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# 1

## The Subordination of Women Revisited: A Contextual and Inter- textual Exegesis of Genesis 3:16

Jacques B. Doukhan

### Introduction

**Y**our desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen 3:16 NKJV). Most interpreters have read this text as a part of the curse directed to the woman.<sup>1</sup> The woman is affected not only in the pain of her child bearing (first part of the curse) but also in the pain of her subordination to her husband (second part of the curse).<sup>2</sup> It is usually argued that “rule” here represents “harsh exploitive subjugation,

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<sup>1</sup> For a review of the six major interpretations of this passage, see Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson, 2007), 60–65.

<sup>2</sup> Thus, S. R. Driver read there an “allusion to the oppressed condition of women in Antiquity” (*The Book of Genesis: With Introduction and Notes*, 14<sup>th</sup> ed.; WC [London: Methuen, 1943], 49); likewise, John C. L. Gibson applied this text to the status of the woman as “subordinate to that of man” (*Genesis*, 2 vols.; Old Testament Daily Study Bible 24 [Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1981], 1:137); C. F. Delitzsch concluded from this passage that the woman who was “created for man . . . was made subordinate to him” (*A New Commentary on Genesis* [trans. Sophia Taylor; 2 vols.; repr. 1978; Edinburg: T & Clark, 1888], 1:103); for H. G. Leupold this is the woman’s “penalty . . . that she should be the one that is controlled” (*Exposition of Genesis* [Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1942], 172). Having briefly reviewed the various “common interpretations” of this passage, Susan T. Foh observed that

which so often characterizes woman's lot in all sorts of societies.”<sup>3</sup> However, as we shall see, a careful examination of Gen 3:16 with special attention to its particular connections with Gen 4:7 and Gen 3:15 suggests another direction of interpretation.

### The Connection with Genesis 4:7

Indeed the numerous echoes between the two texts, Gen 3:16 and Gen 4:7, which are both rebuking words of God, are worth noticing:

Gen 3:16: וְאֶל-אִשְׁךָ תִּשְׁקָתָּ וְהוּא יִמְשֹׁל-בְּךָ

Gen 4:7: וְאֵלֶיךָ תִּשְׁקָתוֹ וְאַתָּה תִּמְשָׁל-בּוֹ

Transliterated text:

Gen 3:16: ***we'el-'ishek teshukatek wehu' yimshol-bak***

Gen 4:7: ***we'eleka teshukato we'atta timshol-bo***

Literal translation:

Gen 3:16: and to your husband your desire, but he shall rule over you

Gen 4:7: and to you his desire, but you should rule over him

As the bold print of the Hebrew transliteration indicates, the Hebrew is basically the same, except for the corresponding adaptations to person and gender:

1. The same technical and rare word *teshuqah* (“desire”) is used within the same association with the word *mshl* (“rule”);
2. The same prepositions and particles at the same place (beginning and end of the phrase): *we'el*, “and to” . . . *b*, “over”;
3. The same sequence of the same words “and to” (with pronominal suffix)-“desire” (with pronominal suffix)-“but he/you”-“rule”-preposition *b* (with pronominal suffix);
4. The same syntax: note, for instance, the same *waw* of contrast opposing the two statements (“but he” // “but you”).

These consistent linguistic and syntactical parallels invite for a reading of Gen 3:16 in the light of Gen 4:7, and should, therefore, guide us in our interpretation of the text. As Victor Hamilton noted, “Given the pairing of

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“despite the differences . . . all the commentators agree that through the woman's desire for her husband, he rules her” (“What is the Woman's Desire?” *WTJ* 37 [September 1975]: 377).

<sup>3</sup>G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC 59 (Waco, TX: Word Books), 81.

*tēšûqāṭô* and *timšōl* in [Genesis] 4:7, one suspects that the pairing of *tēšûqāṭēk* and *yimšāl* [in Genesis 3:16] should carry the same force, whatever that is. Here is a case where the clear meaning of 4:7 illuminates a less clear meaning of 3:16.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed several interpreters have recognized the similarity and parallelism of language between the two texts; unfortunately they generally fail to account for it, either partially or totally in their interpretation.<sup>5</sup> It is this challenge that I propose to pursue in this exegetical enterprise. On account of the particular connection between those two texts, I will seek the sense of the whole text of Gen 3:16 in connection to Gen 4:7. This task will not only deal with the meaning of the technical words of the phrase such as *teshuqah* and *mshl*, but will also embrace by implication and, more significantly, the place and the meaning of the curse on the woman.

### The Meaning of *teshuqah* (“Desire”)

The word *teshuqah* is rare; it is only used three times, in these two passages and in Song of Songs 7:10. It is clear however that the use of this word in the two Genesis texts is fundamentally different than in the Song of Songs, as the association of words, the syntax, and the literary context testify. Unlike the two Genesis texts, the Song of Songs does not associate the word *teshuqah* with the word *mshl* and is applied to the man in regards to the woman in a positive context of joy and salvation. Furthermore, the preposition ‘*al* (“on”) is used instead of the preposition ‘*el* (“to”), suggesting that the *teshuqah*, which in Gen 3:16 was oriented “towards” the future (‘*el*), has now in the Song of Songs reached its point of destination, it is “on” (‘*al*) it. The fact that in the Song of Songs the phrase “his *teshuqah* is on me” is in parallelism to the phrase “I am to my beloved” (literal translation) and takes the place of the usual phrase “and my beloved is mine” (Song 2:16; 6:3) confirms this shift of meaning. It means that the relationship which is described in Genesis as a “not yet” process has now reached the mature stage of “belonging.” All these changes in the Song of Songs in comparison to the Genesis text suggest a new direction from that in Genesis, thus transforming, transfiguring the original meaning of the word in Genesis.<sup>6</sup> The use of the

<sup>4</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, NICOT 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 201. Likewise Walter Vogels argued that “the closeness of these two verses . . . invites us to explain one verse in light of the other” (“The Power Struggle between Man and Woman [Gen 3,16b],” *Bib* 77. 2 [1996]: 201).

<sup>5</sup> See Foh, “Woman’s Desire,” 381; cf. Vogels, “Power Struggle,” 201.

<sup>6</sup> See Phyllis Trible’s comment on the juxtaposition of the Song to the Genesis narratives as positive to negative, as celebration contrasted to exploitation (*God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, OBT [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978], 144–165); see Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 73, 552, 577.

passage in the Song of Songs to understand our Genesis text should therefore be circumscribed insofar as it suggests only its reverse side. The connection between the two Genesis texts is much stronger than that with the Song of Songs, considering the number of unique parallels between the two Genesis texts, and their contextual relation. The interpretation of the word *teshuqah* in Gen 3:16 should be, therefore, conducted essentially in connection to the other Genesis text rather than in connection to the text of the Song of Songs.

Reading Gen 3:16 in the light of Gen 4: 7 suggests that beyond the *teshuqah* of the woman towards the man, it is “sin” that is profiled as “desiring” Adam and prompting him to evil. Indeed the word *teshuqah* in Gen 4:7 should be interpreted in relation to its most immediate antecedent *hatt’at* “sin,”<sup>7</sup> referring not only to the evil deed per se but also to the associated consequences. Thus the word may be associated with death (Exod 10:17) and have a cosmic scope (1 Kgs 13:34). More particularly, this feminine form based on the intensive “refers to the enduring sphere of conduct observed by Yahweh, which He will one day punish or which must be atoned for.”<sup>8</sup> It is not surprising, then, that the word *hatta’t* is used in connection with the word *ns’* to describe the vicarious process of atonement (Exod 10:7; 1 Sam 15:25), and belongs also to the language of Leviticus, in the majority of cases referring to the “sin offering” (Lev 7:37; Ezek 40:39). The meaning of the word *hatta’t* in Gen 4:7 is therefore not well settled. Does the word mean, “sin,” “evil,” referring here to the evil power that would allure the sinner? Or does it mean “sin offering” referring to the solution to the problem of evil, its vicarious atonement represented by the sacrifice? Both interpretations have been advocated. As Koch noted for the word *hatta’t*, “the assignment to one or the other meaning varies from exegete to exegete,” and he then raised an interesting question: “Should we postulate a double usage of the word, a technical meaning alongside the common meaning? Or are the two meanings really more closely related than they seem to the modern Western observer?”<sup>9</sup> Could it be that this ambiguity is implied in this text? If this were the case, it would mean that the same text which refers to sin/evil alluring (*teshuqah*) the sinner would also carry the solution to that sin/evil, namely,

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<sup>7</sup> It cannot therefore refer to Abel, whose name only appears several verses before (v. 4), contra Joaquim Azevedo, “At the Door of Paradise. A Contextual Interpretation of Gen 4:7,” *BN* 100 (1999): 50–51. Also the meaning of *teshuqah*, which implies the specific relationship between male and female (Gen 3:16 and Song 7:10), would not fit the relationship between Cain and Abel.

<sup>8</sup> K. Koch, “*hatta’*,” *TDOT*, 4:312.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:316.

the “sin offering” that brings atonement. This ambiguity may in fact account for the awkward syntax that uses the masculine participial form *robets* (“lying down”) in connection to its feminine subject *hatta’t*, thus implying both the feminine, the “sin offering” and the masculine, the threatening evil. It is interesting that the same ambiguity is attested in the meaning of the word *rbts*, which is generally associated with animals but carries both positive and negative overtones. The positive side of *rbts* refers to the sacrificial animal, which rests in the pasture, carrying a message of hope through the promise of atonement. The word *rbts* is indeed associated with the pasturing herd or flock (Gen 29:2) and the shepherd (Isa 13:20). This interpretation on the positive side has the merit to fit with the immediate context that deals precisely with the issue of the right sacrifice confronting Cain and Abel.<sup>10</sup>

The negative side of *rbts* refers to dangerous and hunting animals, the fierce and violent lion (Gen 49:9), the wild beasts of the desert (Isa 13:20–21), or the monstrous crocodile (Ezek 29:3). Significantly the word *rbts* is also associated with the “deep” (Gen 49:25; Deut 33:13), and with a “curse” (Deut 29:19, 20). The latter example is particularly interesting as it evokes, like in Gen 4:7, a personification behind the word *rbts*. The curse on the sinner is personified as an animal: “it will lie in wait for him (*rbts*).” Now, the implied presence of a malefic animal behind the word *rbts* in Gen 4:16 points naturally to the serpent<sup>11</sup> (masculine) mentioned just above in the oracle about the prophetic conflict with the serpent (Gen 3:15), as well as in the previous episode dealing with the temptation (Gen 3:6), a section with which our text shares a good number of parallels.<sup>12</sup> This specific identification is also confirmed from the outside by the use of the word *rbts* in Akkadian, where it is associated with some kind of demonic animal, a view that is shared by most interpreters.<sup>13</sup> The ambiguous range of our text suggests, then, that behind the word *teshuqato* “his desire” we may read as its agent “*hatta’t robets*,” the lying (feminine-masculine), not only as a reference to the

<sup>10</sup> See on that Azevedo, “Door of Paradise,” 49.

<sup>11</sup> See Vogels, “Power Struggle,” 204.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. W. Dietrich, “Wo ist dein Bruder?; Zur Tradition und Intention von Genesis 4,” in *Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen Theologie: Festschrift für W. Zimmerli zum 70. Geburtstag* (ed. Herbert Donner, Robert Hanhart, and Rudolf Smend; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1977), 94–111; Walter Vogels, “Cain: l’être humain qui devient une personne (Gn. 4: 1–16),” *NRTh* 114 (1992): 327.

<sup>13</sup> See E. J. Waschke, “*rabats*,” *TDOT*, 13:303. This demonic and animal identification excludes, of course, the interpretation that relates *teshuqah* to Abel, as defended by K. A. Deurloo, “תְּשׁוּקָה, dependency, Gen 4,7,” *ZAW* 99.3 (1987): 405; cf. Von Ulrich Wöller, “Zu Gen 4:7,” *ZAW* 96 (1984): 271–272.

personification of evil, the serpent that has initiated the sin, but also the solution to that sin and the problem of evil, namely the “sin offering,” atoning for it. In other words, it may well be that one interpretation does not exclude the other one and that a double entendre is here intended. The agent of *teshuqah* is then both the sin/evil and its solution, the atoning sin offering.<sup>14</sup> This reading of Gen 4:7 suggests that our text has then nothing to do with some kind of “sexual” desire on the part of the woman towards her husband, as it has often been claimed;<sup>15</sup> the text is not so much concerned with Adam’s relationship with the woman (as female) per se, as it is with Adam’s relationship with the power of evil manifested by the serpent in the context of Gen 3.

### The Meaning of *mashal* (“Rule”)

In Gen 4: 7, God’s advice to Cain is then that “he should (or “would”) control” (*mshl*) this evil. The verb is in the jussive mood. If we transfer this syntax to the same verb in Gen 3:16, we are allowed to interpret it here also as a jussive, meaning that man should control (or should have controlled)<sup>16</sup> this evil “desiring” him.<sup>17</sup> The issue at stake here has then nothing to do with men (males) designed to control and subdue women, as a result of Eve’s having tempted Adam, but rather with the issue of controlling evil, as figured in Gen 4: 7 through the image of a crouching animal, alias the serpent. Through the connection between the two texts, one may read that, just as Cain would overcome the evil only through a sacrifice, man should also be victorious over evil, the serpent, only through a sacrifice. This is the scenario just described in Gen 3:15. This is why in Gen 3:16, just as in Gen 4:7, the verb *mshl* should be understood with an aggressive and violent connotation<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Although this interpretation of *hatt’at* as “sin offering” allows the recognition of an allusion to Abel who offered a sin offering, it remains only an indirect one by association.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, L. Ouellette, “Woman’s Doom in Genesis 3:16,” *CBQ* 12 (1950): 389–399. Also the etymological analysis of the word *teshuqah* (probably from the Arabic root *saqa*) does not support the idea of sexual desire but points rather to the idea of “urge,” “impel,” see Foh, “Woman’s Desire,” 378.

<sup>16</sup> In Hebrew, the verb does not express the categories of tense (past, present, or future) and only carries aspects; see *IBHS*, 247–248. Thus the use of the Imperfect form to render the past conditional (in English “should have”) is well attested in Hebrew; see, for instance, Lev 10:18; Num 35:28; 2 Kgs 3:27; Job 10:19; Pss 69:22 (Heb. v. 23); 81:15 (Heb. v. 16); Isa 48:19; and Jer 48:19.

<sup>17</sup> This is also the interpretation of Foh: “As the Lord tells Cain what he should do, i.e. master or rule sin, the Lord states what the husband should do, rule over his wife . . . Sin has corrupted both the willing submission of the wife and the loving headship of the husband,” (“Woman’s Desire,” 381–382).

<sup>18</sup> It is significant that the majority of texts use the verb *mshl* in the sense of “political dominion” (H. Gross, “*mshl* II,” *TDOT*, 9:69) and in the context of apocalyptic interpretation of

implying the total crushing of the animal. Any attempt to dismiss the disturbing idea of “dominion” or “control” in the verb *mshl* at the expense of the less threatening idea of “to be like”<sup>19</sup> or even of the more positive idea of “comfort, protect, care for, love,”<sup>20</sup> would not fit the intention implied in the context of Gen 3:16. The act of control applies here to evil and is, therefore, to be received with all its force and negativity. What is “ruled” here, evil and not the woman as a person, has to be dominated even to the extent of being eliminated.<sup>21</sup> This principle warns us against any misappropriation of the “ruling.” The subjection concerns the temptation of evil and should therefore apply to both man and woman,<sup>22</sup> for the need of controlling evil exists for

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history in Dan 11:3–5, 39, 43, to describe the rule (victory) of kings as the result of battles. See also Prov 16:32 where the verb *mshl* parallels the victorious conquest of cities.

<sup>19</sup> See John J. Schmitt, “Like Eve, Like Adam: *Mshl* in Gen 3:16,” *Bib* 72 (1992): 1–22; John H. Otwell, *And Sarah Laughed: The Status of Women in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 197–98. For other proponents of this position, see Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 64. This interpretation is based, however, on an etymological mistake; since the meaning of “be like” belongs to another root, from the Proto-Semitic *mthl* (see K. M. Beyse, “*mashal* I,” *TDOT*, 9:65).

<sup>20</sup> See Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 72. Although this kind of “ruling” on the part of the man over the woman is tempered through spiritual consideration, the submission of the woman still remains in the inferior position; for instance, she will never be able to function as a “committee chair” in the family setting (*ibid.*, 77). As for the warning that this condition “cannot be automatically broadened into a general prescription mandating subordination of all women to men in society” (*ibid.*, 78), it is hardly realistic for it is doubtful that the habit of considering the woman always in the inferior position within the family setting would not influence the position of the woman in society. Besides, this idea is highly problematic and raises a number of serious questions in regard to specific cases: What about the husband working under the supervision of his wife, would he abandon his leadership position? What about the single woman, would she be exempted from the curse? Or should she submit herself to all the men of the planet? What about the woman who has a job and occupies a leadership position while her husband is unemployed, would she, then, have to submit herself to her husband, at home? What about the woman who is more intelligent or wiser than her husband would she have to submit herself to her husband’s will, simply because he is the man, because of the curse? On the other hand, it is ironic that while some men are willing to allow the woman, their wife, to behave as the “boss” at home, they are reluctant to let her rule in the work place or in the church.

<sup>21</sup> It is noteworthy that Ellen G. White applied the same text to the control of our appetite, thus supporting the traditional interpretation that it is sin that lies at the door and should be controlled: “‘And if thou doest not well sin lieth at the door.’ Let all examine their own hearts to see if they are not cherishing that which is a positive injury to them, . . . Let them strive to bring appetite under the control of reason.” (*Manuscript Releases Volume Twenty* [Nos. 1420–1500], p. 8).

<sup>22</sup> Note that the same idea of reciprocity detected in Gen 3:16, which describes the mutual control between man and woman or between man and evil reappears between Cain and evil: unless Cain controls evil he will be controlled by it. The same process of reciprocity could work as well if one retains the allusion to Abel through the reading of *hatt’at* as sin offering: unless Cain controls evil and follows the lead of his younger brother in his offering of the right sacrifice, he would not recover his status as the elder brother, cf. Azevedo, “Door of Paradise,” 50–51; cf. Ellen G. White: “Abel’s offering had been accepted; but this was because he had done in every particular as God required to do. If Cain would correct his error, he would not be deprived of his



both. The biblical text refers to Adam in a generic sense, implying both Adam and Eve (see Gen 3:22). The man should control the urge for evil whether it comes from the woman or from within himself. And the same can be said for the woman. For the problem of temptation exists for the man as well as for the woman, even when they are single. In other words, the subordination of the woman to the man is subject to the subordination of the man to the woman insofar as this subordination pertains to the subordination of evil, and not because she is a woman and he is a man. It seems that this interdependent submission is implied in Paul's double recommendation: "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. . . . Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it" (Eph 5:22–25).<sup>23</sup>

### The Cause for the Curse

Our passage (Gen 3:16), the curse directed at the woman, is situated in the center of the three curses (Gen 3:14–19). Three times, the word of God is introduced by the regular "said," and the reference to the addressee, "to the serpent," "to the woman," and "to the man":

Gen 3:14–15:

So the Lord God said to the serpent:  
"Because you have done this,  
You are cursed . . ."

Gen 3:16:

To the woman He said:

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birthright: Abel would not only love him as his brother, but, as the younger, would be subject to him. Thus the Lord declared to Cain, 'Unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.'" (*Bible Echo*, April 8, 1912, par. 7).

<sup>23</sup> It is interesting that this paradigm of reciprocal subjection has been implied in Ellen G. White's interpretation of this passage: "In the creation God made her the equal of Adam. Had they remained obedient to God—in harmony with His great law of love—they would ever have been in harmony with each other; but sin had brought discord, and now their union could be maintained and harmony preserved only by **submission on the part of the one or the other.**" (*Patriarchs and Prophets* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1958], 58; emphasis supplied). Then White explained that it is because Eve was the first to have left the original state of original harmony that God enjoined her, to submit herself to the new order of mutual subjection described as "submission on the part of the one or the other." Then White deplored that this divine readjustment was broken by man who abused the new situation: "Had the principles enjoined in the law of God been cherished by the fallen race, this sentence [of mutual subjection], though growing out of the results of sin, would have proved a blessing to them; but man's abuse of the supremacy thus given him has too often rendered the lot of woman very bitter and made her life a burden" (*ibid.*, 58–59).

“I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception;  
in pain you shall bring forth children;  
Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule  
over you.”

Gen 3:17–19:

Then to Adam He said:

“Because you have heeded the voice of your wife,  
and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded  
you, saying, ‘You shall not eat of it’:

Cursed is the ground for your sake.” (NKJV)

A comparison between the word of God to the serpent and to Adam on the one hand and the word of God to the woman on the other hand reveals one striking particularity in the word addressed to the woman: while the two curses to the serpent and to Adam are regularly introduced by a reason, “Because you have done this” (Gen 3:14); “Because you have heeded the voice of your wife . . .” (Gen 3:17), the curse of the woman has no such introduction. This irregularity suggests that the reason for the curse has been given but we have not been able to identify it. Insofar as the meaning of Gen 3:16 should be searched in the light of Gen 4:7, an analysis of the reason for the control in the former text may help also to determine the reason for the control in the latter text.

Indeed the text of Gen 4: 7 contains two distinctive phrases, as indicated by the Massoretic accentuation (the disjunctive *atnakh* marks the separation after *rbts*), and the logical connection between the two phrases suggests that the second phrase, “And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it,” should be understood as the explanation, the reason for the first phrase “Isn’t if you do well, lifted; but if you do not do well, sin lies at the door” (my literal translation).

The linguistic connections *’im teytiv* (“if you do well”) // *’im l’o teytiv* (“if you do not do well”) and the symmetric conclusion on the verbs with opposite meanings *s’et* (“lift”) and *rbts* (“lie down”) suggest that the two statements “”Isn’t if you do well, lifted,” and “but if you do not do well, sin lies at the door” belong together in the same sentence and are both under the regime of the same interrogation *halo’* (“isn’t?”). Then, the second sentence, is not just related to the last statement about *rbts*, as suggested by a number of translations,<sup>24</sup> but responds to the whole interrogative phrase. The

<sup>24</sup> See *The Bible in Basic English* (BBE) and *Young’s Literal Translation* (YLT).

purpose of the second phrase is now to explain the condition described in the first sentence, why “sin lies at the door.” The introductory *waw* would then function as an explanatory/causal *waw*;<sup>25</sup> and the verse could therefore be literally translated in these terms:

“If you do well, will you not be accepted?

And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door.

**Because** (*waw*) its desire (is) for you, and you should rule [or should have ruled] over it.”<sup>26</sup>

The reason why “sin lies at the door” and why your offering has not been accepted is that “you should have ruled over it” through the sacrifice. If this analysis is correct, we could infer by analogy that in Gen 3:16, the second phrase “Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you” should be understood in a similar manner as the explanation to the first phrase, “I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children.” In this perspective, the second phrase would then function as the reason for the first phrase, the curse, as it is the case for the two other curses:

“I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children

**Because** your desire (is) for your husband, and he should rule [should have ruled] over you.”

With the lessons learned from the semantic and syntactical connections with Gen 4: 7, we would like to propose the following translation: “Because to your man, your *teshuqah*, but he should control you.” This statement refers back to the past situation when evil was “desiring” man, but he has not controlled it (Gen 3:6), as well as to any future similar situation when evil is to be controlled. And this failure to control evil is identified as the very reason for the curse, given here before the cause, in contrast to the other two curses, displaying then the following double chiastic structure ABBA, BAAB:

**Because** you have done this (A),  
you are cursed (B) . . .

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<sup>25</sup> See *IBHS*, 651.

<sup>26</sup> It seems that this explicative function of the second phrase has been perceived by the American Standard Version, since it puts a colon before our phrase, “If thou doest well, shall it not be lifted up? and if thou does not well, sin coucheth at the door: and unto thee shall be its desire, but do thou rule over it” (Gen 4:7).

I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children (B)

**Because** your desire for your husband, and he should rule [should have ruled] over you (A)

**Because** you have heeded the voice of your wife (A) . . .

Cursed is the ground for your sake (B)

It is also noteworthy that this thematic flow cause-curse of the text is followed and thus confirmed not only by the shift of tenses, but also by the shift of persons involved, serpent-woman/woman-man/man:

Words to the serpent: Cause (A), Past (serpent); Curse (B), Future (woman);

Words to the woman: Curse (B), Future (woman); Cause (A), Past (man);

Words to the man: Cause (A), Past (man); Curse (B), Future (man).

The implication of this reading is that the second phrase of Gen 3:16 is not a part of the curse but only its explanation, and this observation should affect the very meaning of the curse on the woman.

### **The Meaning of the Curse and the Connection with Genesis 3:15**

The cause of the curse refers to the failure of the man and the woman to rule over evil and points beyond the mere issue of the husband-wife relationship to the cosmic issue of salvation. The meaning of the curse on the woman should also, then, be concerned with more than the mere issue of clinical birth and should also point to the cosmic solution. This direction of reading is, indeed, confirmed as we note the particular connections between Gen 3:16 and its preceding verse, Gen 3:15, and apprehend this verse within its immediate context of the three curses.

### **The Connection Between Gen 3:15 and Gen 3:16**

Gen 3:15: וְאִיכָה אֲשִׁית בֵּינִי וּבֵין הָאִשָּׁה וּבֵין יָרֵעָה וּבֵין יָרֵעָה הוּא יְשׁוּפָהּ רֹאשׁ וְאֵתָה תְּשׁוּפֶנּוּ עֶקֶב

Gen 3:16: אֶל-הָאִשָּׁה אָמַר הָרְבָה אֲרֻבָּה עֲצָבוֹנָהּ וְהָרִינָה בְּעֶצֶב תֵּלְדִי בָנִים וְאֶל-אִישָׁהּ תְּשׁוּקָתָהּ וְהוּא יִמְשָׁל-בָּהּ

Transliterated texts:

Gen 3:15: ***we'ebah 'ashit benka uben ha'ishshah uben zar'aka uben zer'ah hu' yeshupka ro'sh we'attah teshupennu 'aqeb***

Gen 3:16: *'el-ha'ishshah 'amar harbeh 'arbe 'itsbonek weheronek  
be'esseb teldi banim we'el-'ishek teshukatek wehu' yimshol-  
bak*

Literal translation:

Gen 3:15: Enmity I will put between you and the woman and between your seed and her seed, He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel

Gen 3:16: To the woman he said: I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall give birth to children; your desire shall be for your husband, but he should control you

Besides being next to each other, as the bold print of the transliteration indicates, these two texts (Gen 3:15 and Gen 3:16) share a number of common words, syntactical forms, literary parallels, and specific motifs:

1. Both share the same unique divine annunciation in the first person:  
"I will put enmity"  
"I will greatly multiply"
2. Both share the same unique reference to "the woman" (*ha-'ishah*).
3. Both share the same reciprocal relation of "ruling over /crushing" between the masculine third person ("he," *hu'*) and the second person "you":  
He (*hu'*) will crush you [masc], but you [masc] will crush him  
To your [fem] husband your [fem] desire, but he [*hu'*] will rule over you [fem]
4. Both share the same motif of birth: in Gen 3:15 by reference to the seed (*zera'*) and in Gen 3:16 by reference to conception and giving birth to sons.

Indeed the strong echoes between these two texts suggest, as is the case with Gen 4:7, that these two texts are interrelated and that they should be understood in connection to each other. The parallels invite, then, to a reading of Gen 3:16 in the light of Gen 3:15:

1. The phrase of the curse "I will greatly multiply" related to the phrase "I will put enmity" would mean, then, that the curse on the woman, bearing on the birth giving, should be understood in the perspective of the "enmity" put by God between the forces of evil and the messianic seed.

2. The echo on “the woman” (*ha-’isha*) would mean that the woman who will suffer the pain of birth giving and the woman who is confronted with the serpent are the same. This identification between the two women is confirmed by the structural thematic flow of the three curses: Serpent-woman, woman-man, man. Just as the mention of the man in the third curse follows and is related to the man of the second curse, the woman of the second curse follows and should then be related to the woman of the first curse.
3. The literary parallel of reciprocal relation between the “he” (*hu’*) who crushes the serpent (second person) and the “he” (*hu’*) who rules over the woman (second person) suggests that the ruling over the woman should be understood within the fight which confronts the messianic seed with the serpent.
4. The same motif of birth in the two curses suggests that the pain and the anguish associated with birth giving and the woman in the second curse should also be related to the woman and birth giving in the first curse, and therefore to salvation. Saying that birth is threatened, means that the process of salvation, which depends on the delicate transmission of the “messianic” seed, is itself threatened. It is also interesting to notice that the same anguish is associated to the curse of the earth in God’s words to man; the same word *’itsavon* (“sorrow” in v. 16 and “toil” in v. 17) reappears there in the same perspective of a threat over the production of the earth and the future of humankind. The use of the same key word for the curse on the earth, which relates to man, as for the curse on birth, which relates to the woman, suggests that the two curses are of the same nature. The anguish and the pain in the curse of the woman means then more than the physical pain of childbirth; its horizon is cosmic and concerns human fate and hope. It is in that connection significant that the word “curse” (Heb. *’rr*) is never directly used for man or woman; it only applies to the serpent (Gen 3:14) and to the earth (Gen 3:17). There is still hope for humans. This is precisely the lesson that Adam takes in the conclusion of the section of the curses. Following immediately the prophecy on the

name of Adam (*'adam*), etymologically related to the word “earth” (*'adamah*) and conveying death and hopelessness (Gen 3:19), Adam comments on the name of Eve, referring to her childbearing: “And Adam called his wife’s name Eve, because she was the mother of all living” (Gen 3:20). This prophecy on the name of Eve (*Hawah*), etymologically related to the word “life” (*hay*), conveys, now, as a response to death and hopelessness contained in the name of Adam, the message of hope and salvation.

### Conclusion

Our exegetical analysis of Gen 3:16, which proceeded in connection to its unique parallel text in Gen 4:7, has led us to a new understanding of the meaning of the curse: the pain of giving birth by the woman in Gen 3:16 and the action of “ruling over” (*mshl*) should be interpreted within the paradigm of the conflict opposing humans to the force of evil “lying at the door” in Gen 4:7, rather than within the mere paradigm of male-female relationship.

This interpretation has been confirmed by our exegesis of Gen 3:16 in connection to the verse which precedes it, Gen 3:15: The pain of giving birth by the woman in Gen 3:16 is to be related to the cosmic enmity and conflict between evil and the messianic seed as outlined in Gen 3:15, and should therefore be understood in the perspective of the message of hope as outlined in that first messianic prophecy.

Ironically, the so-called curse on the woman that has been abusively exploited to justify the subordination and hence the oppression over women by men may well have been intended to mean, instead, blessing and salvation for humankind.