

## Birth Bricks, Potter's Wheels, and Exodus 1,16<sup>(1)</sup>

In Chapter 1 of the book of Exodus, the king of Egypt gives instructions to the two midwives, Shiprah and Puah, to kill the male Hebrew children as a means of controlling the growing population of Hebrews in Egypt. The Hebrew of this passage is not particularly difficult, with the exception of one term. Exod 1,16 reads:

וַיֹּאמֶר בִּלְדָכָן אֶת־הָעִבְרִיּוֹת וּרְאִיתֶן עַל־הָאִבְנִים אֲסָבֵן הוּא וְהַמֶּתֶן אִתּוֹ וְאֲסָבַת הִיא וְחַיָּה

The problematic word is *'obnayim*. This word is a virtual hapax, and commentators have argued for numerous translations of *'obnayim*. The only other attestation of this word in Biblical Hebrew is in Jer 18,3. There, however, the context of the use of the term is not childbirth, but ceramic production. Despite the Jeremiah passage, the best interpretation of this term understands it as a reference to some kind of birthing equipment, most likely a birthing brick. This reading is widely held, although other suggestions are frequently offered. That this term is best understood as birth brick, however, is apparent based on linguistic evidence, based on Mesopotamian and Hittite analogy, based on well documented Egyptian practices, and based on the actual discovery of a birth brick uncovered in the recent Yale-Pennsylvania expeditions at Middle Kingdom Abydos. Furthermore, given the strong evidence for reading *'obnayim* explicitly as birth brick(s), Kilmer's suggestion that the brick acted as a symbol for the construction life can be supported and extended to demonstrate that child birth and clay production activities were, at least semiotically, related.

### 1. Previous Translation Attempts of *'obnayim*

Most modern translations of *'obnayim* in Exodus 1,16 reflect the belief that this must be some kind of birth equipment. Both the JPS and the NRSV take the word as "birthing stool". The JPS provides a

<sup>(1)</sup> A modified form of this paper was read at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Atlanta, 2004 in the Egyptology and Ancient Israel section, although the idea for the paper itself arose in a seminar on Exodus led by Jeffrey Tigay. Thanks are due to Matthew Rutz, Jeffrey Tigay, Joseph Wegner, Theresa Musacchio, and Nicholas Picardo for various comments, suggestions, bibliography, and corrections.

footnote to explain the translation, saying: “More exactly, the brick or stone supports used by Egyptian women during child birth”. The NIV translates the term in virtually the same way: delivery stool. The Evan-Shoshan concordance defines the word as: *maššab ’iššah belidtah* (a woman’s place to sit while she gives birth”. The American Standard Bible, the Webster Bible, and even the King James Bible all offer translations that suggest that the *’obnayim* was a type of equipment sat upon by a woman while in labor. However, there are enough divergent interpretations to make this discussion important. Surprisingly, a consensus has not yet been reached about what exactly this word refers to or how it should be understood.

As a brief digression, it is important to note that these translations presuppose that women in ancient Egypt did not give birth while in a supine position. Birthing while lying down is a relatively modern innovation, and in many ways is more beneficial for the attending doctor or midwife than for the pregnant woman herself. A squatting or seated position better facilitates a mother’s own power to birth, in that it allows the pelvic floor muscles to stretch more easily and allows the woman to use her thigh muscles along with her abdominal muscles and uterus in a way that does not fight gravity. A birthing stool was frequently employed in this process, since it helped support the mother during labor. There is much ethnographic evidence for birthing techniques in this position, using a birthing stool, from the Roman period through sixteenth century Puritan practices to the Fellahin of modern Egypt. The Roman author Soranus (who wrote during the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian) describes such a stool as a seat with a crescent-shaped cavity — allowing the woman to sit, but not interfering with the birthing process. Similar images are presented in Thomas Raynalde’s 1545 work, *The Byrthe of Mankynde*; two woodcuts visually illustrate how a birthing stool was used in Germany. In front of the expectant mother is the midwife, seated slightly lower so that she has access to the mother and baby. In both woodcuts, a woman stands behind the mother as well giving further support. Textual descriptions of such activities are also attested in Medieval manuals and in Puritan documents<sup>(?)</sup>. Photographs in Winifred

(?) For discussion on the Medieval manuals, see J. TOWLER – J. BRAMELL, *Midwives in History and Society* (New Hampshire 1986) 82 and, more generally, B. ROWLAND, *Medieval Woman’s Guide to Health* (Kent 1981). For discussion on the Puritan documents, see R.V. SCHNUCKER, “The English Puritans and Pregnancy, Delivery and Breast Feeding”, *History of Childhood Quarterly* 1 (1974) 641.

Blackman's ethnography of the Fellahin of Upper Egypt depict this equipment, a birthing stool and a woman leaning on a sieve while sitting on the stool<sup>(3)</sup>. Roth and Roehrig also cite Winckler's ethnographic accounts of similar practices in modern Egyptian villages<sup>(4)</sup>. In Winckler's account, the birthing woman rests her feet up-ended basins, ceramic cooking pots, or on mudbricks. It is this type of equipment, the birthing stool, which is referred to in these translations of Exodus 1,16.

"Birthing stool" is not the only translation for *'obnayim* that one encounters in English renderings of Exodus. The New Jerusalem Bible makes a relatively common translation error in Exod 1,16. *'obnayim* there is translated as "the two stones". Here then, *'obnayim* is taken as a dual form of the word *'eben*, the singular form that is usually rendered into English as "stone". In fact, *'obnayim* appears to be dual only in the ending, the vocalization of *'obnayim* is not the most likely vocalization for a dual derived from *'eben*. The expected vocalization would be *abnayim*, which is not attested, but is reconstructed on analogy with the attested dual form of *regel*, which is *raglayim*. The expected singular of *'obnayim* is *\*'oben*, but this word is not attested. While it is possible that the word was incorrectly vocalized by the Masoretes, it is best to assume that *'eben* is not actually the same word and a translation involving stones is not required. As it stands, *'eben* derives from the form *\*'abn* and is cognate with the well attested Akkadian *abnu*. The etymology of *'obnayim* should be seen in the singular form *\*'oben* and in proto-semitic would have been *'ubnu*. Unfortunately there is no obvious cognate for this word. However, an analogous situation is apparent with the word *'ozen* (meaning ear) which in the dual is *'oznayim*, and should be vocalized *'uznu* in proto-semitic.

Other translations that have been suggested reflect a better understanding of the history of the Hebrew language, but are still problematic. Propp, in his 1999 commentary on Exodus 1–18, discusses the problem of this word, and his discussion is worth repeating. Propp discusses three plausible interpretations but decides that a fourth translation makes more sense. Propp writes: "(a) the *testicles* proving the child's gender...(b) *pedestals* upon which women rested their legs during birth...(c) the bricks on which Egyptian

<sup>(3)</sup> W. BLACKMAN, *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt* (London 1968), figures 28 and 29.

<sup>(4)</sup> A. ROTH – C. ROHRIG, "Magical Bricks and the Bricks of Birth", *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 88 (2002) 130-131.

midwives may have deposited newborns... I incline toward theory (a), since the evidence for (c) is scant and, were (b) correct, we would expect “between” the two stones”<sup>(5)</sup>.

But approach (a) also has difficulties. Nowhere else does Hebrew literature call testicles “stones”. More important, the context suggests that both boys and girls possess or are associated with *'obnayim*. Note that to determine sex, the midwives “look upon, inspect” (*ra'a 'al*) rather than simply see (*ra' 'et*) the *'obnayim*. This suggests a fourth explanation: “two stones” are pudenda in general.

Propp’s comments demonstrate that in spite of the relative standardization of translation choices amongst English language Bibles, there is still considerable difficulty in determining the meaning of this word. Propp’s suggestions provide more problems than are solved. Of difficulty first is his declination of *'obnayim* as a dual of *'eben*. Propp himself acknowledges that this is not the expected form. Therefore, Propp’s suggestion based on Durham’s 1987 suggestion “testicles” — inspired by the old English idiomatic use of “stones” for testicles cannot be upheld. Beyond this basic issue, other problems are apparent<sup>(6)</sup>.

Propp favors an understanding of the passage, where the midwives are explicitly told to look at the genitalia of the child to determine whether the child needs be killed or not. This does fit the context of the verse. As shall be demonstrated later, Propp is incorrect in asserting that there is minimal evidence that babies were rested upon birthbricks immediately following birth — this is a relatively well-attested practice, which shall be discussed below. Likewise, as shall be demonstrated, Propp is incorrect in suggesting that the use of the preposition *'al* is problematic; if taken as birthing equipment, the rendering “look upon the *'obnayim*” is plausible. Within Propp’s discussion, no strong arguments against taking *'obnayim* as birthing equipment can be identified.

Propp concludes that *'obnayim* must refer to external genitalia, male or female. It is difficult to reconcile this conclusion with the use of the term in Jeremiah. Before continuing the discussion of the word’s use in Exodus, it is important to discuss the use of the word in Jeremiah. In this situation, context demands reading *'obnayim* as a type of equipment.

<sup>(5)</sup> W. PROPP, *Exodus 1–18* (New York 1999) 139.

<sup>(6)</sup> See J. DURHAM, *Exodus* (WBC 3; Waco, TX 1987) 12, for Durham’s argument.

## 2. *Jeremiah 18,3*

Jer 18,3 reads:

וארדד בית היוצר (והנהו) [והנהוהוא] עשה מלאכה על-האבנים

Most English translations render *'obnayim* here as some form of potter's equipment. For example, the RSV and the NIV translate this as wheel. BDB suggests this reading as well. Also mistakenly taking *'obnayim* as a dual form of *'eben*, BDB provides an explanation for why this word can mean potter's wheel — potter's wheels, according to BDB, consisted of two discs that revolved one above the other, that looked like mill-stones<sup>(7)</sup>. BDB provides further explanation for how this word came to mean both a potter's wheel and a birthing stool. The entry reads: “fr. likeness to potter's wheel; on custom of labor upon stool”. Here then, the word is explained in both contexts as descriptive — both pieces of equipment are made up of two stones.

Although this is a relatively ingenious solution to the problem, it is not entirely convincing. It is based once again on the premise that *'obnayim* is the dual form of *'eben*, a premise that has already been rejected. The context of the use of this word in Jeremiah necessitates a translation that fits within the context of ceramic production. That the same terminology may have been used to describe birthing equipment and ceramic equipment is not all that surprising in an ancient Near Eastern context. In Mesopotamia, Egypt, and possibly Biblical Israel there seems to have been a conceptual or at least semiotic connection between these two arenas of activity.

## 3. *Clay Technology and Human Reproduction*

In Mesopotamia, there is much evidence that points to a conceptual link between manufacture involving clay and human reproduction. The Sumerian sign TU/DU2 has a wide semantic range. Prominent meanings though are “to fashion clay on a wheel”, “to give birth”, or “to assist in giving birth”. The link between these two spheres of human creative activity is more directly manifest in the story of Atrahasis. In this text, the goddess Mami is described as the creator of human life and her creation of humans is described in terms of ceramic production. Lambert's translation of this section reads:

<sup>(7)</sup> F. BROWN – S. DRIVER – C. BRIGGS, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA 1996) 7.

[She] put [her hand out] to her clay. She nipped off [fourteen] pieces of clay, Seven she put on the right, [Seven] she put on the left, Between them she placed the brick...the cutter of the umbilical cord...The birth-goddess, creatress of destiny — They completed them in pairs in her presence, Since Mami conceived the regulations for the human race. In the house of the pregnant woman in confinement. Let the brick be in place for seven days<sup>(8)</sup>.

This is not the only time that human birth is described using terminology derived from ceramic production. The *shumma izbu* omen series likewise employs the language of ceramics when discussing birth related issues. For those unfamiliar with Mesopotamian omens, this particular set of texts describes the messages or meanings that the gods grant through various phenomena. Of particular interest to us here are the descriptions of fetuses. Kilmer has convincingly demonstrated that the descriptions of deformed fetuses use clay terminology, otherwise used in discussion of ceramic production<sup>(9)</sup>. Kilmer states:

I believe that we have overlooked a deeper meaning and significance of the unbaked clay brick, in that it appears to have been likened to placental material. That is, the fetus may have been thought of as the product that developed in and from the malleable, clay-like placenta<sup>(10)</sup>.

To push Kilmer's argument a little bit further, it is suggested that there was a connection between the manufacture of ceramics from unbaked clay and human reproduction that invited the use of the same language in both contexts.

It is not just Mesopotamia where this conceptual link is apparent. In Egypt, the god Khnum is both a potter and the creator of humanity, at least in some accounts. A patron god of potters, Khnum is credited, in some texts, with fashioning humanity on a potter's wheel, out of clay. In the Westcar papyrus, this deity is said to bring in birthing equipment, including a birthing stool for the woman to give birth on<sup>(11)</sup>. In the

<sup>(8)</sup> W. LAMBERT – A. MILLARD, *Atra-Hasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Winona Lake, IN 1999) 61-63.

<sup>(9)</sup> A. KILMER, "Proportional Guidelines in Near Eastern Art: The Birth of Brick", *JNES* 46 (1987) 211-213.

<sup>(10)</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>(11)</sup> For an early edition, see A. ERMAN, *Die Märchen des Papyrus Westcar* (Mittheilungen aus den orientalischen Sammlungen; Berlin 1890). For an English translation and further commentary, see *The Literature of Ancient Egypt* (ed. W. SIMPSON) (New Haven 1972) 15-30.

relevant section of Westcar, the deities Isis, Nephtys, Heket, and Meshkenet are present while Reddedet gives birth. Khnum is the male deity present and the one responsible for bringing in the birthing stool. It is interesting that this deity is connected with ceramic production and the birth of humans, and that his toolkit includes equipment for both birthing and pottery production. This is reminiscent of the Mesopotamian story known to modern audiences as: “Enki and the World Order”<sup>(12)</sup>. There, the goddess Nintu, acting as a midwife, is said to be equipped with a brick for use in assisting the birth activities. Matthew Rutz has noted the various puns on the name of Nintu, which is understood to mean “Lady Birth”<sup>(13)</sup>. She is described there as Nintu, the Lady of giving birth, and the Sumerian reads: dingir NIN-TUD, NIN-TUD-TUD-DA.

This same cognitive connection between pottery production and human reproduction may also be apparent in the Hebrew Bible. In Gen 27,7 God is said to create man out of the *עפר מן-הארמה* (“dust of the ground”), and the subsequent animals that he creates are all made from the ground. Likewise, the use of the verb *יצר* to describe God's activity further points to the analogy of pottery production since this verb is used to describe ceramic production activities in other parts of the Hebrew Bible (such as Isa 29, 16; 1 Chr 4,23, and most noteworthy for us — Jer 18,4). Clearly there was a conceptual connection between at least the initial creation of humanity and the earth, manifest semiotically in Biblical Hebrew. Ceramic production begins with gathering clay and mud from the earth. Likewise, the creation of humans is described as originating in the clay of the earth.

What this evidence suggests is not a specific answer to the question of what *'obnayim* means in both the Exodus and the Jeremiah context. Rather, it demonstrates that there was some conceptual connection between the two types of activity in the ancient Near East. The language of ceramic production was used in discussions of childbirth and conception. One does not need to posit, then, that there is a direct link between the *'obnayim* equipment used in ceramic production and the *'obnayim* equipment used in childbirth. BDB's attempts to draw a material parallel between these two objects is not necessary, although it is possible that the use of the same word in both

<sup>(12)</sup> For translation, commentary, and composite text edition, see C. BENITO, “*Enki and Ninmah*” and “*Enki and the World Order*” (University of Pennsylvania, Ph.D Dissertation, 1969).

<sup>(13)</sup> M. RUTZ, Personal Communication.

contexts did derive from the visual similarities of the equipment. What specifically was that birth equipment? The better attested Mesopotamian and Egyptian birthing practices suggest possible candidates for the *'obnayim*.

#### 4. *Birthing Practices in Cuneiform Traditions*

Mesopotamian childbirth practices have been well reconstructed already by Stol, so there is no need to go into these practices in depth here<sup>(14)</sup>. Germane to this discussion, however, are Stol's comments about the brick of birth, which is well attested in cuneiform traditions. Beyond the cuneiform sources already discussed above, Stol demonstrates that birth bricks are attested in a hemerology, a Neo-Assyrian letter, and in a Sumerian personal name. Stol connects these references explicitly to the passage from Exodus in question.

Stol further demonstrates a possible connection between the Biblical passage and Hittite and Ugaritic traditions. This evidence is not as strong, as in neither situation is it possible to argue definitively that the equipment in question is a brick as opposed to a stool. Stol (following de Moor) identifies a possible birth brick in Ugaritic literature, specifically in KTU 1.12 I 14-27. Stol connects this observation with the Exodus passage. If this reading of the text is correct (although problematically, the term in question, *'ugrm*, is also a hapax, usually translated as field or soil), then the Ugaritic text should be understood as a command to take various birthing equipment and give birth. Beckman has argued that Hittite texts attest that the laboring woman gave birth while seated on a stool, with texts that specifically describe the stool and a professional name that translates as "woman of the birth stool"<sup>(15)</sup>. These texts demonstrate the prevalence of squatting birth practices outside of Mesopotamia proper. In and of themselves, however, they do not specifically prove that the *'obnayim* were birth bricks, but certainly suggest that some kind of equipment to support the woman in an upright position should

<sup>(14)</sup> M. STOL, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible. Its Mediterranean Setting* (Cuneiform Monographs 14; Groningen 2000) 119-122. The Ugaritic text can be found in M. DIETRICH – O. LORETZ – J. SANMARTIN, *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts From Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places* (Münster 1995). For other interpretations of *'ugrm*, see the entry in G. DEL OLMO LETE – J. SANMARTÍN, *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition* (Leiden 2004) 27.

<sup>(15)</sup> G. BECKMAN, *Hittite Birth Rituals* (Wiesbaden 1983) 102.

be expected. Egyptian practices, which are more thoroughly attested in a number of different media, provide stronger evidence for explicitly connecting this Hebrew term with a birth brick.

### 5. *Egyptian Birthing Practices*

Childbirth practices in Egypt are well known and have been the subject of study by Erika Feucht<sup>(16)</sup>. Feucht reconstructs the birthing practices of the Egyptians from a variety of sources. In the practices that can be reconstructed (although practices likely varied somewhat between different classes of women as well as different periods of Egypt's history), the woman never seems to have given birth in a supine position. Descriptions suggest that she would squat on the floor, squat on two bricks, or sit on a confinement chair. After birth, the child is given a name, the umbilical cord is cut, and the baby is laid upon a cushion on a brick. At this stage, it is important to describe in detail some of the evidence used to reconstruct these birthing practices.

Pictorial evidence demonstrates aspects of Egyptian birthing culture. In an ostraca from Deir el-Medina a woman sits in a birthing pavilion, holding up the baby<sup>(17)</sup>. The chair she sits in may be the birthing stool, but this is unclear from the image. However, the similarities in posture with the determinatives for nurse or nursing connects the ostraca strongly with child bearing practices. A similar image is preserved in the royal tomb at Amarna<sup>(18)</sup>. Likewise, a relief from the Temple of Hathor at Dendara depicts the labor process from a squatting position<sup>(19)</sup>.

The language used to describe birthing hints at the practices involved. The determinative used with *mswt* depicts a woman kneeling. The child is depicted being born while the woman is in this position; the head and arms of the child are clearly visible. Feucht suggests that paraphrases for this word were also used by the Egyptians, one of which reads: *prj hr t3* "come down to the ground".

<sup>(16)</sup> See E. FEUCHT, *Das Kind im Alten Ägypten* (New York 1995) and "Birth", *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* (ed. D. REDFORD) (Oxford 1999) 192-193.

<sup>(17)</sup> See R. JANSSEN – J. JANSSEN, *Growing Up in Ancient Egypt* (London 1990) 5, and G. PINCH, *Magic in Ancient Egypt* (Austin 1994) 127.

<sup>(18)</sup> JANSSEN – JANSSEN, *Growing Up in Ancient Egypt*, 4-6.

<sup>(19)</sup> Z. HAWASS, *Silent Images* (Cairo 1995) 82.

Roth and Roehrig follow Fischer's translation of the word *jn<sup>c</sup>t* as midwife and interpret the associated determinative as a midwife holding a birthbrick<sup>(20)</sup>.

Indeed, written evidence for childbirth gives important information as well. Aside from the gynecological literature available, which is too numerous to detail here, references to direct aspects of child birth are attested. Roth and Roehrig argue that references to birth bricks can be found in the Sixth Dynasty tomb of Watetkhethor at Saqqara. Information about birthing practices is given indirectly in a votive stele from Deir el-Medina. A stela from a man named Neferabu to the goddess Meretseger includes a line that Lichteim, following Gunn and Wilson, translated as: "I sat on bricks, like a woman in labor"<sup>(21)</sup>. The word for brick used here is *dbt*, and it is also used in the birthing context of the Westcar Papyrus. In the end portion of the Westcar papyrus that describes Reddet's labor (which has already been mentioned in passing), the reader is explicitly told what happens to the child immediately after birth<sup>(22)</sup>. The child is washed, the umbilical cord is cut, and he is placed upon a cushion of bricks (*ifdy m dbt*). Here, "bricks" is a translation of the word *dbt*. It is unclear from these two uses whether the *dbt* was some furniture that the woman knelt on while giving birth or whether it was equipment used in dealing with the baby after birth<sup>(23)</sup>. It is clear, however, from the art-historical and textual evidence that at least well-to-do women in Egypt gave birth sitting in a chair, and possibly in a birthing arbor or an area of the house set off for this activity.

While Hathor is the deity most associated with Egyptian childbirth in modern accounts, another goddess, Meshkenet, seems to have been particularly associated with birthing equipment. Meshkenet is directly linked with both the birthing stool and with the bricks that the child is placed on after birth. Meshkenet is also a word that is used to describe the birthing stool – the determinative for the word when referring to the stool and not the divinity is a chair. Yet Meshkenet herself is also depicted as a brick with a human head<sup>(24)</sup>. In some copies of the Book

<sup>(20)</sup> ROTH – ROEHRIG, "Magical Bricks and the Bricks of Birth", 131.

<sup>(21)</sup> M. LICHTHEIM, *Ancient Egyptian Literatur* (Los Angeles 1984) II, 108.

<sup>(22)</sup> See the translation in W. SIMPSON, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt* (New Haven 1972) 15-30.

<sup>(23)</sup> See ROTH – ROEHRIG, "Magical Bricks and the Bricks of Birth", 131-132 for a more complete discussion on various interpretations.

<sup>(24)</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

of the Dead<sup>(25)</sup>, in spell 125, Meshkenet is depicted in this manner. Indeed Budge labels two line-drawings of Meshkenet as a birth brick with the caption “The Two Birth Stones”, with האבנים and Exodus 1,16<sup>(26)</sup>. Budge is not normally a trustworthy source. However, in this situation his suggestion seems to be correct.

So to repeat the context of use of these bricks in the Westcar papyrus, after birth the child is placed on the bricks, with a cushion in between. Once there, Meshkenet proclaims him king of the land and Khnum breathes life into him. From this literary account, it seems that after birth in Egypt the child was placed on bricks and likely some sort of ritual took place. The baby was physically placed upon the bricks. This helps our reading of Exodus 1,16, where the midwives are told to (וראתן על-האבנים) “look upon the *'obnayim*”. If we take the *'obnayim* as the bricks where the baby is placed after the umbilical cord is cut, we no longer have any interpretative problem. Positing the word as a dual form, one should expect the reference to be to two bricks. The perspective of the preposition על “upon” makes sense in this context and Propp's concerns about the presence of this preposition here are solved. Indeed, if one takes *'obnayim* to refer to this kind of equipment, then the passage in Exodus makes easy sense. The midwives are told to look upon the bricks and if the baby is male kill it, and if female let it live. In the Westcar papyrus it is while the baby rests on the bricks that its fate is determined (to be king of Egypt) and Khnum breathes life into it. So it is fitting from a literary perspective that the king of Egypt orders that the life or death of the Hebrew children be determined while on this brick.

These bricks are not mere literary conventions. A brick of this nature was unearthed in 2000, in the William Kelly Simpson Pennsylvania-Yale excavations at Abydos. This is the only actual birth brick to be recovered archaeologically<sup>(27)</sup>. Led by Dr. Josef Wegner of the University of Pennsylvania, the Penn team recovered the brick while excavating the Middle Kingdom town in South Abydos. The

<sup>(25)</sup> The best example comes from the *Papyrus of Ani* (see *planche 3* in G. RACHET, *Le Livre des Morts des Anciens Égyptiens* [Paris 1996]), although a schematic depiction of Meshkenet as a birth brick can be found in a Book of the Dead in the Egyptian Museum in Turin (ROTH – ROEHRIG, “Magical Bricks and the Bricks of Birth”, 130).

<sup>(26)</sup> E. BUDGE, *From Fetish to God in Ancient Egypt* (New York 1988) 61.

<sup>(27)</sup> J. WEGNER, “A Decorated Birth-Brick from South Abydos”, in *Egyptian Archaeology* 20 (Spring, 2002) 3-4.

town was likely established in order to support the mortuary cult of King Senwosret III whose mortuary complex lies roughly to the southwest of the town<sup>(28)</sup>.

The birthing brick was found in the mayor's residence of this town. Within the mayor's residence were a group of rooms that seem to have been associated with his daughter, as her name appears on the large quantities of seal impressions recovered from this part of the complex<sup>(29)</sup>. Within one of these rooms, the birth brick was found almost intact. The brick itself is no different in composition from the literally thousands of mudbricks that make up the mayor's complex. It is made of clay, the same fabric as the regular building bricks, and is roughly consistent in size. The striking difference is the preserved painted images upon the brick.

The imagery of the brick clearly identifies it as a birth brick. The center of the image is a seated woman, holding a child. Her posture regarding the child she holds is reminiscent of the ostraca scene of the woman and baby in the birthing arbor found at Deir el-Medinah. The seated woman has two attendant women, perhaps midwives. Certainly the kneeling figure is suggestive of this. The entire scene is framed by two standards, each bearing the head of the goddess Hathor<sup>(30)</sup>. The presence of this goddess, who is associated with birth, female sexuality, and the female creative principle further points to this object's childbirth connection.

The sides of the brick are not nearly as well preserved, and the reverse was not preserved at all. The images on each of the sides consist of anthropomorphic or anthropomorphized animal figures. Wegner associates these images with scenes from Middle Kingdom apotropaic wands. These figures were certainly protective in nature, calling on mythological/symbolical motifs as protection for the newborn.

Wegner argues that this brick may have been a brick knelt on by Egyptian women. It is also possible that this brick was used as the brick upon which the baby was placed after birth, as in the Westcar papyrus; given the ambiguities of this equipment already mentioned above, it is difficult to determine which theory accurately reflects this

<sup>(28)</sup> J. WEGNER, "Excavations at the Town of *Enduring-are-the-Places-of-Khakaure-Maa-Kheru-in-Abydos*: A Preliminary Report on the 1994 and 1997 Seasons", *JARCE* 35(1998) 3.

<sup>(29)</sup> WEGNER, "A Decorated Birth-Brick from South Abydos", 4.

<sup>(30)</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

brick's use. Both are possible. The discovery of a birth brick in an actual living context in Middle Kingdom Egypt provides strong evidence that this kind of equipment was in general use in Egyptian birthing contexts.

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Based on the variety of evidence from ancient Near Eastern sources regarding the use of birth bricks in delivery practices, it is most likely that the *'obnayim* mentioned in Exodus 1,16 refers to some sort of birthing equipment, as opposed to a reference to genitalia. While the traditional translation has taken this equipment to be a birthing stool, this reflects later Greek and Roman practices, and in fact it seems more likely to refer to the bricks a child is placed on immediately following birth. There is some ambiguity in modern readings of Egyptian literature on this subject and these two pieces of equipment may not have been distinct from one another. The use of the preposition על indicates that the *'obnayim* there more likely refers to the bricks the child is placed on immediately afterwards but does not rule out the possibility that the reference is to the actual bricks the mother would have knelt on.

The fact that this equipment term is attested in both birth contexts and ceramic production contexts provides further evidence for Kilmer's suggestion that there was a conceptual link between these two spheres of human activity in the ancient Near East. This link was substantial enough to facilitate the borrowing of vocabulary from one activity's equipment as referents for the equipment of another activity. Ceramic production and human reproduction were not such different activities in Near Eastern thought. This has long been recognized as explicit in mythological texts. Since this connection transfers to the level of mundane classification and naming of equipment, it points to a deeper level of cognitive connection. The role of the potter and the role of mother/midwife/doctor were closely connected. For Biblical exegesis then, references to ceramic production should not necessarily be taken as references to the mundane world. Nor should the connection between motherhood and creation be glossed over.

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## SUMMARY

It is argued here that the Hebrew word *'obnayim*, which appears in Exodus 1,16 and Jeremiah 18,3 refers to either birthing equipment or equipment used in ceramic production. The particular type of birthing equipment referred to by this word is identified as a "birth brick", which is well attested in Near Eastern literature and one of which has been uncovered in archaeological excavations at Abydos in Egypt. It is further argued that the semantic range of this word is not surprising given the conceptual link between child birth and ceramic manufacture in the ancient Near East.