who cannot keep up with the coaching script or the disciple who hides in the courtyard scared and confused.²² These narrative strategies may not be able to communicate pain – neither the pain of a birthing woman nor the pain of crucifixion – but they can certainly heighten a sense of excruciation or outrage in readers or audiences. It also has to be said that such narrative strategies are not

innocent. When it comes to the passion narratives they have caused resentments against Jesus' alleged "opponents" in Christian audiences for centuries.²³

Pain Management

In recent years, claims about the pre-discursiveness or incommunicability of pain have become contested. Feminist critics interested in birth have insisted on dragging pain out of the dark place of nature and tracing its links to the world. Whatever a birthing woman experiences is, according to this argument, necessarily entangled with language and culture. Pamela Klassen, writing about the experience of home birthing women, argues: "The language spoken by the body, whether in pain, pleasure, or merely discomfort, is always a translation through a woman's layers of personal and psychic history and cultural values."²⁴ In a similar vein, Della Pollock suggests that pain "doesn't precede language", instead "it is always interwoven with meanings and meaning systems".²⁵ The problem, in her view, is not the inability of women to articulate pain, but the many cultural conventions that compel women to articulate the pain of birth in a particular way - which in turn informs the experience of birth itself.²⁶

Once upon a time, one conventional way of knowing and telling the pain of birth had its source in the infamous line at the beginning of Scripture, according to which women suffer in childbirth in order to pay for humanity's fall from grace. "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing" (NIV), God says to Eve after she eats from the forbidden tree. The reception history of Genesis 3:16 has been told and retold many times and it is here, in fact, that birth and crucifixion have been said to intertwine most disturbingly in the lives of women in the past. In 17th century France, pregnant women were encouraged to understand and to accept the pain of birth as divine judgment and pray to God in ways such as the following: "May I suffer the cruellest pangs with joy, and may I join them with the sufferings of your Son upon the cross, in the midst of which He engendered me into eternal life."²⁷ Prayers like this served as an interpretive lens not only for making sense of the pain of birth, but also for perceiving this pain as beneficial. Linda Shearing describes similar 18th century American attitudes towards childbirth: "[W]omen's cries of pain were useful to their spiritual development"; they were said to be "both God's curse and a spiritual aid to woman's salvation."²⁸

As Shearing goes on to show, medical professionals were the first who engaged in a critical revision of this type of discourse. Obstetricians eager to apply chemical anaesthesia in their practice were at the cutting edge of exegetical scholarship on Genesis 3:16 because they wanted to diffuse this verse's authority over their

professional interests. When understood correctly, God's words, as the 19th century Scottish physician James Young Simpson argued, do not prohibit pain relief during childbirth, because the Hebrew term *eseb* does not refer to physical pain but to physical labor. The physical labor of muscle contractions, Simpson pointed out, is not affected by anaesthesia. Anaesthesia, the argument went, could therefore be applied without any theological worry.²⁹

In our time, the history of pain management during childbirth has taken several additional turns. One can assume that the number of women who experience childbirth through the lens of Genesis has decreased considerably. Consequently, there are probably not very many birthing women who see a link between the pain they experience, their own sinfulness, and the atoning quality of Jesus' suffering on the cross. But this does not mean that the suffering of Jesus can no longer wield hermeneutical power in today's birthing rooms. In her study of North American home birthing women, Pamela Klassen reflects on the experience of Carrie, a born-again charismatic Christian, who was able to make powerful connections between her own experience of childbirth and what she understood to be God's act of parturition on the cross. I abbreviate Klassen's citation of Carrie's oral reflection:

“God showed me that the same thing I experience in the natural and the physical realm [in birth] was what he experienced in releasing his Son. [It was the same as] the separation that he had with his son at the cross when [Jesus] ... took upon himself the sin of mankind, and he was for the first time in his life separated from God.”³⁰

Klassen's discussion of Carrie's reflections suggests that labor pain can become spiritually charged through the figure of the crucified Christ, even though times have changed. In fact, there is something that Carrie shares with 17th or 18th century birthing women and that is the experience of labor pain without anaesthesia. Her story belongs to a particular spectrum of contemporary birth culture that rejects medically induced pain relief. What makes Carrie's story different from historical narratives of 17th or 18th century birthing women is the fact that she had a choice in this matter. The question whether or not to give birth at home is, among other things, also a question of how to deal with the option of pain management. Carrie gave birth at home because she wanted to have a birth as “natural” as possible: no chemical support, no epidural, no C-section. Today, some hospitals and birthing centers in North America are adjusting to these

desires. Thereby they follow the lead of what Abby Epstein's documentary claims to be the advanced birthing culture of European countries.

In the Northern part of Switzerland where I live, women who undergo conventional prenatal monitoring are, according to my experiences, indeed discouraged by the medical authorities from announcing in advance that they want anaesthetic pain relief during the birth. Doctors and midwives are prepared to explain labor pain as a desirable part of the birthing process and suggest that women embrace and experience this pain without medical interference. The website of the clinic where I myself gave birth offers the following advice for how to deal with labor pain:

“Mobility allows the woman to instinctively alleviate the pain and to diminish resistance and pressure. The breaks in between contractions are necessary for balance and relaxation. Therefore, contraction and the break in between contractions lead to pain tolerance. As the birthing process advances, this tolerance increases as well and the moment of birth comes closer. Trust in your ability to give birth by yourself. There is no peak-experience like this!”³¹

What happens when a woman follows the advice given here? Sometime during pregnancy she officially decides to have a “natural birth” without anaesthetic devices except for homeopathic drops, fragrances or massage. Once she finds herself in the delivery room she is ready to get in tune with the workings of her womb's muscles, her pain tolerance increases, and she remains confident about her ability to give birth all by herself like a hiker reaching the peak of a mountain. Another possibility is that things do not work out this way. Instead the woman finds herself overwhelmed with unbearable pain knowing that it was she who decided to live through it, and while she changes her mind about the idea of an epidural for example, she learns from the attending midwife that now it is too late. Such stories of pain management resonate with the gospel accounts of Jesus' passion. “Jesus accepted the excruciating pain of crucifixion in order to bring about spiritual birth for strangers...,” writes Nancy Klenk Hill.³² However, acceptance of pain does not come out of the blue. Like countless pregnant women in Switzerland or North America, Jesus has to think about the possibility of pain relief. In anticipation of his execution, Jesus takes his time considering the option of avoiding pain altogether. Agonizing in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays that he might be spared the suffering that awaits him. Once the decision is made against such course of events, he still seems to reckon with its possibility. “Do

you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?”, Jesus says while being arrested in the gospel of Matthew (Matthew 26:53). According to the gospel of John, Jesus remains in full control of the process until the very end. But the gospels of Mark and Matthew tell a different story. Here it seems that Jesus' relationship with the idea of pain relief becomes ever more conflicted as the passion story proceeds.

The drinks that are offered to the crucified Jesus, according to the gospels, are dubious in their substance: wine, vinegar, gall and myrrh, mixed together in different ways and given to Jesus by various people. But in Mark and Matthew at least one of them seems to be a narcotic. Mark's Jesus flat out rejects it (Mark 15:23). Jesus “would not take any such anaesthetic”, commentators explain. “All His faculties must be unclouded for what lay before him.”³³ Matthew's Jesus tastes it but then does not drink it (Matthew 27:34). What could this tasting mean?

Sudden hesitation, profound ambivalence, the back and forth between the desire for a “natural birth”, the promise of an IV to increase the strength of contractions, the shut down of all senses through an emergency Caesarean?

In many contemporary birth stories just as in the gospels, pain gains its meaning in light of the option of pain relief. When faced with the possibility to alleviate, even to avoid pain altogether, the cause of pain is ultimately traced back to the suffering person him- or herself. It was the birthing woman who wanted to have it that way – just as Jesus *chose* to suffer on the cross. I do not want to deny that a choice like this can result in a “peak-experience”, as the Swiss hospital puts it, or that it can lead to the kind of deeply felt reflections offered by Carrie, or that it can amount to the spiritual empowerment as claimed by some feminist theologians. But I do want to press the question of what happens when pain gets enmeshed in such narratives a little further.

A comic-heroic narrative norm

In the gospel of Mark, Jesus' birthing on the cross does not culminate in a “cry of victory”, as it is the case in John's gospel, but in a “cry of desolation”. To be precise, Mark's crucified Jesus expresses himself through two different kinds of cries. The first cry is his famous citation of the beginning of Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (15:34). The second cry remains inarticulate: “With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last” (15:37).³⁴

There is much at stake in these two cries for Christian readers of Mark's gospel. Was Jesus “abandoned not only by his disciples but also by his Father?”³⁵ “Had God indeed deserted Him?”³⁶ Exegetical commentaries on Mark's passion

combine their efforts in arguing against this possibility. A widespread argument runs as follows: Jesus' cry of desolation ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?") is one of a series of intertextual echoes between Psalm 22 and Mark's account of the crucifixion.³⁷ Commentators therefore frequently speak of the likelihood that (Mark meant to imply that) Jesus cited more than only one line from the Psalm. Those who take Mark's account to be a reflection of what actually happened at the crucifixion argue that Jesus might not have had the strength to cite more than one line but that he remembered and silently recited the Psalm in its entirety. The Psalm in its entirety, however, is not only an expression of abandonment, but also, and in fact to a large part, an affirmation of faith, trust, and triumph. "So here we have," as Alan Cole concludes, "the agony of one suffering the experience of abandonment by God, and yet certain by faith of ultimate vindication and triumph."³⁸

Feminist theologians have offered a variation of this same argument, and here, birth and crucifixion become, once again, closely intertwined. What mainstream exegetes repeatedly ignore and feminist authors persistently point out is the fact that Psalm 22 prominently features birth imagery. The psalmist enacts the shift from desolation to affirmation through the image of God as a midwife: "Yet you brought me out of the womb; / you made me trust in you / even at my mother's breast. / From birth I was cast upon you; / from my mother's womb you have been my God" (NIV, Ps 22:9-10).

Juliana Claassens has explored the effect of this imagery on the entire psalm. Particularly the image of God as a midwife, in Claassens' reading, evokes a situation of utter despair where something has gone wrong in a birthing process so that the lives of both mother and child are in danger:

"Evoking the connotations of a midwife who draws a baby from the womb, thereby bringing life to a child who would have died together with its mother if it stayed in the womb, the psalmist pleads with God to bring about life in her own situation of suffering and despair so strong that it is close to death."³⁹

Through the evocation of a birth situation of intense crisis and the image of God as a saving midwife, the psalmist, according to Claassens, is able to make a dramatic transition from death to life. The "initial cry of despair" turns into "a renewed hope for the future" and "a declaration of trust".⁴⁰

Feminist theologians who read Jesus' "cry of desolation" against the background of the Psalm's deployment of birth imagery, describe a similar movement from

despair to trust. For example, German exegete Marianne Grohmann repeats the argument of conventional scholarship, according to which Jesus cited not only the Psalm's cry of despair, but had on its mind larger portions of this text including its affirmation of God's saving power. For Grohmann, the image of God as a midwife is able to produce a sense of basic trust and security (*Urvertrauen*) that are, as she argues, tied to human experiences of birthing.⁴¹ Mark's gospel confronts us with death, she argues, but only to remind us of this basic trust established at the moment of birth.

According to Della Pollock, contemporary birth storytelling in the United States is often governed by a "comic-heroic norm", a narrative script that forces women to move efficiently from the mess of labor or surgery to a happy ending. Pain is often told, or alluded to, in order to end with the blissful scene that dominates much of contemporary popular literature on pregnancy and birth: The radiant mother with her newborn baby on her chest, her hair wet with sweat, her clothes still in disorder – uncanny allusions to the darker events that just lie behind her. References to those darker events, according to Pollock, often have the function of highlighting the successful delivery. Remembering and narrating pain – in intimate conversations among female friends or in the anonymity of internet chat rooms – is often a flirtation with disaster. "If it weren't for this doctor or that technological advancement the baby could have died." In such ways, Pollock writes, birth stories often "... play with disaster, knowing it will be cast out or contained within the comic structure of the story."⁴² Told from the vantage point of a narrator holding a healthy baby in her arm, tales of possible disasters become the stage of a happy ending. Pollock points out that this narrative script is so powerful that those births that actually end with death or disaster are very hard to tell: "failed births" such as stillbirth or miscarriage, or the birth of a severely sick child.

It seems that a comic structure shapes the experience of many readers of Mark's passion story as well. Pain is told through restrained narrative devices. Desolation and abandonment are alluded to. Readers gain a glimpse into the depth of despair, only to rise to the heights of triumph.⁴³ Most recipients of crucifixion scenes know they are heading towards resurrection, or at least towards something, depending on theological standpoints, a sense of basic trust in God, or salvation from sin, or the emergence of a new community, or the birth of the church. If Jesus experiences labor pain, this pain has a purpose. In the words of Margaret Hammer:

“... Jesus' travail is productive ..., like that of a mother whose travail culminates in a healthy birth. The suffering of Jesus' death, like the distress of a birthing mother, is resolved and redeemed in the joy and fulfilment of having accomplished an arduous but vital task.”⁴⁴

What does it mean to look at narratives of pain that ultimately lead to some sort of outcome? How does the comic script of birth and passion stories shape our perception of the kind of pain that does not bring “joy or fulfilment”, that does not carry any redemptive meanings?⁴⁵ Are birth and passion stories the kind of cultural material that prevents us from adequately remembering involuntary suffering, obstructed labor, pain that is not productive? And what is the function of successful birth narratives vis-à-vis those births that do end with catastrophe or death?

Labor Pain as a Metaphor for crisis

I find it important to notice that the deployment of birth imagery in the Hebrew Bible repeatedly and stubbornly defies the comic script of birth story telling. References to childbirth are not always channelled into the kind of upward movement that seems to characterize Psalm 22. On the contrary, images of childbirth, and specifically, images of labor, appear most often in contexts of intense crises that do not get diverted or resolved. The cycle of prophecies in Jeremiah 4:5-6:30 offers a case in point. In these passages the prophet speaks of an enemy that approaches from the North and is threatening to destroy Jerusalem and its inhabitants. In the midst of these announcements the prophet utters the following words of lament:

My belly! My belly! I writhe in labor!
 Walls of my heart!
 In uproar is for me my heart.
 Not can I keep silent.
 For the sound of the trumpet I hear with my whole being,
 the signal of war. (Jeremiah 4:19)

Feminist exegete Angela Bauer, whose translation I follow here, has highlighted this striking case of prophetic discourse in which a male voice evokes the agony of childbirth.⁴⁶ Traditional Bible translations, Bauer points out, often cover up what is at stake here, namely Jeremiah's identification with a woman in labor

pain. A little later in the prophetic text, the use of childbirth imagery is made explicit, and here I am able to follow the familiar rendering offered by the NIV:

I hear a cry as of a woman in labor,
 a groan as of one bearing her first child –
 the cry of the Daughter of Zion gasping for breath,
 stretching out her hands and saying,
 “Alas! I am fainting;
 my life is given over to murderers.” (Jeremiah 4:31)

These two passages from Jeremiah belong to a series of texts in the Hebrew Bible in which the threat of a military crisis is expressed through the image of labor pain. Crying, groaning, gasping for breath, fainting, and surrender belong to a vast repertoire of birthing symptoms from which the prophets draw in order to call attention to impending catastrophes brought about by various armies and enemies.⁴⁷ For a long time, this kind of imagery was ignored or quickly glossed over by the exegetical discourse, but today, it has become a subject of concern for an increasing number of feminist scholars. What these scholars agree upon is the fact that the use and representation of labor pain by the prophets is highly irritating. According to Angela Bauer, it is the combination between life-giving and deathly linguistic fields that strikes an odd chord with feminist readers.⁴⁸ Why did these ancient writers choose labor pain of all things as an image of war and battle? What should one make of the fact that images of birth show up to illustrate the threat of mass destruction? If these are metaphors, what is the point of comparison? Is it the unavoidability of pain? The intensity of pain? The feeling of being utterly at the mercy of an alien force? And what are the rhetorical effects on intended audiences? Feminist scholars who elaborated on this question do not agree with each other. Amy Kalmanofsky reads these texts as attempts on part of the prophets to horrify their audiences into reformation.⁴⁹ Katheryn Darr thinks about the possibility that images of labor pain are used to evoke the Deity's pity.⁵⁰ Cynthia Chapman argues that images of labor pain are used to shame and humiliate those who are about to become the victims of war.⁵¹

One point that has especially provoked concerns among feminist scholars is the bleak context in which labor pain shows up in the prophetic texts. According to Ulrike Sals, women's labor serves as a strikingly static image. What is missing in these texts is the outcome, the successful birth, or (at least) the end of pain. In her opinion, prophets connect labor pain with death and fear because they look at female experiences through male eyes.⁵² Tarja Philip shares this assessment and

offers a socio-historical explanation for the link between labor pain and death, namely men's restricted access to actual births:

“In Israel the men were not accepted in the delivery room, and their knowledge of the process was limited. The men might have seen the beginning of the pangs, which might suddenly “grip” the woman, and they could hear cries of pain at the next stage, in which they could not participate ...”⁵³

Philip suggests that it was men's experience of having to wait helplessly and anxiously for the birth to take its course, which fueled the metaphorical use of labor pain by the prophets. Philip goes on to wonder how women would have written about the pain of childbirth if they had been given a chance to do so. Perhaps, she proposes, women would have looked at birth in a much more positive light, associating it not so much with fear and death than with a sense of “wonder, pride, and satisfaction” about “the beginning of new life”.⁵⁴ This would have resulted, according to Philip, in a more holistic development of childbirth imagery that would address the danger of birthing not at the expense of the pleasure and joy a birth can bring to a woman's life.⁵⁵ To use labor pains as an illustration of affliction and death, according to this kind of critique, erases the bodily power and agency of birthing women. Labor pain, according to feminist theologians such as Hanna Strack, should not be perceived as a miserable, sorrowful state but as a transformative process that recruits a woman's physical and emotional strength.

Critiques like these reveal, I think, a profound clash between biblical legacies and contemporary feminist investments in the theme of childbirth. Jeremiah deploys the image of labor pain in order to dramatize the situation of people who passively await an overwhelming crisis. Many feminist writers, in contrast, are interested in biblical imagery of birth and labor pain as instances of women's agency and creative power. To link childbirth labor with passive suffering is not useful to such projects. Feminist theologians invested in women's capacity to bring something new into the world will not be able to draw from Jeremiah 4 or similar texts. The horrified prophet who writhes like a woman in labor is almost like an ancient biblical antidote to what Hanna Strack has in mind when she configures birthing women as powerful “co-creators with the divine”. To a certain degree it is thus no wonder that feminist theologians reject prophetic images of labor pain as stereotypical misinterpretations of the experience of childbirth.

But of course, there is no such thing as “the experience of childbirth”. What we are dealing with here is, as I see it, the dissonance caused by different discursive productions of childbirth. There are worlds between Jeremiah 4 and the kind of birth promoted by the Swiss hospital in which female bodies are said to be strong enough to push a baby into the world. This dissonance has been critically addressed by German exegete Claudia Bergman who warns against the type of analysis that takes contemporary expectations around birth as a point of reference for reading prophetic texts. She writes:

“It is certainly true that childbirth most often concludes in the birth of a healthy child, at least in the modern age and in Western society. But it is notable that texts employing the Birth Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible do not focus on a happy outcome. ... Birth Metaphor texts describe what happens before the happy or tragic result, namely the pain and fear and crisis of childbirth at a point when one is truly on the threshold between life and death. This is why childbirth and crisis can be compared in the first place, because the outcome of neither one can be predicted with certainty.”⁵⁶

Bergmann emphasizes that Jeremiah's first readers were attuned to the link between birth and death, not because theirs was an androcentric way of looking at things, but because the death rates of birthing women were high. The resonances between a battle field and a birthing room might seem far fetched to us. But, as Bergmann points out, they were powerfully present for ancient audiences.⁵⁷ To make this point, Bergmann refers to an ancient Middle Assyrian medical text in which the metaphor works the other way around and a woman's childbirth is compared to a battle scene:

“The woman in childbirth has pangs at delivery, at delivery she has pangs, the babe is stuck fast, the babe is stuck fast. The bolt is secure – to bring life to an end, the door is made fast – against the suckling kid ... The mother is enveloped in the dust of death. Like a chariot she is enveloped in the dust of battle, like a plough she is enveloped in the dust of the woods, like a warrior in the fray, she is cast down in her blood.”⁵⁸

This text describes a situation that resembles the birth crisis alluded to in Psalm 22:11-12. A baby is stuck in the womb of a woman. Both mother and child are in danger of dying. Here, ancient writers take recourse to an image that at the time

might have seemed most capable of capturing the danger that threatens the lives of a birthing mother and her child, namely the image of a bloody battlefield. When Hebrew prophets make the opposite move, taking recourse to the crisis of birthing, they might in fact have chosen a collective experience that to them was most powerfully able to make visceral the horrors of an upcoming battle. My point here is not that we should take the portrayal of labor pain in the Hebrew prophetic texts as a better or more appropriate representation of childbirth than the ones offered by feminist theologians of birth. And I also do not want to deny that these texts can be alienating for 21st century readers interested in the spiritual aspects of childbirth. But I think Bergmann makes a compelling plea that asks us to be open to the possibility that childbirth metaphors and allusions to women's labor pain can be at times effective means of describing intense human crises. I also would want to argue that this dissonant and perhaps jarring prophetic tradition of labor imagery should not be ignored in contemporary readings of Jesus' crucifixion as a birthing process. A birthing Jesus belongs, partly at least, to the tradition represented by the prophet of Jeremiah who writhes and holds his belly in pain as an enemy approaches and threatens to destroy his people. Jesus, like Jeremiah, can be read as a man in labor pain. And as a man in labor, Jesus, too, asks contemporary readers to work on the tension between childbirth and catastrophe.

Conclusion

The rediscovery of the birthing Jesus by Christian feminist theology raises more questions than the ones I have addressed here. What I wanted to initiate in this essay is a process of thinking through the ways in which feminist concerns with contemporary birthing cultures can play into reading Jesus' crucifixion as childbirth. I also wanted to point to the ways in which this newly rediscovered trope could become entangled with the comic-heroic narrative script of birth storytelling in our time. The birthing Jesus on the cross can reinforce the kind of narrative norms that leave little room for stories of birth whose prominent theme is not joy but pain. Finally, I wanted to suggest that the long neglected biblical tradition in which men identify with a woman in childbirth should not be dismissed altogether as an androcentric discourse on women's birth experiences. Instead, it needs to be acknowledged and more thoroughly examined as one foil against which to reconfigure a birthing Jesus on the cross.

If we are willing to bracket the notion, which in some contemporary birthing cultures has received such a huge currency, namely that giving birth can be a

matchless “peak-experience”, reading crucifixion and childbirth together might refer us to unexpected histories and legacies. Rather than reading for productive pain in tales of crucifixion, I suggest a reading that traces another trajectory. Mark 15:34 (Jesus' cry of desolation) as I have tried to indicate, can refer contemporary audiences to another biblical tale of a birthing crisis, to birthing labor that stopped to progress, to a birth that is at the threshold of death and whose outcome is uncertain. It is a birth story deeply buried within the alleged comic structures of Psalm 22, a story that in its turn faintly echoes with an even older story of a birth gone wrong, a “babe stuck fast” and a “mother enveloped in the dust of death” in the ancient Near Eastern parallel.⁵⁹ When I – as a feminist today – consider the possible links between childbirth and Jesus' passion I want to remember and reckon with this ancient trajectory.

I wrote this essay during my time at the Women's Studies and Religion Program (WSRP) at the Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge where I was a 2009/2010 Research Associate. I thank my former WSRP colleagues for their critical engagement with this text.

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¹ Caroline Walker Bynum 1986, 419. The image was taken out of a 13th century French moralizing Bible where it was accompanied by another possible birthing scene: the birth of Eve out of Adam's body. The entire essay was republished in Bynum's book *Fragmentation and Redemption* which was translated into German in 1996 and continues to make an impact on feminist theological discourses.

Concerning the image, see Caroline Walker Bynum 1991, 99.

² Margaret L. Hammer 1994, 66-67.210; Hanna Strack 2006, 218-220. In German-speaking Europe, this argument needs to be situated within a recent trend in feminist theology that is based on a rediscovery of Hannah Arendt's notion of natality, the human capacity to bring something new into this world.

³ It is especially the voice of Marguerite of Oingt that gets repeatedly invoked in these discourses. The quote provided by Bynum is this: “My sweet Lord ... are you not my mother and more than my mother? ... Ah! sweet Lord Jesus, who ever saw a mother suffer such a birth? For when the hour of your delivery came you were placed on the hard bed of the cross ... and your nerves and all your veins were broken. And truly it is no surprise that your veins burst when in one day you gave birth to the whole world” (Caroline Walker Bynum 1986, 418).

⁴ Mary J. Streufert 2006, 72.

⁵ Colleen Carpenter Cullinan 2008, 103-104. For similar kinds of discourses, see Nancy Klenk Hill 1989 and Murray Rae 2003.

⁶One biblical text that has been said to encourage such a reading is Acts 2:24. In this verse, the apostle Peter speaks of Christ's resurrection as a release from the “birth pain of death”. Most English translations have erased the association with childbirth basing their decision on alleged ancient translation mistakes. However, translation error or not, feminist scholars interested in recovering childhood imagery in the Bible are able to point to the fact that the word that is used in the accepted manuscripts behind the canonical New Testament text is *ōdinas*, and

ōdin, according to Walter Bauer's lexicon, is the Greek word for labor pain. See Margaret L. Hammer 1994, 63-67.

⁷ For a detailed reading of the childbirth parable in John 16:21, see Kathleen Rushton 2002.

⁸ Barbara E. Reid 2007, 155. For different readings of birth or maternal imagery in John, see Turid Karlsen Seim 2005, J. Massynbaerde Ford 1997, Deborah Sawyer 2003, and – for the German context – Andrea Günter 2004.

⁹ Barbara E. Reid 2007, 165.

¹⁰ Heidi Murkoff, Arlene Eisenberg, and Sandee Hathaway 2002, 391.

¹¹ Dorothee Sölle 1999, 76; Hanna Strack 2006, 208ff.

¹² I published a short version of such an experimental reading in the Swiss feminist-theological journal FAMA (Tania Oldenhage 2010).

¹³ Ananda Lowe and Rachel Zimmermann 2009, 46.

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt 1998, 115.

¹⁵ Elaine Scarry 1985, 4.

¹⁶ Scarry refers to Christ's crucifixion in the context of her discussion of religious pain ceremonies which for her radically differs from the situation of torture victims, Elaine Scarry 1986, 34. Recent reconstructions of Jesus' crucifixion tell another story. Scholars such as John Dominic Crossan or E. P. Sanders have reconfigured Jesus as one of countless victims of Roman state terror, a random victim of torture, his corpse a deterrent against social upheaval.

¹⁷ This is actually a commonplace on gospel criticism and is repeated over and over again.

¹⁸ http://www.ethoughts.org/crucifixion_description.htm

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ R. Kent Hughes 1998, 378.

²¹ Non-academic contributions to this question are flourishing on the Internet. For a typical way in which Christian commentators are dealing with this question, see Alan Cole 1998, 317.

²² For a critical engagement with the coaching script for fathers who find themselves in the delivery rooms, see Carine Mardorossian 2003.

²³ I am alluding here to the anti-Jewish strand of the Christian passion-tradition with its violent reception history which is the topic of my larger research project. See also my essay "Reading the Cross at Auschwitz: Holocaust Memories und Passion Narratives", Tania Oldenhage 2002.

²⁴ Pamela Klassen 2001, 782.

²⁵ Della Pollock 1999, 121.

²⁶ Conventional stories of birth pain, Pollock argues, “overwrite that experience with prevailing expectations for birth, limiting the possibilities for telling pain to the ways in which it has been conventionally known and told” (Della Pollock 1999, 134).

²⁷ Tikva Frymer-Kensky 1995, 183.

²⁸ Linda Shearing 2009, 87.

²⁹ This kind of reasoning is still reflected in Bible translations which speak of “toil” instead of “pain”.

³⁰ Pamela Klassen 2002, 800.

³¹ “Die Bewegungsfreiheit erlaubt der Frau instinktiv den Schmerz zu lindern, den Widerstand und den Druck zu vermindern. Die Wehenpausen sind nötig für das Gleichgewicht und zur Entspannung. Sowohl Wehe und Wehenpause sorgen deshalb für die Schmerztoleranz. Je weiter die Geburt fortschreitet, desto stärker wird die Toleranz und desto näher kommt der Augenblick der Geburt. Vertrauen Sie auf Ihre Fähigkeit, Ihr Kind selbst zu gebären. Kein Gipfelerlebnis ist grösser!“ <http://www.spitalbuelach.ch/index.php?id=646>.

³² Nancy Klenk Hill 1989, 1.

³³ Alan Cole 1989, 316. This is a typical take on the verse. See also C.E.B. Cranfield 1959, 455, James Brooks 1991, 258, Eugene LaVerdiere 1999, 291. For a lengthy discussion, see Raymond Brown 1994, 940-942.

³⁴ Here, Jesus' dying is represented through an incomprehensible signifier of pain that could lead one to recall Elaine Scarry's thesis about the destruction of language in torture.

³⁵ James Brooks 1991, 261.

³⁶ Alan Cole 1989, 321.

³⁷ These include mockery and the division of clothes.

³⁸ Alan Cole 1989, *ibid.*

³⁹ Juliana Claassens 2006, 172.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 170-171.

⁴¹ Marianne Grohmann 2007, 69. Hanna Strack makes a similar claim, see Hanna Strack 2006, 219.

⁴² Della Pollock 1998, 4.

⁴³ “When this depth had been reached, the victory had been won.” C.E.B. Cranfield 1995, 459.

⁴⁴ Margaret Hammer 1994, 66-67.

⁴⁵ There is one moment in the literature on birth theology where this comic script appears to raise the larger issues that are driving me in this work. In a poem on birthing labor, Tikva Frymer-Kensky writes: “First the pain and then the progress.

First the trial, then the peace. Turmoil, torment, suffering, and anger, is this the way deliverance begins?...From the ashes rises Phoenix. Does Crucifixion lead to Salvation? After the Holocaust came the State... Will this pattern someday end?" (Tikva Frymer-Kensky 1995, 188-189).

⁴⁶ Bauer is interested in the tensions that arise between gender identifications across cultures and centuries. Angela Bauer 1998a, 202-203.

⁴⁷ Claudia Bergmann offers a thorough study of this repertoire.

⁴⁸ Angela Bauer 1998b, 268.

⁴⁹ Amy Kalmanofsky 2008.

⁵⁰ Katheryn Darr 1994.

⁵¹ Cythia Chapman 2004.

⁵² Ulrike Sals 2003, 65.

⁵³ Tarja Philip 2006, 97f.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 98.

⁵⁵ Philip concludes: "A simile of a woman in labor written by women might, therefore, be different from the simile written by men, and it would probably appear in the context of life, and not in the context of death." Ibid, 98. For a similar critique in relation to the book of Isaiah see Irmtraud Fischer 1998, 248.

⁵⁶ Claudia Bergmann 2008, 99-100.

⁵⁷ „Archeological evidence suggests that women in ancient Israel were pregnant an average of eight times, but that only two of these eight children reached adulthood.“ Ibid, 219.

⁵⁸ W. G. Lambert 1969, 32

⁵⁹ I am building here on Bergmann's careful readings of birth imagery in Psalm 22 and the Ligabue 33-40. Claudia Bergmann 2008, 153-158

Dr. Tania Oldenhage has taught at Mount Union College in Ohio and at the Protestant Academy of Boldern in Zurich. In 2009/2010 she was Research Associate at the Harvard Divinity School. Her current scholarship focuses on a post-Holocaust hermeneutics of the New Testament passion narratives.