

## The Woman's Womb as a Place of God's Action and Creation

Marcin Chrostowski

Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome

marcinchrostowski@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1974-3923>

**ABSTRACT:** In the Hebrew Bible, the woman's womb is rendered by three main nouns: רֶחֶם (most often translated as "womb"), בֶּטֶן ("belly") and מֵעָה (plural only: מְעֵי, "bowels"). Although these terms take on various shades of meaning, they very often refer to the female womb. In this context, they always appear in relation to God, who is particularly active in this field. This article aims to show the ways of God's creative activity in the female womb, which also takes various metaphorical shades.

**KEYWORDS:** womb, belly, bowels, מֵעָה, בֶּטֶן, רֶחֶם

The concept of fertility in the Bible is connected with God in a very specific way. The overwhelming majority of biblical examples attest to the fact that the new life was not only conceived but created and shaped by God in a woman's womb, which is a special place of His action and creation. Every creature depends on God by "the enlivening breath of life (נִשְׁמַת־חַיִּים)" (Gen 7:22), and the biblical author's thinking was modelled by the concept of the divine authorship of every life and creation on earth. However, in the process of conception, God acts in a very physical (i.e. personal) way, not only being responsible for the fact of a woman's pregnancy as God and Creator of every being but as really involved in every human conception, being active in that field. Therefore, every engenderment (or lack thereof) in the Scripture is more or less related to or even dependent on God.

One of the most important terms pertaining to conception in the Bible is "womb." It refers both to the Hebrew (HB)<sup>1</sup> and Greek (LXX)<sup>2</sup> Bible, both to Old (OT) and New Testament (NT),<sup>3</sup> as well as outside of it,<sup>4</sup> and refers not only to the woman but also to

1 K. Elliger – W. Rudolph (eds.), *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, 5 ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft 1997).

2 A. Rahlfs (ed.), *Septuaginta. Id est Vetus Testamentum graece iuxta LXX interpretes edidit Alfred Rahlfs. Editio altera, quam recognovit et emendavit Robert Hanhart. Duo volumina in uno* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft 2006).

3 *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28 ed. (eds. E. & E. Nestle – B. & K. Aland – J. Karavidopoulos – C.M. Martini – B.M. Metzger) (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft 2012).

4 For example, the womb imagery in the Book of Genesis was reinterpreted in *4 Ezra*, where God's role in the process of conception was described in the matter of theodicy; E. Iricinschi, "Interroga matricem mulieris: The Secret Life of the Womb in *4 Ezra* and Sethian Cosmology," *Envisioning Judaism. Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of his 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday* (eds. R. Boustani et al.) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2013) 752;

God's<sup>5</sup> womb. For example, Jer 31:20c includes one of the most beautiful descriptions of God's love towards Ephraim (metonymically: Israel), in which the womb is used metaphorically to express God's feelings: "Therefore my bowels (מֵעֵי) bow to him; I must show him mercy (חַסְדִּי)!"<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Job 38:29 places in God's mouth these words in the first person: "From whose womb (מִמֶּנִּי) has the ice come out? Who multiplied the frost from heaven?" Therefore, the womb is a symbol of God's love and creative activity, for the world is the fruit of His "womb," and His love is "centralized" there because the womb is also a symbol of procreation.<sup>7</sup> Also, wisdom "with the faithful (μετὰ πιστῶν) was created for them (συνεκτίσθη αὐτοῖς) in the womb (ἐν μήτρᾳ)" (Sir 1:14b).<sup>8</sup>

However, apart from being a symbol of procreation, love or the beginning of everything, the womb is a place of God's forming deeds since the work of creation did not end with the formation of the world. The author of Psalm 139 reflects on God's creative action in shaping each human being in the womb: "You knit me together in my mother's womb (בְּבֶטֶן)" (Ps 139:13). "Inside a mother's womb (ἐν κοιλίᾳ μητρὸς) the flash was modelled (ἐγλύφην σὰρξ)," says the inspired author of Wisdom (Wis 7:1b). The passive voice used here shows that man did not form himself but "was shaped/created/modelled" in the mother's womb (ἐν κοιλίᾳ) by God (in the *passivum divinum* sense), who is the first "actant" in the process of conception and creation of every human. It proves that a woman's womb is the place of special cooperation between God and man. What distinguishes biblical thought is God's active participation in the creation of man and, generally speaking, every life.<sup>9</sup>

In the HB, the woman's womb is rendered by three main nouns: רֶחֶם (most often translated as "womb"), בֶּטֶן ("belly") and מְעֵי (plural only: מַעֲיִם, "bowels").<sup>10</sup> Of course, there are other Hebrew nouns pertaining to the womb, such as קֶבֶץ ("stomach")<sup>11</sup> and לֶחַיִּים ("belly"), but they are used less often and in the second case (לֶחַיִּים), it refers to

see also F. Flannery-Dailey, "Go, ask a woman's womb': Birth and the Maternal Body as Sources of Revelation and Wisdom in 4 Ezra," *JSP* 21/3 (2012) 243–258.

5 Generally, the Hebrew name יהוה is translated as "the Lord" and אֱלֹהִים as "God." However, these terms will be used interchangeably in the present article, especially when biblical quotations are not cited.

6 Unless otherwise stated, the translations come from the author.

7 G. Vall, "From Whose Womb Did the Ice Come Forth? Procreation Images in Job 38:28–29," *CBQ* 57/3 (1995) 504–513.

8 V. Petrakis, "The Beginning of Wisdom is to Fear the Lord, And She was Joined with the Faithful in the Womb," *WSir* 1:12 *The Theology of Children, An Insight from the Old and the New Testaments*, *Love, Marriage and Family in Eastern Orthodox Perspective* (eds. T.G. Dedon – S. Trostyanskiy) (Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 44; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias 2016) 295–302; see also J. Corley, "Wisdom and Fear of God in Ben Sira 1:11–21: Second Temple Perspectives," *JSP* 30/1 (2020) 46–56.

9 W. Węgrzyniak, "Starotestamentowe życie nienarodzonych," *Polonia Sacra* 17/1 (2013) 18, 34.

10 They do not always have the same sense, taking on different shades of meaning depending on the context. For example, רֶחֶם should be distinguished from בֶּטֶן because the latter refers not always to the womb specifically but also to the larger abdominal area of the body. On the other hand, מְעֵי is to be distinguished from מַעֲיִם, which also refers to the stomach, belly (2 Sam 20:10) and male reproductive organs (Gen 15:4; 2 Sam 7:12; 16:11); V.P. Hamilton, "רֶחֶם," *NIDOTTE* III, 1093.

11 *DCH* VII, 170.

the belly of reptiles.<sup>12</sup> It is also related at least in part to חֵיק (“[woman’s] lap, bosom”; e.g. Deut 28:56; Prov 5:20; Ruth 4:16; Lam 2:12).<sup>13</sup> The present article deals with the most noteworthy texts in which the connection of the female womb with God’s creative action occurs and explains the ways of that activity. The main field of research will be the HB, but references to the LXX and NT texts will also be made.

## 1. רֶחֶם (“Womb”) as a Place of Loving and Merciful Activity of God Towards Man

The first noun, רֶחֶם, occurs in the HB 30 times (along with its derivative nouns) and, in the overwhelming majority, refers to the woman’s womb, whose fruits belong to God or depend on Him. It pertains to a physical organ which is unique to the female. From this noun, the Hebrew language developed other words:<sup>14</sup> the verb רָחַם (“love, have compassion/mercy”), the noun רַחֲמִים (“compassion, mercies”) and the adjective רַחוּם (“compassionate, merciful”). The root רחם is the base from which the substantive is derived. רֶחֶם is probably a primary noun, of which the verb רָחַם is denominative. The other noun, רָחֵם, is a by-form of רֶחֶם.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike other Hebrew words related to the womb, such as בֶּטֶן, (“belly”), חֵיק (“lap, bosom”) and מְעֵים (“bowels”), which in the HB can also denote the parts of the male body, without exception the noun רָחֵם/רֶחֶם is used for the female womb.<sup>16</sup>

At this point, it should be noted that the metaphorical use of רָחֵם (not pertaining to a mother’s womb) is very rare and refer to the other “womb.” The only exceptions are the above-mentioned expression רָחֵם מִשְׁחָרַר (Ps 110:3) and descriptions of the beginning of something in terms of “coming out of the womb,” as in the Book of Job: “the sea (יָם) burst out (בָּגִיחוֹ) from the womb (מִרְחֶם)” (Job 38:8).<sup>17</sup>

The Greek Bible translates the nouns רָחֵם/רֶחֶם/רַחֲמִים as μήτρα, which, similarly to רָחֵם, occurs in 33 times LXX and two times in NT. The expression כָּל־פֶּטֶר־רֶחֶם, “all that opens the womb,” is translated as πᾶν διανοίγον μήτραν. Other translations such as κοιλία, “belly, womb” are also used,<sup>18</sup> but they refer to other Hebrew nouns, namely בֶּטֶן and מְעֵים.

<sup>12</sup> C.L. Rogers Jr., “בֶּטֶן,” *NIDOTTE* I, 835.

<sup>13</sup> T. Kronholm, “רָחֵם,” *TDOT* XIII, 456.

<sup>14</sup> Hamilton, “רָחַם,” 1093.

<sup>15</sup> *HALOT* III, 1217.

<sup>16</sup> Kronholm, “רָחֵם,” 456.

<sup>17</sup> Kronholm, “רָחֵם,” 458, quoting this passage from Job (“the womb of the sea”), gives an incorrect reference, Job 10:18. In fact, this expression occurs in Job 38:8.

<sup>18</sup> Kronholm, “רָחֵם,” 458.

### 1.1. Frequent Meanings of רֶחֶם

Usually masculine, this noun means a womb or a matrix and refers to the belly or womb of a woman (most occurrences) or an animal, namely the place where a foetus develops and from which it exits at birth (Gen 20:18; 29:31).<sup>19</sup> A womb that miscarried could also be a curse from God but not necessarily (Hos 9:14).<sup>20</sup>

Generally speaking, in the HB, the term רֶחֶם/רְחֵם denotes the female genitalia as a whole (uterus, vulva and vagina) and refers to the site where human life originates, so the most common and traditional translation of it is “womb,” sometimes used idiomatically.<sup>21</sup>

The Hebrew nouns רֶחֶם/רְחֵם/רְחֵמָה have a similar meaning in other ancient languages;<sup>22</sup> in Middle Hebrew, in the Dead Sea Scrolls (1QH 4:30; 9:30; 15:15, 17)<sup>23</sup> and Jewish Aramaic, רֶחֶם means the womb; Akkadian *rēmu(m)* denotes the womb but also mercy and compassion.<sup>24</sup> This leads to an interesting observation about the common root of the words “womb” and “love” and their connections with God, which will be analysed below.

### 1.2. The Relationship between רֶחֶם (“Womb”) and רַחֵם (“Love, Have Compassion/Mercy”)

Several ancient languages match the idea of the womb with love, mercy and compassion, which is applied almost exclusively to God. It is clear both in Hebrew and ancient languages, both in the text and the ancient buildings.<sup>25</sup> As Horacio Simian-Yofre points out, secular usage of the root רַחֵם in the HB is limited: only in Prov 28:13 רַחֵם in pual could refer to human mercy. In the other texts where רַחֵם occurs as a verb, it is always associated with God showing or withholding mercy or human beings showing or withholding mercy as agents of the divine will. Except in the passages where רַחֵם has physical connotations (Gen 43:30; 1 Kgs 3:26), it always denotes the compassion or mercy that God shows or withholds, directly or through human agents. In sum, רַחֵם appears to be indigenous to religious and theological language; only occasionally does it refer to human relationships.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>19</sup> *CWSD-OT*, 1049.

<sup>20</sup> *DCHVII*, 470; in this context, see D. Krause, “A Blessing Cursed: The Prophet’s Prayer for Barren Womb and Dry Breasts in Hosea 9,” *Reading between Texts. Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (ed. D.N. Fewell) (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 1992) 191–202.

<sup>21</sup> In the phrase רַחֵם רְחֵמָה (Judg 5:30), the meaning “one, two wombs” refers to the soldiers’ term for concubines captured during a war. Here is the only case of using the theoretical form of the analysed noun, i.e. רְחֵמָה; Kronholm, “רַחֵם,” 455.

<sup>22</sup> *HALOT* III, 1217.

<sup>23</sup> M. Abegg – J. Bowley – E. Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Concordance* (Leiden: Brill 2003–2015) I–II. See also N.A. Meyer, “Born of Woman, Fashioned from Clay: Tracking the Homology of Earth and Womb from the Hebrew Bible to the Psalms of Thanksgiving,” *DSD* 28 (2021) 135–178.

<sup>24</sup> Kronholm, “רַחֵם,” 454, where he cites *KAI*, 27, 23.

<sup>25</sup> I. Ziffer, “Moon, Rain, Womb, Mercy. The Imagery of The Shrine Model from Tell el-Far’ah North – Biblical Tirzah. For Othmar Keel,” *Archaeology and Ancient Israelite Religion* (ed. A. Faust) (Basel et al.: MDPI 2020) 146.

<sup>26</sup> H. Simian-Yofre, “רַחֵם,” *TDOT* XIII, 451.

Although some claim that in Hebrew, the strict relationship of the nouns רַחֵם/רַחֲמֶיךָ and רַחֲמֶיךָ to the verb רַחֵם (“love, have compassion/mercy”) remains uncertain<sup>27</sup> and it should also be considered in the light of other ancient languages. The Akkadian noun *rēmu* (“womb, compassion”; the etymological equivalent of Hebrew noun רַחֵם) is “the word typically used to express compassion or loving affection ‘from above.’”<sup>28</sup> Although the Akkadian distinguishes between two verbs *ra’āmu* (“love”; from the root *r’m*) and *rēmu* (“have compassion”; from the root רַחֵם), Hebrew and Aramaic combine them as רַחֵם (“love, have compassion/mercy”).<sup>29</sup> This also refers to the relationship between the Hebrew verb רַחֵם (“love, have compassion/mercy”) and the Arabic verb *rahīma* (“show compassion, have mercy”), and *rahūma* (“be soft/tender, show sympathy, love”),<sup>30</sup> and the Aramaic noun רַחֲמָא (“mother love”).<sup>31</sup> As Tryggve Kronholm aptly emphasizes, present-day scholarship tends to posit a common Semitic verb with the root רַחֵם with an equally comprehensive semantic domain, similar to that of אָהַב (“love”).<sup>32</sup> But here, it is important to underline that the Hebrew verb רַחֵם does not only refer to love itself but to its higher form: mercy and compassion, which is associated with the womb (רַחֵם) and centralized there.

It is also important to point out that the adjective “merciful” in the overwhelming majority refers to God, which is attested in the HB and outside of it. The oldest surviving documentary evidence of the epithet “merciful” referring to divinity is found in a Northwest Semitic language – apart from the rather general usage in the Mesopotamian formula *ilu rēmēnū* (“merciful god”)<sup>33</sup> – it appears on the Tell Fekheriye stele from 9<sup>th</sup> century BC, inscribed in Akkadian (an Assyrian dialect) and Aramaic. The Aramaic reads אלה רחמן (*’lh rḥmn*; “merciful god”)<sup>34</sup> and is a close equivalent to the Hebrew adjective רַחוּם (“compassionate, merciful”).<sup>35</sup> The adjectival form רַחוּם occurs 13 times in the Hebrew Bible, 11 times in combination with חַנּוּן (gracious). Besides Ps 112:4 (which uses the formula to describe human beings), it refers only to God (יהוה).<sup>36</sup>

There are also suggestions to connect the readings of the opening passages of the Bible: “In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void [...], and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (Gen 1:1–2),

27 Kronholm, “רַחֵם,” 454.

28 G. Schmuttermayr, “RHM – Eine lexikalische Studie,” *Bib* 51 (1970) 509; quoted after Kronholm, “רַחֵם,” 454.

29 Hamilton, “רַחֵם,” 1093.

30 Lane I/3, 1059–1060, quoted after Kronholm, “רַחֵם,” 455.

31 Hamilton, “רַחֵם,” 1093.

32 Kronholm, “רַחֵם,” 455, where he cites, among others, H.B. Huffmon, *Amorite Personal Names in the Mari Texts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1965) 261.

33 The phrase *ilu rēmēnū* is one of the most common characteristics of Marduk; T. Abusch *et al.*, *Corpus of Mesopotamian Anti-Witchcraft Rituals* (AMD 8/3; Leiden: Brill 2020) 226.

34 A. Abou-Assaf – P. Bordreuil – A.R. Millard, *La statue de Tell Fekheriye et son inscription bilingue assyro-araméenne* (Études Assyriologiques 7; Paris: Éditions Recherches sur les Civilisations 1982) 23, l. 5.

35 L. van der Watt, *The Reception of the Grace Formula in Old and New Testament Theologies. A Hermeneutical and Theological Study* (Diss. Stellenbosch University; Stellenbosch 2020) 31–32, <https://scholar.sun.ac.za/handle/10019.1/109121> [access: 11.01.2022].

36 Simian-Yofre, “רַחֵם,” 448.

with the Ugaritic literature, which was drawn by Otto Eissfeldt and described by Admiel Kosman. According to this view, God connects intimately and empathetically with the existing matter (תְּהוֹם) from a dialogic perspective. From today's point of view, it can be called "love," in light of which all comes and continues to be "born" from the material "womb" of תְּהוֹם.<sup>37</sup>

God's love "related to the womb" can be found in the Book of Jeremiah 31. God speaks in the first person as a mother of the son Ephraim: "Therefore my bowels (מַעֲי) bow to him; I must show him mercy (רַחֲמֵי) (Jer 31:20c). The verb רָחַם ("have compassion/mercy") and the noun רֶחֶם ("womb") are intertwined in their root (רָחַם), which could be translated as "compassion." Here the word "bowels" (מַעֲי) denotes "heart" or "inner parts," which in several other passages of the Scripture correspond to the word "womb."

### 1.3. God's Creative Activity "from the Womb" (מִרְחֶם)

The phrase מִרְחֶם (literally: "from the womb"; Job 3:11; 10:18; Ps 22:11; 58:4; Jer 1:5; 20:17, 18) denotes not so much the birth but the existence in the womb as the real beginning of human life. The biblical statements cited here link the idea of life with the womb, not only stressing that coming out from the womb is the beginning of one's life but also suggesting that real life already exists in the womb. This is particularly evident in Ps 22:11: "I was entrusted to You from the womb (מִרְחֶם), from the womb of my mother (מִבֶּטֶן אִמִּי) my God (are) you."<sup>38</sup> Finding that "from the moment of his birth and his mother's initial care, the sufferer had been dependent ultimately upon God"<sup>39</sup> is not enough because God is presented here not only as the One on whom everything depends but as the One who looks after everything and everyone (cf. Ps 22:10).

The same language referring to the mother's womb as the place where life begins is presented in Ps 58:4a: "They go astray, the wicked, from the womb (מִרְחֶם) they err"; and in Ps 58:4b: "From the womb (מִבֶּטֶן) they tell lies." In both psalms cited (Ps 22:11; 58:4), the Hebrew text uses two different (but synonymous) words for a womb, namely, רֶחֶם ("womb") and בֶּטֶן ("belly").<sup>40</sup> In exaggerated language, the author of Ps 58:4a wants to say that these people go astray from the womb, which means: "from the very beginning of life" as if he wanted to say that they have gone astray "since forever."

A similar idea of the beginning of life "from the womb" (מִרְחֶם) is in Job 3:11; 10:18. God here is not only the first "actant" in the "forming" of human in the womb, as presented in the Book of Jeremiah (Jer 1:5), but is also responsible for "bringing someone's out of the womb." In the first verse (Job 3:11a), Job prays, complaining that he did not die at birth,

37 A. Kosman, "And the Spirit of God Hovered': A Dialogic Reading of the Opening Lines of Genesis," *Nashim* 33 (2018) 7–19.

38 In v. 10b, the literal translation is: "from the womb of my mother my God (are) you." It means that from his birth, God had cared for and protected him; R.G. Bratcher – W.D. Reymann, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Psalms* (New York: United Bible Societies 1991) 218.

39 P.C. Craigie – M.E. Tate, *Psalms 1–50*, 2 ed. (WBC 19; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2004) 199.

40 Bratcher – Reymann, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Psalms*, 517.



more precisely, after leaving the womb: “Why (לָמָּה) <sup>41</sup> died I not from the womb” (מֵרֶחֶם)? In the same verse (3:11b), Job explains further: “Why did I not come out of the womb (מֵרֶחֶם) and die.” The first prepositional phrase “from the womb” (מֵרֶחֶם) is clarified, expanded and specified by the second: “out of the womb” (מִבֶּטֶן). It may be that the “from” in the first phrase means “immediately after leaving the womb” (cf. Job 3:11b). <sup>42</sup> He then asks: “Why (לָמָּה) from the womb (מֵרֶחֶם) did you bring me out?” (Job 10:18). God here plays the role of a midwife, who induces labour or delivers a child.

God is responsible for the human existence (in a sense: occurrence) in the mother's womb, as presented in the Book of Jeremiah, where God is described as He, who “did not kill me in the womb (מֵרֶחֶם)” (Jer 20:17a), that is to say, “He saved me in the womb.” Otherwise, says the prophet: “my mother would have been my grave and her womb (רֶחֶם) forever great” (Jer 20:17b). <sup>43</sup> The phrase מֵרֶחֶם means literally: “from the womb.” The preposition מֵן used here can have a temporal meaning, <sup>44</sup> and “from the womb” could mean “from the time I was in the womb.” <sup>45</sup> At this point, the text seems to suggest that human life begins before birth. It depends entirely on God, who also appoints His chosen ones for special tasks.

The analysis carried out above may lead to the first conclusions of a theological nature. First, human life “from the womb” (מֵרֶחֶם) belongs to God (Ps 22:11). Secondly, God “shaped” every human being “in the womb,” even before birth (Jer 1:5), which testifies to the true life of man even before birth. Third, even complaining about the fate of a man, which is difficult “from the womb,” is directed straight to God (Job 3:11; 10:18; Jer 20:17–18). He is the addressee of these lamentations and the “first to act” in human life “from the womb.”

#### 1.4. “All That Opens the Womb” (כָּל־פֶּטֶר־רֶחֶם) Belongs to God

Especially interesting are the Hebrew phrases: “all the firstborn that opens every womb” (כָּל־בְּכוֹר פֶּטֶר כָּל־רֶחֶם) (Exod 13:2) or: “all the firstborn that opens the womb” (כָּל־בְּכוֹר פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם) (Num 3:12) and the expressions: “all that first opens the womb” (כָּל־פֶּטֶר־רֶחֶם) (Exod 13:12, 15; 34:19; Num 18:15; Ezek 20:26) or the variant: “(all) that opens every womb” (פֶּטֶר־כָּל־רֶחֶם) (Num 8:16).

<sup>41</sup> The opening word “why” (לָמָּה) in these verses (Job 3:11; 10:18) is typical of cries of lament in the Psalms (Ps 10:1; 22:1) and in the prophetic section (Jer 20:18; Lam 5:20). Job's outburst, however, is not a straightforward complaint to God. Job's “whys” are a wish that his life had never begun; N.C. Habel, *The Book of Job. A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster 1985) 110.

<sup>42</sup> The parallelism of “die” (מֵת) and “expire” (גָּנַע) also occurs in Job 14:10 and of “womb” (רֶחֶם) and “belly” (בֶּטֶן) in Job 10:18–19; 31:15; Ps 22:11; 58:4; Jer 1:5; D.J.A. Clines, *Job 1–20* (WBC 17; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1989) 89.

<sup>43</sup> In this context, “great” means the womb is still enlarged due to pregnancy; B.M. Newman – P.C. Stine, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Jeremiah* (New York: United Bible Societies 2003) 459.

<sup>44</sup> BDB, 581.

<sup>45</sup> P.C. Craigie – P.H. Kelley – J.F. Drinkard Jr., *Jeremiah 1–25* (WBC 26; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1991) 279.

The text clarifies that every such firstborn, both of man or beast, belong to God (Exod 13:2; 13:12, 15) as His statement is short and clear: “all that first opens the womb” (namely all the firstborn) (כָּל־פֶּטֶר־רֶחֶם) is Mine (לִי) (Exod 34:19).

Here comes a very interesting perspective on the relationship between God and רֶחֶם, namely, the affiliation of every fruit of the womb to God, that is to say, every living creature belongs to God under the Torah law. It is shown especially in the legal statements of the HB (Exod 13:2, 12, 15; 34:19; Num 3:12; 8:16; 18:15).

### 1.5. God “Opened Her Womb” (פָּתַח אֶת־רֶחֶמָהּ)

The HB presents birth as the “opening of the womb,” which is always God’s will. Such “opening of the womb,” the metaphor for conception, is described to stress that God is active in every conception. It is shown in the case of Leah in the Book of Genesis: “When the Lord saw that Leah was taken away, He opened her womb (וַיִּפְתַּח אֶת־רֶחֶמָהּ), and Rachel was barren” (Gen 29:31). But later, “God remembered Rachel; He heard her and opened her womb (וַיִּפְתַּח אֶת־רֶחֶמָהּ)” (Gen 30:22).

Considering the story of these two sisters, one should know that Rachel was previously barren, but the same is said of Leah, Rachel’s fertile sister: before she gave birth to her first child, Lord “opened her womb” (וַיִּפְתַּח אֶת־רֶחֶמָהּ) (Gen 29:31). If neither Rachel nor Lea can become pregnant without divine intervention, God seems to be personally involved in their pregnancies.<sup>46</sup> In order to “open the womb,” God’s direct action is necessary, regardless of whether the woman has already had children or not. Every pregnancy is then attributed to the power of God, on whom everything depends.

### 1.6. God “Closed Her Womb” (סָגַר רֶחֶמָהּ)

God is also presented as He, who “closes the womb”; therefore also active in this area. A good example is Hannah, about whom the author of 1 Samuel writes that her husband Elkanah “loved her, and the Lord had closed her womb (סָגַר רֶחֶמָהּ)” (1 Sam 1:5). But “her rival annoyed and irritated her with constant taunting because the Lord had closed her womb (סָגַר יְהוָה בְּעַד רֶחֶמָהּ)” (1 Sam 1:6). This passage recalls the biblical motive of the greater love of the husband for the barren wife. For example, Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah despite her barrenness (Gen 29:30–31). Likewise, Peninnah used her fertility to rise above her rival. Similar relations were between Hagar and Sarah (Gen 16:4) and Leah and Rachel (Gen 30:1–24). In the case of Leah, the Lord opened her womb when He saw that she was hated (Gen 29:31),<sup>47</sup> in which divine providence could be seen.

In the house of Abimelech, God has “closed with a closure” (עָצַר עָצַר) of all the wombs (כָּל־רֶחֶם) (Gen 20:18). In the preceding verse (Gen 20:17), Abraham intercedes on behalf of Abimelech before God; as a result, fertility is restored to Abimelech, his wife, and slave

<sup>46</sup> C.R. Moss – J.S. Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility. Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness* (Princeton, NJ – London: Princeton University Press 2015) 58.

<sup>47</sup> R.W. Klein, *1 Samuel* (WBC 10; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2000) 7.



girls. The verb עָצַר, used in v. 18 to describe the Lord's closing of all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, had been earlier used by Sarah about herself and her own condition: "restrained me (עָצַרְנִי) the Lord from bearing" (Gen 16:2). In Gen 20:17–18, the Lord is presented not only as the One, who causes everything but also cares for everyone. His restraining providence deterred Abimelech from sleeping with Sarah.<sup>48</sup>

The conclusion is clear: God is the giver and protector of every life, the main subject of this event and its main inspirer.<sup>49</sup> Human life begins in the womb, which is the place of God's creative activity. In fact, every life is created by Him already before birth. The relationship of God's womb with creation is clearly present in the Bible. One should also constantly remember the special intervention of the Holy Spirit in the conception of the Son of God. The womb is, therefore, the place of God's loving action, so it should be interpreted as the place of cooperation with God.

## 2. בֶּטֶן ("Belly") as a Place of God's Activity in the Innermost Part of the Human Body

The second Hebrew noun concerning the present subject is בֶּטֶן, which occurs 72 times in the HB, frequently in terms of "belly," "inner parts of the body" or "womb."

A number of the OT texts (e.g. Isa 46:3; 49:15; Jer 1:5; Ps 22:11; 58:4; Job 3:11; 10:18, 19; 31:15) use the noun רֶחֶם in parallel with בֶּטֶן, "belly," "womb,"<sup>50</sup> from which it should be distinguished as the latter refers not only to the womb but, as the exceptions reveal, to the larger abdominal area of the body. The above examples present the appearance of both nouns related to the womb, namely בֶּטֶן and רֶחֶם. The basic meaning of "interior" compares quite closely with the Greek κοιλία ("belly, womb"; 101 times in the LXX, 22 times in the NT) and γαστήρ ("belly, stomach"; 67 times in the LXX, 9 times in the NT). These two words are employed almost exclusively to translate בֶּטֶן in the LXX.<sup>51</sup> One of the most significant examples of using the noun κοιλία in the NT is the passage from Luke 1:42b when Elisabeth says to Mary: "blessed is the fruit (ὁ καρπὸς) of your womb (τῆς κοιλίας σου)." It testifies to the fact that it generally denoted the womb.

The Aramaic root בטן is the base for the noun "belly" and the verb "to be pregnant,"<sup>52</sup> "pregnant woman," "pregnancy" and "conception."<sup>53</sup>

48 V.P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 18–50* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1995) 71.

49 G. von Rad, *Genesis. A Commentary*, Revised ed. (OTL; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster 1972) 294.

50 Kronholm, "רֶחֶם," 456.

51 D.N. Freedman – J.R. Lundbom, "בֶּטֶן," *TDOT* II, 94.

52 M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Bavli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (London – New York: Luzac – Putnam 1903) I, 158.

53 M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period* (Dictionaries of Talmud, Midrash and Targum 2; Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press 1990) 91; M. Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon. Translation from the Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann's Lexicon Syriacum* (Winona Lake, IN

## 2.1. Frequent Meanings of בֶּטֶן

In the HB, the feminine noun בֶּטֶן frequently refers to the “belly”<sup>54</sup> or a “lower abdomen” of a man (Judg 3:21–22) or a woman (Num 5:21–22, 27), where it usually refers to a “pregnant belly” (Hos 9:11; in a beautiful form: Song 7:3). In Job 40:15, there is a reference to the “belly” of hippopotamus (בִּהְמוֹת). Belly, or rather “bowels,” could be a seat of passion, avarice (Job 20:20, 23), intellectual faculties (Prov 22:18)<sup>55</sup> or the “innermost part” of the upper cosmos, namely the firmament (Job 38:29), as well as the lower cosmos, Sheol (Jonah 2:3). The examined noun is once used as an architectural term to denote a “rounded projection,” upon which the two pillars of a building stood (1 Kgs 7:20).<sup>56</sup>

The meaning range of בֶּטֶן is even wider and can also be extended to the man, who can also speak of children as having come from his בֶּטֶן (Job 19:17). In a figurative sense, בֶּטֶן denotes the inner being of a person; the innermost part, as the place where thoughts are treasured and the spiritual being expressed itself (Job 32:18; Prov 20:27).<sup>57</sup>

בֶּטֶן could also mean the human “body” as opposed to the soul (נַפְשִׁי וּבִטְנִי) (Ps 31:10; 44:26).<sup>58</sup> A separate lot of meanings concern the translation of the noun as “womb,” which needs to be analysed separately.

## 2.2. בֶּטֶן as “Womb” where God Acts

As mentioned above, the noun בֶּטֶן occurs in parallel with רֶחֶם, which more exclusively means the “womb.” Therefore, with the general meaning of “inside,” בֶּטֶן frequently refers to the womb, where it is linked strongly with God’s creative and active care, comfort and the calling of His chosen one (Ps 22:10; 139:13; Isa 44:2, 24; 49:1, 5; Jer 1:5).

Rebekah was found to have twins in her בֶּטֶן (Gen 25:24). One of them, Jacob, earned his name from his activity, as he “took the heel of his brother” in בֶּטֶן (Hos 12:4). An angry Jacob says to Rachel, Leah’s sister: “Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb (פְּרִי־בֶטֶן)?” (Gen 30:2).

In the idioms “the fruit of my womb” (פְּרִי בִטְנִי) (Mic 6:7; cf. Gen 30:2) and “the sons of my womb” (לְבָנֵי בִטְנִי) (Job 19:17), children are generally called the “fruit of the womb” (פְּרִי הַבֶּטֶן) (Deut 28:4; Ps 127:3; Isa 13:18), where the noun בֶּטֶן may be a synecdoche for “body,” from which the children come from, not the belly. The Lord swears an oath to David, saying: “One of the sons of your womb (מֶפְרִי בִטְנֶךָ) I will set on your throne”

– Piscataway, NJ: Eisenbrauns – Gorgias 2009) 137; A. Tal, *A Dictionary of Samaritan Aramaic* (Leiden – Boston, MA – Köln: Brill 2000) 94; quoted after: Ziffer, “Moon, Rain, Womb, Mercy,” 146.

54 C.L. Rogers Jr., “בֶּטֶן,” *NIDOTTE* I, 639; Freedman – Lundbom, “בֶּטֶן,” 95.

55 At this point, one would rather choose the meaning referring to the biblical sense of “heart.” This meaning is not literal but figurative; it designates the innermost part of man, literally “innermost parts of the belly” (סְדֵר־בֶּטֶן) or figuratively the “inmost soul” (Prov 18:8; 26:22, 20:27, 30), which leads to another translation, namely “inner parts” of the body in a general sense (Prov 22:18), and another verb מָעִים that will be discussed later in this article.

56 Freedman – Lundbom, “בֶּטֶן,” 95.

57 *CWSD-OT*, 129.

58 BDB, 105–106.

(Ps 132:11). In Hos 9:11, 16, Ephraim is the personified nation, described with בֶּטֶן. Also, Isaiah speaks of the nation as having been formed in a mother's בֶּטֶן (Isa 44:2, 24). Here the noun could simply mean the "womb."

It is worth stressing that children, described by the phrase "fruit of the womb" (פְּרִי הַבֶּטֶן), are considered "a reward" (שָׂכָר) from the Lord (Ps 127:3). God is the One who gives or withholds "the fruit of the womb" (פְּרִי־בֶטֶן) (Gen 30:2). The covenant is a promise that He will "bless" the "fruit of your womb" (פְּרִי־בֶטֶנְךָ), that He will grant children if His people keep it (Deut 7:13; 28:4, 11, 18, 53; 30:9, all contain the phrase פְּרִי־בֶטֶן, which most often appears in this book, especially in Deut 28).<sup>59</sup> However, if the nation is disobedient, God will curse the "fruit of the womb" (Deut 28:18), or as a result, Israel will eat the "fruit of the womb (פְּרִי־בֶטֶנְךָ) which God your Lord has given you" (Deut 28:53). The promise for keeping the Law is not eternal life but a fruitful one, rich in the fruits of God-given offspring in the land that God has given Israel.<sup>60</sup>

God is the One who shapes and forms the foetus in בֶּטֶן (Job 3:3–11; 31:18; Ps 139:13; Jer 1:5), who brings the child forth from בֶּטֶן (Ps 22:10; Isa 46:3) and superintends its life from its earliest moments (Ps 71:6; Isa 49:1). The wicked go astray "from the womb (מִרְחֶם) and speak lies from birth" (מִבֶּטֶן) (Ps 58:4). God also curses the womb of the adulteress (Num 5:21).<sup>61</sup>

### 2.3. God's Creative Activity "in the Womb" (בְּבֶטֶן)

God is active in forming every human being in the "womb," and He cares for the unborn (Ps 139:13; Eccl 11:5). Especially important in this regard is the fragment of Eccl 11:5: "As you do not know what way the spirit comes to the bones in the pregnant womb (בֶּטֶן) that is with child. Ecclesiastes's main thought may be as follows: "As you cannot know the path of the wind – like the bones in a pregnant womb."<sup>62</sup> In addition to the wise advice of the inspired author regarding the mysterious ways God acts, the text relays an important message about the child's life before birth. What is more, God himself is the giver of the spirit He breathes into the bones of the pregnant, precisely "into her womb."

The same idea is expressed even more clearly in another passage (Ps 139:13), which describes the creative activity of God, forming a human being in the mother's womb: "You formed my kidneys, You knit me together in my mother's womb (בְּבֶטֶן אִמִּי)." A similar example is found in the Book of Job: "Did not He that made me in the womb (בְּבֶטֶן) made him? And did not He (the One) fashion us in the womb (בְּרֶחֶם)? (Job 31:15)."

<sup>59</sup> Rogers, "בֶּטֶן," 640, quoting the biblical references about the blessing of the "fruit of the womb," incorrectly cites Deut 28:18, which contains the curse of the "fruit of the womb." Later, now correctly, he gives this reference in the paragraph relating to the cursing of the fruit of the womb and withdrawal of God's blessing as a result of breaking the Covenant.

<sup>60</sup> Rogers, "בֶּטֶן," 640.

<sup>61</sup> J.N. Oswalt, "בֶּטֶן," *TWOTI*, 103.

<sup>62</sup> Although the pointing to בְּבֶטֶן makes it a construct with הַמֵּלָאָה ("in the womb of a pregnant woman"), it is also possible to construe הַמֵּלָאָה as an adjective (the pregnant womb); J.L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes. A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster 1987) 180.

It is clarified very precisely also in the Book of Jeremiah. Calling him to be a prophet, God says: “Before I formed you in the womb (בְּטֶן), I knew you (יָדַעְתִּיךָ), and before you came out of the womb (מִרְחֹם), I sacrificed you” (Jer 1:5).<sup>63</sup> God creates not only the human body in the womb but sacrifices its life even before the actual birth, that is to say, God confirms the real life begins in the womb. The texts suggest that God knows His servant even before conception, before forming him in the womb. The opening word “before” (בְּטֶרֶם) of this vocational dialogue between God and Jeremiah is deeply significant. Even if the prophet in his later days would have been overtaken by despair, he could know that the divine destiny full of love for him reached back even before his birth; what is more, that destiny even preceded his existence in the womb. The verbs used here are equally important. The verb יָדַע, “know,” has considerable meaning in the OT because it reaches beyond the intellectual knowledge to the personal union, for it is used in the intimate relations between a man and his wife (Gen 4:1). Therefore, God’s deep commitment to His servant precedes even his birth.<sup>64</sup> Some try to interpret this passage of Jer 1:5 as two pre-birth phases of Jeremiah’s existence, which could also witness an Israelite understanding of two phases of the pre-birth selection. The first occurred before the conception and the second after it but already in the womb.<sup>65</sup> Again, this can lead to the conclusion that the real life of humans begins in the womb and show how important this issue is in the HB.

#### 2.4. God’s Creative Activity “from the Womb” (מִבֶּטֶן)

The idiom “from the womb” (מִבֶּטֶן) refers to the very beginning of one’s life, as in Job 31:18, where Job says that from his mother’s womb (מִבֶּטֶן אִמִּי) he guided the widow, meaning: “I have always done this.”<sup>66</sup> However, the analysis of the majority of the biblical passages relating to בֶּטֶן testifies to the fact that the construct phrase מִבֶּטֶן refers more frequently to God who is active in that area.

The beginning of human life on the earth is viewed generally as starting “when he comes out of the womb” (מִבֶּטֶן יֵצֵאתִי) (Job 3:11; cf. Job 10:18; with רִחֹם).<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, God knows the life, vocation and future of the individual even before birth (Jer 1:5; Gen 25:23; cf. Rom 9:11–13). The Lord is the One who delivers the child from a woman, as the Psalmist notes: “You took me out of the womb” (אֶתֶּה גָּדִי מִבֶּטֶן) (Ps 22:10).<sup>68</sup> In this theological

63 A thorough investigation of this verse is described in D.M. Pike, “Formed in and Called from the Womb,” *To Seek the Law of the Lord. Essays in Honor of John W. Welch* (eds. P.Y. Hoskisson – D.C. Peterson) (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation 2017) 317–331.

64 J.A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1980) 145.

65 Pike, “Formed in and Called from the Womb,” 331.

66 Freedman – Lundbom, “בֶּטֶן,” 95–96. Similar statements are to be found in Judg 13:5 about Samson: “the boy shall be a Nazarite to God from the womb (מִן־הַבֶּטֶן),” that is to say, he shall be a Nazirite from his birth, or even before it. Judg 13:7 expresses the same idea about Samson being a Nazirite to God “from the womb” (מִן־הַבֶּטֶן) “to the day of his death.” In Judg 16:17, he himself claims to be a Nazirite “from my mother’s womb” (מִבֶּטֶן אִמִּי).

67 It is clear also in the statements like: “They err from the womb (מִבֶּטֶן) speaking lies” so that from their birth, or the very beginning of their life, they are wicked (Ps 58:4; cf. Ps 51:5; Rom 3:10–18); Rogers, “בֶּטֶן,” 640.

68 Rogers, “בֶּטֶן,” 640.

context, the construct phrase מִבֶּטֶן has two meanings: “from within the womb,” that is, from the very beginning of one’s life, which starts in the womb (Job 1:21; Ps 22:10) or “from birth” (Judg 13:5; Ps 58:4; 71:6).<sup>69</sup>

The idea of God’s knowing and forming the human being in the mother’s womb (בֶּטֶן) is incredibly thoroughly and meticulously explained in the Book of Isaiah (Isa 44:2, 24; 49:1, 5). The first assurance comes from God himself: “the Lord who made and formed you (עָשָׂה וַיִּצְרֶךְ) in the womb (מִבֶּטֶן)” (Isa 44:2, 24).<sup>70</sup> God evidently wishes to declare that Israel should not be dismissed out of His hand, although His nation could not keep the bond. The noun “Jeshurun” (יֵשׁוּרוּן) used further (Isa 44:2b) is in the form of an endearing diminutive;<sup>71</sup> that is why the LXX translates Jeshurun by the Greek word ἡγαπημένος “beloved.”<sup>72</sup> Israel is called as such not only because of the everlasting love towards him but also because God has personally knit him in the womb (מִבֶּטֶן) of his mother.

God calls His servant from the womb, that is, from the very beginning of his life: “The Lord had called me from the womb (מִבֶּטֶן); from the bowels of my mother (מִמְעֵי אִמִּי) He had mentioned my name” (Isa 49:1). The statement about calling the name in the bowels of the mother speaks explicitly about the life before birth. “Mentioning the name,” in turn, suggests knowing the exact essence of his life, precisely from the moment of appearing in the mother’s womb. A similar idea of giving a special vocation and tasks is found in the same chapter of the book: “The Lord formed/shaped me (יָצַרְנִי) from the womb (מִבֶּטֶן) for His servant” (Isa 49:5). It suggests that God not only forms every human in the womb but has a plan for him even before he is born. The verb “shaped” (יָצַרְנִי) was used in Isa 45:9, where it denoted a potter. He is here paralleled by the creator and linked with the words of redemption, which apply even if Israel has to go through fire and water. Here the prophet is reminding Israel about the creative activity of the living God, who formed him “from the womb to be His servant.”<sup>73</sup>

God’s creative but also caring activity can be seen in Isa 46:3: “They are borne by me from the belly (מִבֶּיִרְיָם), they are carried from the womb (מִבֶּיִרְיָם).” It could be understood in two ways: literally, that every human is specially cared for by God even before birth, “from the womb” (מִבֶּיִרְיָם/מִבֶּטֶן), but another meaning is also possible, as John D.W. Watts proved. He interprets that passage collectively, explaining the phrase מִבֶּיִרְיָם/מִבֶּטֶן, not only as “before they were born” but as “before they were a people.” They have been carried by

<sup>69</sup> Freedman – Lundbom, “בֶּטֶן,” 97.

<sup>70</sup> The second fragment does not contain the verb עָשָׂה.

<sup>71</sup> The root is probably יָשַׁר, which brings to the mind the idea of straightness or uprightness, so the sense may be “the upright one,” which could appear paradoxical in the present context. God calls these people, sinners from the beginning (Isa 43:27), “the upright one.” At any rate, the impression gained here is of informal affection; the formal relationship is still intact, but God holds them in His heart; J.N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah. Chapters 40–66* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1998) 165–166.

<sup>72</sup> G.A.F. Knight, *Servant Theology. A Commentary on the Book of Isaiah 40–55* (ITC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1984) 76.

<sup>73</sup> Knight, *Servant Theology*, 129.

His providence for a long time before, so it refers to the period of Abraham's promise. Despite his people being old, the Lord is still carrying them in His mercy.<sup>74</sup>

The conclusion is as follows: God not only shapes His children, individually and collectively as a nation, but continues His caring creativity "from the womb," i.e. from the very beginning of their life, up until old age (Ps 71:9, 18). The momentous statement: "You knit me together in my mother's womb (בְּרֶטֶן אִמִּי)" (Ps 139:13) testifies not only that God is the first cause of everything, but that He is personally involved in the process of the formation of every human body.

### 3. מַעֲיִם ("Bowels") as a Place of God's Caring Action

The third noun applied to describe the womb is מַעֲיִה, used 32 times in the HB, always in the plural, מַעֲיִם, which denotes bowels, inward parts of the body or just the womb.<sup>75</sup> In the LXX, the noun is rendered as κοιλία, used almost always to translate מַעֲיִם, as well as בֶּטֶן. Very often, the noun מַעֲיִם occurs in parallel with בֶּטֶן ("belly, womb") or other nouns denoting "the inside." However, when it refers to a woman, the noun almost always pertains to the womb, and it often has בֶּטֶן as a parallel.<sup>76</sup> The meanings must therefore be put in order.

#### 3.1. Frequent Meanings of מַעֲיִם

The noun מַעֲיִם could be translated as "bowels," "belly," "womb," "gut(s)," "entrails," "internal organs," in general, "(the) inside."<sup>77</sup>

As Victor P. Hamilton explains,<sup>78</sup> the metaphorical use of body organs was common in antiquity, and hence, the HB uses, for instance, the liver (כֹּבֶד, sometimes confused with קְבוֹד, "glory") in expressions of joy, the kidneys (כִּלְיֹת) for affection, the heart (לֵב) for affection as well as mind, and the abdominal organs (מַעֲיִם) for compassion. In today's understanding, English, for example, uses the word "heart" in most such expressions. The Bible associates feelings and emotions with the body organs (e.g. the abdomen), just as modern people consider the broadly understood "heart" as the seat of feelings. Hebrew reflects the common linguistic usage (not invented by the Jews) whereby mental and emotional states are designated by organs affected in some way by emotions. Therefore, this figure of speech extends into the NT. For example, the Epistle to the Colossians says: "Put on yourself bowels of

<sup>74</sup> J.D.W. Watts, *Isaiah 34–66*, Revised ed. (WBC 25; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2005) 711.

<sup>75</sup> This masculine noun refers to internal organs and is used to describe entrails, intestines, belly, womb, sexual organs, sympathy and, figuratively, the seat of emotions or heart; *CWSD-OT*, 639.

<sup>76</sup> D. Garrett – P.R. House, *Song of Songs. Lamentations* (WBC 23B; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2004) 209.

<sup>77</sup> Other possible meanings for the places of occurrence are listed in *DCHV*, 382.

<sup>78</sup> V.P. Hamilton, "מַעֲיִה," *TWOTI*, 518, describing the passages, when the noun is used of man, gives an incorrect reference, 2 Sam 17:12. In fact, this expression appears in 2 Sam 7:12.



mercy (σπλάγχνα οίκτιρμοῦ)" (Col 3:12) or Philippians: "If there is any encouragement in Christ [...] if any bowels and mercies (σπλάγχνα καὶ οίκτιρμοί)" (Phil 2:1).<sup>79</sup>

### 3.2. מַעֲיִם as the "Womb" of God

As noted above, twice the noun is found in phrases connected with God's emotions. The first example is in the Book of Isaiah: "Where is your zeal, your strength, your compassion (הַמֶּזֶן מַעֲיִר; lit.: "moving of Your womb/bowels") and your mercies (רַחֲמֶיךָ) toward me? Are they restrained?" (Isa 63:15). The most important in this regard is the phrase "your compassion (הַמֶּזֶן מַעֲיִר)," which could be rendered literally as "the murmur/rumblings of your internal organs." It is an idiomatic expression based on the biblical Hebrew way of thinking that feelings originate in the stomach. In this place, the noun מַעֲיִם refers to compassion and love, which have their habitat in God's "womb," metonymically, in His heart. It could be translated as the surge of God's pity or the place of God's deepest feelings<sup>80</sup> that come from His inward parts.

This idea can also be found in Jer 31:20: "That is why my bowels are moving (הַמֶּזֶן מַעֲיִר) towards him; I must show him mercy (רַחֲמֶיךָ אֶרְחַמֶּנּוּ)." The phrase הַמֶּזֶן מַעֲיִר is in parallel to רַחֲמֶיךָ אֶרְחַמֶּנּוּ and reveals the idea of God's compassion. This divine quality echoes the parade of gracious terms that preceded the composition: "favour," "love" and "loyalty" (Jer 31:2–3). In the context of guilt, especially of confessed guilt of Israel, who is, nevertheless, "dear son and a pleasant child," such terms appropriately morph into "compassion" toward him (cf. Ps 103:13 with רַחֲמֶיךָ, "love, have compassion/mercy"). It aligns with the parable of the merciful father (or the prodigal son) when the father saw his son in the distance making his way back: "was filled with compassion" (ἐσπλαγγχίσθη) (Luke 15:20).<sup>81</sup>

### 3.3. מַעֲיִם as the Womb of a Woman

Although מַעֲיִם does not always denote the womb, however, when referring to a woman, it always means it; in such cases, it is often employed in parallel with בֶּטֶן (Gen 25:23; Isa 49:1; Ps 71:6). Given the quotation from the Book of Isaiah was mentioned earlier, it is worth describing the other references.

In Gen 25:23, the woman's womb is the subject of God's speech to Rebekah. She was previously barren, so her husband Isaac prayed on her behalf. The Lord has heard the prayer, and Rebekah conceived, which evidently was the sign of God's action (Gen 25:21). As the twin brothers in her womb struggled among themselves, she asked God for advice (Gen 25:22), to which He immediately replied: "Two nations (שְׁנֵי גֵוִים) in your womb (בְּבֶטְנְךָ) and two peoples (שְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים) from your bowels (מִמַּעֲיִיךָ) shall be separated" (Gen 25:23). As it can be observed, the noun מַעֲיִם takes on the meaning of womb, in which God has previously acted. God's speech means that the two unborn infants will become founders of two nations.

<sup>79</sup> Hamilton, "מַעֲיִר," 519.

<sup>80</sup> G.S. Ogden – J. Sterk, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Isaiah* (New York: United Bible Societies 2011) 1777.

<sup>81</sup> L.C. Allen, *Jeremiah. A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 2008) 349–350.

“Two peoples” (שְׁנֵי לְאָמִים) is in parallel with “two nations” (שְׁנֵי גֵוִים), and “from your bowels” (מִמְעֵיךָ) is paralleled with “in your womb” (בְּבֶטֶןךָ).<sup>82</sup> God knows the fate of every child even before its birth and has a plan for everyone. It testifies to the fact that life begins before birth, and for a mother, it could be a place of cooperation with God, as shown in God’s dialogue with Rebekah.

In Ps 71:6, there is another instance of both nouns referring to the womb (מֵעֵים and בֶּטֶן), quoted in parallel: “Upon You I have leaned from the womb (מִבֶּטֶן); from my mother’s womb (מִמְעֵי אִמִּי) it was You who took me out.” Here God is anthropomorphically compared to human figures and portrayed as a midwife delivering a child, which depicts Him as full of concern for the baby still in the womb and from the first moments after birth.

The conclusion here is clear: there has never been a time when God was not near, and His constant and unchanging presence has elicited from the author the continuous hymn of glory, in which he asks to stay in God’s presence also in the later years of life, in old age (Ps 71:9, 18) despite all the difficulties he will have to face.<sup>83</sup> It reminds us of God’s continuous and constant grace, which begins with the earliest moments of human life, before birth and immediately after.

## Conclusions

In the HB, God deeply influences the womb through His action and creation. He opens (Gen 29:31; 30:22) and closes the womb (Gen 20:17–18; 29:31; 30:2; 1 Sam 1:5–6; see also Judg 13:3), forms a human inside the womb (Ps 139:13–16; Job 10:8–12; 31:15; Isa 44:24; 49:5; Jer 1:5), consecrates (Jer 1:5), calls from the womb (Isa 49:1–2), as well as brings to birth (Isa 66:9).<sup>84</sup>

In Ps 22:10–11; 71:6, there are physical descriptions of God’s bringing forth from the womb. In Ps 22:10, the author’s prayer is clear: “You took me out of the womb” (אֶתָּה גִּבִּיתָ מִבֶּטֶן) (Ps 22:10), because he was entrusted to God “from the womb” (מִרֶחֶם); “from the womb of my mother” (מִבֶּטֶן אִמִּי) (Ps 22:11). A similar idea is presented in Ps 71:6, where God brings forth the man from the womb: “from the womb (מִבֶּטֶן); from my mother’s womb (מִמְעֵי אִמִּי) it was You who took me out.”

Therefore, the image of God is physical in the womb. In both psalms (Ps 22:10–11; 71:6), God takes care of the infant from the very beginning of its life and even before by assuming the role of a midwife. This image is also conceptual because bringing forth from the womb could be seen as a movement from darkness to light, from being enclosed to being exposed. The womb is then a space of surety, despite existing at the same time as a place of uncertainty.

82 W.D. Reayburn – E. McG. Fry, *A Translator’s Handbook on the Book of Genesis* (New York: United Bible Societies 1997) 579–580.

83 R. Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship. A Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (ITC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1998) 223.

84 K. Langton, “Bringing to Birth: Relationship with YHWH,” *AABNER* 1/1 (2021) 67.

With the diverse range of physical and conceptual aspects of the womb, the opening of it is one of the most compelling images to describe the human relationship with God.<sup>85</sup>

The woman's womb in the Bible is then not only a female organ, where the foetus simply grows before starting a "real" life after birth, but the space where the life truly begins, so that it is fair to say that life stretches not only "from birth to death," but "from womb to tomb." Consequently, death was perceived not only as a return "of the dust to the earth" (Eccl 12:7; Gen 3:19) but as a "return to the womb," which is attested in the First Temple tombs,<sup>86</sup> and Egyptian mythology.<sup>87</sup>

The action, creation and cooperation with God in the womb were highlighted in the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, "*What is Man?*" (Ps. 8:5). *An Itinerary of Biblical Anthropology*, a professional study on the anthropological vision of the Holy Scripture, published in 2019.<sup>88</sup> The Commission notes: "Man cannot be understood only through the prism of those features that characterize him as a single individual, but also in his condition of a 'son' (in relation to God and to man), 'brother' and cooperator responsible for the fate of all."<sup>89</sup> This cooperation has also "religious ramifications. In fact, neither parent can boast of being the source of the child's parentage alone, as this prerogative is reserved exclusively for the One Father. It is not enough just to "make a child" (as it is commonly said) if God does not open the womb of a woman so that she can conceive and give birth (Gen 30:2). For this reason, believers bless the Lord, who, uniting two spouses (Tob 8:15–17), gave them the grace of giving a body to a child of man (Ruth 4:13; 1 Sam 1:19–20:27)."<sup>90</sup>

It can be summarized that the womb is a primal and very significant image that encompasses all life, which is entrusted to God and relies on Him from the very beginning (or even before conception; Jer 1:5). By turning the focus on the creative actions of God rather than finding a title for Him (a midwife, mother or father), we are invited to see that understanding the issue of the womb in the Bible is crucial to the overall message of all the biblical passages about God's love, deeply rooted in fertility, womb, procreation and childbirth.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Langton, "Bringing to Birth," 66.

<sup>86</sup> O. Keel, "The Peculiar Headrests for the Dead in First Temple Times," *BAR* 13/4 (1987) 50–53; see also the reinterpretation of these observations in G. Barkay, "Burial Headrests as a Return to the Womb. A Reevaluation," *BAR* 14/2 (1988) 48–50.

<sup>87</sup> M.I. Hussein, "Anatomy of the Egyptian Tomb. The Egyptian Tomb as a Womb," *Discussions in Egyptology* 49 (2001) 25–33; C.B. Hays, "My Beloved Son, Come and Rest in Me': Job's Return to His Mother's Womb (Job 1:21a) in Light of Egyptian Mythology," *VT* 62/4 (2012) 607–621.

<sup>88</sup> Original title: "*Che cosa l'uomo?*" (Sal 8,5) *Un itinerario di antropologia biblica* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2019). The translation is based on the Polish text: Papieska Komisja Biblijna, "*Czym jest człowiek?*" (Ps 8,5) *Zarys antropologii biblijnej* (trans. H. Witczyk) (Kielce: Jedność 2020). According to the commonly accepted method of citing such sources, the reference to the text is given by a number.

<sup>89</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, "*What is Man?*" (Ps 8:5), n. 10.

<sup>90</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, "*What is Man?*" (Ps 8:5), n. 214.

<sup>91</sup> K. Langton, "Bringing to Birth," 85.

## Bibliography

- Abegg, M. – Bowley, J. – Cook, E., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Concordance* (Leiden: Brill 2003–2015) I–II.
- Abou-Assaf, A. – Bordreuil, P. – Millard, A.R., *La statue de Tell Fekherye et son inscription bilingue assyro-araméenne* (Études Assyriologiques 7; Paris: Éditions Recherches sur les Civilisations 1982).
- Abusch, T. *et al.*, *Corpus of Mesopotamian Anti-Witchcraft Rituals* (Ancient Magic and Divination 8/3; Leiden: Brill 2020).
- Allen, L.C., *Jeremiah. A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 2008).
- Baker, W. – Carpenter, E. (eds.), *The Complete Word Study Dictionary. Old Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers 2003) (= *CWSD-OT*).
- Barkay, G., “Burial Headrests as a Return to the Womb. A Reevaluation,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 14/2 (1988) 48–50.
- Bratcher, R.G. – Reyeburn, W.D., *A Translator’s Handbook on the Book of Psalms* (New York: United Bible Societies 1991).
- Brown, F. – Driver, S.R. – Briggs, C.A., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (BDB complete)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1952).
- Clines, D.J.A., *Job 1–20* (Word Biblical Commentary 17; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1989).
- Clines, D.J.A. (ed.), *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 2011) V, VII.
- Corley, J., “Wisdom and Fear of God in Ben Sira 1:11–21: Second Temple Perspectives,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 30/1 (2020) 46–56.
- Craigie, P.C. – Kelley, P.H. – Drinkard Jr., J.F., *Jeremiah 1–25* (Word Biblical Commentary 26; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1991).
- Craigie, P.C., – Tate, M.E., *Psalms 1–50*, 2 ed. (Word Biblical Commentary 19; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2004).
- Crenshaw, J.L., *Ecclesiastes. A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster 1987).
- Davidson, R., *The Vitality of Worship. A Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (International Theological Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1998).
- Donner, H. – Röllig, W., *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften*, 2 ed. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 1966–1969), 3 ed. (1971–1976).
- Elliger, K. – Rudolph, W. (eds.), *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, 5 ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft 1997).
- Flannery-Dailey, F., “‘Go, ask a woman’s womb’: Birth and the Maternal Body as Sources of Revelation and Wisdom in 4 Ezra,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 21/3 (2012) 243–258.
- Freedman, D.N. – Lundbom, J.R., “מִצְוָה,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (eds. G.J. Botterweck – H. Ringgren – H.-J. Fabry) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1977) II, 94–99.
- Garrett, D. – House, P.R., *Song of Songs. Lamentations* (Word Biblical Commentary 23B; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2004).
- Habel, N.C., *The Book of Job. A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster 1985).
- Hamilton, V.P., *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 18–50* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1995).
- Hamilton, V.P., “מִצְוָה,” *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (eds. R.L. Harris – G.L. Archer Jr. – B.K. Waltke) (Chicago, IL: Moody 1980) I, 518–519.
- Hamilton, V.P., “מִצְוָה,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (ed. W.A. VanGemeren) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1997) III, 1093–1094.

- Hays, C.B., "My Beloved Son, Come and Rest in Me': Job's Return to His Mother's Womb (Job 1:21a) in Light of Egyptian Mythology," *Vetus Testamentum* 62/4 (2012) 607–621.
- Huffmon, H.B., *Amorite Personal Names in the Mari Texts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1965).
- Hussein, M.I., "Anatomy of the Egyptian Tomb. The Egyptian Tomb as a Womb," *Discussions in Egyptology* 49 (2001) 25–33.
- Iricinschi, E., "'Interroga matricem mulieris': The Secret Life of the Womb in 4 Ezra and Sethian Cosmology," *Envisioning Judaism. Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of his 70th Birthday* (eds. R. Boustani et al.) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2013) 751–770.
- Jastrow, M., *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Bavli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (London – New York: Luzac – Putnam 1903) I.
- Keel, O., "The Peculiar Headrests for the Dead in First Temple Times," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 13/4 (1987) 50–53.
- Klein, R.W., *1 Samuel* (Word Biblical Commentary 10; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2000).
- Knight, G.A.F., *Servant Theology. A Commentary on the Book of Isaiah 40–55* (International Theological Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1984).
- Koehler, L. – Baumgartner, W., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill 2000) III.
- Kosman, A., "And the Spirit of God Hovered': A Dialogic Reading of the Opening Lines of Genesis," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 33 (2018) 7–19.
- Krause, D., "A Blessing Cursed: The Prophet's Prayer for Barren Womb and Dry Breasts in Hosea 9," *Reading between Texts. Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (ed. D.N. Fowell) (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 1992) 191–202.
- Kronholm, T. "רֶחֶם," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (eds. G.J. Botterweck – H. Ringgren – H.-J. Fabry) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2018) XIII, 454–459.
- Lane, E.W., *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: Williams & Norgate 1863–1893, reprint 1968) I.
- Langton, K., "Bringing to Birth: Relationship with YHWH," *Advances in Ancient Biblical and Near Eastern Research* 1/1 (2021) 65–88.
- Lisowsky, G., *Konkordanz zum Hebräischen Alten Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft 1993) 1330.
- Meyer, N.A., "Born of Woman, Fashioned from Clay: Tracking the Homology of Earth and Womb from the Hebrew Bible to the Psalms of Thanksgiving," *Dead Sea Discoveries* 28 (2021) 135–178.
- Moss, C.R. – Baden, J.S., *Reconceiving Infertility. Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness* (Princeton, NJ – London: Princeton University Press 2015).
- Nestle, E. & E. – Aland, B. & K. – Karavidopoulos, J. – Martini, C.M. – Metzger, B.M. (eds.), *Novum Testamentum Graece* 28 ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft 2012).
- Newman, B.M. – Stine, P.C., *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Jeremiah* (New York: United Bible Societies 2003).
- Ogden, G.S. – Sterk, J., *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Isaiah* (New York: United Bible Societies 2011).
- Oswalt, J.N., "רֶחֶם," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (eds. R.L. Harris – G.L. Archer Jr. – B.K. Waltke) (Chicago, IL: Moody 1980) I, 102–103.
- Oswalt, J.N., *The Book of Isaiah. Chapters 40–66* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1998).
- Petrakis, V., "'The Beginning of Wisdom is to Fear the Lord, And She was Joined with the Faithful in the Womb.' WSir 1:12 The Theology of Children, An Insight from the Old and the New Testaments," *Love, Marriage and Family in Eastern Orthodox Perspective* (eds. T.G. Dedon – S. Trostyanskiy) (Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 44; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias 2016) 295–302.

- Pike, D.M., "Formed in and Called from the Womb," *To Seek the Law of the Lord. Essays in Honor of John W. Welch* (eds. P.Y. Hoskisson – D.C. Peterson) (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation 2017) 317–331.
- Pontificia Commissione Biblica, "Che cosa l'uomo?" (*Sal* 8,5). *Un itinerario di antropologia biblica* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2019). Polish trans. H. Witczyk: Papieska Komisja Biblijna, "Czym jest człowiek?" (*Ps* 8,5). *Zarys antropologii biblijnej* (Kielce: Jedność 2020).
- Rahlf's, A. (ed.), *Septuaginta. Id est Vetus Testamentum graece iuxta LXX interpretes edidit Alfred Rahlf's. Editio altera, quam recognovit et emendavit Robert Hanhart. Duo volumina in uno* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft 2006).
- Reyburn, W.D. – Fry, E.McG., *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Genesis* (New York: United Bible Societies 1997).
- Rogers Jr., C.L., "רָצוֹן," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (ed. W.A. VanGemeren) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1997) I, 639–641.
- Rogers Jr., C.L., "גִּחְוֹן," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (ed. W.A. VanGemeren) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1997) I, 835.
- Schmuttermayr, G., "RHM – Eine lexikalische Studie," *Biblica* 51 (1970) 499–532.
- Simian-Yofre, H., "רָחֵם," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (eds. G.J. Botterweck – H. Ringgren – H.-J. Fabry) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2018) XIII, 437–452.
- Sokoloff, M., *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period* (Dictionaries of Talmud, Midrash and Targum 2; Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press 1990).
- Sokoloff, M., *A Syriac Lexicon. Translation from the Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann's Lexicon Syriacum* (Winona Lake, IN – Piscataway, NJ: Eisenbrauns – Gorgias 2009).
- Tal, A., *A Dictionary of Samaritan Aramaic* (Leiden – Boston, MA – Köln: Brill 2000).
- Thompson, J.A., *The Book of Jeremiah* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1980).
- Vall, G., "From Whose Womb Did the Ice Come Forth?' Procreation Images in Job 38:28–29," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 57/3 (1995) 504–513.
- Van der Zwan, P., "Bedeutungen und Bilder der Gebärmutter in der Hebräischen Bibel," *Journal for Semitics* 24/1 (2015) 169–197.
- von Rad, G., *Genesis. A Commentary*, Revised ed. (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster 1972).
- van der Watt, L., *The Reception of the Grace Formula in Old and New Testament Theologies. A Hermeneutical and Theological Study* (Diss. Stellenbosch University; Stellenbosch 2020) <https://scholar.sun.ac.za/handle/10019.1/109121> [access: 11.01.2022].
- Watts, J.D.W., *Isaiah 34–66*, Revised ed. (Word Biblical Commentary 25; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2005).
- Węgrzyniak, W., "Starotestamentowe życie nienarodzonych," *Polonia Sacra* 17/1 (2013) 17–34.
- Ziffer, I., "Moon, Rain, Womb, Mercy. The Imagery of The Shrine Model from Tell el-Far'ah North – Biblical Tirzah. For Othmar Keel," *Archaeology and Ancient Israelite Religion* (ed. A. Faust) (Basel et al.: MDPI 2020) 133–156.