

Nurse, nursing: II. New Testament

Stefan Schreiber

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speech,” the drama of the coming disaster is rhetorically heightened by the image of the nursing woman: “Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants (θηλάζουσας) in those days!” The crisis immediately prior to the beginning of the eschaton, which promises war-like hardships for the people, is marked by the particular effect it will have on pregnant and breastfeeding women, whose condition leaves them defenseless and unable to escape (Schottroff: 243–44, 248; cf. Sib. Or. 2:190–92).

Matthew uses the verb θηλάζειν in 21:16 to mean “to suck.” In his quotation of Ps 8:3 (LXX), the praise of Jesus comes “out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies (θηλάζόντων).” This recontextualization of the psalm serves to legitimize Jesus’s messianic work on the basis of Scripture. In Luke 11:27, a woman blessed Jesus by referring to “the womb that bore you and the breasts at which you drank (ὅς ἐθήλασας)” (cf. BerR 98:20). The praise of Jesus radiates out to this mother, who was permitted to bring forth such a son.

II. New Testament

The terms “nurse” (τροφός, 1 Thess 2:7) or “nursing” (the verb θηλάζειν in Mark 13:17/Matt 21:16; Luke 11:27) rarely occur in the NT. In 1 Thess 2:7, Paul and his co-senders draw a comparison between a wet nurse who lovingly cares for her own children and their ministry as missionaries to the fledgling church in Thessalonica: “like a nurse (τροφός) tenderly caring for her own children (τὰ ἑαυτῆς τέκνα).” The substantive noun used here, τροφός, almost always means “wet nurse” (Gerber: 275; but see Boring: 77: “nursing mother”). The employment of nurses, who nourished infants and provided for small children, was common among families in the Roman Empire (Gerber: 282–84). The comparison in 1 Thess 2:7 gains significance from the contrast between the professional role of a wet nurse and the care of one’s own children. The wet nurse typically provides for other children in exchange for pay and employment while giving attention to her own children out of maternal love (Schreiber: 142). The personal devotion of the missionaries to the young church is contrasted against their professional commitments (as apostles, 2:7a). In Thessalonica, Paul and his co-senders could have maintained a professional distance from the church as missionaries of the gospel. Instead, they shared their own lives with the church out of love, as illustrated by the image of a wet nurse (2:8). Other interpretations of this passage present the gentleness of the wet nurse as a means of philosophical education, contrasting with the potentially severe, demanding speeches of philosophers (Malherbe: 146, 160), emphasize the “tenderness” and “authentic mother love” of the imagery (Boring: 87), or present Paul as a role model who assumes a serving function (Hoppe: 153).

In the cry of woe in Mark 13:17/Matt 24:19; Luke 21:23, in Jesus’s so-called “end of the world

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