The Creation of Woman in the Bible
Another look at the Adam and Eve story

The creation of woman in the Bible has been the topic of much debate lately in Biblical Archaeology Review. In “Was Eve Made from Adam’s Rib—or His Baculum?” from the September/October 2015 issue, Ziony Zevit makes a shocking claim about the Adam and Eve story in the Bible. The Biblical text says that Eve was created from Adam’s tsela’. Although tsela’ has traditionally been translated as “rib,” Zevit argues that it is better translated as Adam’s os baculum. This controversial conversation continues in Mary Joan Winn Leith’s article “Creating Woman,” published in the March/April 2016 issue of Biblical Archaeology Review.

In her article, Leith examines the creation of woman in the Bible. She looks at the etiological and euphemistic support for Zevit’s interpretation, and she considers how this would have fit into ancient views of biology. Then Leith focuses on an interesting part of the Adam and Eve story in the Bible: the “punishment poem” in Genesis 3:14–19.

This poem occurs after Adam and Eve have eaten the forbidden fruit. Because of their disobedience, God curses them. As Leith explains, this curse takes positive relationships, including childbirth, and turns them negative:

[T]he “punishment poem” in Genesis 3:14–19 reverses to negative effect all the positive relationships that prevailed before the humans disobeyed God. Humans and God, man and woman, humans and animals, humans and the earth now become alienated from each other where before all was harmonious. The most famous negative effect of the human disobedience is the woman’s pain in childbirth. At least theoretically then, before the punishment, childbirth in Eden should have been painless. If the father-as-child-bearer principle is hovering in the background of the creation of the woman, then the difficult childbirth promised to the woman in Genesis 3:16 reverses the painless “birth” in Genesis 2, where not only does a man—rather than a woman—give birth, but thanks to the anaesthetic “deep sleep” (tardemah), the man suffers no pain.

Thus, the creation of woman in the Bible from man—the first birth, according to Leith—is painless, but, as the “punishment poem” illustrates, all subsequent births are painful. Further, not only was the first birth painless, but it was a man—not a woman—who shockingly gives birth, setting it apart from all others.

Leith then examines Christian symbolism related to the Adam and Eve story in the Bible. Early Christians believed that Eve was created from Adam’s rib or side, and they found parallels between Adam’s side and Jesus’ side that was pierced during his crucifixion. John 19:34 records, “Instead, one
of the soldiers pierced his (Jesus’) side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out.” Early Christians believed that the blood represented the holy Eucharist, and the water represented baptism—two sacraments given by Jesus to the Church. Therefore, the Church was birthed from the side of Jesus, just as Eve was birthed from Adam’s side.

This interpretation is illustrated well in an 11th-century mosaic from the Church of the Dormition in Daphne, Greece. In this mosaic, blood and water flow from the pierced side of Jesus in the direction of his mother, Mary. Leith explains that Mary is often referred to as the “new Eve” and “considered to personify the Church.” The birth of the Church is visually depicted by the blood and water (sacraments) flowing toward Mary (the Church). Adam also makes an appearance in this scene. Jesus’ blood drips onto Adam’s skull at the foot of the cross. This symbolizes 1 Corinthians 15:21–22: “For since death came through a human being (Adam), the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being (Christ); for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.”