

## **Breastfeeding and the Bible**

by Larry G. Overton

I recently received an email that contained just one line, one simple question: “Is there anything in the Bible that relates to breastfeeding?”

The question was an interesting one, for several reasons. For one thing, I find any study of the Scriptures interesting. It is also interesting because of some family background that pertains to breastfeeding. If you’ve read the “Who We Are” page on my web site, then you know that my wife Beth is a midwife, documented by the Licensure Department of the Texas Department of Health. (If you’re interested, Beth has a web site you can visit at [texas-midwife.com](http://texas-midwife.com).) She has also completed the Intensive Course in Breastfeeding, Phase I offered by the TDH. So the subject of breastfeeding very directly relates to my wife’s chosen profession.

Furthermore, Beth breastfed all three of our children, and has counseled our three girls (two daughters and a daughter-in-law) on breastfeeding. Our oldest daughter (Kassy) currently has two children and breastfed both of them up to around age two. Our daughter-in-law (Hannah) is still nursing her son, and he will turn two in March. Our youngest daughter (Jessica) just married last August, and she and her husband are not planning on having children for at least another year. Even so, Jessica, a certified EMT who is studying to become a midwife, is determined to breastfeed her own children when the time comes.

So, this subject is definitely of interest to my wife and me. Beth even requested that I develop this email response into an article. So, I answered the email, and then immediately began to expand the information I sent in that email response into this research paper.

Yes, the Bible speaks of breastfeeding, although you won’t necessarily find the actual term “breastfeeding” in Scripture. However, there are several key words under this general topic: breasts, nursing, suckling, etc. Also, the wording in these passages may vary slightly, depending upon which Bible version you read from.

The Bible mentions breastfeeding (or “giving suck,” “suckling,” or “nursing,” depending upon your translation) in two ways: as a literal reference to the physical act of breastfeeding, and a reference to the image of breastfeeding as an idiomatic expression or even a metaphor. In this research paper, I will deal with the literal references first, which will include a discussion of the duration of breastfeeding, or, to put that another way, how long children in Biblical times were

breastfed before they were weaned. I will then consider the non-literal, idiomatic references to breastfeeding.

### *Literal References*

The first reference in the Hebrew Scriptures to breastfeeding is found in Genesis 21:7. Here is that passage, along with the following verse, quoted in the New International Version.

And she added, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”<sup>8</sup> The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast.

The phrase “would nurse children” is rendered in the King James Version (KJV) as “should haue giuen children sucke.”

Breastfeeding is mentioned in the Scriptures as a very matter of fact and common occurrence. So common, in fact, that it was taken for granted as the normal way of feeding an infant. Consider the following examples of such matter of fact Biblical references to breastfeeding.

Why did the knees receive me? Or why the breasts, that I should nurse? [Job 3:12, New King James Version]

If only you were to me like a brother, who was nursed at my mother's breasts! Then, if I found you outside, I would kiss you, and no one would despise me. [Song of Solomon 8:1, NIV]

“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!” [Isaiah 49:15, NIV]

And it happened, as He spoke these things, that a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, “Blessed *is* the womb that bore You, and *the* breasts which nursed You!” [Luke 11:27, NKJV]

Of course, Playtex™ bottles hadn't been invented yet, so this norm is quite understandable. In the rare event of someone not being able to breastfeed a child, the alternative was a wet nurse. For a Biblical example of this, see Exodus 2:7-10, which I quote below, taken from the New American Standard Bible (1995 Updated Edition).

7 Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, “Shall I go and call a nurse for you from the Hebrew women that she may nurse the child for you?”

8 And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, “Go *ahead*.” So the girl went and called the child's mother.

9 Then Pharaoh's daughter said to her, “Take this child away and nurse him for me and I will give *you* your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed him.

10 The child grew, and she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. And she named him Moses, and said, "Because I drew him out of the water."

In verse 7, Miriam offers to call "a nurse" for the Egyptian princess. Darby translated this as "a wet-nurse." The phrase in Hebrew is literally "a woman causing to be breastfed" (*'ishāh mēyneqet* [אִשָּׁה מֵיִנְקֶת]). Of course, that literal rendering of the Hebrew construction sounds very awkward to our English ears. A more palatable way to put that in English is the participial phrase, "a nursing woman." This particular grammatical construction in Hebrew (a feminine singular participle in the hiphil [causative] verbal stem) is used five times in the Old Testament, and in each case is typically translated "nurse" (Genesis 24:59; 35:8; Exodus 2:7; 2 Kings 11:2; 2 Chronicles 22:11). While it appears from these verses that the duties of such a "nurse" extended beyond breastfeeding, and could even lead to a lifelong relationship, it is still clear that the basic function and origin of the "job title," so to speak, was that she was a "breastfeeding woman."

Breastfeeding was associated with bearing children, which was considered a blessing. By extension, breastfeeding was considered a blessing and "dry breasts" a curse, as the following two passages make clear.

"because of your father's God, who helps you, because of the Almighty, who blesses you with blessings of the heavens above, blessings of the deep that lies below, blessings of the breast and womb." [Genesis 49:25, NIV]

"Give them, O LORD-- what will you give them? Give them wombs that miscarry and breasts that are dry." [Hosea 9:14, NIV]

### **Breastfeeding and Weaning**

Before we move on to consider the non-literal, idiomatic references to breastfeeding, let's look at what the Bible has to say about how long children in Oriental cultures were breastfed, when they were weaned, in other words. The Bible does not actually tell us when children were weaned from the breast. However, cultural norms concerning this did prevail, and the Scriptures give us clues as to what those norms were. Also, there are sources outside the Bible that tell us more specifically when a child was typically weaned.

Beginning with sources outside the Bible, I turn to the fourth century Roman Catholic teacher Jerome. Adam Clarke in his commentary on Genesis cites two opinions referred to by Jerome. "Some hold that children were always weaned at *five* years of age; others, that they were not weaned till they were *twelve*." Nursing a child till age *five* almost defies the American imagination. Age *twelve* certainly does! To put Jerome's information in perspective here, one must remember that he was an ascetic who lived and worked in a monastery more than 400 years after Christ. There is therefore reason to doubt the accuracy of his information on this subject. The bulk of ancient evidence seems to dismiss both of these ages as the point at which children in the ancient Middle East were weaned.

Another source outside the Bible is the Qur'an (also spelled Koran), the book revered as sacred in the Muslim world. Of course, the religion of Islam and the Qur'an did not exist prior to the seventh century AD. Nonetheless, it does give us insight into the customs of the ancient Middle

Eastern neighbors of Israel. Quoting again from Adam Clarke, “The term [for breastfeeding] among the Mohammedans is fixed by the Koran, chap. xxxi.14, at *two* years of age.” Here is that quote from the Qur’an, chapter 31:14.

In travail upon travail  
Did his mother bear him,  
And in years twain  
Was his weaning:

My copy of the Qur’an is a translation by ‘Abdullah Yusuf ‘Ali. His commentary note on this reference to weaning a child after “years twain” (i.e., two years of age) gives a rationale for this age being chosen. “The set of milk teeth in a human child is completed at the age of two years, which is therefore the natural extreme limit for breast-feeding. In our artificial life the duration is much less.”

There is another extra-biblical reference that refers to children being weaned at two years of age. It is a Jewish commentary on the Biblical narrative concerning the infancy of Moses (see Exodus 2:1-10). In verse 9, we are told that the daughter of Pharaoh unwittingly hired the mother of Moses (Jochebed) to breastfeed him. The very next verse starts with the phrase, “The child grew...” In the *Shemot Rabbah*, a Rabbinic commentary on the book of Exodus (*Shemot* [שְׁמוֹת]), a Hebrew word meaning “names,” is the Hebrew title for the book of Exodus), we are told that Moses, at this point of “growing up,” was two years old (Section 1:31).

Yet another Middle Eastern source outside of the Bible is Babylonian practice. Glenn Wyper, in his article on weaning in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* [Volume IV, p. 1033], refers to Babylonian practices regarding the nursing and weaning of children. Wyper indicates that these ancient Babylonian practices paralleled Hebrew customs. He then suggests that a three-year “nursing period was widespread in the ancient Near East.”

Let’s turn to the Bible now and look at a few passages of Scripture that refer to how long children were nursed in Biblical times. For starters, let’s look at Exodus 2:7-10 again. We looked at this passage earlier (see pages 2-3) as a Biblical example of a wet nurse. Let’s consider this passage again, for it directly relates to this subject of nursing and weaning.

7 Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and call a nurse for you from the Hebrew women that she may nurse the child for you?”

8 And Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Go *ahead*.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother.

9 Then Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child away and nurse him for me and I will give *you* your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed him.

10 The child grew, and she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter and he became her son. And she named him Moses, and said, “Because I drew him out of the water.”

To fully appreciate what this passage tells us about nursing and weaning, we must back up and consider these statements in context. Moses was three months old (see verse 2) when his mother set him adrift down the River Nile. However, verses 7-9 make it clear that he was not yet weaned. Pharaoh's daughter unwittingly hired the boy's own mother (Jochebed, Exodus 6:20) to be his wet nurse, and so he was breastfed well beyond three months. In verse 10, we are told that the child "grew," or, more literally, "grew up." Clearly, the period of time that Jochebed nursed her son for the Pharaoh's daughter was longer than just a few months. As I mentioned earlier, a Rabbinic commentary on this passage says that Moses was two years old at the point of his weaning and adoption by the princess of Egypt.

Yet another passage from the Old Testament giving us some clues to the age of weaning is 1 Samuel 1. A woman named Hannah had prayed at the Tabernacle in Shiloh for a son, and vowed to God that she would dedicate her son to Him all the days of his life. The old priest Eli saw Hannah praying and weeping, and when he learned that she was pouring out her soul before Yahweh, he told her to "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant your petition that you have asked of Him" (1 Samuel 1:17, NASB). The Lord granted her request, and Hannah named her son Samuel.

21 When the man Elkanah went up with all his family to offer the annual sacrifice to the LORD and to fulfill his vow, 22 Hannah did not go. She said to her husband, "After the boy is weaned, I will take him and present him before the LORD, and he will live there always." 23 "Do what seems best to you," Elkanah her husband told her. "Stay here until you have weaned him; only may the LORD make good his word." So the woman stayed at home and nursed her son until she had weaned him. 24 After he was weaned, she took the boy with her, young as he was, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour and a skin of wine, and brought him to the house of the LORD at Shiloh. [NIV 1 Samuel 1:21-24, NIV]

Hannah weaned her son Samuel before she dedicated him to a life of service in the Tabernacle. Obviously, she did not turn over to the old priest Eli a baby that was just a few months old. Bible scholars generally agree that the age at which Hannah weaned her son and dedicated him to tabernacle service was more like three years of age. To quote Adam Clarke once again,

Samuel appears to have been brought to the sanctuary when he was just weaned, and then he was capable of ministering before the Lord, 1 Sam. i.22-28; and this certainly could not be before he was *three* years of age. [Clarke, Volume I, p. 133.]

John McClintock and James Strong agree with this assessment. In their article on weaning in their massive Bible encyclopedia, they write,

When Samuel was weaned, he was old enough to be left with Eli for the service of the tabernacle (1 Sam. i,24). As no public provision was made for the children of priests until they were three years of age, it is probable that they were not weaned sooner (2 Chron. xxxi,16; 2 Macc. vii,27). [McClintock & Strong, Volume X, p.892]

McClintock and Strong's mention of public provision for the children of priests three years old and upwards leads to another passage of Scripture, which they themselves cite: 2 Chronicles 31:16. (See the Appendix for a discussion of a translation variation found in this passage.)

Besides those males from three years old and up who were written in the genealogy, they distributed to everyone who entered the house of the LORD his daily portion for the work of his service, by his division, [2 Chronicles 31:16, NKJV]

This passage records king Hezekiah's distributing the tithes and offerings from the people of Judah to the priests and their families. As I just said, McClintock and Strong see the reference in this verse to "males from three years old and up" as a reference to the age at which children were weaned. And Adam Clarke agrees with this assessment, as the following quote shows.

...it seems likely that among the Jews they were weaned when *three* years old...and this is farther strengthened by 2 Chron. xxxi.16, where Hezekiah, in making provision for the Levites and priests, includes the children from *three* years old and upwards; which is a presumptive proof that previously to this age they were wholly dependent on the *mother* for their nourishment. [Clarke, *ibid.*]

One other passage of Scripture that I would like to examine in this paper is Hosea 1:8. The woman in question in this verse is Gomer, the wife of the prophet Hosea. This passage tells that after Gomer had weaned her daughter Lo-ruhamah, then she conceived another child and in due course gave birth to a son. Here is my own translation of that verse.

After she had weaned Lo-ruhamah, then she conceived and she gave birth to a son.

This passage is interesting, for it speaks matter-of-factly about the relationship of a woman weaning her child and then becoming pregnant again. It is possible to see in this an implication of contraceptive benefits to breastfeeding. Admittedly, this possible contraceptive angle was not the primary message of this passage. That being said, however, the matter-of-fact way in which this verse mentions the weaning of a child followed by conception certainly allows for this understanding.

How do I know that my translation and interpretation of this verse is correct? Well, with regard to my translation, I will spare you the details of Hebrew lexicography and grammar that lead me to this rendition. Suffice it to say here that other translations render this verse in a similar way. Both the NIV and the NJB translate the Hebrew word at the beginning of this verse (*watigmōl* [וַתִּגְמֹל]) with the phrase "After she had weaned..." The KJV, NASB and other versions read "When she had weaned..." My translation, therefore, is not without precedent.

As for my interpretation of this, again, I am not alone. Glenn Wyper, in his article concerning weaning in the *ISBE* (Volume IV, p. 1033), states that "Once a child was weaned, the mother was free to bear another..."

Furthermore, interpreting the statement in this verse as a reference to contraceptive benefits of breastfeeding is a perfectly legitimate interpretation because there are in fact such benefits to breastfeeding. It has long been observed in cultures where breastfeeding is common that nursing a child has a prophylactic affect against conceiving.

In fact, this phenomenon has been so consistent and observable that it has been named: lactational amenorrhea, the absence or suppression of a woman's menses (or menstrual flow) due to breastfeeding. Furthermore, this phenomenon has been studied sufficiently to develop it into a family planning method: the Lactational Amenorrhea Method (LAM).

During the last decade or so in particular, many studies of LAM have been conducted in various parts of the world: Rwanda, Pakistan, Chile, Honduras, Mexico and of course the USA. (See a list of studies cited in the Bibliography.) Also, various health organizations, both national and international, have released consensus papers on the effectiveness of LAM. And speaking of the effectiveness of LAM, statistics from the aforementioned studies show that this method provides more than 98% protection against pregnancy during the first six months after birth. Many women find that breastfeeding is effective as a prophylactic against getting pregnant well beyond this six month period.

Sound incredible? There is actually a perfectly logical, or, more to the point, physiological explanation for this phenomenon. Here's how it works. As a baby nurses at its mother's breast, the sucking action stimulates nerve endings in the areola, which send messages to the hypothalamus, a part of the brain that controls metabolism. This in turn signals the pituitary gland to release two hormones (oxytocin and prolactin) which work together to produce and release the mother's milk. However, in addition to contributing to milk production, prolactin has another effect: high levels of prolactin in a woman's body helps to suppress ovulation. Hence, lactational amenorrhea.

And so, returning to the verse in Hosea chapter one, we find that it is certainly possible and even physiologically accurate to interpret this verse as referring, at least indirectly, to a phenomenon that the ancients were well familiar with, the phenomenon known today as lactational amenorrhea.

I have not exhausted in this paper all of the Biblical passages that refer to the physical act of breastfeeding, but I have included what I believe to be a sufficient amount of Scripture on the subject. As I said before, the Biblical evidence does not actually tell us when children were weaned. Even so, these Biblical references certainly lead us to the conclusion that in Biblical times children were breastfed for a considerable length of time, a time frame measured not in months but in years.

Before I conclude this discussion of weaning, however, there is one other extra-biblical source to consider. It is an ancient Jewish source, and this particular reference makes a specific statement about the length of time a child was breastfed. It is found in a body of Jewish literature commonly known as the Apocrypha, specifically in the book of 2 Maccabees. Here is the quote.

My son, have pity on me. Remember that I carried you in my womb for nine months and *nursed you for three years*. I have taken care of you and looked after all your needs up to the present day. [2 Maccabees 7:27, Today's English Version. Emphasis mine.]

The context of this verse is a touching story of a Jewish family facing a time of persecution instigated by the Selucid king Antiochus IV. A young man was being challenged to renounce the Laws of Moses or die. The words recorded in this passage are of course those of his mother. She was encouraging her youngest son to remain true to the Jewish faith despite persecution, despite the threat of death. The topic of faithfulness in the face of persecution is certainly a noble sentiment. For our purposes in this discussion of breastfeeding and weaning, however, this passage gives a clear indication of the time that Jewish children were typically weaned. And that time of weaning from the breast was three years of age.

### **Idiomatic Use of Breastfeeding Imagery**

Now that we have looked at Biblical references to the physical act of breastfeeding, let's move on to consider the non-literal, idiomatic references to breastfeeding in the Bible.

Because breastfeeding was a universal practice, and because the timing of the weaning of a child from the breast was also a standard cultural practice, the image of breastfeeding was used in identifying a child of a certain age. For example, in Isaiah's prophecy of the coming peace and safety of the Messiah's reign on earth, the prophet refers to different ages of children, differentiating between them on the basis of one type of child still being breastfed and the other being weaned. Here is that passage (Isaiah 11:8) in the New King James Version (NKJV).

The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole,  
And the weaned child shall put  
his hand in the viper's den.

In the old King James Version (KJV), we read "sucking childe" instead of "nursing child" as in the NKJV and other modern translations.

Another example of this type of idiomatic usage is found in Psalm 8:2 (New American Standard Bible).

From the mouth of infants and nursing babes  
You have established strength  
Because of Your adversaries,  
To make the enemy and the revengeful cease.

Where the NASB has "nursing babes," the KJV reads "sucklings."

### **Breastfeeding Imagery Used Metaphorically**

Turning once again to the prophet Isaiah, we find use of breastfeeding to be a metaphor. In Isaiah 66:10-12, the city of Jerusalem is pictured as though she is a nursing mother to her inhabitants. Here is the passage, quoting once again from the NASB.

10 "Be joyful with Jerusalem and rejoice for her, all you who love her; Be exceedingly glad with her, all you who mourn over her,

11 That you may nurse and be satisfied with her comforting breasts, That you may suck and be delighted with her bountiful bosom.”

12 For thus says the LORD, “Behold, I extend peace to her like a river, And the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream; And you will be nursed, you will be carried on the hip and fondled on the knees.

Note that the imagery in this passage refers to more than just nourishment. Breastfeeding involves nurturing as well as nourishing. In addition to feeding her infant, a woman breastfeeding her baby provides satisfaction and comfort.

Another example of breastfeeding imagery used metaphorically is Isaiah 60:16.

You will also suck the milk of nations And suck the breast of kings; Then you will know that I, the LORD, am your Savior And your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob. [NASB]

These words occur in the context of prophetic statements concerning Jerusalem. In chapter 60, Isaiah prophesied that a day would come when the city of Jerusalem and its Temple would be rebuilt by foreigners, that “the wealth of the nations” will be brought into Jerusalem, “with their kings led in procession” (verse 11). In verse 16, this idea of the wealth of nations and their kings being brought to Jerusalem is expressed figuratively, with the metaphor “you will suck *the* milk of nations and *the* breast of kings you will suck.”

In the New Testament, in 1 Thessalonians 2:7, the apostle Paul uses the image of a nursing mother as a simile for the care that he and his apostolic companions had for the Thessalonians.

But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing *mother* tenderly cares for her own children. [1 Thessalonians 2:7 NASB]

### **Conclusion**

The conclusion here is that breastfeeding was a fact of life in Bible times. It was so common to the culture of the Bible lands that the image of a nursing mother influenced even idiomatic expressions and figures of speech. In fact, I’ll take that conclusion one step further. Breastfeeding was an everyday, common occurrence in Biblical times because it is God’s design for nourishing an infant. He who created mankind as male and female designed them to procreate (Genesis 1:27-28). And in order to nourish and nurture the children born from the union of man and woman, our Creator designed the female anatomy for breastfeeding an infant. As the patriarch Jacob put it in Genesis 49:25, it is “the Almighty who blesses [us] with...the blessings of the breasts and of the womb.”

## Appendix

### 2 Chronicles 31:16

There are probably some of you reading this verse that have noticed that your version of the Bible refers to “males *thirty* years old and up” instead of “males *three* years old and up.” This difference in translation obviously affects the interpretation of this passage. Some English versions do read “thirty” instead of “three.” However, the evidence against this rendering being accurate is overwhelming. Let’s take a look at that evidence.

For starters, the overwhelming majority of translators disagree with this rendering. Out of the thirty-one English versions of this passage that I consulted, only four read “thirty” instead of “three.” Two of the four versions with this rendering are Catholic translations, the New American Bible and the New Jerusalem Bible. The other two versions with this rendering are the New American Standard Bible and the Good News Bible (Today's English Version). And in each of these four versions, there is a footnote to this rendering, indicating that the word in the Hebrew text is “three,” not “thirty.”

Which leads me to the next line of evidence. The rendering “thirty” is not based upon textual information. In other words, the Hebrew word underlying the number of years referred to in this verse is *shālōsh* [שָׁלוֹשׁ], which means “three.” If the chronicler had meant to refer to “males *thirty* years old and up,” he would have used the Hebrew word *sh’lōshīm* [שְׁלֹשִׁים]. Therefore, in order to come up with the rendering “thirty,” these four versions chose to render this Hebrew word into English based on what they conjectured the meaning of the passage to be, and not on what it actually, literally says.

Consider also the various translations of the Hebrew Bible into other languages. The ancient Greek version of the Hebrew text, the Septuagint, reads *trietous* [τριετούς], “three years old,” and not *triakontaetous* [τριακονταετούς], “thirty years old.” The Peshitta, a Syriac version of the Old Testament that dates from around the middle of the second century to the early part of the third century AD, also reads “three,” as does the Latin Vulgate. In short, there is no textual evidence suggesting a variant reading of “thirty” in this verse.

If there is no textual basis for changing the reading to “thirty” as opposed to “three,” then why did the translators in the four versions mentioned above make that change? Where did they get the idea that it should read “thirty” and not “three”? The answer is that they were letting their interpretation get in the way of their translation. In 1 Chronicles 23:3, there is a reference to a count being made of the Levites, saying that the “Levites thirty years old or more were counted.” The translators evidently assumed that the emphasis of 2 Chronicles 31:16 was the same as that of 1 Chronicles 23:3.

However, as we have seen, neither the original text nor the majority of translations (whether ancient or modern) supports this rendering. Furthermore, a number of influential Jewish historians and commentators have understood this passage to refer to tithes and offerings being distributed to the priests and Levites and their families, from three years of age upward. Consider the following quotes.

The first is a quote from “The Antiquities of the Jews,” written by Flavius Josephus, in the first century AD.

The king [Hezekiah] also made garner and receptacles for these fruits [the tithes and the first-fruits], and distributed them to every one of the priests and Levites, and to their children and wives; and thus did they return to their old form of divine worship. [Josephus, “The Antiquities of the Jews,” Book IX, Chapter XIII, § 3 (*The Works of Falvius Josephus*. Volume III, p. 46.)]

The next quote I offer here is from Alfred Edersheim, an Austrian Jew born in Vienna in 1825. He came to accept Jesus as his Messiah as a young adult. He later became a clergyman in the Church of England. Edersheim was a lecturer on the Septuagint at the University of Oxford from 1884 until 1889, the year of his death.

The provision for the priesthood included not only those who were for the time actually on service in the Temple, but also the others in the priest cities, together with their wives and children, and lastly to those in the country districts around these cities (vers. 16-19). [Alfred Edersheim, *Bible History Old Testament*, p.917.]

Edersheim’s own translation of 2 Chronicles 31:16 accurately renders the Hebrew *shālōsh* and the Greek *trietous* into English:

“besides their registration [the names registered] of the males from **three** years upwards, of all them that came to the house of Jehovah, according to the requirements of every day,” etc. [Edersheim, *ibid*. Emphasis mine.]

As I mentioned earlier, John McClintock and James Strong equate the mention of three years of age in 2 Chronicles 31:16 with the time frame of weaning children.

Most Oriental mothers suckle their children much longer than is usual in Europe, and the same custom seems to have prevailed among the ancient Hebrews. When Samuel was weaned, he was old enough to be left with Eli for the service of the tabernacle (1 Sam. i,24). As no public provision was made for the children of priests until they were three years of age, it is probable that they were not weaned sooner (2 Chron. xxxi,16; 2 Macc. vii,27). [McClintock & Strong, Volume X, p.892]

And finally, here is the quote from Clarke’s commentary.

... it seems likely that among the Jews they were weaned when *three* years old...and this is farther strengthened by 2 Chron. xxxi.16, where Hezekiah, in making provision for the Levites and priests, includes the children from *three* years old and upwards; which is a presumptive proof that previously to this age they were wholly dependent on the *mother* for their nourishment. [Clarke, Volume I, p. 133.]

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