

Curse to Co-creation: Religious Models of Labour Pain

Until the nineteenth century when labour pain became a technical problem to be solved, such pain was given religious meaning. Christian understandings of labour pain have long been based in interpretations of key Biblical texts, beginning with Genesis 3:16 and continuing with New Testament texts, which are understood to be commentary to this primary text. This article examines the four major spiritual models of labour pain that stem from these interpretations—curse of Eve, salvific, growth and perfectionist—and charts their rise and fall. The models are not distinct but intertwine and affect each other over time. The curse model—labour pain as punishment for Eve’s disobedience—was not used on its own but was most often paired with the salvation model or growth model so that the punishment of Eve was healing or generative. Salvation and growth intertwine as well in some understandings, as a woman’s spiritual and emotional growth lead to her active role in salvation history. The perfectionist model turns the curse model on its head, as it strives for a prelapsarian state in which women will not suffer the curse of Eve. Perfectionism in this sense is a belief that one can return, in this world, to a perfect union with God, a form of divinization. In conclusion, the four models are seen to have adapted to the secular transformation of pregnancy and labour, offering a potential model comingling pain and pleasure, spirit and body.

Until the advent of anaesthetics in the delivery room in the nineteenth century, labour pain was assumed and given religious meaning. Anaesthetics, and later psychoprophylaxis, however, complicated the question of labour pain. Pain became a psychological or physiological issue rather than a religious one. Alternative methods of birthing outside the medicalized model initiated new religious models, particularly a perfectionist model that claimed women could return to a prelapsarian state in which pain was not part of labour. This article examines the four major spiritual models of labour pain—curse of Eve,

salvific, growth, and perfectionist—in the Western Christian context, with the aim of understanding how these interpretations intertwine and alter over time.

The medicalization of childbirth in the nineteenth century has been studied in depth, and I will not linger upon it here. Religious voices of the day did not fight much to keep the religious meaning of birth. The Catholic Church itself rejected the religious aspect of birth as it put in place prohibitions against sisters in nursing orders and grew suspicious of midwives, which left the field open to the secularizing influence of the medical profession (Martin). Protestants equally turned birth over to doctors and hospitals. The language of pain changed as it secularized; it was seen as a treatable dysfunction and a technical problem to be solved.

Curse of Eve

“To the woman he said
 ‘I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;
 in pain you will bring forth children.’”
 Genesis 3:16 (NRSV)

Western Christian understandings of pain in childbirth are tied primarily to readings of Genesis 3:16. This passage has been commonly understood to explain pain during birth as payment for original sin—Eve’s punishment for disobeying God. Since Eve led Adam into sin, it was judged that her punishment would be worse than his, which was toiling in the fields (“cursed is the ground because of you / In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life” [Genesis 3:17]). However, Biblical scholars have noted that the above translation of Genesis 3:16 is problematic. A better translation might be “I will greatly increase your toils and pregnancies / Along with travail shall you beget children” (Meyers 105 and 108). In this translation, the pain is not physical but psychological, and the suffering refers not to the act of childbirth itself but to the whole range of childbearing, from conception through parenting. This is the pain referred to throughout the Bible when the term “*issabon*” is used—one which Iaian Provan notes may also include economic hardship and worry. Biblical scholars have accepted this wider interpretation of Genesis, yet in popular belief, the pain of labour continues to be understood as payment for sin. Although the “Eve’s curse” interpretation may seem purely negative at first glance, the punitive model has the advantage of removing guilt and fear of the afterlife. Pain is seen as just and retributive (Glücklich 17).

Throughout Western Christianity until the nineteenth century, most women accepted labour pains as part of Eve’s curse, but added other, more positive, interpretations to this. Motherhood in the Early Church and Middle Ages

was centred on two characteristics: suffering and nurturing. The suffering was the ongoing emotional pain throughout the life of a mother, just as the above Biblical commentators emphasize. Pain in childbirth was not excluded, however, and the traditional curse interpretation of Genesis 3:16 is reflected in the medieval understanding of Mary's birthing Christ. Jesus's birth echoes the first birth, Eve from Adam; both are supernatural, painless and leave no mark. Jerome (420 CE), John Chrysostom (407 CE) and others believed that Mary did not suffer in childbirth because she was free of the original sin, which they read into Genesis 3:16. All other women must submit to this punishment, and in submitting, they can purify their souls.

It is indicative of the strength of the curse model that when Dr. James Simpson introduced chloroform into the delivery room in 1846, he felt the need to answer religious critics with his own interpretations of the Bible; he traded in the word "sorrow" in Genesis 3:16 for "labour" as we have seen done previously. Dr. Simpson published a pamphlet in 1847 on the subject of religious objections to chloroform, but no real debate ensued (Shoepflin). As the understanding of labour pain changed in the nineteenth century, the curse model has largely disappeared (Corretti and Desai 2018). Christian authors bring it up only to dismiss it. One Christian midwife I interviewed dismissed the interpretation to her clients; she replaced it with one of opportunity to trust in God and strengthen that relationship.

Salvific

"When a woman is in labour, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world." (John 16:21)

Labour pains can be understood as punitive and healing simultaneously, as we see with the mixing of Eve's curse and the salvation motif. Ariel Glucklich notes the following: "In religious literature, pain that is conceptualized as a problem (punishment) is experienced as a decentralizing threat to the telic center (ego). In contrast, pain that is conceptualized as a solution (medicine) assumes a higher telos than ego and is centralized or reinforced by the sacrifice of the ego" (61). Creative co-suffering with Christ, often linked to the John passage above, was a way for women to experience their labour pain as a solution. The salvation motif mixed the language of Eve's curse with co-suffering with Christ, as in this seventeenth century French prayer:

In my confinement, strengthen my heart to endure the pains that come therewith, and let me accept them as the consequence of your judgment upon our sex, for the sin of the first woman. In view of that curse ... may I suffer the cruelest pangs with joy, and may I join them with the suffering of your Son upon the cross ... If it is your will that I die in my confinement, may I adore it, bless it and submit to it (qtd, in Gélis 155).

While many women related directly to Christ in his patient suffering for others, others related to Mary as a mother in pain. The fourteenth-century mystic, Birgitta of Sweden, experienced pain through multiple pregnancies and births, which she describes in her *Revelations*. In one mystical vision, in which she is granted the wish of seeing Mary give birth, Birgitta emphasizes the painlessness of the birth, and Mary reassures her of this. Even though Mary did not feel pain in childbirth, she relates Christ's death to that very pain, telling Birgitta: "I was like a woman giving birth who shakes in every limb of her body after delivery. Although she can scarcely breathe due to pain, she still rejoices inwardly as much as she can because she knows the child she has given birth to will never return to the same painful ordeal he has just left" (Book 7:21).

Mary may not have suffered in labour, but she understands the pain as she shared it in Christ's death, when she became the mother of salvation. This theology is not new to Birgitta; it is found as early as Rupert of Deutz (1135 CE). In one thirteenth-century English poem, Christ on the cross explicitly tells his mother that "now at last you must learn / what pain they suffer who bear children" (qtd in. Neff 268). Women, thus, could identify with Mary's birthing pains at the crucifixion, relying on Mary's understanding of their pain, and pray to her for an easy labour. Mary's birth pains at the crucifixion could then be linked to women identifying their own labour pains with Christ on the cross so that they share with him a role in salvation through suffering.

Over time, the curse motif was largely replaced with this salvific one. In the twentieth century, Catholic theology struggled with the meaning of labour pain in light of modern medicine. The curse of Eve argument was rejected and replaced with arguments reinforcing the role of mothers in the home and elevating their sacrifice. In a 1956 address on the subject of natural childbirth, Pope Pius XII argued for the benefits of psychoprophylaxis—a method of preparing women psychologically for anaesthetic-free labour. He tackled Genesis directly and argued that God did not forbid "mothers to make use of means which render childbirth easier and less painful" (44). He also distanced himself from the perfectionist position by noting that some pain was inevitable. The pope reminded his audience that suffering is not always negative and that mothers can "show that suffering can be a source of good, if she bears it with God and in obedience to His will." The meaning of suffering is not spelled out

here, but it is linked to the suffering of Christ and great heroes. That pain can have positive meaning is in line with a theology of vicarious or expiatory suffering which flourished between World War I and Vatican II council (1918-1962). This theology was popular in France and the United States, as theologians and mystics, in particular victim souls, struggled with the meaning of pain in light of the tragedies of the World Wars and growing scientific explanations for pain. The victim souls, who were believed to have been chosen by God to suffer terrible physical pain in order to save others' souls, were largely women. Women could offer up suffering, whether in illness or labour, as part of their nurturing roles.

The salvific motif has been problematized as sadomasochistic and antifeminist, yet it continues in many Christian circles. A new iteration of this motif is the co-creation motif. As women suffer in labour, they create with the suffering Christ, and birth a graced, divinized humanity (Cullinan 103). In less explicitly salvific language, women repeatedly speak of co-creating with God or of feeling at one with the creative powers of the universe.

Growth

“Yet she will be saved through childbearing,
provided they continue in faith and love and
holiness, with modesty.” (1 Timothy 2:15)

This confusing and pseudepigraphal Pauline text is one of the early references to Genesis 3. It is used to argue for salvific or expiatory pain, but it can also be used to argue for the growth model. There are three major interpretations of this text: theological (salvific), figurative, and physical (growth). In the theological or salvific interpretation, women are saved through childbearing and other maternal activity. The author of the pastoral epistles expands upon Genesis so that childbirth is not only punishment but also part of women's redemption—based on a vision of the world in which their activities are relegated to the household and centred on childbearing (Solevag). Related to this is the figurative interpretation: Mary has saved us through birthing Christ. This interpretation is found in Ambrose of Milan (397 CE) (Reuling 89), although it is considered a stretch by most Biblical scholars, as the rest of the passage pertains to actual women's activities. Christopher Hudson understands the passage to concern ethical growth, and relates it to Jewish commandments surrounding birth. I Timothy is a parallel call to gentile women to test their righteousness during this time of danger (406). This last interpretation can be linked to that of John Chrysostom for whom labour pain was a source of potential spiritual growth: to educate (Reuling 2006, 156).

Puritan authors also used pregnancy and birth as a metaphor for conversion

and growth in faith. Actual labour followed suit. In his 1710 sermon on pregnancy and childbirth, Cotton Mather, the great Puritan minister, emphasized the moral value of pregnancy and labour: “for your *preparation for Death* is the Most Reasonable and Most Seasonable thing to which you must Apply your self” (emphasis in original, Christy 6). Although he referred to Eve’s sin, his major emphasis when it came to labour pains was shared suffering with Christ, acceptance of God’s will, and spiritual education: “bear Afflictions and Abasements, with a CHRIST-like Patience, and are Crucified unto the World...Then you have a CHRIST formed in you” (emphasis in original, Christy 6). For Mather, pregnancy and the pain of labour are a form of spiritual exercise that a woman must take full advantage of, as they allow her to grow in faith in God, to focus on doing good, and to prepare for death.

This understanding of pain continued into the modern era and was an argument against medication. One gynecologist in 1872 argued that “this baptism of pain and privation has regenerated the individual’s whole nature ... by chastening made but a little lower than the angels” (qtd. in Pernick 47). Today, there is little discussion of labour preparing one for death, yet the pain of labour is still often linked to growth. Catherine Niven and Tricia Murphy-Black note that the consequences of recalling labour pain are beneficial for women in the vast majority of cases; they teach them coping strategies, increase their confidence, and give them a feeling of pride and a sense of achievement (251). Pamela Klassen, in her interviews with home-birthing mothers, shows that pain “is often invested with the power to grant women understanding of their gods, their intimate relationships, and themselves” (78). Often these women speak of growth in relationship to creation, God, and their partners through experiencing labour pain.

Perfectionism

Painless child-bearing is a physiological problem;
and ‘the curse’ has never born upon the woman whose
life has been in strict accord with the laws of life.
(Stanton, *The Woman’s Bible*)

Attend any childbirth preparation class in any hospital today and the major point of the course will be pain management. Yet outside of the medical establishment, not everyone agrees that pain is part of birth. Women speak of orgasmic births. One Christian midwife I interviewed asserted that the feeling is more like an anxiety attack than pain, and Ina May Gaskin famously quipped: “Think of it as an interesting sensation that requires all of your attention” (*Spiritual Midwifery* 43). This understanding that labour pain is unnatural is part of the perfectionist model of labour pain. Proponents of

this motif use Genesis but can also turn to Galatians 3:13—“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Klassen 81-82)—in their arguments for pleasurable birth.

In the nineteenth century, many natural healing advocates in the United States and abroad used the language of nature rather than God to argue that childbirth should not be painful if a woman had lived a natural, healthy life. Preaching a form of perfectionism, these practitioners flipped the curse motif on its head: pain is a form of punishment, but the cause is civilization or the particular woman’s habits. Yet perfectionism offered hope—it is possible to return to the prelapsarian state and to move to divinization if one acts and thinks in the proper manner (Pernick 52). The suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton favoured natural healing, and in her 1898 commentary on Timothy, she gives a perfectionist position: childbirth is not meant to be painful, she says; pain is the result of not living according to natural law.

In the mid-twentieth century, a new movement called “psychoprophylaxis,” or “natural childbirth,” continued this perfectionist argument; it claimed that if women educated themselves they would not need anaesthetics during labour. Grantly Dick-Read, an English physician, was the most spiritually inclined of the natural childbirth advocates, and, thus, the most tuned to perfectionism. He was not a true perfectionist, however, since he sometimes saw the need for a doctor to intervene. Dick-Read argued that pain is rooted in fear and that doctors could soothe and calm a woman out of her fear of pain and out of pain itself. It is culture and civilization, including the Bible, that make women assume they must suffer. In a Rousseauian passage, Dick-Read cites watching an Indigenous woman give birth with ease before moving on with her work. The image of the “primitive woman” in the early United States served different purposes for different authors. As Richard Wertz and Dorothy Wertz point out, this image could be used by men to imply that civilization had “unsexed” women, making them aggressive and unfeminine and that their natural role was one of domesticity and passivity—roles promising a less painful birth (113-14). Women, on the other hand, often used the image to symbolize purity and pride. Stanton once exclaimed “Am I not almost a savage?” after a relatively painless labour (qtd. in Caton 122).

Wertz and Wertz call Dick-Read’s text the most religious work on childbirth since Cotton Mather’s sermon on Elizabeth. Dick-Read combined arguments about biology and nature with essentialist arguments focusing on childbirth as the spiritual fulfillment in women’s lives. Childbirth should be pleasurable—a spiritual experience as well as a physical achievement. His writings emphasize that birth is a “spiritual manifestations of the underlying forces of her existence” and a “physical manifestation of a spiritual experience” (123 and 107). This language made him particularly popular with Catholics, as he brought social value back to childbirth, using psychological and biological

terms to reinforce the theology.

The perfectionist model was strengthened in the 1970s with the arrival of *Spiritual Midwifery*, a foundational home birthing text written by Ina May Gaskin and the other midwives of The Farm, a religious commune in Tennessee. Gaskin's understanding of pain stems from Dick-Read, from her experience as a midwife, and from the religious beliefs of the commune. Just as doctors had named the pains of labour "contractions" to distance women from the pain, Gaskin renamed them "rushes"—a term that "describes better how to flow with the birthing energy" (*Spiritual Midwifery* 19). The term "rushes" is linked to "what a rush!" which is slang for an exciting, mind-altering experience; thus, the language of pain or stress was replaced with that of a mystical, pleasurable experience. An integral part of the rewriting of childbirth was this emphasis on the ecstasy of birth. As one woman, Cara, said "It felt ecstatic. Everything that happened in my body felt really natural" (qtd. in Gaskin, *Spiritual Midwifery* 37) (See Delaporte 2018 for more detailed discussion of The Farm's theology of birth).

The Farmies, as the commune dwellers were called, embedded Christian beliefs into their religious system, but their understanding of suffering was opposed to the traditional Christian understandings of maternity. Suffering was not a sign of good motherhood, or a way to be granted prestige by society; rather, it was a sign of weakness and, more importantly, of ego. If one lets go of one's ego, one lets go of pain. Nonmedicalized childbirth was seen as heroic and spiritual but not because it was considered painful or because the birthing mother was a sort of selfless martyr or sacrifice. Instead, the birth process was seen as a locus of pleasure. Unlike prior authors—who had acknowledged the sexual aspect of childbirth but had attempted to protect women from its confusion—Ina May embraced this connection. One Farmie recounts the following: "at the start of a heavy contraction, I found his [her husband's] mouth. We French kissed. Whew! Here comes another! We kissed again, from the start to the finish of the contraction.... I was testing the midwives' adage: 'It's that loving, sexy vibe that puts the baby in there in the first place, and the same loving, sexy vibe will get the baby out' (qtd. in Gaskin, *Spiritual Midwifery*, 186). Gaskin's later work addressed the possibility of orgasmic birth directly, as women narrated their orgasmic birth stories. One mother, Margaret, links orgasmic birth to the mystical: "I had a cosmic union orgasm, a bliss-enhanced state. In a way, this has had a permanent effect" (qtd. in Gaskin, *Ina May's Guide* 158). Orgasm, here, is not hedonistic or self-centred; rather, it has long-term effects on couples and the woman's relationship to the world.

The Farm's theology also included the Buddhist belief that suffering is simply wrong thinking. Since all people are linked together in an energy web, this wrong thinking affects those around us. Gaskin's quip—"Don't think of

it as pain. Think of it as an interesting sensation that requires all your attention”—reflects this belief in pain as wrong thinking which affects others as well as the self.

Gaskin's theology of childbirth pain was part of a larger perfectionist tendency on The Farm. Although the theology and rules changed over time, there was an underlying belief in the perfectibility of human nature, as evidenced by the period when Farmies stopped wearing glasses, believing they could perfect their sight through proper thought. This experiment ended rather quickly as Farmies stumbled around, but is indicative of their perfectionist underpinnings.

Perfectionism moved the locus of blame for pain from the universal image of Eve to the individual woman while it offered a possible utopian future in which birth would not only be painless but a source of spiritual enlightenment for the whole community. Although Gaskin's work has been tremendously influential, her understanding of pain is still in the minority. Perfectionist interpretations of labour pains continue with discussions of pleasurable and orgasmic births, although they are now largely nuanced to emphasize the malleability between pleasure and pain.

Conclusion

This brief journey through Christian interpretations of labour pain indicates a movement toward an understanding of pain centred not on passive stoicism, individual pleasure (the orgasmic birth for the sake of orgasm), or a secular-medical fear of pain, but on a growing awareness that labour pain, with its particular waves and its proximity to pleasure, is a prime location for co-creation and growth. This model links pain not only to individual growth but also to the potential for growth in the community and cosmos. Although the new interpretation is generally no longer fully perfectionist, it is touched by utopian possibilities—that is, a private moment can have a wider impact on society or even the cosmos. The use of the Biblical texts noted with each model reinforces this greater meaning of pain to move and create. As the curse model has receded, the phantoms of Eden and Eve have not. Embedded into the perfectionist model is the hope for a return to a renewed relationship with God, a possibility of *"tikkun olam"* (improving the world in Jewish theology) or a co-creation of sorts. The salvific model, in which women suffer actively with Christ or Mary, gives the route to this return to wholeness. Finally, the growth model is expanded through this theological lens to include the maturing of the woman herself to become a force for healing growth in the world. Pain and pleasure, the body and the soul, are integrated into one narrative about birth and spiritual renewal—the body is the site for a microcosm of salvation history from Eden to human divinization with Christ.

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