

# GIVING BIRTH ON SOMEONE'S KNEES: THE MEANING OF GENESIS 30:3

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## INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM

When Rachel cannot become pregnant with Jacob, she gives her maid Bilhah to him and says: *Here is my maid Bilhah; have intercourse with her, and she will give birth on my knees/lap* [vateled 'al birkai], and I too will be built from/through her (Genesis 30:3).<sup>1</sup>

In a previous article I presented evidence that the expression “I will be built from/through her [my handmaid],” which also is used by Sarah in Genesis 16:2, means “I will become able to get pregnant myself and have my own child(ren).” As to how a woman might be built “*from/through her handmaid*,” Sforno suggests that the husband’s success with the wife’s handmaid might awaken the wife’s “jealousy,” and this would somehow give her the power to become pregnant herself. I proposed that perhaps originally this was thought to occur not through “jealousy” but through a type of sympathetic magic, although it is clear that the text no longer sees it this way.<sup>2</sup>

But what does Rachel mean by saying that Bilhah “will give birth on my knees/lap?” Two explanations of this phrase have been proposed. The first, which is the explanation of the traditional Jewish commentators that I reviewed, is that the wife will raise the handmaid’s child. The second, which is adhered to by many modern commentators and which I will discuss later, is that the newborn child will be *placed* on the wife’s knees/lap as a symbol either of ownership or of formal, legal adoption.

The first explanation is based on Targum Onkelos’ ancient Aramaic translation, which paraphrases “that she may bear (a child), whom I will bring up” [va’ana’ erabei].<sup>3</sup> Rashi simply cites this to explain the phrase. Ibn Ezra, Ramban and Sforno do not comment on the phrase; presumably, they accept this explanation. S.D. Luzzatto, writing in the early 1800’s, not only accepts

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this view but also cites three other texts which he believes are relevant to this one: Isaiah 66:12, Job 3:11-12, and Genesis 50:23.<sup>4</sup>

This explanation and Luzzatto's three other texts raise several problems. First, the presence of the word "too" in the phrase "I too will be built from/through her" links the first of the phrases in Genesis 30:3 with the second, implying a connection or perhaps even a cause and effect relationship between the two. How would Bilhah's giving birth on Rachel's knees/lap help Rachel "too" to become able to get pregnant herself? Second, Isaiah 66:12 speaks of a very young child being played with on someone's – perhaps God's – knees/lap, not of a child being *born* on someone's knees/lap, and thus may not be relevant to our phrase at all. Third, Job 3:11-12 seems to deal specifically with the *delivery* of a newborn onto someone's knees/lap, and not with any subsequent raising of the child. To start with, let's take a closer look at the verses in Job.

#### JOB 3:11-12: A REFLECTION OF NORMAL BIRTHING PROCEDURE

Job 3:11-12 reads: *Why did I not die at birth, / Expire as I came forth from the womb? // Why were there knees to receive me, / Or breasts for me to suck?* (NJPS, 1999) These verses appear to reflect the birthing procedure of that time and place. We know that a woman in labor squatted;<sup>5</sup> as the baby came out, it was apparently "caught" by the midwife and placed onto someone's knees/lap. The knees/lap might conceivably have belonged to the mother herself, the midwife or her assistant, or someone else. Thus, the phrase in Genesis 30:3 might be taken to mean "give birth *onto* someone's knees/lap."

In their comments on Genesis 30:3, none of the traditional Jewish commentators I looked at except for Luzzatto cited these verses in Job as having a possible bearing on our phrase; in addition, none of the commentators whom we will now look at on Job 3:11-12 refer in their comments to Genesis 30:3. Nevertheless, three traditional Jewish commentators explain these verses from Job in the way I have indicated, although each opts for a different explanation as to whose knees/lap are meant. Rashi explains they are the mother's; thus Rashi apparently feels that the newborn was *placed* onto her lap. In contrast, Metzudat David explains they are the midwife's, who "according to their normal procedure kneel between the mother's legs" and catch the child

on their knees/lap rather than allowing it to fall to the ground. Similarly, Malbim writes that they are the father's, who does the same thing as Metzudat David says the midwives do. In looking at the ancient Near Eastern texts discussed below, we will see that those texts support the idea that the newborn was *placed* on someone's knees/lap rather than *lowered* onto them.<sup>6</sup>

Looking at the phrase "She will give birth on(to) my knees/lap" from this perspective, it seems that Rachel is insisting that *she* be the one on(to) whose knees/lap the newborn will be placed or lowered.<sup>7</sup> At first glance, this seems easily understandable; Rachel, who longs for children (cf. Genesis 30:1), wants to hold the child immediately after it is born. And yet, this explanation does not address the second part of her statement, in which she seems to assume that having the child on her knees/lap would enable her *too* to become pregnant in the future. Thus, seeing the phrase as a reflection of normal birthing procedure or of Rachel's desire for children isn't adequate to explain Rachel's words. Perhaps the explanation offered by modern commentators will be better.

#### ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN TEXTS ON WHICH MODERN COMMENTATORS BASE THEIR EXPLANATION

Before we can consider modern commentators' explanation of our phrase, we need to consider three ancient Near Eastern texts to which the commentators will refer. These texts, found at the Hittite city of Hattusas (now Bogazkoy in Turkey) which began to be excavated in 1906, refer to the placing of a newborn on someone's knees/lap. Some of the scholars who analyzed these texts maintain that this act has symbolic significance; according to them, it symbolizes ownership, acceptance into the family, or legitimization. Although these texts are in the Hittite language, they are stories belonging to the Hurrian culture which existed in northwest Iraq, including the area of biblical Haran, in the mid-second millennium BCE. This was the area, and perhaps also the era, that biblical tradition says the patriarchs and matriarchs of Genesis came from.

The first text is a myth called the Song of Ullikummi. When Ullikummi is born to the god Kumarbi (his father), the birth is described as follows: "[the midwives...] brought him to birth, / And the Fate-Goddesses... [lifted (or: took) the child] / [and] they placed him on Kumarbi's knees. / Kumarbi be-  
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gan to rejoice over this son, / and began to fondle him, / and began to give [to the child his] dear name.”<sup>8</sup> Kumarbi decides to call the child Ullikummi, and states that he is destined to battle another god. Then Ullikummi is lifted off of Kumarbi’s knees and placed on the knees of the great god Enlil, whose attention is drawn to the child. Enlil realizes and reiterates the child’s destiny. Finally, the child is taken to where he is to be raised.

We should note several things about this text. First, there is a detailed description of what happens immediately after birth. The attending goddesses *lift up* or *take* the newborn and *place* it on the father’s knees/lap. This supports the view that the newborn was *raised up* and *placed* on someone’s knees rather than *lowered onto* them. The father “rejoices” over it and “fondles” it; he then names the child and describes its future. Second, when the child is placed on Enlil’s knees/lap, Enlil too focuses on the child and declares what its future will be. Only after this happens is the child *then* taken to where he is to be raised; thus in this text (in contrast to the traditional Jewish explanation) placing the child on someone’s knees/lap is not an idiom meaning “he raised it.”

In 1949, Albrecht Goetze, an expert on Hittite texts, wrote that the father’s taking the child on his knees, rejoicing and fondling it “is not meant as play without meaning, it has definite legal implications: the father acknowledges the children as his own.”<sup>9</sup> However, it is hard to see from this text how this act has such symbolic legal significance. Note also that the child is placed on Enlil’s knees/lap as well, and Enlil is not its father.

The second Hittite text is the Story of Appu and His Two Sons. Appu longs for children but does not have them for a long time. Finally, his wife bears him two sons in succession. The births are described as follows: “... Appu’s wife bore a son. The midwife lifted the child up high and gave/cradled (?) it to Appu on his knees. Appu began to rejoice over the child, and began to fondle it lovingly (?), and bestowed on him the sweet name Bad... For the sec[ond time] [the wife of A]ppu... bore a son. The midwife [lif]ted [the child up high], and he bestowed upon it the name Right...”<sup>10</sup>

This text contains several of the same formal components that we noted in the Song of Ullikummi above: the attending woman lifts up the child and places it on the father’s knees/lap; the father rejoices and fondles it; the father names it, and the name relates to the child’s future which he foresees in the

text. We see that the report of the second child's birth omits a few of the formal components present in the first: the midwife is said to lift the child but omits placing him on his father's knees, and the rejoicing and fondling is omitted. Hoffner refers to this as "telescoping" of "standard formulas," something that he says occurs in other texts too.<sup>11</sup>

In this text, as in the Song of Ullikummi, there is no indication that placing the child on Appu's knees is a symbolic, legal acknowledgment of patrimony. In both of these texts, placing the child on a father's or god's knees/lap may be best understood as a stereotypical prelude to the father's or god's focusing on the child to name it and, in connection with that naming or independently of it, to foresee the child's future. This may not reflect real-life birth procedures, but may simply be a traditional part of "birth-of-a-son" scenes in Hittite-Hurrian stories and myths. Along these lines, Richard Onians notes that the expression "it lies on the knees of the gods" is common in Homer. In Greek myths, a person's future is determined by the Fates, goddesses who spin a person's future in the form of a thread; furthermore, in ancient Greece wool was usually spun on the lap or knees. Thus Onians argues that the expression "it lies on the knees of the gods" may mean that the future is still being decided by either the great gods or the Fates.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, these Hittite-Hurrian story-texts appear to see the knees/lap not only as a place where a parent can rejoice over a new child, but more importantly as the place where destiny is foreseen. Both of these texts are different from Job 3:11-12, which appears to describe a true-to-life birth procedure; there, we see no indication whatsoever that the "receiving knees/lap" have any legal or other symbolic function, any more than the parallel "nursing breasts" do.<sup>13</sup>

The final Hittite text is the Story of the Fisherman and His Wife and the Foundling Child. A fisherman whose wife is not able to have children is said to come across a newborn child lying on the ground. The text states: "The fisherman lifted up the child [from the] ground / and began to fondle (?) it, [and] rejoiced [over it (?)] / and placed it on his chest [and] carried [it] away."<sup>14</sup> This story also exhibits two of the formulaic elements we have seen: the lifting up of the child and the father's fondling and rejoicing over it. Hoffner notes that here, instead of the word "knees/lap" which we might expect by analogy with the former two texts, this text uses the Sumerian symbol

meaning “bosom” (i.e., chest). However, in this case it makes sense that the fisherman carries the child away held close to his chest rather than on his knees/lap.<sup>15</sup> Note too that when the fisherman holds the child to his chest, no mention is made of its naming or future destiny. Although this story makes use of a few of the formal elements we have seen in the other two texts, it doesn’t seem to be analogous to them overall.

THE MODERN COMMENTATORS’ VIEW: “GIVING BIRTH ON ONE’S KNEES/LAP” INDICATES ACCEPTANCE OR EVEN FORMAL ADOPTION

Now we can turn to the second possible explanation of the phrase “she will give birth on my knees/lap,” that of many modern commentators. Based on the Hittite texts above, modern commentators generally understand the phrase in Genesis 30:3 as referring to an act of *placing* a newborn on someone’s knees/lap to symbolize ownership, acceptance into the family, or legitimization, or even by extension as a ceremony of formal adoption of a child biologically not one’s own. Speiser comments on Genesis 30:3 as follows: “To place a child on one’s knees is to acknowledge it as one’s own...” and he cites the Story of Appu. He goes on to say, “This act is normally performed by the father. Here, however, it is of primary interest to the adoptive mother who is intent on establishing her legal right to the child.” In other words, *Rachel* wants to be the person upon whose knees/lap the newborn is placed so that the child will thereby be designated *legally* as hers *by adoption*.<sup>16</sup> Speiser understands the two unusual phrases in Genesis 30:3 and their relationship to each other as follows: “let her give birth on my knees/lap” (i.e., I will perform the ceremony to formally adopt the child she bears), “so that I may reproduce through her” (i.e., so that I too will be *deemed* to have reproduced by acquiring the legal rights to her offspring).<sup>17</sup>

Although Speiser’s understanding explains the connection between the two phrases in Genesis 30:3, his view has several serious problems. First of all, we have seen that the Story of Appu (and the other two Hittite texts as well) cannot be used as evidence that placing a newborn on the father’s knees/lap is some sort of symbolic acknowledgement of the child as his own. As stated before, the placing of a newborn on someone’s knees/lap may simply be a traditional element in Hittite-Hurrian myths and stories connected with the foreseeing of the child’s future, rather than a reflection of a real-life birth

procedure *always* performed by the father. Secondly, none of these texts deal with “adoption.”<sup>18</sup> Finally, the idea that this “ceremony” may be performed by a *mother* who is adopting a newborn child is completely unsupported by these texts;<sup>19</sup> indeed, the Hittite texts give no indication that a mother could “adopt” a child at all.

On the other hand, van Seters draws attention to two non-Hittite texts which are later than those discussed above, and which specifically refer to a husband whose wife is childless having children with a slave woman; those children are then said to be the wife’s children in some way. One is a papyrus from Egypt dated around 1100 BCE, a legal document written by a childless wife after her husband’s death. She states that she and her husband had purchased a slave woman with whom the husband had two daughters and a son. The wife states that she has “no son or daughter except them.” The wife now gives the eldest daughter to her (the wife’s) younger brother as a wife, and she (the wife) declares “today I make him a son of mine,” i.e. she adopts him as well (for inheritance purposes). To be sure, this text concerns a wife whose husband has died, and thus as a widow she might be able to do things such as adopting children which she might not have the power to do were her husband still alive. The second text, however, does not have this problem; it is a marriage contract from Nimrud (ancient Calah) in northern Iraq from the mid-600’s BCE. It states that if the wife does not bear sons, the husband will take a handmaid, and the sons she bears will be “as her sons,” i.e. they will be considered hers. These texts indicate that a wife could indeed be considered in some way to lay legal claim to children or perhaps even formally adopt them. However, neither of these texts refers to a ceremony involving someone’s knees/lap; a childless woman’s adoption of a child (or at least the informal ascription of a child to her) seems to be legally effected by a declaration alone, such as “I have no son or daughter except them,” “today I make him a son of mine,” or “they shall be as my sons.”<sup>20</sup>

#### ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE “ADOPTION” EXPLANATION

We see, therefore, that in the ancient Near East a childless woman might indeed be able to adopt a child, or at least have a child ascribed to her in some way. However, Tigay argues that this is not what “she will give birth on

my knees/lap” refers to. First, he points out that the cross-cultural examples of placing a newborn on someone’s knees “almost always” specify that the knees are those of the natural parent or grandparent. Only in the Story of the Fisherman does “placing on the lap occur in an apparently adoptive context, but even there it is not clear that the ceremony is part of the adoption.” However, as we have seen, it is not clear in that story that there is any “ceremony” at all, much less adoption. The fisherman simply picks up the child, and holding it to his chest (not on his lap), he takes it home and the couple raises it as their own. As a matter of fact, the continuation of the story relates that when the fisherman gets home, he tells his wife to shut herself up in her room and scream, so that the townspeople will assume that she *herself* is having a baby! This would obviate the need for any formal adoption ceremony, at least one done in the presence of others.<sup>21</sup>

Secondly, Tigay points out that there *is* one clear adoption ceremony in the Bible. In Genesis 48:5-6, Jacob says to Joseph: *Now, your two sons... shall be mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine no less than Reuben and Simeon* (NJPS 1999). This sounds almost exactly like the statements made in the Egyptian text discussed above. In addition, this text mentions that the adopted sons are in some way close to someone’s knees/lap; v. 12 says “Joseph took his sons out *mei'im* his knees.” Speiser and Sarna understand this to mean “from off of Jacob’s knees/lap,” and claim this shows that the children were placed on Jacob’s knees/lap as part of the ceremony.<sup>22</sup> However, this would be the *only* instance we have seen that the knees/lap are involved in such a ceremony. Furthermore, if the children were on Jacob’s lap, it is strange that the text says *vayotzay yosef 'otam* [Joseph took them out]. Perhaps for this reason, Tigay understands v. 12 to mean “Joseph took them out from *between* his [Jacob’s] knees,” and since the sons were not *on* his knees, Tigay contends this was *not* connected with the adoption.

The chronology and choreography in this story present many difficulties; for example, it appears that the mention of the “knees” in v. 12 is connected *not* with Jacob’s *adoption* of Ephraim and Manasseh in vv. 3-7 but with his *blessing* of them in vv. 8-20. At any rate, Speiser, Sarna and Tigay all assume that in v. 12 the word *mei'im* means “from” or “from between,” and that “his” refers to Jacob. However, the phrase is ambiguous on both counts. The word *mei'im* means either “from” or “from (beside) a place;”<sup>23</sup> thus, the



phrase could mean either “from *off of* his knees/lap” or “from *beside* his knees/lap” (or even conceivably “from *between*” them). In addition, “his” could just as easily be referring to Joseph’s knees as to Jacob’s.

With all of these variables, we can see that other possible explanations of this chapter may well exist that would not require us to see Ephraim and Manasseh sitting on Jacob’s knees/lap as part of the adoption. For example, in line with the meaning “from *beside* his knees,” we might consider Onkelos’ translation *min kodamohi* [from in front of him / from before him]. Especially if “him” in this verse refers to Joseph rather than Jacob, the text might be describing the boys as standing in front of Joseph. In any case, Jacob’s knees/lap might not be involved in the adoption, which would consist solely of a verbal declaration. Finally, we should note that this story deals with older children and has nothing at all to do with birth, a fact which drives a further wedge between this story and the phrase “being *born* on someone’s knees/lap” as indicative of adoption.

#### DO THE MATRIARCHS’ STORIES SUPPORT THE IDEA OF ADOPTION?

Tigay maintains that all indications in the biblical text that Bilhah’s and Zilpah’s children in some way belong to Rachel and Leah do not need to be explained by formal adoption; they can be explained just as well by the fact that the wives own their handmaids. First, both wives make statements indicating that the children are in some sense ascribed to them: Leah implies this by saying [*w*]omen will deem me fortunate (NJPS 1999) in Genesis 30:13, and Rachel explicitly says *God... has given me a son* in Genesis 30:6. But Tigay argues that the latter statement might just as well be based on Rachel’s ownership of Bilhah, and not on formal adoption of the children, much less on the idea that the handmaids’ children are actually considered to have been borne by the wives (the same is true for Leah). Second, Tigay also notes that in Genesis the handmaids’ children are usually described and counted separately as their own (for Sarah, Genesis 21:10, 13; for Rachel and Leah, Genesis 33:2, 6-7; 35:23-26). Also, Zilpah’s children always follow Leah’s in these lists, and Bilhah’s always follow Rachel’s. Again it seems simplest to explain this as due to the wives’ ownership of their handmaids and not due to formal adoption. Finally, Tigay notes that the handmaids’ children share in

Jacob's estate, but his wives did not need to adopt them for this to happen; it is true simply because they are his (by handmaids who belong to his wives and who permitted him to sire children with them).<sup>24</sup>

In addition to Tigay's arguments, I would note that the wives apparently continue to "own" their handmaids even after giving them to their husbands.<sup>25</sup> In addition, although Rachel names Bilhah's sons Dan and Naphtali, and Leah names Zilpah's sons Gad and Asher (Genesis 30:6-13), the right to name a child does not necessarily imply that the wife adopted it; yet again, the wives may have that right simply because the handmaids belong to them. In addition, if "she will give birth on my knees/lap" is assumed to be *understood* in Genesis 16:2 (i.e., its absence is a case of "telescoping" of a two-part formula) and thus Sarah is proposing that she will adopt Hagar's child, then it is remarkable that as the story develops, Sarah clearly does *not* consider Ishmael to be her child.

For all of these reasons, we cannot firmly state that according to the Hebrew Bible the handmaids' children are either formally adopted or even otherwise considered solely as the children of Jacob's wives. Thus, the explanation of this phrase proposed by modern biblical commentators is unsatisfactory. We need to consider whether there might be another way of explaining it.

#### A POSSIBLE ORIGIN FOR THE PHRASE "SHE WILL GIVE BIRTH ON(TO) MY KNEES/LAP"

In the Introduction, I mentioned Sforno's psycho-physiological explanation for the expression "I will be built from/through my handmaid:" by means of the husband's and the handmaid's success in producing a child, the wife's "jealousy" will be awakened, and this will give her the power to become pregnant herself. I suggested that the people of that time may have believed that if a childless woman's handmaid (who is her property) became pregnant by means of the woman's husband, this in some mysterious way had the effect of "building" the fertility of the childless woman; perhaps originally this had been thought of as a form of sympathetic magic. But if so, there must have been a magical *procedure* for transferring the fertility from woman to woman.

We have seen that in biblical times, a child was placed on someone's knees/lap immediately after birth. Tigay suggests that people may have be-

lieved that placing a newborn child on the knees/lap of *any* childless woman (close to her own abdomen and vagina) immediately after it was born may have had a sympathetic magic-like effect of transferring fertility to the childless woman.<sup>26</sup> In other words, the phrase “she will bear on(to) my knees/lap” might have originally referred literally to such a procedure.

Seeing the phrase in this way would explain the connection between the two phrases in Genesis 30:3. Rachel says that by her handmaid “giving birth onto my knees/lap,” I *too*, like *Leah*<sup>27</sup>, will be rendered able to get pregnant from/through my handmaid’s act. If this explanation is correct, then the placing of Bilhah’s newborn child on *Rachel’s* knees/lap is the *procedure* which will result in Rachel being rendered able to get pregnant herself. This explanation also avoids the problems we noted with the modern commentators’ explanation; it frees us from being required to see the placing of the newborn onto Rachel’s knees/lap as a ceremony in which she formally adopts the child, or even as a symbolic recognition that it “belongs” exclusively to her.

However, this explanation has at least one problem. The text in Genesis 30 gives no indication that it considers the procedure referred to in this phrase to be magical. As in the story of Sarah in Genesis 16,<sup>28</sup> the text clearly sees Rachel’s fertility as the result of God’s personal intervention rather than anything else (cf. Genesis 30:22). The text may also see the wives’ restored fertility as a reward for their magnanimous actions, as Rashi comments on Genesis 16:2 and 30:3 (cf. Leah’s words in Genesis 30:18). The text must therefore see our phrase as a fossilized *expression* having a *figurative* meaning which is no longer connected with its magical origins. What might that meaning be?

#### HELP FROM GENESIS 50:23

We now need to consider the last of the verses cited by Luzzatto, the only other place in the Hebrew Bible where the phrase “be born on someone’s knees/lap” appears: Genesis 50:23. The commentators we have considered explain this phrase in the same way they explain it in Genesis 30:3. For the traditional Jewish commentators, it means that Joseph raised (or at least was involved in the raising of) the children. For the modern commentators, it

means that Joseph performed the ceremony that either accepted the children into the family, or even signified his formal adoption of them.

Before we examine whether either of these meanings makes sense in this verse, we must first explicitly recognize what Sarna, alone among all the commentators we have considered, recognizes implicitly: the two halves of the verse are a couplet which has parallel phrases arranged chiasmatically (the first part of the first line is parallel to the last part of the last line, and the last part of the first line is parallel to the first part of the last line):<sup>29</sup>

*And Joseph saw to [ra'ah le] Ephraim a third generation;*

*Also the children of Machir son of Manasseh were born on Joseph's knees.*

If we look at the verse in this way, *Ephraim's third generation* (i.e., Ephraim's grandchildren) is parallel to *Machir son of Manasseh's children*, which refers to Manasseh's grandchildren.<sup>30</sup> Thus "were born on Joseph's knees" must be parallel to "and he Joseph saw to" [*vayar' yosef le...*].<sup>31</sup> I believe that any explanation of this verse must take account of and be consistent with this structure.

If the traditional Jewish commentators' view is correct, then *and Joseph saw to...* must also be an idiom meaning "raised (or *oversaw* the raising of) the children." However, the expression "*ra'ah le*-someone" never has the meaning to "oversee" a child's upbringing elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Furthermore, if this *were* the correct explanation, why would Joseph have raised both Ephraim's and Manasseh's *grandchildren*?

As to the modern commentators, Speiser explains the phrase, "That is, in time for Joseph to accept them formally into his family;"<sup>32</sup> Tigay expresses a similar view. But these modern commentators cannot seriously be maintaining that, in addition to the child's father, the senior male member of a family had to formally "accept" every child born into his extended family by having it placed on his knees/lap at birth! On the other hand, van Seters proposes that an adoption ceremony is meant; he argues that this verse "can only mean that they [Machir's children] were given tribal status along with Ephraim and Manasseh..." i.e. that Joseph *adopted* them as he did Ephraim and Manasseh.<sup>33</sup> We have shown that there is no clear evidence for seeing this phrase as indicating an adoption ceremony. However, if van Seters' explanation is true,

it is strange that Machir's *children* are adopted and not Machir himself; also, neither Machir nor his children are counted as a separate tribe in the lists of the tribes of Israel.<sup>34</sup>

At any rate, the parallel, chiasmic structure of the verse does not fit well with either of these modern explanations any more than it did with the traditional Jewish one. Translating the phrase "he formally accepted" the children of Machir into the family would require us to understand the words *ra'ah le...* to mean the same thing, a meaning for which no evidence exists in biblical Hebrew. Translating the phrase "he adopted" the children of Machir similarly requires us to understand the words *ra'ah le...* in the same way, namely that Joseph adopted Ephraim's "third generation" as well, a meaning even more unlikely than any of those we have yet considered. Indeed, why would Joseph have formally adopted his unnamed great-grandchildren?<sup>35</sup>

There is, in fact, another biblical verse that uses the construction "see to someone" [*ra'ah le-X*], namely Psalm 128:6: *ure'ay vanim levanecha shalom 'al yisra'el* [*And live to see your children's children. May all be well with Israel!* (NJPS 1999)]. In this verse, "see" is used in the sense of "be alive long enough to see," and "to" means "belonging to," i.e. "And may you live long enough to see children belonging to your children." This is exactly analogous in construction to the first phrase of Genesis 50:23, the meaning of which would then be "And Joseph saw, *belonging* to Ephraim, a third generation." If the first phrase of Psalm 128:6 has the meaning of living long enough to be able to see your grandchildren, then it is probable that the first line of Genesis 50:23 means Joseph lived long enough to see his great-grandchildren.<sup>36</sup>

Although he doesn't cite the verse in Psalms, Sarna translates the verse this way; he writes that although the phrase "born on someone's knees" usually implies legitimization of progeny, the parallelism in this verse suggests that a figurative use of this phrase is intended.<sup>37</sup> But he doesn't indicate what, in his opinion, that might be. I believe that Onkelos' translation of "*mei'im* his knees" in Genesis 48:12 as "from in front of him," which I cited above, can help us here. I would suggest that the author of Genesis 50:23 may be using the phrase "born on Joseph's knees/lap" in the figurative sense of being born

“in front of Joseph:” i.e., *in Joseph’s presence*, as a way of saying “while he was still alive.”

This explanation provides a key to understanding how the text uses the phrase “she will give birth on my knees/lap” in Genesis 30:3. Could this phrase also in some way be referring to Rachel’s presence?

#### THE MEANING OF “SHE WILL GIVE BIRTH ONTO MY KNEES/LAP”

I previously raised the issue of Rachel’s inability to have even one child and her desperate longing to do so. At first glance, Rachel’s use of the two phrases in Genesis 30:3 and the acts (giving her handmaid to Jacob, and her handmaid “giving birth onto her knees/lap”) and hope (being able to have her own biological children) connected with them seem to be specifically connected with what has up to now been denied her by God: her own fertility, children of her own, the status of motherhood. It is remarkable, however, that although Leah uses neither of these two phrases, she does exactly the same thing as Rachel and receives the same reward from God: she gives her handmaid to Jacob, and God rewards her by restoring her fertility (see Genesis 30:9, 18). Since the act of giving the handmaid to her husband and the reward are the same in *both* their cases, we can presume that the text assumes the idea of the handmaid’s “giving birth onto her knees/lap” *also* applies in Leah’s case. But Leah already has given birth to four children, so the giving of Zilpah to Jacob cannot be for the purpose of allowing Leah to *finally* become fertile and become a mother. The biblical text represents Leah and Rachel as both wanting (more) children, but not because they long to be mothers. I contend that Genesis 30 sees both Leah’s and Rachel’s actions as having the same primary goal: to enable the wife to fulfill her *role of providing her husband with children*, when she herself isn’t *currently* able to do so.

But if the acts and the reward are the same in both cases, why are the two phrases used only in Rachel’s case? As we have shown, the difference between Rachel’s and Leah’s situations cannot explain why the two phrases are used specifically in Rachel’s case and not in Leah’s. I suggest that the text may not use the two phrases in Leah’s case simply because the text does not record a “speech” by Leah to Jacob; it just records what she did. Perhaps,

having used the phrases as the core of a “speech” by Rachel in her more dramatic case, the text felt no need to provide a similar “speech” for Leah; the reader would have understood that Leah probably made a similar “speech” as well. In the eyes of the text, the action, the hope and the phrases connected with them apply equally whether the wife has ever borne children before or not.

I suggest that, just as in Genesis 50:23, the phrase in Genesis 30:3 is used by the text to mean that the handmaid will bear a child to the husband *before me*, e.g. *in my presence*. What does this imply? Since the wife would perform the act herself if she could, the fact that it is done by her property and in her presence means that her handmaid is acting *as an extension of her*, i.e. *in her place*. Some might call this a surrogacy procedure, with the handmaid serving as the wife’s surrogate. However, it is important to recognize that the most common understanding of “surrogacy” today is that the child belongs solely to the wife in all legal, social and even genetic respects, not to the birth-mother. In Genesis, however, the children *are* considered to be the birth-mother’s children; they are *not* considered to belong totally to the wife as though she bore them, nor are they considered to be hers by adoption. They are considered to be *associated* with the wife because they were produced at her suggestion and by her property, *not* with the goal of having (more) children *for herself* but in an effort to fulfill her role vis-à-vis her husband. She hopes that God will reward her for this by “building” her fertility too.

#### SUMMARY: THE EVOLUTION OF A PHRASE

The phrase “she will give birth on(to) my knees/lap” originated from the normal birthing procedure in ancient times. It may have originally referred to a sympathetic magic procedure whereby a newborn was placed on the knees/lap of a childless woman, perhaps specifically the newborn of a husband and his childless wife’s handmaid, to transfer fertility to the childless wife. Although we have only one instance of the phrase in connection with actual birth and it is therefore impossible to be sure, the phrase may have traditionally been linked with the following phrase “I will be built from/through her” to indicate that placing the newborn on the knees/lap of

the childless wife was the *procedure* by which she would be rendered able to get pregnant herself.

However, the phrase had lost its magical association by the time it is used in Genesis 30:3. The text understands the phrase as an idiom meaning “she will give birth *before me/in my presence*, implying that she, my property, will allow me to fulfill my role of bearing my husband children (which I personally am unable to do at this time) by functioning as an extension of me. If the two phrases in Genesis 30:3 were originally linked together, then the absence of the first phrase in the story of Sarah in Genesis 16:2 might be a case of “telescoping,” or shortening a longer traditional formulaic text. Alternatively, the linkage may have come to be considered less necessary by the tradition when the magical meaning was no longer even thought of.

Finally, we see evidence of a further broadening of the phrase’s meaning in Genesis 50:23; “in someone’s presence” is completely detached from the context of birth, and is used as a way of saying “while someone was present,” meaning “during his lifetime.”<sup>38</sup>

#### NOTES

1. All translations of biblical verses are mine unless noted otherwise. I translate the word *birkai* as “my knees/lap,” since the word “knees” is sometimes used to mean what we mean in English by the word “lap.”
2. E. Landau, “What Does ‘I Will Be Built From/Through Her’ in Genesis 16:2 and Genesis 30:3 Mean?” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 48:1 (2020) pp. 40-56. As noted there, many of the traditional Jewish commentators assume this meaning but never offer support for it.
3. M. Aberbach and B. Grossfield, *Targum Onkelos to Genesis: A Critical Analysis Together With an English Translation of the Text* (Denver: KTAV Publishing House, 1982) pp. 178-179.
4. S.D. Luzzatto (SHaDaL), *The Book of Genesis - A Commentary* translated by Daniel A. Klein (Northvale, NJ and Jerusalem: Jason Aronson Inc., 1998) p. 276.
5. See K. McGeough, “Birth Bricks, Potter’s Wheels and Exodus 1,16,” *Biblica* 87:3 (2006) pp. 305-318.
6. Jeffrey Tigay sees both Job 3:12 and Genesis 30:3 the same way as Metzudat David and Malbim. However, it seems more likely to me that immediately after being born, the infant was *raised and placed onto* someone’s knees/lap; if the mother gave birth straddling someone else’s knees and the baby was caught and *lowered* onto those knees, the person whom the mother was straddling would be drenched with the blood and fluids that emerge with the child. It is even harder to imagine that the *father* would have been in that position. See J. Tigay, “Adoption” *Encyclopedia Judaica* vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972) col. 298-299.
7. Hermann Gunkel suggested that the phrase “give birth on my knees/lap” was meant literally; in what he termed “a barbaric act,” the handmaid actually sat on the wife’s lap, leaning back against her, while giving birth. Although Gunkel’s suggestion cannot be ruled out, it does seem



fairly “barbaric” and there is no other evidence for it. See H. Gunkel, *Genesis*, third edition, original in German in 1910, translated by Mark E. Biddle (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), p. 325.

8. H. G. Güterbock, “The Song of Ullikummi” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 5:4 (1951) pp. 135-161. Güterbock’s English translation places the verbs at the end of each phrase; I have changed this to make it more readable. The square brackets indicate words that are not clear on the tablets, but are supplied by the researcher based on the context or the language contained in other similar texts. A question mark (which we shall encounter in the Story of Appu below) indicates a word whose meaning the researcher isn’t sure of.

9. A. Goetze, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 69:3 (1949), p. 180. Harry Hoffner also writes that while the placing of the child on the father’s knees is doubtless a practical act, it also “may have symbolic overtones of official recognition as legitimate son and heir.” In addition to the three Hittite texts we are considering, he also cites an “unpublished birth ritual” and a passage in the Iliad. See H.A. Hoffner, “Birth and Name-Giving in Hittite Texts” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 27:3 (1968) pp. 198-203.

10. J. Friedrich, “Churritische Märchen und Sagen in hethitischer Sprache,” *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie*, Neue Folge vol. 15 (49) (1950), pp. 213-255. This is my English translation of Johannes Friedrich’s German translation. See Note 8 regarding the meaning of the brackets and question marks.

11. Hoffner, *op. cit.*

12. R. B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), pp. 303-309.

13. There are other texts in which the description of a child sitting on a superior party’s knees/lap can be seen as symbolic, but in a different way than Goetze and Hoffner have argued. The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary cites three texts in which such a description is used to indicate the concern, protection or authority which that superior party grants to a child, especially to a child who is or will become king. One such text refers to “my eldest son, the one whom I raised on my lap.” A second text says, “you were a small child, Assurbanipal, when you used to sit on the lap of Sharrat Ninua” (a goddess). Finally, “your son and grandson will exercise kingship on the lap of Ninurta” (a goddess). These uses seem to tie the image of a child sitting on an adult’s lap, known to all of us as an image of joy and love, to being under a superior’s (especially a god’s or goddess’) care and/or drawing authority from him/her. This may well be a good explanation for the use of the image in Isaiah 66:12. Note, however, that none of these texts refer to a newborn being placed on someone’s knees/lap *at birth*. See I. J. Gelb et. al., editors, *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1965), s.v. *birku* pp. 256-7.

14. Friedrich, *op. cit.* Again, this is my English translation of Friedrich’s German translation.

15. Hoffner, *op. cit.* Whether “bosom” is intended to be a substitute for the formulaic “knees/lap” here, as Hoffner believes, is not completely clear. Hoffner also states the semantic range of the Sumerian symbol “bosom” is similar to that of the Hebrew *cheiq*, and based on this argues that “[i]t is possible to add Ruth 4:16 to the group of Old Testament passages in which placing a child on one’s knees symbolizes recognition as a legitimate child and heir...” I would suggest that in Ruth 4:16, “Naomi took the child and held it to her bosom” might best be understood as

“she hugged it close;” like placing a child on one’s lap, this is a symbol of love and care which fits with the verse’s continuation that “She became its foster mother” (NJPS 1999).

16. E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1964) pp. 228-233.

17. Speiser, *ibid.*, pp. 116-121. See Landau, *op. cit.* for a possibly better alternative to Speiser’s understanding of “so that I may reproduce through her.” Nahum Sarna agrees with Speiser, writing that the phrase indicates a symbolic gesture of parenthood or adoption widely attested in Near Eastern sources, especially Hittite, as well as in the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome. However, the only specific texts I have seen cited by scholars in support of this view are the three Hittite texts I have referred to, and those referred to by Hoffner in Note 9. See N. M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989) pp. 207-208.

18. Similarly, neither of the two Hurrian adoption contracts from Nuzi that I discussed in my previous article make any reference to placing the adopted son on the adopting father’s knees/lap. To be fair, though, the contracts might not make explicit reference to such a ceremony; additionally, such a ceremony may not have been performed because the son being adopted was not a newborn. See Landau, *op. cit.*

19. Thorkild Jacobsen cites a theory that goddesses were sometimes considered to have *adopted* the Mesopotamian kings, based on statements that these rulers were nourished with the milk of some goddess or placed on her lap. Jacobsen comments that such acts don’t signify adoption elsewhere in Sumero-Akkadian literature. As I have contended above, he writes that being placed on the knees/lap of a goddess signifies divine protection. See T. Jacobsen, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 2:2 (1943) pp. 119-121.

20. J. van Seters, “The Problem of Childlessness in Near Eastern Law and the Patriarchs of Israel” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 87:4 (1968) pp. 401-408. By the way, the second document also provides that if the husband does have a child with a handmaid, “she [the wife] shall not curse, strike, nor be furious and treat her [the handmaid] improperly.” This is another text which shows that the wife’s possible resentment toward the handmaid (cf. Genesis 16:6) was a recognized issue in the ancient Near East (see Landau, *op. cit.* for another example).

21. See Friedrich, *op. cit.*

22. Speiser, *op. cit.*, p. 355 holds that the boys being on Jacob’s knees/lap is part of the adoption ceremony. Sarna, *op. cit.*, p. 327, however, writes that it a symbolic gesture betokening acceptance and legitimation as son and heir.

23. F. Brown, S. R. Driver and C. Briggs (eds.), *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, reprinted from the 1906 edition), s.v. *’im* (“BDB”). BDB cites our phrase (without translating it) as an example of the meaning “from a place,” but the other examples cited seem best translated as “from *beside* (next to) that place” (e.g., Exodus 21:14 and I Samuel 20:34).

24. Tigay, *op. cit.*, references a similar situation attested in the Law Code of Hamurabi, paragraphs 170-1. See Landau, *op. cit.* for a discussion of these paragraphs.

25. Genesis 30:4 states that Rachel gave her handmaid Bilhah to Jacob “as a wife” [*le’ishah*]; however in Genesis 32:23 and subsequently, Bilhah is still called a handmaid or a concubine! Either there is some difference of opinion as to Bilhah’s status, or her exact legal status may not have been so important to the biblical text, which called her Jacob’s “wife” (*’ishah*: literally, “woman”) simply to indicate that Rachel had granted him the right to sleep with her, or Bilhah

was considered both Rachel's handmaid and Jacob's wife (in the sense of "concubine") simultaneously.

26. Tigay, *ibid.*

27. Exactly who Rachel is thinking of in her use of the word "too" is not totally clear. Rashi says that she is referring to Sarah; by using Sarah's procedure, Rachel hopes to become pregnant "too," i.e. like Sarah did. Sforno maintains that Rachel is referring to Leah, hoping to become pregnant like Leah; this is supported by the introductory verses in Genesis 30:1-2. As a third possibility, I would point out that the internal structure of v. 3 focuses on *Bilhah*. Rachel tells Jacob, "Take Bilhah, *she* will give birth on(to) my knees/ lap, and I *too* will become pregnant *through her*." Thus Rachel might be thinking of Bilhah.

28. See Landau, *op. cit.*

29. See Sama, *op. cit.*, p. 351. Even if the verse is not actually poetry but prose, it clearly has a parallelistic and chiasmic structure.

30. The Binyan Shlomo (Rabbi Shlomo Hachohen, Vilna, 1828-1905) supports this reading; he explains the use of the word "also" as implying that Joseph saw the same number of generations of both Ephraim and Manasseh. On the other hand, there are commentators who do not see the number of generations referred to as the same. For example, the Bekhor Shor (France, 12<sup>th</sup> century) writes that Ephraim's *great*-grandchildren are meant ("the *children* of his third generation"), to fulfill Jacob's words that Ephraim would be greater than Manasseh (Genesis 48:19). In either case, though, the two phrases are parallel in that they use the paired names Ephraim and Manasseh (cf. Genesis 48:20) and give a number of generations for each.

31. Despite the fact that "to" and "Ephraim" are part of the same word, I place the name Ephraim in the second part of the first half of my translation to emphasize the parallel between "Ephraim's third generation" and "Machir son of Manasseh's children."

32. Speiser, *op. cit.*, pp. 374-376.

33. van Seters, John, *Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis* (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) p. 324.

34. Tigay, *op. cit.*, makes a similar point. Sama, *op. cit.*, p. 351, comments that Machir was the most important of the clans of Manasseh. Perhaps it is for this reason that the couplet uses Machir's name in the phrase which is parallel to the designation of Ephraim's grandchildren.

35. We saw two other possible meanings reflected in the ancient Near Eastern texts that we considered. The placing of a child onto someone's knees/lap was either a prelude to that person's (or god's) naming them and/or foreseeing their future at birth, or was symbolic of the protection and authority transferred to the child by a superior party. Neither of these meanings makes sense for Machir's children as opposed to all of Joseph's other great-grandchildren, nor could they be a possible meaning of the Hebrew phrase *ra'ah le...*

36. This was suggested by Radak.

37. Sama, *op. cit.*, p. 351.

38. A similar broadening of a phrase relating to "presence" from having a literal meaning in a specific context to having a figurative one in a more general context can be seen in the English expression that something happened "on my watch." This expression originated in the military and was literally meant, but it was later broadened to mean that whatever occurred happened when I was *present and in charge*.



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