

Numbers 11:12

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Have I conceived all this people? have I begotten them, that thou shouldest say unto me, Carry them in thy bosom, as a nursing father beareth the sucking child, unto the land which thou swarest unto their fathers?

Analysis

Moses' rhetorical questions intensify: 'Have I conceived all this people? have I begotten them?' uses pregnancy and childbirth imagery to describe the relationship between leader and people. The implied answer ('No, God did') redirects responsibility to its proper source. God created Israel as His people through redemption from Egypt; Moses merely served as God's instrument. The servant cannot be held ultimately responsible for what belongs to the Master.

The question emphasizes a crucial leadership principle: leaders don't own the people they serve—God does. Moses recognized his role as steward, not owner. This prevents both tyrannical control (claiming ownership over people) and escapist abandonment (refusing responsibility God has assigned). Moses was neither dictator nor deserter but faithful servant seeking to honor both God's sovereignty and his own calling.

The childbirth metaphor anticipates Paul's description of pastoral ministry: 'My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you' (Galatians 4:19). Spiritual leadership involves birth-like labor—pain, effort, and burden—yet the children belong to God, not the human minister. This provides both comfort (ultimate responsibility rests with God) and accountability (we must serve faithfully as stewards of souls).

Historical Context

Ancient Near Eastern cultures used familial metaphors for political relationships—kings as fathers, subjects as children. Moses' use of pregnancy/childbirth imagery was striking in a patriarchal culture where such language typically applied to mothers, not male leaders. This underscored the unnaturalness of Moses' burden—he was being forced into a role (nurturing parent) that wasn't his by right or nature. Only God is properly the parent of Israel (Exodus 4:22: 'Israel is my son, even my firstborn').

Related Passages

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. How does recognizing that God's people belong to Him (not to human leaders) prevent both controlling manipulation and irresponsible abandonment in ministry?
2. What does Moses' use of childbirth imagery reveal about the costly, painful nature of faithful spiritual leadership?

Interlinear Text

אָנֹכִי אָמַם בְּזִי הַ	אָנֹכִי הָאָנֹכִי	כָּל אֲתָךְ בְּרִיתִי	כָּל מְבָשֵׂר	כָּל מִבְּשָׂר	אָנֹכִי אָמַם בְּזִי הַ
H595	Have I conceived	H853	H3605	all this people	H2088
	H2029			H5971	H518
					H595
יָלַדְתִּי יְהוָה	יָלַדְתִּי יְהוָה	תָּאמַר רָ	תָּאמַר רָ	יִשְׁאָל אֶל	יִשְׁאָל אֶל
have I begotten	H3588	them that thou shouldest say	H559	H413	beareth
H3205				H5375	
בְּתוּמֵךְ בְּ	בְּתוּמֵךְ בְּ	בְּאַמֵּן	בְּאַמֵּן	אֶת	בְּגִיאָה
them in thy bosom	H2436	beareth	H5375	H853	the sucking child
	H834	as a nursing father	H539		H3243
לְאַבְתִּים:	לְאַבְתִּים:	נִשְׁבֵּעַת	נִשְׁבֵּעַת	עַל	עַל
unto the land	H127	which thou swarest	H7650	unto their fathers	H1
H5921	H834				

Additional Cross-References

Isaiah 40:11 (Parallel theme): He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.

Isaiah 49:23 (Kingdom): And kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and their queens thy nursing mothers: they shall bow down to thee with their face toward the earth, and lick up the dust of thy feet; and thou shalt know that I am the LORD: for they shall not be ashamed that wait for me.

Exodus 13:5 (Parallel theme): And it shall be when the LORD shall bring thee into the land of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he sware unto thy fathers to give thee, a land flowing with milk and honey, that thou shalt keep this service in this month.

1 Thessalonians 2:7 (Parallel theme): But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children:

Genesis 50:24 (Parallel theme): And Joseph said unto his brethren, I die: and God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land unto the land which he sware to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Genesis 26:3 (Parallel theme): Sojourn in this land, and I will be with thee, and will bless thee; for unto thee, and unto thy seed, I will give all these countries, and I will perform the oath which I sware unto Abraham thy father;

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