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IS BREAST MILK A “KINSHIP-FORGING SUBSTANCE” IN THE
HEBREW BIBLE? A RESPONSE TO CYNTHIA CHAPMAN

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Introduction

This paper is a response to an article recently published in the *Journal for Hebrew Scriptures* by Cynthia R. Chapman. She proposes a thought-provoking argument, that breastfeeding (i.e., breast milk) in the ANE and ancient Israel (i.e., as evidenced in the Hebrew Bible) should be seen as paramount in forging kinship ties, even more so than blood relations.¹ Chapman utilizes a series of ANE and biblical texts to prove her proposed theory. While I have few issues with the concept, for Chapman has articulated more than a convincing argument from extra-biblical sources for such a position, I do think that her attempt to establish biblical precedence for her thesis is somewhat forced and unsustainable. For this reason, I will not focus on Chapman’s use of ANE sources but will rather systematically assess the biblical evidence that she espouses as proof of the use of breast milk as a kinship-forging substance. Through this discussion I will conclude that Chapman’s thesis needs to be reassessed and perhaps abandoned when it comes to the Hebrew Bible. The only text that appears to support her proposition is from the highly figurative Song of Songs. Even though her hypothesis *may* have been the reality for ancient Israelites, the texts cannot bear the weight of proof needed to sustain her argument.

1. Chapman, “Breast Milk,” 1, argues that blood ties are more European in nature than Near Eastern.

Isaiah 60:16; 49:23; 66:12–13

Chapman offers the “post-exilic” texts of Isa 60:16, 49:23, and 66:12–13 as support for her thesis. Beginning with Isa 60:16, she argues that the nations will suckle Jerusalem, thus, bestowing upon the holy city the “status-conferring properties of royal breast milk.”² She translates v. 16 as follows, “You [Jerusalem] shall suck the milk of nations, you shall suck the breasts of kings, and you shall know that I, Yahweh, am your savior and your redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.” She concludes this portion by noting that “When Zion sucks the milk of nations and sucks the breasts of kings, she acquires their traits and status, becoming royal and majestic herself.”³ There are two fundamental problems with this proposition. First, while Chapman acknowledges the metaphorical nature of the passage, it is clear that within the overall context of ch. 60, the author wants the reader to see that it is material wealth that is in view here, not royal status and traits *per se* (e.g., חיל “wealth” vv. 5, 11; זהב “gold” and לבונה “frankincense” v. 6; צאן “flocks” v. 7; כסף “silver” and זהב “gold” v. 9; foreigners will build Jerusalem’s walls again v. 10; and the coveted lumber of Lebanon will come to Jerusalem v. 13). Now it is possible that one could argue that this material wealth will elevate Jerusalem to a “royal status” in a financial sense, for this would be a potential effect of any such transference of wealth. However, this is clearly tangible wealth, not abstract royal status, which appears to be Chapman’s assertion here. Thus, from the overall context, the metaphor is clearly reflecting the idea of material support from the nations at the behest of God, not the transfer of “royal status” through metaphorical breast milk.⁴

2. Ibid., 12. Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah*, 552–53, suggests a similar reading although he goes on to stress the material support of Israel, not the royal nature of kings, *per se*.

3. Chapman, “Breast Milk,” 12.

4. So too Watts, *Isaiah 34–66*, 296, and Leupold, *Exposition of Isaiah*, 314. Leupold points out the material aspect of the nations’ support of Israel (i.e., the best of their “products”).

Second, if breast milk is a “kinship-forging substance” as Chapman argues, it is very unlikely that Yahweh would want the newly constituted exilic community/Jerusalem to take on the “traits” of foreign nations, the very thing that had caused the exile in the first place (cf. Jeremiah 2; 44; Ezekiel 16; 23; 20:32; Hos 8:8; 9:1 etc.). What is more, it is Yahweh’s glory/royal status that is being bestowed upon the people, not that of the nations.⁵ Yahweh will not only make his people an “everlasting exaltation” (גאון עולם), he will also be in charge of bestowing their new status upon them (v. 17). Conversely, we see centripetal movement by nations and kings toward Israel, whom Yahweh has made the center of the nations (cf. Ezek 5:5; 38:12; Isa 2:2–3; Mic 4:1–2). For example, the nations are attracted to *Israel’s* splendor (נגה), their kings are “drawn” (נהוגים) (Qal passive participle v. 11) to the *city*, nations’ survivals are threatened if they do not serve (עבד) Israel (v. 12), and all who subjected them will bow (שחה) before them (v. 14). Thus, there is no foreign royal status being bestowed upon Israel; on the contrary, nations and kings are drawn to them.

In Isa 49:23 Chapman picks up on this same theme of the transfer of royalty through ingestion of breast milk. She renders the passage, “Kings will be your wet nurses, and their princesses will give you suck.”⁶ Again, in this metaphorical text, Chapman argues that “The result of this combined ingestion of royal breast milk is that the exiles will become like royals with those very same kings and princesses bowing down to them and licking the dust off their feet.”⁷ While aspects of points one and two in the above argument hold true here as well, a few further comments can be made. First, it is very impractical to assume that those

5. See for example the numerous references to Yahweh’s glory and favor being transferred to the newly constituted city. E.g., v. 1 כבוד יהוה עליך (the glory of Yahweh has risen upon you); v. 2 וכבודו עליך יראה (and his [Yahweh’s] glory will appear upon you); v. 9 כי פארך (for He [Yahweh] has glorified you); v. 10 וברצוני רחמתיך (and in my [Yahweh’s] favor I have had compassion upon you); v. 19 ואלהיך לתפארתך (and your God as your glory).

6. Chapman, “Breast Milk,” 12.

7. Ibid., 13.

who “lick the dust” off Israel’s feet are of an elevated status over Israel, at least a status that merits transference of royalty through breastfeeding.⁸ Second, the metaphor of v. 23 must be again read in the context of the chapter (esp. vv. 24–26), which suggests the exact opposite. Yahweh will in fact compel foreign royalty to deliver up the exiles and support them.⁹ This seems to be the force of the metaphor, not transference of royalty. Third, as with Isaiah 60 it is Yahweh who gives the reconstituted nation its strength and glory, making them a light (אור) to the nations (cf. 49:6). Moreover, he causes princes to bow down before them (שחה v. 7) and makes Israel a “covenant” (ברית) for the nations (v. 8).¹⁰ Interestingly, 49:15 even uses the metaphor of a woman with a nursing child (עול) but it is Yahweh who is being likened to the nursing woman (cf. v. 16), not the nations.¹¹

Finally, in her dealing with Isa 66:12–13 Chapman is perhaps closest in keeping with her proposed thesis, especially by her inclusion of the discussion regarding the Judean pillar figurines from the 8th to 7th centuries BCE. Here, her argument takes on more force as Jerusalem metaphorically nurses the exiles.¹² She avers, “Here, one might imagine that the exiles return to their homeland carrying the foreign stain of Babylonia. Only through a rebirth by their capital city and through ingesting the milk of Jerusalem’s breasts can they regain their ethnic status as the new Israelites marked by “glory,” a repeated epithet of Yahweh’s

8. So too Leupold, *Exposition of Isaiah*, 186–87. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55*, 312–13, notes that the picture here of queens nursing Israel is a role befitting slaves, who often served as wet nurses (hardly an elevated status). He also points out that “licking the dust” of another’s feet, in the context of royal settings would be “court protocol” for lesser kings/vassals before a king of much greater status. Again, this is hardly a desirable status to be conferred through breastfeeding. For a similar picture of licking the dust of one’s feet in an ANE context, see the subservient act of Abimilki king of Tyre before Akhenaton where Abimilki likens himself to mere dirt, cf. “The Amarna Letters,” translated by W. F. Albright (*ANET*, 484 esp. EA, No. 147).

9. So too Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 311.

10. See similar comments by Motyer, *Isaiah*, 395.

11. Verse 15 parallels a mother’s attentiveness to her nursing child to Yahweh’s attentiveness to Israel’s needs.

12. Chapman, “Breast Milk,” 14–17.

royal power.”¹³ In acknowledging the need for the exiles to regain their “ethnic status,” Chapman undermines her argument in her first two proposed passages (i.e., Isa 60:16 and 49:23). In these earlier passages, she appears to be suggesting that Israel’s consumption of the nations’ breast milk only conferred royal status and not ethnic identity. This of course raises the question of how breast milk can be bifurcated in such a way even in a metaphorical sense. One is left wondering if this last passage may, in fact, be better explained as “nourishment and emotional bonding between God and Jerusalem,” as Chapman points out in a footnote.¹⁴

One final note needs to be made regarding Chapman’s inclusion of the Judean pillar figurines. Her survey of their use in Judean life and culture is persuasive. However, one must keep in mind the difference between that which is reflected in popular culture of the day (often interpreted from archaeological finds) and the theologically biased purview of the Hebrew Bible.¹⁵ There can be no doubt that these figurines, along with other archaeological finds such as the Taanach Cult Stand and inscriptions like those found at Kuntillet Ajrud, point out a radically different perspective to that often portrayed in the Hebrew Text.¹⁶ As such, caution needs to be maintained when attempting

13. Ibid., 13.

14. Ibid., n. 58. So too the conclusions of Watts, *Isaiah 34–66*, 363, and Leupold, *Exposition of Isaiah*, 376.

15. This is often presented as the “Yahweh-alone” perspective. For a brief discussion on the development of monotheism in Israel, see Lang, *Monotheism and the Prophetic Minority*; Lang, “No God but Yahweh!”; Lang, “Zur Entstehung des biblischen Monotheismus.”

16. For one interpretation of the 10th century BCE Taanach Stand, see J. Glen Taylor’s works. He suggests that the first (i.e., the bottom level) and third levels of the stand depict Asherah and her image respectively, while levels two and four depict Yahweh (an absent deity between two cherubs) and his image (a horse and the sun disk between the two temple pillars) respectively. If this is the case, then the stand may reflect the popular religion of the day. See, Taylor, “Representations of Yahweh,” 56–66; Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun*, 24–37; Taylor, “Was Yahweh Worshipped as the Sun?” 55–59; Hess, *Israelite Religions*, 321–24. For notes on the Kuntillet Ajrud inscriptions, see Hess,

to prove certain facets of popular culture from the Hebrew Bible. This caution could also pertain to breast milk as a kinship-forging substance.

Song of Songs 8:1–2

Next, Chapman's titular passage, *Song of Songs* 8:1–2, is indeed the most supportive of her thesis. Her exposition is compelling at key points, especially when she comments,

The milk brother relationship described in 8:1 is an imagined relationship; the woman fantasizes that if her lover were her milk brother, several things would become possible. She [the female lover] insists that if he were a brother who had nursed at her mother's breasts, she could kiss him in public and no one would censure the activity. This suggests that public displays of physical affection between milk siblings were an accepted societal norm.¹⁷

Indeed, contextually, this is the intended meaning of the text. The young woman wants to have the freedom to express her affection to her lover/husband in public in the same way practiced by those who were next of kin (i.e., brother, father, or near relative, cf. *Gen* 29:11).¹⁸ Where Chapman appears to falter is in her understanding of the phrase "mother's house," which she interprets in a literal sense. She notes, "The house of the mother, as a kinship designation and physical space specific to the mother, is precisely the location we would expect to find uterine and milk siblings residing together."¹⁹ Here I must agree with Duane

Israelite Religions, 283–89; Smith, *Early History of God*, 118–25, esp. the bibliography on p. 118 n. 46.

17. Chapman, "Breast Milk," 18. So too the conclusion of Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 424, and Pope, *Song of Songs*, 657.

18. Cf. Pope, *Song of Songs*, 657. ben Gershom, *Song of Songs*, 87, suggests that the reference to the brother who "sucked the breasts of my mother" is actually a nursing child not an adult *per se*. Hess, *Song of Songs*, 228 n. 59, notes an Egyptian love poem that presents a similar picture as v. 1 and the concerns about public displays of affection. Cf. also Keel, *Song of Songs*, 261, for comparisons with Egyptian love poetry where brother/sister terminology is used.

19. Chapman, "Breast Milk," 19.

Garrett's analysis that vv. 1 and 2 are not as closely tied grammatically as most English texts present them. He argues that v. 2 should read "I will lead you and bring you to *my mother's house*—she who has taught me. I would give you spiced wine to drink, the nectar of my pomegranates" (italics mine).²⁰ As Garrett correctly points out, "my mother's house" (בֵּית אִמִּי) here is a euphemism for the female reproductive parts.²¹ This rendering would remove any suggestion of a tryst with a biological brother or lover in their mother's physical house where the woman and her brother had been conceived. The author is not referring to a literal place where "milk siblings reside together,"²² but is expressing the female's desires in keeping with the highly symbolic language of the Song and the euphemistic overtones throughout. While I cannot be certain, it appears that Chapman is rejecting the idea that after ch. 4 of the Song, the two lovers are in fact experiencing conjugal relations as husband and wife.²³ Therefore the context of 8:1–2 is suggesting that even for a married woman, the simplest public displays of affection were inappropriate—something that saddens the newlywed. Therefore, because of this cultural taboo, the young woman instead will lead her beloved into an intimate moment of lovemaking, no doubt in the privacy of their *own* home.²⁴

20. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs*, 423.

21. Garrett and House, *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, 172–73, 248–49. Hess, *Song of Songs*, 230, seems to hint at this as well by noting that "the instruction envisaged here is best understood as that of lovemaking and the joys of sexual pleasure . . ." On the other hand, Exum, *Song of Songs*, 247 (expressing basically the same position as Keel, *Song of Songs*, 261), points out the difficulty with the woman bringing her lover to her mother's house but misses the euphemism by suggesting that the lovers are so wrapped up in each other that they "give little thought to [social] convention"—a most unlikely ANE concept.

22. Chapman, "Breast Milk," 19.

23. Thus the conclusion of Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 404–5 and Garrett and House, *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, 248.

24. So too Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs*, 424 n. 180. However, contra Estes, who suggests that the couple are married and the woman is taking her lover to her mother's house: "the safest, most private place

In addition, one could just as easily argue that the wishful quip by the female lover in 8:1 referring to her beloved as a brother (i.e., “one who suckled at my mother’s breasts”) may simply be a stylized way of referring to her biological brother in a provocative manner. This definitely would be in keeping with the erotic tenor of the Song. The author may have no intention of promoting “breast milk as a kinship-forging substance” in which ethnic identity is being passed along as Chapman implies. On the contrary, the author may simply be continuing the highly figurative language, especially in light of v. 2. Now to be fair, this does not negate the possibility of Chapman’s overall thesis. As a matter of fact, it is this passage that perhaps demonstrates her thesis most clearly—if that is indeed the intent of the original author. However, even though this may be the case, due to the highly figurative and euphemistic nature of the Song of Songs, and the tenuousness of the other texts she draws upon, her hypothesis cannot be sustained on this one text alone.

*Hannah/Samuel and Manoah’s Wife/Samson:
1 Samuel 1; Judges 13:3–5*

Chapman next moves into narrative literature, which one would expect to be less problematic when compared to the poetic and figurative language of Isaiah and the Song of Songs. This portion of her argument, on the surface, appears strong, especially in light of the Nazirite aspects that she teases out in these first two narratives. Chapman draws together the two stories of Hannah and Samuel and Samson and his mother. She states,

she knows.” Cf. Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 404. In ANE social conventions, the husband took the wife to his father’s house not vice versa (cf. Genesis 24: 38; and Garrett and House, *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, 172–73). Chapman, “Breast Milk,” 19 n. 85, posits an interesting resolution to this problem by noting that the “house of the mother” is a sub-unit nested within the larger house of the father.” However, based upon the highly symbolic language of the Song of Songs, the euphemistic interpretation fits best within the context.

The story of Samson's mother describes the prescribed maternal diet for a mother carrying a Nazirite; while the story of Hannah adds details concerning breastfeeding a Nazirite infant. Both stories provide evidence for the belief that a gestating and nursing mother had to adhere to the ritually prescribed diet of her Nazirite son.²⁵

The strength of Chapman's argument for transference of ritual purity through a mother's breast milk is at first glance compelling. There can be no question in Judg 13:3–5 that there is a symbiotic relationship between the diet of the mother and the developing child and his status as a Nazirite. However, nowhere does the Judges' account mention breastfeeding.²⁶ Furthermore, the laws for the Nazirite in Num 6:1–5 make no such dietary prohibition on a pregnant woman. It is, perhaps, for this reason that an angel has to give Manoah's wife specific instructions in this regard—possibly a one-time prohibition (cf. Judg 13:4, 14)? On the other hand, Chapman's argument in the 1 Samuel passage rests heavily upon an argument from silence.²⁷ Nowhere is Hannah prescribed to keep a Nazirite diet like Manoah's wife.²⁸ It is clear that Chapman needed to bring the two accounts together in order to bolster her thesis.²⁹ One could just as easily argue from the pericope in 1 Samuel that the author was seeking to show the tender young age at which Samuel entered service in the tabernacle by the repeated use of the word for weaning (גמל, vv. 22, 23, 24). The Masoretic Text makes this fact clear in the use of נער (“youth”/“child”) side by side in the phrase “now the

25. Chapman, “Breast Milk,” 22.

26. It is only an assumption that the diet for Manoah's wife is directly tied to her breastfeeding, since the text is silent in this regard. One would expect that, if breastfeeding was of vital importance to Judges 13 as Chapman suggests, the text would be clearer than it is.

27. Chapman's argument could have been strengthened by referencing Cartledge, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 41, who brings out the importance of Hannah's breastfeeding of Samuel until he is weaned, as opposed to taking Samuel to Shiloh earlier and employing a wet nurse.

28. So too Miscall, *1 Samuel*, 13.

29. To be fair, Chapman is not the first to do this. There is precedence for these connections elsewhere. Cf. McCarter, *1 Samuel*, 65. Nevertheless, it is suspect in the context of what Chapman is trying to prove.

child *was very young*” (lit. “now the child was a child,” והנער נער) in v. 24.³⁰ Moreover, as I will demonstrate in the Sarah/Isaac narrative, barren women who are granted the blessing of children tend to desire this privilege of breastfeeding, especially after the trauma of barrenness. Thus, Chapman’s stance that breast milk plays a vital role in passing on ethnicity, at least in the 1 Samuel pericope, is tenuous at best.³¹

Sarah and Isaac

Chapman’s exposition of “three preposterous breastfeeding narratives” (Chapman’s wording) includes Sarah’s birthing and nursing of Isaac; Jochebed’s nursing of Moses at the request of Pharaoh’s daughter; and Naomi serving as a wet nurse for Obed. In all of these “tropes,” Chapman avers that due to the presence of a foreigner/“outsider” (i.e., Hagar, Pharaoh’s daughter, and Ruth respectively) the narrators needed to assure the reader that women of acceptable ethnic identity nursed these foundational males of Israel.

To begin with, Chapman contends that Sarah as a woman of status could have employed a wet nurse—the obvious choice being Hagar. However, because of the importance of breast milk to ethnic identity, Sarah opted to breastfeed Isaac herself as

30. So too, the rendering by the Tanakh and the NJB. Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel*, 28, suggests that based upon 2 Macc 7:27, Samuel was perhaps around three years old. Evans, *Message of Samuel*, 29, places Samuel’s age possibly as old as five years. According to lactation consultants Jan Riordan and Karen Wambach, ancient societies generally stopped breastfeeding between 2–4 years of age based on a child’s physiological needs and growth. See, Riordan and Wambach, *Breastfeeding and Human Lactation*, 52. For a discussion on the possible corruption of the MT here at v. 24, see Klein, *1 Samuel*, 3, and McCarter, *1 Samuel*, 56–57. S. R. Driver also points out the possibility that this is a textual error (see the similar reading of 4QSam^a) based on the LXX rendering as “the child was with them (והנער עמם)” but opts for “the child was with her (והנער עמה).” Cf. Driver, *Notes*, 21.

31. Chapman’s inclusion of Pseudo-Philo is perhaps one of the most compelling pieces of information reinforcing her argument in the 1 Samuel story. However, because this is not a canonical text the strength of its witness is not overly helpful to her argument in the context of the canonical Hebrew Bible.

opposed to using a foreigner/“outsider.” Again, several points can be made of graded significance. First, Chapman herself notes Rebekah’s (Isaac’s wife) similar elite status by pointing out that Rebekah had her own wet nurse (cf. Gen 24:59). This wet nurse is not only named (i.e., Deborah) but her death is also recorded (cf. Gen 35:8).³² According to Chapman’s reasoning, does this not allow for the possibility of Deborah (an “outsider”) being a wet nurse to Jacob and Esau? In the case of Jacob, he is the very eponymous leader for the family/nation of Israel! Yet the text is silent about who exactly breastfed Jacob and Esau (cf. Gen 25:21–27). Second, Sarah’s breastfeeding of Isaac must be understood in light of the preceding narratives (see esp. Genesis 16–18). That there was animosity between Hagar and Sarah because of Ishmael’s birth is putting it mildly (cf. Gen 16:4, 6; 21:10). As such, one would well expect Sarah not to employ Hagar as a wet nurse for this very reason. Third, it had been 14 years since Hagar had borne Ishmael (cf. Gen 16:16 and 21:5). If she had weaned him at two to three years of age, the norm for the ANE, this would mean that she had not nursed a child for over 10 years. The text makes it clear that Hagar had only the one child (Gen 21:10–21). Therefore the odds of Hagar lactating after 10 years are low (see further discussions below for Naomi).³³

Fourth, the biblical account of Isaac’s nursing and weaning may be best explained on the grounds of Isaac’s miraculous birth. Sarah had longed for a child so earnestly that she had insisted that her husband marry another woman (i.e., Hagar) in order to have a child. Thus, according to Gen 18:11–15 and 21:7, it is just as probable that Sarah nursed Isaac as part of the fulfillment of the miraculous event, and to bond with the child that she had always dreamed of having. I cannot imagine Sarah “farming out” this task, regardless of her status, after God had performed

32. Chapman, “Breast Milk,” 28 n.133.

33. This is the same argument that can be made for Naomi. Modern lactation consultants do note the potential for a woman to start lactating after ceasing to breastfeed, but this takes weeks to accomplish, if it happens at all. Normally, this can occur within a few weeks or months of ceasing to breastfeed. Restarting after a period of years is uncommon.

such a miracle. In a similar vein, one could also ask the question as to why Sarah did not nurse Ishmael. If breast milk is a kinship-forging substance that can even be used to draw an “outsider’s” child into ethnic unity with another’s family, as suggested by Chapman in the Ruth-Naomi account, why would Sarah not force lactation and “adopt” Ishmael in this way?

Finally, according to anthropological studies, “in cultures that view breast milk as a conduit for ancestral power, it is not unusual for wet-nurses to be restricted to women of the mother’s or father’s clan and lineage.”³⁴ This is the heart of Chapman’s assertion about ancient Israel and the biblical accounts in question. According to this reality, Hagar would not have met the qualifications to begin with, thus removing the basis of Chapman’s argument from the start. In all these debated texts, ancient readers would have automatically eliminated any foreign women (i.e., “outsiders”) as unacceptable wet nurses.

Where I do think Chapman is correct is in her assessment of Sarah’s timing of the “divorce” and expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael.³⁵ Some time after the weaning of Isaac and the ensuing celebrations would have been the opportune time, although we can only speculate on the elapsed time between Gen 21:8 and 9.

Moses and Jochebed

Chapman’s second “preposterous” breastfeeding text is that of Moses and Jochebed.³⁶ When Pharaoh’s daughter found Moses floating in the bulrushes in a makeshift ark, Moses’ sister (Miriam?) shows up and offers to procure wet-nursing services for the Egyptian’s new-found son. Of course it is Moses’ mother Jochebed who fills the role thus allowing *her* breast milk to transfer Levitical and Israelite ethnicity to Moses.

Chapman avers that the purpose of the opening portions of Exodus is to clarify the ethnic identity of Moses. She insists that

34. Riordan and Wambach, *Breastfeeding and Human Lactation*, 807. For the actual study see van Esterik and Elliott, “Infant Feeding Style,” 183–95.

35. Chapman, “Breast Milk,” 30.

36. *Ibid.*, 30–33.

the author informs the reader through this breastfeeding account that Moses is in fact Israelite, a Levite at that. The biggest downside of Chapman's assertion is that she does not explain to the reader why Pharaoh's daughter would not have insisted on an Egyptian wet nurse if in fact the important connection between breast milk and ethnic identity was so well known in the ANE—a reality her paper presents very persuasively throughout. While it is possible that the text is a "literary trope of mocking the Egyptians"³⁷ one still must answer the question as to why Pharaoh's daughter would have overlooked this "elephant in the room." Moreover, is it not just as possible that the breastfeeding account is included to show God's compassionate intervention in the midst of the human carnage implied in Exodus 1? The reader is brought into the heart-wrenching story of Exodus 2 by witnessing and feeling the emotional pain of Jochebed as she attempts to hide and keep her beautiful (גִּבּוֹר) boy from certain death for three months (Exod 2:2). The resolution to the conflict in the text comes when Moses is given back to Jochebed so she can raise the child in the open and with Pharaoh's financial support (Exod 2:9). If Pharaoh's daughter did know about the importance of breast milk ethnicity connections, the text makes it clear that she cannot overpower the plans and purposes of Yahweh, a similar situation evinced in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.³⁸ The irony of the text is fitting, but more importantly it shows the protection of God's chosen leader from birth (note also a similar theme in Joseph's life immediately before in Genesis 39–50).³⁹ The text thus depicts how Jochebed was afforded the opportunity to raise and coddle her child in the midst of infanticidal chaos by means of the most intimate act available to a mother, breastfeeding.

37. *Ibid.*, 31. She notes Propp's assertion of this fact. Cf. Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 154.

38. There are 14 references to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart (Exod 7:13, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 12, 34, 35; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:8). In no less than six of these cases, the Lord does the hardening of the god-like Pharaoh (Exod 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:8).

39. Note similar protective motifs in "The Birth Legend of Sargon of Akkad," translated by Benjamin R. Foster (*COS* 1.133:461).

Finally, Chapman does not address the fact that Jochebed had already nursed Moses for a period of three months (cf. Exod 2:2). This is not only implied in the text, it is made explicit when Moses' sister quickly *finds* someone to “nurse” Moses for his new royal mother (Exod 2:7–9).⁴⁰ In light of this, one must answer the question as to how long a child has to be breastfed before he/she is ethnically linked to the desired family. If Naomi's possible “symbolic” breastfeeding of Obed is sufficient (Chapman's suggestion—see next section below), is Jochebed's nursing of Moses for three months sufficient? Again, Chapman passes over this issue.

Naomi and Obed

Chapman's final “preposterous” breastfeeding narrative is, perhaps, the least convincing textual example she puts forward in her article. Her assertion that Naomi became a wet nurse to Obed in order to pass on her ethnic identity to her grandson due to Ruth's tainted Moabite pedigree is strained on several levels.

First, Chapman's premise that, because Ruth is a foreigner (נכרית Ruth 2:10), she cannot pass on acceptable ethnicity to Obed, even though she has sworn loyalty oaths to Naomi, her people, and her God, is not convincing (Ruth 1:16–17). Throughout Israel's history, men of war were known to have captured foreign women who later became their wives (cf. Num 31:18). The book of Deuteronomy presents legislation that is meant to elucidate and give instruction on this very practice (Deut 21:10–14). In these cases, ethnicity was not a matter of concern for Yahweh or the people.⁴¹ Second, and along the same lines of

40. The Hebrew word נָקַד (“to nurse”) is used twice in v. 7 as both a participle and a verb and twice in v. 9. This is the term normally used for wet nurses and nursing in general (e.g., Gen 21:7; 24:59; 32:16; Num 11:12; Deut 32:25; 1 Sam 1:23 etc.).

41. I am aware that Chapman narrows her arguments to men of status (i.e., Isaac, Moses, and Obed/David) but this neither answers the question as to why Isaac, and not Jacob is given a breastfeeding narrative, nor does it solve the problem of why David's own mother is not brought into the narratives in a breastfeeding incident. On p. 40, Chapman suggests that there was no foreign

argument, are the genealogical lists of the New Testament. The entry on Obed, David's grandfather, in the New Testament Gospel of Matthew, whose audience was clearly Jewish, lists not only Ruth (1:5), but Tamar (1:3) and Rahab (1:5), in the lineage of Jesus. Obviously as of the first century CE ethnic connections to these foreign women were not an issue either. Surprisingly, Naomi is never mentioned again in the Bible after Ruth 4:17, whereas Ruth is.

Third, Chapman goes against almost all commentators and several modern translations in her assertion that Naomi was, in fact, a literal wet nurse to Obed based upon the language of Ruth 4:16.⁴² Chapman translates v. 16 as follows, "Naomi took the child and placed him at her *breast*, and she became his *wet nurse*" (italics mine).⁴³ Chapman focuses on the Hebrew word נָנִיא (Qal participle feminine) insisting that it can have the connotation of "wet nurse" even though it has a wide semantic range being used of both males and females and with the nuance of both a wet nurse and a guardian (e.g., Num 11:12; Esth 2:20; 2 Kgs 10:1; Isa 49:23).⁴⁴ What is more, the inclusion of the word

or slave woman in the narrative of Rebekah; thus, solving the problem for why there was no breastfeeding narrative for Jacob. However, earlier in her article (cf. p. 28 n. 133), she points out that Rebekah had her own wet nurse (however old she was, cf. Gen 24:59 and 35:8).

42. So Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 259; Sasson, *Ruth*, 172; Campbell, *Ruth*, 164; Younger, *Judges/Ruth*, 483; Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 730. For a discussion on the possibility of Naomi's actions serving as a legal adoption, see Köhler, "Die Adoptionsform," 312–14. For a refutation of Köhler, see Joüon, *Ruth*, 94, or Campbell, *Ruth*, 165. Two proponents of the "wet nurse" interpretation are de Waard and Nida, *Book of Ruth*, 79, as cited by Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 259. For modern translations that go against Chapman's reading, cf. NIV, NLT, and TNK. Most other translations use the generic term "nurse" with no connotations of "wet nursing," cf. NAS, NRS, NKJ, ESV, etc.

43. Chapman, "Breast Milk," 35.

44. Chapman spends three pages (pp. 36–38) giving examples where the root נָנִיא may be understood in the technical sense of "wet nurse." However, several of these must be understood in the figurative sense. Furthermore, Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 258–59, duly notes that the "feminine form [of נָנִיא] occurs in one passage (other than Ruth 4:16) to refer to the "nurse" of the *five-year-old* Mephibosheth (cf. 2 Sam 4:4). Hence, it is quite clear that the word is used to mean "nurse" in the sense of the one who takes care of or looks after a child."

חֵיק (“lap”), which never means “breast,” helps clarify that wet nursing is not in play.⁴⁵ Even though Chapman correctly points out that the normal Hebrew term for wet nurse is מִיִּנְקָה from the root יִנַּק (“to nurse” cf. Gen 24:59; 35:8; Exod 2:7; 2 Kgs 11:2; 2 Chron 22:11), she does not answer the question as to why the author did not use the less ambiguous term.⁴⁶ If breast milk as a kinship-forging substance was so important and central to the account, why would the author not use one of these clearer terms as opposed to the more cryptic term אִמָּנָה?⁴⁷

Fourth, while there is some evidence of “grandmothers” in African and other cultural contexts nursing their grandchildren (i.e., premenopausally),⁴⁸ the very idea that a “post-menopausal”

Bush rightly notes that the chances of Mephibosheth still being nursed at five years of age are slim.

45. So Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 257, and Block, *Judges/Ruth*, 730 (as does Campbell, *Ruth*, 164–65), correctly point out that the combination of חֵיק (“the front of one’s body” cf. 2 Sam 12:3) and אִמָּנָה (“guardian” or “nanny”), terms used of both men and women, should not be forced into being read as “wet nurse” in the context.

46. Chapman, “Breast Milk,” 36 n. 171.

47. So too Sasson, *Ruth*, 172.

48. Slome, “Nonpuerperal Lactation in Grandmothers,” 550–52. Slome lists five cases of Zulu women who ranged in age from 45 to 48 who suckled their grandchildren. In most cases these women had had several of their own children and all but one was still *premenopausal*. In the one case where the grandmother was postmenopausal, lactation did not occur. The elapsed time from the weaning of their own children until the suckling of their grandchild ranged from 2 to 15 years, most falling into the lower range. Slome cites two other studies of African tribes that do appear to attest to post-menopausal grandmothers lactating. These studies are: Bryant, *The Zulu People*, 631, and Barlow and Buchan, “Non-Puerperal Lactation,” 976. However, in the former study, no scientific or medical analysis was done; it was merely general observations by the author, a historian (cf. Bryant’s own comments in his preface concerning the unscientific nature of his research of the Zulu tribe, pp. xi–xiv). In the latter case, one woman was observed at age 55 who breastfed her grandchild eight years after her own child had been weaned. No mention is made of her menopausal state in this brief notation. Cf. also David Livingston, *Missionary Travels*, 140. Livingston records one event where a grandmother had nursed her grandchild. He goes on to note that the grandmother “at least forty years of age” (no doubt again premenopausal). Finally, H. A. Wieschhoff, “Artificial Stimulation,” 1403–15, compiled a wealth of examples from around

(Chapman's wording) woman would become a wet nurse is problematic especially after not having children for at least 20 years.⁴⁹ According to breastfeeding and lactation specialists Jan Riordan and Karen Wambach, lactation in women involves a two-stage process: endocrine and autocrine. The endocrine stage is hormonal, brought on by a woman's pregnancy, whereby she produces colostrum (i.e., nutrient-rich milk full of proteins and immunoglobulins produced at the end of pregnancy). The autocrine stage begins when a baby starts to nurse.⁵⁰ Thus, pregnancy is what triggers lactation, and Naomi was not currently pregnant. While it is possible for a "woman to stimulate lactation without a recent pregnancy," it is rare.⁵¹ Riordan and Wambach go on to tell the story of a 40-year-old woman who adopted a child and decided to breastfeed. They note the many "challenges of inducing lactation beginning one month before the birth using breast stimulation via pumping and use of

the world in relation to grandmothers suckling grandchildren. In every case presented where the grandmothers were premenopausal (i.e., 30 to late 40s in age), lactation at some level occurred. For women at or near menopause (around 50 years of age) the lactation that did occur was insufficient to sustain the child and in one case actually caused the infant to die of apparent malnutrition. In all these cases, the older the woman was the longer it took to begin lactation (3 to 10 or more days). Wieschhoff (1414) notes only one documented case in France of a woman 71 years of age suckling a child after a 25 year lapse in breastfeeding. He notes that this is an obvious "abnormality." He concludes, "It should be emphasized . . . that in no instance has a careful physical examination been made by those who report its [lactation] occurrence, so that we are dealing with impressionistic accounts. . . . what may be termed cultural fiction" (1414–15).

49. Chapman, "Breast Milk," 36. Mahlon and Chilion were obviously of adult age and were married. A conservative estimate from the time Naomi had her last child until he died must have been at least 20 years, if not more (i.e., see the notation of the family living in Moab for 10 years in 1:4). So too, Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 259, and Sasson, *Ruth*, 172, who note the improbability of Naomi serving as a wet nurse at such an advanced age. Note that Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 259, goes on to reject Sasson's (235–37) suggestion of a parallel between ANE goddesses suckling infants and Ruth 4:16 on the basis that there is no "vestigial motif" here in the text.

50. Riordan and Wambach, *Breastfeeding and Human Lactation*, 92.

51. *Ibid.*, 52.

domperidone and oxytocin spray. A lactation consultant, a midwife, and a birth mother, who was a relative, supported this mother during the rigorous process.”⁵² In this rare case, the use of modern drugs and pumps was necessary, both of which were not at Naomi’s disposal.⁵³ Lactation specialist Christine Sneed adds that, while it is true that women can force lactation without ever having a child, this is generally only possible in women *before* menopause—even then the woman rarely if ever can produce enough milk to meet the demand of a child.⁵⁴ Given these assertions of lactation experts, it is virtually impossible to believe Chapman’s assertion that a postmenopausal Naomi breastfed Obed. It appears that Chapman recognizes the tenuousness of her suggestion that Naomi became a literal wet nurse because she posits the possible “symbolic” nature of the action

52. *Ibid.*, 827. Cheales-Siebenaler, “Induced Lactation,” 42–43, relates an account where an adoptive mother induced lactation but still required modern drugs and pumps. She concluded that no “measurable amount of milk was pumped until the baby was four months old.” For traditional methods of inducing lactation, see Mead, *Sex and Temperament*, or Lawrence, *Breastfeeding*, esp. ch. 17. These methods include herbal teas and coconut milk (as cited by Biervliet et al., “Induction of Lactation,” 582). On the use of herbs and galactagogues in traditional cultures, see Riordan and Wambach, *Breastfeeding and Human Lactation*, 810. Note, however, that in the cases where traditional medicines and herbs are used, women are generally already nursing and are seeking to increase milk production. Riordan and Wambach, *Breastfeeding and Human Lactation*, 531–32, suggest this has more of a placebo effect than anything else. See also Wieschhoff, “Artificial Stimulation,” 1406–9 for a discussion on traditional African lactating remedies. Wieschhoff is also dubious of these traditional “remedies” for lactation (1414).

53. For a chart of this detailed regimen, see Riordan and Wambach, *Breastfeeding and Human Lactation*, 532.

54. Christine Sneed, personal communication. Cf. also Bryant, “Nursing the Adopted Infant,” 374–79, esp. 378, where she notes that rarely will this method produce enough milk to sustain a child. See a similar conclusion in the case study by Biervliet et al., “Induction of Lactation,” 581–83. Medical practitioners Kinga A. Szucs, Sherry Axline, and Marc Rosenman do report a case whereby an adoptive premenopausal mother produced enough breast milk through induced lactation to meet the needs of twins. See their article, “Induced Lactation,” 309–13. For a further bibliography on the topic, see Dennis, “Breastfeeding Initiation and Duration.”

as well.⁵⁵ However, she draws upon symbolic wet-nurse examples from much later Islamic and Irish settings. The time span between the story of Ruth and these later texts is a problem, not to mention the cultural differences of the latter case. Furthermore, how is “symbolic” nursing supposed to pass on ethnic identity if this suggested status resides in the breast milk?⁵⁶

Finally, Chapman suggests that the author of Ruth stresses Ruth’s Moabite/foreign identity (a negative—thus the reason Naomi had to breastfeed Obed) by using the phrase “Ruth the Moabite” throughout. She avers that this is the case until Ruth marries Boaz, at which time the heroine becomes simply “Ruth” and is quickly replaced in the narrative by Naomi (4:13).⁵⁷ However, the text is somewhat divided in its use of both references. The appellation “Ruth” is used seven times (cf. 1:4, 14, 16; 2:8, 22; 3:9; 4:13) in four chapters whereas the phrase “Ruth the Moabitess” is used only five times (cf. 1:22; 2:2, 21; 4:5, 10). Therefore the usage may be stylistic as opposed to a means of negatively emphasizing Ruth’s ethnicity in some way. In light of the numerous problems with this textual example, Chapman’s proposal again appears somewhat dubious.⁵⁸

55. Chapman, “Breast Milk,” 38.

56. While the “symbolic” concept could be argued for the metaphors of Isaiah, which Chapman musters as evidence (see above), here in these three “preposterous breastfeeding accounts” the text wants to be read in a literal sense.

57. Chapman, “Breast Milk,” 38–39. Chapman points out that Ruth is never mentioned by name after v. 13, thus heightening the role of Naomi as breast-milk provider. However, Ruth is addressed indirectly, and with glowing praise, in v. 15. Technically, there are only two more narrative verses after v. 15 before the genealogical list. It is very odd to assume that Ruth has been lowered or removed from the picture because of her foreignness when, in essence, she receives the highest praise from all of the ladies of the region.

58. Based upon the historical setting (cf. Ruth 1:1) it is possible that the use of the phrase “Ruth the Moabitess” may have been added by a later editor. This may have been done to contrast the upright nature of Ruth, a foreigner, who is keeping the Law of Yahweh as opposed to the Canaanization of the Israelites in the book of Judges.

Some Final Notes

Chapman makes several arguments from silence. She states,

We also do not have breast milk source identification when that identification would hurt or work against the desired ethnic presentation of the foundational male. Tamar, the Canaanite, is not described as nursing Perez. Joseph's Egyptian wife is not shown to nurse Ephraim. Bathsheba does not nurse Solomon. In each of these households, there is no insider woman who could be brought into service as Naomi was for Obed.⁵⁹

While most of these observations are indeed true, it does not warrant a blanket statement suggesting that breastfeeding narratives are absent because these women are/may be "outsiders." One glaring problem is with her questioning of Bathsheba's tribal identity.⁶⁰ A close reading of the text suggests that Bathsheba is from the tribe of Judah. Yes, Bathsheba was the daughter of Eliam (2 Sam 11:3) as Chapman notes, but 2 Sam 23:34 goes on to identify Eliam as the son of Ahithophel the Gilonite, from the region of Judah.⁶¹ This is the most acceptable tribe for a king to be from! Solomon had a double ethnic connection to his home tribe through both his mother and father.

Finally, in a footnote, Chapman suggests that the Deuteronomist "provides the subtle clue" that Joash's breastfeeding was outsourced to a wet nurse to shield him from the "stain" of Athaliah's ethnicity (i.e., the house of Ahab cf. 2 Kgs 11:1–3;

59. Chapman, "Breast Milk," 40.

60. *Ibid.*, 40 n. 185.

61. The inclusion of Eliam along with Uriah the Hittite's name in the identification of Bathsheba seems to indicate some importance for her father (so McCarter, *II Samuel*, 285, 499, and Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 153). Even though some may question the significance, I agree with both Herzberg and Mauchline in their positive identity of Ahithophel as Bathsheba's grandfather, especially when one considers the actions of Ahithophel in siding with David's conspirators during the revolt of Absalom (cf. 2 Sam 15–17). He must have had a good reason for doing so, viz., to get revenge for David's actions against Uriah and his granddaughter. Cf. Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel*, 309–10; Mauchline, *I and 2 Samuel*, 248–49. See also comments by Schley, "Ahithophel," 121–22, and Jewish interpreters in *Sanhedrin* 69b, 101a. On the location of Giloh in Judah, cf. Mazar, "Giloh," 1027–28, and McCarter, *II Samuel*, 357.

2 Chron 22:10–12).⁶² However, Joash's mother is clearly listed as Zibiah of Beersheba (2 Kgs 12:1; 2 Chron 24:1) with no apparent relation to Athaliah. Why would the Deuteronomist seek to mention an unnamed wet nurse of perhaps questionable ethnicity when Joash's ethnicity could have been bolstered by Zibiah's clearly stated Judahite connections? Therefore there was no need for a wet nurse's breast milk to cleanse the "stain" of Athaliah's lineage when Joash's biological mother could have served the purpose more effectively.

Conclusion

As I have demonstrated throughout, in most cases Chapman's thesis raises more questions than it answers. There can be little doubt that both relatively modern and ANE cultures (perhaps even Israel's) placed importance upon breast milk as a kinship-forging substance, something Chapman does an excellent job of demonstrating. However, when it comes to the biblical examples, her evidence is tenuous at best. It is clear that in every biblical case marshaled by Chapman (perhaps with the exception of Song of Songs 8:1–2), either alternate explanations can be offered for the presence of breastfeeding narratives or her thesis falters on grammatical, medical, and/or logical grounds. Until some of these concerns are addressed, if they can be at all, I remain unconvinced by Chapman's proposal.

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62. Chapman, "Breast Milk," 40 n. 186. She notes that Joash is the only king from Judah who has a wet nurse mentioned in the text.

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