Department of Reviews and Abstracts

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Collective Review

FEAR OF THE FETUS: AN ANCIENT CAUSE FOR THE CESAREAN SECTION

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"THE fear of the spirits of the dead appears to have been one of the most powerful factors, perhaps, indeed, the most powerful of all, in shaping the course of religious * * * development from the lowest to the highest; and for that reason it is not specially characteristic of any form of society."^{1, 2} Linked with this was the jealousy toward living mankind felt even by the Olympian gods³ which they manifested by causing premature deaths.⁴ This too was felt by demigods, the belief in whose jealousy, the world over, gave rise to hero-cults, that is, "appeasement of souls cut off by misadventure in their prime and believed to be envious of their survivors."⁵ Similar were the cults of martyrs⁶ and of criminals;⁷ and the like belief may have caused the "murder-stones" and cairns of loose rocks where some one had died by violence.⁸ Most envious of all, however, were the spirits of fetuses who, not having had any fair chance for life on earth, were naturally resentful toward those enjoying better fortune, manifested especially by inflicting disease upon some relative, "because, not having lived long enough on earth to form attachments to their living relations, they were less likely to show mercy."⁹ Far away from modern New Zealand¹⁰ is ancient Egypt's gilded mummy which Pierre Loti graphically describes thus: "On a table in the middle of one of the rooms, a thing to make you shudder gleams in a glass box, a fragile thing that failed of life some two thousand years ago. It is the mummy of a human embryo, and some one, to appease the malice of the born-dead thing, had covered its face with a coating of gold—for, according to the belief of the Egyptians, these little abortions became the evil genii of their families if proper honor was not paid to them. At the

¹The Golden Bough (J. G. Frazer) ed. 3, viii, 36-37; *ibid.*, ix, 93, 98.

²Dread of evil spirits is generally gone from modern culture, see Proceedings of Charaka Club, 1916, iv, 5; why, a problem for psychologists, (E. C. Parsons), *Psychoanalytic Review*, 1916, iii, 291.

³(J. A. Scott) *Classical Journal*, 1914-15, x, 271-272; *ibid.*, 1918, xiii, 372.

⁴(T. Reinach) note in *Revue Critique*, March 18, 1916, p. 192.

⁵*Folk-Lore*, 1917, xxviii, 279-294, at 285-286.

⁶Compare Tertullian's *Invidia of the Martyrs*, *Expositor*, July, 1919, at 33, end.

⁷Cult of Executed Criminals at Palermo (E. S. Hartland) *Folk-Lore*, 1910, xxi, 167-179, at 178.

⁸Passim in Notes and Queries (London), e.g., 12 Series, v, 188. And so generally, *Golden Bough*, ix, 21; *Popular Religion and Folk-Lore of India*, (W. Crooke, 1896 ed.) i, 235.

⁹*Maori Religion and Mythology* (E. Shortland), 31, 107-108. Compare, as to spirits of own family, *Golden Bough*, vi, 188.

¹⁰(E. Tregear) *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 1917, xxvi, 87-88.

end of its negligible body,* the gilded head with its great fetus eyes, is unforgettable for its suffering ugliness, for its frustrated and ferocious expression."¹¹ The same fear, which Loti sets out, doubtless caused the preservation of a prehistoric (probably paleolithic) fetus in a Syrian grotto.¹²

The Maori's (New Zealand) belief in the malignant evil spirit of the dead fetus may arise from the latter having had no soul and so being especially liable to carry off souls of survivors;¹³ the disastrous consequences of its death while in this soulless condition were avoided in Old Calabar, by giving abortives as tests, early in the pregnancy.¹⁴ "Saxon Leechdoms"¹⁵ also gave directions for removing a dead fetus; but removing a living fetus, for uses in magic, seems still to be frequent in India.¹⁶ That the fetus has a will of its own was believed in France not long ago¹⁷ and forms the basis of obstetrical practice in China,¹⁸ and in sundry places where (it is thought) the time of delivery is at the option of the fetus and where it must be starved, or frightened, out.¹⁹ The Maori belief that the parent of such an ill-shaped creature (as a fetus) is a shark or lizard,²⁰ appears in more extended form among some of our own countrymen, their belief having been written upon by a Massachusetts lady.²¹ A similar fear of the fetus is extant in Europe today; for instance in Maestricht where one of "the names to fearen babes withal"²² is that of "Gerritje ongeboren" (little Girard who has not been born);²³ so in the Shetlands, from a parallel cause, work is suspended on St. Thomas' Day, December 21;²⁴ it of course not being now understood there of whom Thomas was a twin,²⁵ and that one of twins, as also a prematurely-born fetus, in various parts of the world should be exposed for destruction, while special purification is required by the mother.²⁶ That she (after miscarriage or delivery of a stillborn child) is dangerous in high degree, many primitive peoples believe; if she conceals it,²⁷ disaster is brought to her family or to the whole tribe,²⁸ doubtless because the fetus-demon can then not be duly exorcised. The methods of preventing such "revenants" cover too much ground for discussion here, except in the cases of *fetus in utero*; viz.,

¹¹Egypt (La Mort de Philae) (by Pierre Loti, translated . . . W. P. Baines) at 49; in the original, 54-55.

¹²I, *Anthropologie*, 1900, xi, 781, quoting Lyon Médical, (no date).

¹³See Golden Bough, viii, 97 and 102; ix, 261-262. Compare (s. v. Abortions) Semitic Magic (R. C. Thompson, 1908) 20, 21, 23; and Tales * * * Eskimo. (Rink, 1875) xlv, 439f, cited in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (ed. Hastings, et al., 1914) vi, at 55, end.

¹⁴Labor among Primitive Peoples (G. J. Engelmann, 3d. ed.) 2.

¹⁵Leechdoms, Wotcunning and Starcraft of Early England (ed. O. Cockayne) i, 22, 39, 362-363.

¹⁶Omens and Superstitions of Southern India (E. Thurston) 224-229.

¹⁷Labor among Primitive Peoples (G. J. Engelmann) 7.

¹⁸Ibid., 6-7 (as translated and ed. by Rodet) 335-359.

¹⁹Ibid., 6, 20, end.

²⁰Maori Religion and Mythology (E. Shortland) 18.

²¹Hawaiian Shark Aumakua (M. A. Beckwith) *American Anthropologist*, 1917, xix, 505-517.

²²Names Terrible to Children, a long but incomplete series, in (London) *Notes and Queries*, at and prior to, 11 Series, ii, 133.

²³Revue des Traditions Populaires, 1917, xxxii, 223.

²⁴See Folk-Lore, 1917, xxviii, at 304.

²⁵That is, Jesus; see Boanerges (J. R. Harris) 245-246, *et passim*; but the intended elaboration thereon in India, was interrupted indefinitely in consequence of the learned author's being submarined twice.

²⁶Golden Bough, iii, 286, and 286-7, note⁶.

²⁷"If the woman should conceal from the other people that she has had a premature birth . . . the standard of conduct is shifted from a natural to a supernatural basis; . . . the will of God tends to supercede the wishes, real or imaginary, of purely natural beings." Golden Bough, iii, 213-214.

²⁸For confession is like a spiritual purge, *ibid.*, 214-219.

²⁹Ibid., iii, 140; 152-155, 211.

"Among the Kei Islanders, if a woman dies in child-bed, they kill the unborn babe, to prevent the woman becoming a *Pontianak*, in which case she would haunt her husband and emasculate him."²⁹ Far nearer to us, in every way, is "The universal belief of Galician Jews that no dead pregnant woman should be buried with child within. That would mean a great danger to the town in which it happened. So when such a case occurs, all means are taken to abstract the child from the body of its mother."³⁰ This cause-and-effect I felt sure about but never expected to find it thus exemplified; it seems to bring into today's life the reason for that operation among the ancient Hebrews^{31,32} which has long stood unexplained in the history of the cesarean section. This history has been written in a skeptical spirit, possibly as a consequence of the heavy percentage of cesarean mortality, almost into our time. In view of the numerous representations in the arts^{33,34} and of incidental notices,³⁵ it seems probable that the Greeks and Romans were more successful in performing the cesarean section than were our ancestors; this is the more likely because of the surprising finds of such operations in Africa.^{36,37} That the child was extracted from the dead mother on magical grounds was doubtless the reason for the Roman *Lex Regia* which comes to us from very early times.³⁸ This law puzzled a famous surgeon-theologian-inquisitor of the Church in explaining in his *Sacra Embryologia*³⁹ how the practice as to baptism, as set out in the *Rituale Romanum*,⁴⁰ coincided in effect with that coming "*ab antiquis Romanis, quamquam Idololatris et nihil de Baptismate cogitantibus.*" This can properly be explained by remembering that ancient Rome was a regular fossil-bed of primitive beliefs and practices;⁴¹ so (the Romans of all epochs being singularly conservative) it would be strange indeed if so important a practice should not have survived. Only a small shift in view was needed and this in line with other analogues to "Sin-eating" as noted by Frazer: "The original intention of such practices was perhaps not so much to take away the sins of the deceased as to rid the survivors of the pollution of death."⁴²

All necessary was to fix the time for the soul's entering the fetus (say at forty or eighty days of pregnancy),⁴³ and to direct attention

²⁹Mystic Rose . . . (A. E. Crawley), 73.

³⁰Translation of (S. Rubin) Der Urquell, 1897, n.f. i, 270.

³¹"Nothing more or less than the classical Cesarean section:" Embryology and Obstetrics in ancient Hebrew Literature (D. I. Macht) Johns Hopkins Hospital Bulletin, 1911, xxii, 143-146 at 145.

³²But see more extended discussion in Biblisch-talmudische Medizin (J. Preuss, 1911) at 490-498, 698-700.

³³L'operation césarienne dans l'art, Chronique Médicale, 1910, xvii, 1785; (and 1908, xv, at 149-150).

³⁴Der Kaiserschnitt nach den ältesten Überlieferungen unter Zugrundelegung von 18 Geburtdarstellungen, (F. Weindler) Janus, 1915, xx, 1-40.

³⁵E. G., Across a Gap of 2,000 Years (A. Ela) Jour. Am. Veterinary Med. Assn., 1916, n. s. i, 650.

³⁶Notes on Labor in Central Africa (R. W. Felkin) Edinburgh Med. Jour., 1883-4, xxix, 922-930, at 928-929, and plates.

³⁷L'âme d'un peuple africain, les bambara (Joseph Henry) 225, (non vidi); Mit Emin Pascha ins Herz von Afrika. (F. Stuhlmann, 1894) 82, 184, 391, 625, 674, 724.

³⁸Numa Pompilius; "Negat lex regia mulierem, quae praegnans mortua sit, humari, antequam partus ei excidatur: qui contra fecerit, spem animantis cum gravida peremisse videtur." Digesta, i, xi, t. 8 (ed. T. Mommsen, 1902, i, 158).

³⁹Theologie und Geburtshilfe nach F. E. Cangiamila's Sacra Embryologia (editio Latina, MDCLXIV) mit aktuellen Bemerkungen (L. Knapp, 1908).

⁴⁰Ibid., at 72: "Si mater praegnans fuerit, foetus quam primum caute extrahatur, ac si vivus fuerit, baptizetur."

⁴¹See Golden Bough, ix, 234; and Religious Life of Ancient Rome (J. B. Carter) 5.

⁴²Golden Bough, ix, 46, footnote² end.

⁴³Archiv für Kriminal-Anthropologie und Kriminalistik, 1914, ix, 330; this question has a very great literature (J. Preuss in Biblisch-talmudische Medizin at 450); discussion, with some new light thereon, is postponed.

toward saving this immortal soul rather than toward what injury it might do the survivors. This gave rise to the new⁴⁴ theory of the rights of the unborn child as a separate creature,⁴⁵ which were discussed in connection with abortion, cesarean section and, later, in "the great debate as to intrauterine baptism."⁴⁶ The doctors of the Sorbonne finally decided that such baptism even by midwives is valid,⁴⁷ and special apparatus to administer such was made and can be seen depicted.^{48,49} As the Church is opposed to craniotomy⁵⁰ and other killing of the unborn,⁵¹ so (for the purpose of the child's baptism) it enjoined performance of the cesarean section if the mother be dead; this command was enforced on the physician, by the Civil Arm, under penalties even reaching death. Whether it is his duty to operate on the living mother (who has had the sacraments) with or without her consent, is still a matter of controversy.⁵²

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⁴⁴Infant-baptism was not usual among the early Christians (M. Höfer in *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, 1909, xii, at 353, end), before the fifth century (Evolution of Infant Baptism, Tymms, 1912, non vidi), after the Roman influence had loomed larger in comparison with the Jewish and Greek.

⁴⁵See *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vi, 56; *Medical Record*, Jan. 8, 1919, 108, end; *Alienist and Neurologist*, 1911, xxxii, 262-273.

⁴⁶*Die Medizin in der klassischen Malerei* (E. Holländer), 240, end.

⁴⁷*L'Art d'Accoucher* (J. Astruc, 1785) 336-341; 327-335.

⁴⁸Fuller details in *Histoire des Accouchements chez tous les peuples* (G.-J.-A. Witkowski, 1887 ed.) 141-144.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*: Appendix: *L'Arsenal Obstétrical*, 47-48; text, 145-146.

⁵⁰An instrument for the baptism of children before birth (H. M. B. Moens) *Med. Rev. of Rev.*, Oct., 1919, xxv, 622-624, seems to be the result of a ghastly hoax gulped by a traveler blinded by religious prejudice; see *L'Arsenal Obstétrical*, 29-35, devices depicted under heading: *Accouchement prématuré artificiel et avortement provoqué*. Investigation is under way, at the place of the alleged occurrence, to ascertain whether his error was the result of such a hoax, of his misunderstanding explanations in a tongue unfamiliar to him, or of what.

⁵¹*Ecclesiastical Review*, 1895, xiii, 128; see its index as to all the points herein touched, as also *Das Kind* (Ploss-Renz), and *Das Weib* (Ploss-Bartels) *passim*.

⁵²*Ethics of Medical Homicide and Mutilation* (A. O'Malley), *passim*; this book, published under archepiscopal sanction after this article was typed, agrees with many details herein.

⁵³See, as to this whole part of the subject, these good items: *Histoire des Accouchements* . . . (Witkowski) 147-148; Address on the administration of baptism, delivered before the Guild of Sts. Luke, Cosmas and Damian. . . . (A. J. Schulte, 1915); *Med. and Surg.*, 1917, i, at 143-144; Discussion on legal aspects of postmortem Cesarean section (C.-W. Whiteside) *Am. Jour. Obst.*, 1916, lxxii, 1051-1058, 1126-1127; Postmortem Cesarean Section (O. G. Pfaff), *ibid.*, 1916, lxxiv, 967-970, 970-972; Same in *Tr. Am. Assn. Obst. and Gynec.*, 1916, xxix, 42-45, 45-47; (G. Linzenmeier) in *Med. Klin.*, 1920, xvi, 439-442.

The diminishing chances of the child's survival and its lessened legal rights (and especially such of the widower), if extraction be delayed till death of the mother, are questions, interesting indeed, but not germane.

Selected Abstracts

General Problems of Obstetrics

Herbert R. Spencer: William Harvey, Obstetric Physician and Gynecologist. *British Medical Journal*, 1921, No. 3173, p. 621.

The author gives a brief sketch of William Harvey and some of his work. He also considers the contribution of 16th century Paduan teachers of obstetrics and gynecology, discussing the status of obstetrical work in the 16th and 17th centuries. The paper contains interesting pictures of the frontispiece of Harvey's "De Generatione Animalium"; the facade of the university building at Padua; the title page of Mercurio's "La Comare", and the illustration of a Cesarean Section from the same work. There is also a print of the Canterbury portrait of William Harvey. Quotations are given from the Medical Observations of Harvey which deserve careful consideration at the present time. Following some remarks