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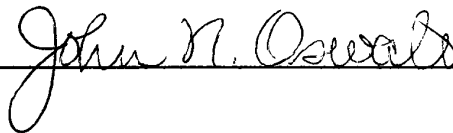
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"IS ANYTHING TOO HARD FOR THE LORD?"
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MOTIF
OF THE
BARREN WOMEN
IN GENESIS

by
Christine Hanak

Approved by:

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "John N. Oswalt", is written over a horizontal line.

A thesis
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of the requirements for the degree of
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CHAPTER 1

Thesis Proposal

Introduction

From the first words of God to mankind, "Be fruitful and multiply," to the reunion of the family of Jacob in Egypt, the story of Genesis is the story of God's creation and preservation of a special family. The formula, "this is the generation of," structures the book around the successive generations which mark the passage of time in chapters 1-11 of prehistory, and which separate the stories of the patriarchs in chapters 12-50. Three beginnings characterize the development of the family in Genesis: first, the creation of all the families on earth through Adam, then the preservation of the family of Noah and finally the calling of Abraham, the father of Israel.

Abraham's call to go out from his land was accompanied by promises of land, descendants and a great name. The specific concern of chapters 12-50 of Genesis is the establishment of Abraham's family, the fulfillment of the promise of descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. This emphasis on the identity of the promised son dominates the second half of the book of Genesis to the extent that the plot of Genesis could be said to be the search for the true heir.¹

The major obstacle to the fulfillment of God's promise of numerous descendants to Abraham is the astonishing circumstance

1. Lou H. Silberman, "Listening to the Text," Journal of Biblical Literature 102 (1983): 18, a phrase which he says is borrowed from Philo.

that not only is Abraham's wife, Sarah, barren, but so, subsequently, are Isaac's wife, Rebekah, and Jacob's wife, Rachel. All other births that occur in Genesis follow the natural creation pattern of being fruitful and multiplying, set forth in 1:28. Only the women who will bear the son who will inherit the promises are unable to conceive without the direct intervention of God. Such a circumstance hardly seems coincidental. What is the significance of the inability of these particular women to bear children and what are the implications of their barrenness for a clear understanding of the God of the Old Testament?

The family provides the social, political and religious setting of the Genesis narratives. The foundational promises of God to the people of Israel concern, and are anchored in, the continuance of the chosen family of Abraham. In any age, childlessness is a personal tragedy, but in the context of Yahweh's covenant with Abraham, it becomes a major threat to the future of the family and to God's ability to make His word good.

Coexistent with the Biblical examples of the power of Yahweh over reproduction, the ancient Near Eastern world was filled with gods who claimed to have power over fertility, and a religious system that claimed through magic, ritual and divination to be able to manipulate these powers. This religious system surrounded not only the patriarchs, but also their descendants who returned to Canaan, posing a direct challenge to the Yahweh's claim to unique and total sovereignty over the natural world.

In Genesis Abraham is portrayed as a man who responds in faith to the God who called him to go to an unknown land and to

receive a future of promise. The relationship Abraham has with Yahweh is based on trust, rather than on manipulation, coercion or playing off divine power. The gradual fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham become a way for him to develop confidence in the power and faithfulness of the One who made the promises.

Genesis records Yahweh's progressive revelation of Himself to Abraham as He leads him on a long journey of faith. The human impossibility of the fulfillment of the promise of a son permits Sarah's barrenness to become a window into the power and character of the God who made the promises, and into what it means to live in relationship with Him. Recurrence of the motif of the barren wife in the stories of Rebekah and Rachel reiterates the faithfulness of the One who continues to speak to the generations that followed through the centuries. Because the promises to the patriarchs were only partially fulfilled in their lifetimes, they move toward the future of Israel's history, speaking to generations to come.

Statement of the Problem

This thesis will analyze the recurring figure of the childless wife in the stories of the patriarchs, against the background of the Ancient Near Eastern understanding of fertility and divine will, to determine the significance of the barrenness of three of the four matriarchs of Israel.

The Sub-Problems

The first sub-problem is to explore existing assessments of this motif in Genesis as it has been seen through various interpretive lenses: historical, mythical, literary and feminist.

The second sub-problem is to review relevant cultural and religious ideas of the ancient Near East which formed the wider background of the patriarchal narratives.

The third sub-problem is to analyze the stories of Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel to determine the significance of their childlessness within the patriarchal narratives and within the larger scope of the Deuteronomic history and the Old Testament.

Hypotheses

The first hypothesis is that the motif of the barrenness of the matriarchs of Israel has significance for understanding the development of the relationship between Yahweh and the people of Israel whose beginnings are found in the family of Abraham.

The second hypothesis is that this significance is best understood against the background of the worldview of the ancient Near East, especially with regard to the control of fertility and the plurality of divine wills.

The third hypothesis is that the stories of the barren matriarchs provide an opportunity for Yahweh to demonstrate His power and faithfulness to solve a humanly-impossible problem which posed an obstacle to the promises He had made to Abraham. The frustration of human strength and cleverness encourages faith

in Yahweh's power and intention to fulfill His promises regardless of circumstances that may indicate the opposite.

Delimitations

This study will not address the problems of Pentateuchal dating and authorship, but will look at the narratives as literary units in their canonical context.

Assumptions

The first assumption is that there is a connection between behaviors and the beliefs of every culture and, therefore, that there are valid insights for this analysis from both Biblical and ancient Near Eastern studies.

The second assumption is that these narratives are coherent literary accounts that are best understood in relation to one another.

The third assumption is that the repetition of this motif in Genesis indicates that it was intended to have theological significance.

The Review of the Literature

Given the importance of family in the Genesis story and the centrality of the promise of descendants to the family of Abraham, the presence of barrenness in three of the four matriarchs is a striking narrative feature that merits critical attention. The significance of the motif has been viewed in various ways, depending on the interpretive framework applied to Genesis as a

whole. These interpretive frameworks, which include historical, mythical-folkloric, literary-analytical and feminist, overlap and complement each other as each attempts to clarify the meaning of the Biblical texts.

Historical

An archaeological viewpoint regards this motif as a reflection of historical solutions to the difficulty of being childless in a culture which saw life without a son, an heir, as futile. An anthropological approach emphasizes the role of children and the human drama of childlessness and draws parallels with contemporary situations in the surrounding cultures.

Solutions to the dilemma of barrenness analogous to those of the Genesis narratives have been discovered in Old Assyrian and Nuzi texts. A. K. Grayson and J. van Seters "The Childless Wife in Assyria and the Stories of Genesis," have explored the custom of a childless wife having children through a maidservant.¹ The significance of this parallel, however, has been disputed by those who do not find the historicity of the Genesis stories to be defensible, or who do not read the texts as truly parallel.

Raphael Patai focused on the curse of barrenness then and now in the Middle East, writing that "barrenness remains the greatest single affliction that could befall a couple."² He

1. A. K. Grayson and J. van Seters, "The Childless Wife in Assyria and the Stories of Genesis," Orientalia 44 (1975): 485-6.

2. Raphael Patai, Sex and Family in the Bible and the Middle East (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959), 74.

cited many Biblical examples of the link between barrenness and disgrace, connecting it to the sins of adultery and idolatry, but did not relate these negatives to the plight of the Genesis matriarchs.

Mara Donaldson, in her study of the significance of the barren wives, applied Levi-Strauss' theories of kinship to the Biblical accounts. The emphasis on marriages and families in Genesis reflects the "struggle in narrative to mediate between two unacceptable forms of marriage."¹ She concluded that the central issue is one of correct marriage alliances and that barrenness is the key indicator that an "incorrect" wife has been chosen, one who stands in the wrong kinship relationship to the husband. This regrettable situation can only be overcome by an act of God.

Mythical-Folkloric

The mythical view is non-historical, with the focus on the child rather than the mother. The stories of the childless wife have been read as examples of traditional motifs found in folklore. T. L. Thompson, in The Origin Tradition of Ancient Israel, elaborated on the work of scholars such as Gunkel, Gressman and van Seters who compared the Genesis stories with European folk tales. He categorized the barrenness of a wife which leads to the birth of a hero as a typical transcultural tale. In this

1. Mara E. Donaldson, "Kinship Theory in the Patriarchal Narratives: The Case of the Barren Wife," Journal of the American Academy of Religion 49 (1981): 79.

context, the significance of the inability of the wife to conceive becomes a clue to the importance of the child who will eventually be born to her.¹

Literary-Analytical

The literary analysis of the text of Genesis begins with and goes beyond the mythical understanding of the motif to consideration of the significance of the use of the motif. In the 1960's, Erich Auerbach developed a theory of narrative which included a comparison of the presentation and arrangement of materials in Homer with those of the Abraham narratives.² Drawing on this foundation and on theories of oral composition, Robert Alter applied the principles of literary analysis to the Genesis stories in The Art of Biblical Narrative. He classified the story of the barren wife as an example of a type scene, a set-formula story occurring at important junctures in the career of the hero which the audience expects the story-teller to include. In Genesis, the type scene of the barren wife who bears an important child appears to deepen the realistic portrayal of human nature in the Bible narrative and functions as part of the larger theme of the tension between divine promise and fulfillment.³

1. Thomas L. Thompson, The Origin Tradition of Ancient Israel (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987).

2. Erich Auerbach, Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton: Univ. Press, 1968).

3. Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

James Williams focused on one aspect of this type scene in his article, "The Beautiful and the Barren," in which he equated beauty with fertility and God's favor, and barrenness with the special nature of the progeny to follow.¹ Naomi Steinberg analyzed the Genesis tales as formula stories following a specific pattern of narrative development from stability to disequilibrium through failed solutions to a return to stability.²

The role of the barren wife motif as a narrative device which serves as an obstacle to the fulfillment of the promise of children, creating dramatic suspense, also found expression in Claus Westermann's book The Promises to the Fathers. In the case of Sarah, barrenness is a key element in the larger motif of the delay of the promise, and, in the case of Rachel, as part of the overall theme of conflict within the family. Westermann observed that conflict between men in Genesis revolves around territory and sustenance and between women over position in the social group and honor.³ Robert Cohen sees the barren woman as a plot device to create obstacles to fulfillment of the promises.⁴

1. James G. Williams, "The Beautiful and the Barren: Conventions in Biblical Type-Scenes," Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 17 (1980): 107-119.

2. Naomi Steinberg, "The Genealogical Framework of the Family Stories in Genesis," Semeia 46 (1989): 41-50.

3. Claus Westermann, The Promises to the Fathers: Studies on the Patriarchal Narratives, trans. David Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 68.

4. Robert L. Cohn, "Narrative Structure and Canonical Perspective in Genesis," Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 25 (1983): 3-16.

George Coats located the childless wife motif as a folk element depicting family life and domestic rivalry. He focused on infertility as a source of family conflict which can only be resolved by the removal of barrenness by Yahweh.¹ The threat to the survival of the family caused by childlessness was further developed by Devora Steinmetz in From Father to Son. She detailed the similarities between the various stories of childlessness and suggested that repetition is a means of character development in the Hebrew narrative style.²

John Goldingay presented the theme of obstacle to the promise as a device to demonstrate the power and faithfulness of Yahweh. In the context of the Genesis to Kings narrative the promises of God to the patriarchs are shown to be permanent and a source of comfort to the exile generation.³ Encouragement of future generations is also the purpose of the repetition of the story three times, according to the commentary on Genesis by Umberto Cassuto; childlessness falls within the framework of ten ordeals suffered by Abraham, each of which is preceded by God's promises and followed by renewed assurances.⁴

1. George W. Coats, Genesis: With an Introduction to Narrative Literature (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

2. Devora Steinmetz, From Father to Son: Kinship, Conflict and Continuity in Genesis (Louisville: Westminster, 1991).

3. John Goldingay, "The Patriarchs in Scripture and History," in Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives, ed. A. R. Millard and D. J. Wiseman (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980).

4. Umberto Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part 2 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984).

Feminist

In recent years, feminist writers have been increasingly concerned with issues of power in relationships between men and women, and they have tended to regard the Genesis narratives as examples of an oppressive patriarchal system. Because the stories of the childless mothers touch a problem unique to women, feminist writers have been sensitive to the nuances of the presentation of women's issues in a male-dominated society.

In a culture which defines women in terms of their ability to bear sons, a woman who is barren is clearly a disgrace, as Alice Laffey pointed out in An Introduction to the Old Testament; pregnancy is a woman's road to whatever power and prestige she could attain in the culture.¹ Mieke Bal, in Lethal Love, remarked that sterility deprives a woman of her status.² In a similar vein, Athalya Brenner noted the intrigue of power politics in the struggle of the matriarchs to produce heirs for the family.³

Most feminist writers agree that the Genesis stories clearly represent Yahweh's power over fertility. Sharon Pace Jeansonne, in The Women of Genesis, described these narratives as

1. Alice L. Laffey, An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 34.

2. Mieke Bal, Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987): 41.

3. Athalya Brenner, "Female Social Behavior: Two Descriptive Patterns within the 'Birth of the Hero' Paradigm," Vetus Testamentum 36 (July 1986): 257-73.

type scenes that unequivocally express God's role as the giver of fertility,¹ and at the same time reinforce the valuing of women in terms of the number of sons they bear.²

For most feminist writers, Yahweh's power over fertility is interpreted as a negative circumstance for women. Authors such as Esther Fuchs in "The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible,"³ and Cheryl Exum in Fragmented Women, complained that the transfer of the power of conception to deity works to maintain the power of a patriarchal ideology.⁴ The importance of the mother is devalued as control over procreative power is transferred from the woman to Yahweh. Fuchs viewed motherhood as imposed by men to maintain political dominance and critiqued the Bible's exclusion of women who do not wish to become mothers. Phyllis Trible, in Texts of Terror, represented Sarah as the victim of Yahweh and commended her attempt to counter divine oppression with human initiative through seeking to have a child through Hagar.⁵

1. Sharon Pace Jeansonne, The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar's Wife (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 7.

2. Jeansonne, 79.

3. Esther Fuchs, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible," Semeia 46 (1989): 151-66.

4. J. Cheryl Exum, Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).

5. Phyllis Trible, Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

John Otwell presented an alternative to the paternalistic view of motherhood as oppression in And Sarah Laughed: The Status of Women in the Old Testament. He noted that motherhood had not only a biological and sociological function, but provided basic evidence of God's care for Israel: through the process of conception and giving birth, God worked to create and sustain His people.¹

Summary

The significance of the three-fold appearance of the childless wife in the patriarchal narratives has been variously interpreted by different schools of thought. This motif has sparked comparison with customs of surrounding nations and provided material for analysis of evidence of development in the Old Testament of kinship theories. It has been identified as a folkloric motif or as a type scene characteristic of oral folk tales. As a narrative plot device within the Genesis narratives, the barrenness of the wife of the patriarch has functioned as a major obstacle to the fulfillment of the promise of God, as well as providing an opportunity to prove His faithfulness and power. For feminists, the prominence of this motif has confirmed the stereotypes of patriarchal oppression of powerless women and reinforced their dependent status.

1. John H. Otwell, And Sarah Laughed: The Status of Women in the Old Testament (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 66-67.

Theoretical Framework

The literary critical approach has tended to be content with observation of the contribution of this motif to the narrative art of Genesis. The focus is on the element of human drama in the story: on the pathos of the childless wife (or husband, in the case of Abraham), or on the dramatic suspense created by obstacles to the fulfillment of the promise of a son. The social and cultural significance of the repeated occurrence of the barren wife has been pressed by feminist writers whose view is colored by contemporary ideological concerns about power structures and patriarchal oppression of women in ancient societies. While the conclusion that these stories demonstrate the control of Yahweh over conception is generally acknowledged, the ramifications of this control for the faith of Israel have not been elaborated.

This paper will use the insights of literary and feminist analyses to explore the spiritual significance of Yahweh's apparent denial of a promised blessing, that of fertility, both in the Genesis narratives and for succeeding generations of His people. While not disagreeing with the feminist assessment that these narratives present the triumph of the power of Yahweh over fertility, this study will seek to demonstrate the positive nature of this power and its ability to illuminate the true character of Yahweh.

Methodology

The stories of Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel contain similar elements as well as unique features. Sarah as the first mother receives the most extensive treatment in Genesis; Rebekah's barrenness is dismissed in one verse; the story of Rachel emphasizes the desperation of the woman who is denied children. The intervention of Yahweh in each situation varies as well. By comparing and contrasting the three matriarchs, this paper will seek to draw out the significance of their plight for the Genesis narratives and for a deeper understanding of the problem for the people of God of delay of promises and denied blessings.

Organization

This study will begin with a comparison of the religious assumptions of the ancient Near East and the faith of Israel to illuminate the attitudes toward fertility and divine will in the Biblical narratives. An overview of the book of Genesis will locate the theme of barrenness in a larger context, followed by a consideration of Old Testament treatment of the problem of barrenness. The fifth chapter will analyze the story of Sarah as paradigmatic for interpreting the three barren matriarchs and for understanding their significance in Genesis and in the ongoing stream of Israel's faith. The stories of Rachel and Rebekah will complete the portrayal of the problem of barrenness within the context of the promise of progeny to the patriarchs. The final chapter will summarize the data and draw conclusions for understanding this motif as it relates to faith today.

Justification for Study

The influence of militant feminism on the dominant secular culture of the United States today makes it difficult for many to accept and understand the God of the Old Testament. Feminists have charged that the patriarchal era has nothing constructive to say to women, and, as a result, many have turned away from Biblical Christianity. At the same time, infertility is an increasingly common difficulty faced by many, and is an especially painful situation for women.

Popular Christian culture in the United States has a tendency to equate God's faithful care of His people with the instant gratification of needs and wants. This approach to life does not adequately equip individuals to deal with the reality of suffering in a fallen world. When the promises are delayed, when evil appears to triumph, when contemporary forms of magic fail to gain the necessary good, what resources are available to understand the ways of God and to persevere in faith? How can the ancient texts of the Old Testament speak to a modern scientific world?

The motif of childlessness in the Genesis narratives touches the spheres of personal life and of frustrated desire that challenge the adequacy of present theological understandings. A thorough exploration of the way this motif functions in Genesis to illumine the character of Yahweh for the patriarchs and for subsequent generations of God's people can contribute to a greater appreciation of the relevance of His word for today.

CHAPTER 2

Ancient Near Eastern Background

Introduction

The religious views of the Mesopotamian world form the cultural background from which the Biblical literature emerged. Israelite religion rose out of its ancient Near Eastern milieu by a two-fold process of adaptation and rejection; in God's providential ordering of Israel's religion, He worked in and through the religious and cultural forms that existed at the time.¹ Although there are similarities in the forms that Israel appropriated across cultural lines, the meanings assigned to the forms were transformed in the process. These differences in meaning are important because they highlight the distinctiveness of Biblical faith and its unique place in the history of the development of religious thought.

The religions of Mesopotamia span a time frame of four thousand years, from the Sumerians in the fourth millennium B.C., through the Assyrians, Babylonians and Western Semitic peoples, ending with conquest by Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C. Religious beliefs covering such a wide historical and geographical expanse experienced both change and continuity. Thorkild Jacobsen summarized the three stages in its development.²

1. M. J. A. Horsnell, "Religions: Assyria and Babylonia," International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, ed. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 94.

2. Thorkild Jacobsen, The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976), 21-79.

In the fourth millennium, religious concern focused around the struggle for economic survival, motivated by the fear of starvation. Cult was characterized by the worship of power in natural phenomena, especially the powers of fertility and plenty; the dominant divine figure became the son and provider whose life expresses the annual cycle of fertility and yield.

In the third millennium, fear of sudden death from war replaced famine as the main reminder of the precariousness of the human condition. The political evolution of the office of king was translated into the religious realm and offered hope of security against enemies. Prominent in this phase was the assembly of the great ruler gods.

In the second millennium, the individual became the dominant focus; the epic tale celebrated man and his prowess even against the gods. The distinctive divine figure was the tutelary god who stood in close personal relationship with the individual worshiper providing protection and guidance. If the earliest figure of the divine was summed up in the idea of the son, and the second period by the idea of the king, this period found inspiration in the figure of the parent.

The idea of a personal god seems similar in some respects to the attitude of the patriarchs toward Yahweh, but in the ancient Near East, the idea of the personal god remained an individual attitude which did not decisively affect national life; only in Israel did the personal relationship with God extend to the

national realm.¹ In spite of parallels in form, the meanings inhering in the forms are opposed so that major differences characterize the two cultures in the area of the divine and its relation to humankind. Significant contrasts between the Mesopotamian and Israelite religious worldviews can be seen in three areas: the question of divine being and origins, the issue of the relationship of deity to nature, and the concept of the relationship between the human and the divine.

Divine Being and Origins

The differences between the religious views of the ancient Near East and Israel are deeper than the obvious contrast between polytheism and monotheism. The primary distinction between the two outlooks is fundamentally related to the nature of deity.² The Mesopotamian idea of deity was characterized by immanence, variety of names and forms, intransitiveness (limitation in scope of action), plurality and choice.³

Saggs suggests that Yahweh can be distinguished chiefly by what He is not: He is not immanent in nature, not representable in human or animal form, does not exist in a multiplicity of forms and is not approachable by certain techniques.⁴ Yehezkel

1. Jacobsen, 163-4.

2. John H. Walton, Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 236.

3. Jacobsen, 5-11.

4. H.W.F. Saggs, The Encounter with the Divine in Mesopotamia and Israel (London: Athlone Press, 1978), 92.

Kaufmann makes some interesting observations about the picture the Old Testament paints of Yahweh: He is the source of all being, not subject to a cosmic order, and free of all limitations of magic and mythology. He is a God who is supreme over all, not limited, distinct from His creation; He has no pedigree, does not inherit, share or bequeath His power and authority. He does not die, has no sexual qualities, and is not dependent on other powers. The Bible, unlike the elaborate mythologies and divine genealogies in ancient Near Eastern literature, does not tell of God's life apart from man; He is always seen in His relationship to His creation.¹

In Mesopotamia, the gods and their powers were limited. The course of the world was governed by divinely ruled interplay of the powers, each of which was determined.² The various Near Eastern mythologies accounted for the origin of the world out of the substance of the gods; there was both theogony and theomachy in their creation stories.

The Mesopotamian gods were derived from the same matter as the world and they remained continuous with and immanent in it. There was a lack of fixed bounds between them and the world of man; nature was characteristically expressed through the idea of a physical bond between gods and men: men could become gods,

1. Yehezkel Kaufmann, The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile, trans. and abridged Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960), 29-69.

2. Helmer Ringgren, Religions of the Ancient Near East, trans. John Sturdy (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), 43.

people were descended from gods.¹ The two groups intermingled to the point that "men are fractions of gods and the gods behave exactly as men."² The gods were intimately tied to the natural world, immanent in it, limited in their power in a way that would be inconceivable for Yahweh.

As John Walton has pointed out, the conduct of the deities of the ancient Near East lacked consistency and was for the most part unpredictable. "There was no absolute morality characteristic of divine conduct and no code to which the gods were bound."³ Unlike the Israelite God who demanded obedience in the social, cultic and moral realms to His revealed will, the Mesopotamian deities only required performance of cultic ritual and conformity to accepted social standards.⁴

Relationship to Nature

These important differences of origin, numbers, character and scope of power between Yahweh and the Mesopotamian gods are clearly reflected in their relationship to the world of nature. In the ancient Near East, it has been observed that religion began with the experience of the numinous, the sense of the presence of the divine which was closely associated with natural

1. Kaufmann, 35.

2. C. J. Gadd, Ideas of Divine Rule in the Ancient East (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1948), 14.

3. Walton, 238.

4. Walton, 243-4.

phenomena; these manifestations of the natural creation were universally recognized by the Mesopotamians as possessing divine qualities,¹ especially those associated with the cosmos, astral bodies and with fertility.² Because the struggle between the forces of nature and human communities was so intense in the Fertile Crescent, and life itself depended on the success of agriculture and husbandry, these cultures associated the divine with the productivity of the land.³ The deity was more than the manifest symbol of a natural force: he or she could be identified with that force.⁴

In contrast, Yahweh stands outside nature in a way the Mesopotamian gods did not.⁵ Israel did not make the simple correlation between the divine and the natural that the ancient Near East did.⁶ Yahweh is the creator of the natural world, but is not part of it. He controls all the forces of nature but is immanent in none of them.⁷

The first two chapters of Genesis establish the basic assumption found throughout the Bible that Yahweh is the sole

1. Joseph P. Healey, "Fertility Cults," Anchor Bible Dictionary, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 791.

2. Horsnell, 92.

3. Healey, 792.

4. Saggs, 88.

5. Saggs, 88.

6. Healey, 792.

7. Saggs, 91.

creator of the universe, but is not to be identified with it. He is of a different substance than the material universe, a fact seen in His works of creation by means of the spoken word rather than through giving birth to the world from the divine essence. There is no hint of a metadivine in Biblical creation. Hebrew ideology claims nothing from nature: all origins, if they come into question, are from Yahweh, who is beyond nature.¹ Yahweh is the sole owner of the natural world by virtue of His creative activity; there is no power beside His.

Relationship to Humanity

The Role of Ritual

According to Kaufmann, the essence of the contrast between polytheism and monotheism is not a plurality of gods per se, but the notion of many independent power-entities, on par with each other.² This plurality of wills produced a level of uncertainty that left humans fearful that unaccountable powers might at any time bring disaster and at the mercy of divine decisions they could neither influence nor gauge.³ Therefore, the ancient Near East relied heavily on ritual, divination and magic to protect themselves from divine caprice.

1. Herbert N. Schneidau, Sacred Discontent (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1976), 59.

2. Kaufmann, 23.

3. H. and H. A. Frankfort, et al., The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man (Chicago: Univ. Press, 1946), 366.

The association of the divine with the natural is by definition magic; in the ancient Near East there was a strong belief in the effectiveness of symbols (action or words) to make things happen.¹ The origin of ritual in general lies in the attempt to control the unpredictable element in human experience.² The ancient Near East viewed ritual as automatically efficient and intrinsically significant, a system of rites capable in itself of working good and evil because its potency derived from the realm above the gods.³ The ritual pattern in the ancient East represented things which were done by and to the king to secure the prosperity of the community for the coming year.⁴ The cult was necessary to insure the presence of the essential powers for fertility, produce and food.⁵ Its purpose was to serve the gods so they could better carry out their duties for the benefit of mankind; cult actions were intended to directly strengthen the powers of nature and keep the processes of life going through the working of analogy.⁶ As Walton points out, the Mesopotamians could not always be certain they were doing the will of their

1. Healey, 792.

2. S. H. Hooke, Myth and Ritual (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1933), 8.

3. Kaufmann, 53.

4. Hooke, 8.

5. Thorkild Jacobsen, Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture, ed. William L. Moran (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970), 40.

6. Ringgren, 42.

gods; they were often unsure of what the gods required, beyond maintenance of ritual and conformity to social standards.¹

The worshipers of Yahweh held a different view of ritual than did the Mesopotamians. For the Israelites, there was only one supreme law: the will of God.² Magic and divination as techniques to manipulate powers over Him were, therefore, useless. Although the forms of worship in Israel were similar to those of her neighbors, their meanings were significantly transformed. For example, the agricultural festivals, rather than being occasions to renew the powers of nature, were opportunities to remember Yahweh's deeds in history on behalf of His people, accomplishing their election and redemption.³ Yahweh did not need their service, nor is it possible to persuade Him to do other than His perfect will.

Fertility

The maintenance of the productivity of nature was a central concern in the polytheistic cults of the ancient Near East.⁴ Since the fertility cults were tied to the status quo, the celebration of the cycles of life and death held for the Mesopotami-

1. Walton, 244.

2. Kaufmann, 73.

3. Gerhard von Rad, The Theology of the Old Testament, trans. D. M. G. Stalker, 2 vols. (HarperSanFrancisco, 1962), 2:104.

4. Bertil Albrektson, History and the Gods: An Essay on the Idea of Historical Events as Divine Manifestations in the Ancient Near East and in Israel (Lund: Gleerup, 1967), 16.

ans the essence of the divine: the pure, abstract, and timeless as distinguished from the historical.¹ In the ancient Near East fertility was not merely the gift of the gods, the natural powers of the earth were themselves regarded as divine.² Among the Canaanites, the concern to maintain the fertility of crops, animals and humans was dominant in religious efforts. This interest finds expression in mythological stories of dying and rising deities related to the seasonal agricultural cycle and the restoration of fertility in the natural world in the spring.³

By the principles of the correspondence between ritual and reality, the reenactment of the life of the gods produced the fertility upon which life depended. The principal focus of the religious experience involved ritualistic and cultic reenactment of the story of the dying god of fertility; sacred prostitution was clearly a feature of their worship.⁴ "In the Canaanite cult, copulation and procreation were mythically regarded as a divine event," resulting in a "divinisation" of sex.⁵ The sacred marriage ritual acknowledged the important role of sex in bringing fertility, and gave place for the expression and celebration of

1. Healey, 793.

2. Rad, 2:110.

3. P. C. Craigie and G. H. Wilson, "Religions, Canaanite," International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, ed. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 99.

4. Healey, 792.

5. Rad, 1:27.

sexual desire in a religious setting.¹ Sacred prostitution was thought of as promoting the powers of nature by the working of analogy: the powers set in motion by human actions promoted corresponding powers in the land.² Characteristic of Canaanite fertility ritual was the association of cult prostitutes with the temples; "by joining in the activities of cultic sexuality, common people could participate in 'stockpiling' fertility energy, which ensured the continuing stability of agricultural as well as human and animal productivity."³

The Bible, however, refuses to envision Yahweh's control of fertility as a sexual process requiring a consort.⁴ Unlike the ancient Near Eastern deities who were sexual beings, Yahweh's role was to provide protection and deliverance, rather than sex and procreation.⁵ Yahweh had male gender, but not sex; He could not model sexuality so it could not be part of the sacred order; sex is taken as one of the matter-of-fact components of the universe.⁶ In Israel, sex was not regarded as a sacral mystery.⁷ It was not demonized or condemned, but was relegated to the

1. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Law and Philosophy: The Case of Sex in the Bible," Semeia 45 (1989): 89-90.

2. Ringgren, 167.

3. Craigie and Wilson, 100.

4. Schneidau, 239.

5. Foster R. McCurley, Ancient Myths and Biblical Faith (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 96.

6. Frymer-Kensky, 90.

7. Rad, 1:27.

social and ethical rather than the religious realm.¹ The offering of first fruits to Yahweh was a way to acknowledge that He was the power behind fertility since the one who fertilized the ground was its proper owner.²

In the Old Testament, fertility is a natural process, like all natural phenomena, under Yahweh's control; it is not itself divine or magic. The means by which the infertile one approaches Yahweh was not through magical practice connected with the sex act or through ritual repetition and sacrifice as in Canaan and Mesopotamia, but through prayer.³ Fertility is the creation gift of a gracious God who desires to bless His people.

The prophets often had to remind the Israelites of the source of their prosperity. Hosea 2:8 complains that Israel has not acknowledged Yahweh as the one who gave her the grain, the new wine, the oil, wool and linen; it was not Baal who brought fertility to the land, but Yahweh.⁴ The God who has the power to dispense the blessings that lead to life is the God who needs to be worshiped. The rejection of cult prostitution shifted hoped-for productivity to the gracious will of Yahweh rather than the manipulation of fertility powers.⁵ The crux of the matter is

1. Frymer-Kensky, 91.

2. McCurley, 89.

3. McCurley, 90.

4. John Day, "Canaan, Religion of," Anchor Bible Dictionary, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 835.

5. Craigie and Wilson, 100.

control of fertility: the one who controls the productivity of the land and people is their owner.

Revelation in History

The difference between gods who were tied to the cycles of nature and Yahweh who is transcendent over creation gives these cultures distinct views of the function of history. In the ancient Near East, the realm of nature filled the mythology and ritual existed to maintain the cyclical ebb and flow of the creative forces of nature. Bertil Albrektson has summarized some important observations about the Mesopotamians' view of history and its relationship to the gods. They traced divine powers in the recurring interplay of the forces of nature, but also believed the gods had powers over all domains of life, that they acted in history as well as in nature. Like the Israelites, they believed that what happened in history was not in the last analysis the work of human powers but of divine. Their basic belief was that all that happens is controlled and governed by divine powers; there was a general belief in divine omnipotence.¹

A significant difference between the ancient Near Eastern and Israelite beliefs did not involve whether their deities ruled over both the events of history and the processes of nature, but of the principle source of revelation about the divine. Instead of finding their revelation of God's presence with them in the

1. Albrektson, 12-28.

numinous experience of the natural world, the Old Testament found Yahweh revealed in the unique events of history that comprised His relationship with them. While both Israel and Mesopotamia depicted divine intervention in history, only in Israel is Yahweh's intervention focused toward an established and consistent goal: His actions in Israel's history go far beyond preserving the status quo.¹

Yahweh's revelation of Himself and His will in the context of covenant distinguished Israel from her neighbors; in no other culture does the election and blessing of their God "mean so much and serve as a foundational theological premise for so long."² Yahweh's revelation of His faithfulness flowed from historical events in which He showed them His character. The unfolding of history, not cosmic phenomena, became a revelation of the dynamic will of God.³

Summary of Differences

Horsnell has summarized the distinctiveness of Israelite religion as follows: in Israel, nature is not experienced as personal but as inanimate; faith in a transcendent God is not tied to the forces of nature and fertility but is strongly opposed to the Mesopotamian polytheistic and fertility-based religion. Yahwism maintains a strong antimythological tendency, with

1. Walton, 233.
2. Walton, 247.
3. Frankfort, 370.

a high view of deity and a strong monolatrous and monotheistic tendency in contrast to the polytheism and henotheism of the ancient Near East. Yahweh had a high moral character and His judgments are not arbitrary or capricious; He is a God of grace who acts with a view to human redemption and reconciliation.¹

Walton believes that the most significant difference lies in Yahweh's single will and ultimate power contrasted with the limited plurality of competing divine wills of polytheism. Yahweh was "wholly other," characterized by constancy and morality. He is utterly independent of humankind, requiring obedience to His revealed will and He cannot be manipulated by ritual.²

Although there were many similarities between Israel and her neighbors, their relationship to deity was profoundly different. Where differences are posited or observable between Israel and contemporary cultures, the theological distinction between polytheism and monotheism usually provides the explanation.³ Israel was separated from her cultural environment through her belief in a single God, sovereign and transcendent over all creation, with a single will and a revealed plan for creating and blessing His people, and, ultimately, the whole world.

As already noted, the most striking difference is the presence in the universe of only one all-powerful will as opposed to a variety of competing powers and wills. The fact of one

1. Horsnell, 94.

2. Walton, 236-244.

3. Walton, 244.

supreme will causes those subject to that will to make radical assumptions connected to morality, obedience and the entire sphere of life. The Israelite could not play off one god against another or resort to magic to exert his own power in manipulating the divine. There was only the will of the one God. The impact of His control over fertility was to demonstrate His superiority over the gods, over nature, over life itself. This sovereign control over the very source of life is clearly demonstrated from the beginnings of His revelation of Himself, recounted in the book of Genesis.

CHAPTER 3

Genesis Background

IntroductionStrategic Importance

Genesis, as its opening word "b^ereshit" indicates, is the book of beginnings, orienting the reader of Scripture to the origins of the world, of mankind and of the people of Israel. As a prologue to the Old Testament, Genesis stands in a place of interpretive significance both for the Pentateuch and for the Old Testament as a whole. Genesis sets the thematic agenda for the story of the people of God, and lays a foundation for comprehension of the identity of the people of Israel and of the purposes and character of their God.¹ The account of the origins of life and the election of a special people to receive the blessings of a relationship with Yahweh set the stage for the development of this relationship across the centuries of Israelite history. For these reasons, an adequate understanding of the structure and themes of Genesis provides an important key to understanding the subsequent materials of the Old Testament.

Hermeneutical Perspectives

Because of its strategic location in the Old Testament narrative, Genesis has been carefully studied for thousands of years from a variety of hermeneutical perspectives. For the last

1. David J. A. Clines, The Theme of the Pentateuch (Sheffield: JSOT, 1978), 45-47.

two hundred years, scholarship has concentrated on the task of identifying sources which account for the origins of the Genesis material, resulting in a fragmented and splintered text. More recently, there has been a growing appreciation of the obvious literary art of the completed work and of the internal unity of the book in its present form. Genesis offers itself as a "unified work of literary art; that is to say, a unitary composition thematically developed and integrated from beginning to end."¹ The themes and motifs introduced in the initial chapters of Genesis appear over and over again in subsequent sections of the Old Testament.

Whatever historical form the compositional process of Genesis took, an attentive reading of the text makes it clear that the traditions which were chosen for transmission to future generations were carefully selected and combined to express a literary and thematic unity. This study will consider Genesis from a narrative-critical point of view, using the literary context to determine the function of the motif of the barren woman, seeking its significance for, and impact on, the faith of the people of Israel.

Structure and Unity

Structurally, the book of Genesis appears to fall into two distinct parts: the account of prehistory in chapters 1-11, and

1. Bruce T. Dahlberg, "On Recognizing the Unity of Genesis," Theology Digest 24 (1976): 361.

the account of the ancestors of Israel in chapters 12-50, organized around the biographies of four generations of the family of Abraham. Much scholarly debate has focused on the historical relationship, or perceived lack thereof, between primeval and patriarchal legends. In terms of literary and thematic unity, the present form of the book displays a coherent continuity of plot and motif, characterized by an "easily discernible unity and a noticeable lack of uniformity."¹

As Brevard Childs has observed, Genesis is structured into a whole by means of the genealogical formula, using the word "toledot" (the generations of).² This formula, repeated ten times during the narrative, distinguishes the various families and delineates their growth. The "toledot" formula structures the book into unified composition and makes clear the nature of the unity which is intended. For example, the use of the formula in 2.4 connects the creation of world with the history that follows; the major concern is to describe creation and world history in the light of the divine will for a chosen people.³ The family is so central to the structure of Genesis that it has also been suggested that genealogy is the plot of Genesis.⁴ This deliberate

1. John Sailhamer, "Genesis," The Expositor's Bible Commentary, gen. ed. Frank Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 4.

2. Brevard Childs, Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 145.

3. Childs, 46.

4. Steinberg, 41.

literary structuring around family groups gives important clues to the way the stories were intended to be read and understood, and indicates the priorities of the message of the book.

Themes of Genesis

The generational emphasis of Genesis focuses on the family of the present with an emphasis on the family of the future. Concern for offspring and the promise of future blessing through children recur throughout the book of Genesis and on through the historical record of the people of Israel. Because the past was foundational to the present in the understanding the Israelites had of themselves, the Genesis narratives continued to speak to future generations of God's people concerning the ability and intention of Yahweh to fulfill His promises, and concerning their identity as the people of God. Yahweh's unchanging character as revealed in His actions within their history enabled the Israelites to understand and interpret their present circumstances in the light of His revealed plan to create a special people.

Relation between Past and Present

As has often been noted, one of central concerns lying behind the final shape of the Pentateuch is the attempt to uncover the inherent relation between the past and the future; the narrative texts of past events are presented as pointers to the future.¹ Genesis forms the first part of what has been known

1. Sailhamer, 8.

traditionally as Torah (instruction), a designation indicating its historical function within the community. Genesis is an historical narrative, providing a re-presentation of past events for purpose of instruction.¹ Torah presents, in the form of story, the essential character and moral obligations for any current audience by depicting those of the normative past.² The events of the past are read as pointers to the future.³ This instructional and interpretive function makes the individual elements of the stories important; accurate interpretation of the stories within their narrative context is seen as relevant to subsequent generations of those who live under God's covenant and promise.

The concern for family and fertility forms part of a larger question in the Old Testament of the sovereignty of God. As previously noted, the one who controls fertility is the one to whom the people owe worship. As part of Torah, the stories of the promise of children to a family whose mothers are barren provide particular narrative and historical evidence to future generations of Yahweh's sovereignty over creation and history, as well as His intention and power to fulfill His promises.

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1. Sailhamer, 10.
 2. Coats, 25.
 3. Sailhamer, 10.

Promise and Fulfillment

Prominent among the themes of the Old Testament is that of Yahweh's promises and their fulfillment. The specific promises of blessing, both in creation and in election, continued to occupy the attention of successive generations of God's people. The theme of the Pentateuch is the partial fulfillment of promise to and blessing of the patriarchs.¹ Concerns about fulfillment of the promises are reflected not only in the books dealing with the narrative history of Israel, but also appear in the poetic and prophetic writings of the Old Testament.

Genesis lays out the foundations of these promises, presenting them in the context of circumstantial threats and obstacles to their fulfillment. The chief obstacle to fulfillment of the promise of a great people is the infertility of Abraham's wife. The failure of the various human solutions to this problem highlights the inability of human power to produce blessings. The issue of barrenness tests the limits of the power of Yahweh and His willingness to fulfill His word.

Identity of the People of God

Development of the theme of promise raises the question of the identity of the people who are to receive these promises. Genesis presents a continual struggle within the family of Abraham to possess the blessing of promises and land. The winners

1. Clines, 29.

receive the blessing and the losers are expelled from the land, usually toward the east.¹ The story of Genesis is the constant struggle to create a family whose members can live together and share common destiny, providing the foundation for the future nation; the threat to survival of the family comes mostly from within the family.²

Into the struggle on the human level to possess the blessing, the factor of infertility falls like a bomb: the Genesis stories conclusively prove that no manner of human scheming is able to open the womb; only God has that power. Yahweh's power over human conception establishes that His power to fulfill His plan to create His people is absolute. Against the background of human struggle and divine plans, the patriarchal narrative begins to develop a view of what it means to live as a community of the people of God.

Conclusion

These central issues of the connection between past and present, the fulfillment of promise and the identity of the true people of God remained of supreme importance to the Israelites in succeeding generations. The accounts preserved in Genesis give 'ancestral' justification to two key biblical concepts: Israel's identity as the chosen people and her claim to possession of the

1. Martin Ravndal Hauge, "The Struggles of the Blessed in Estrangement I," Studia Theologica 29 (1975): 15.

2. Steinmetz, 1.

land of Canaan.¹ In addition, since the history of Israel as recorded in Genesis through Kings displayed the same tendencies to inter-family strife and the resistance to God that ends in judgment, these early narratives of election, promise, disobedience, exile and restoration were a reassurance that "the commitments Yahweh made to the patriarchs and their descendants were permanent and thus they apply to the exile generation, too."²

Within the context of these themes, the question of infertility in the patriarchal families, as presented in the motif of the barren women, provides important insights into the relationship between God and His people, especially in the areas of His sovereign power and His intention to bless His people. Yahweh's revelation of Himself through particular historical events taught His people what He is like and instructed them on how to live with Him.

Barrenness, then, is closely related to the major themes of Genesis, and its threefold repetition suggests it is a theologically significant issue. The next chapter will explore the treatment of this theme in Genesis and in other parts of the Old Testament.

1. Exum, 107.

2. Goldingay, 27.

CHAPTER 4

Barrenness in the Old Testament

Blessing and BarrennessFertility as Blessing

In an agriculturally based society, the fertility of nature forms the foundation of all material, social and spiritual blessings. The productivity of fields and flocks is the source of material prosperity and the basis of life itself. Human fertility is essential to a good life: large families provide continuity for the future and necessary labor, as well as protection and security in old age. Children are also signs of prosperity.¹ Fruitfulness is a spiritual blessing as well, since worship involves offerings of grain and animals.

In Genesis, the theme of blessing is connected closely with the themes of family and promise. In the Hebrew Bible, fertility is always associated with blessing.² It is clear from the beginning of Genesis that the design of Yahweh's blessing on creation is fertility. In Genesis 1:28, 9:1, 26:24 and 35:11, His command to human beings is to be fruitful and multiply. The first thing God does in relation to man is to bless him, giving him fruitfulness, productivity, dominion, and the implicit promise of numer-

1. Janet L. R. Melnyk, "When Israel was a Child: Ancient Near Eastern Adoption Formulas and the Relationship between God and Israel," in History and Interpretation: Essays in Honor of John H. Hayes, ed. M. Patrick Graham et al. (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 246.

2. Jeansonne, 79.

ous progeny.¹ The injunction to be fruitful and multiply is repeated at each of the three family beginnings (Adam, Noah, Abraham), as Yahweh bestows blessings of land and of fruitfulness on humanity. He restates this blessing to Noah after the flood, and, in the form of promises, to Abraham assuring him of many descendants.²

As Otwell has observed, childbearing had a social function in Israel as seen in Psalm 128:3: the essence of blessedness of is pictured as a fruitful wife and many sons. Motherhood was not only a biological and sociological phenomenon, it was evidence of God's care for Israel: the birth of a child was a demonstration of God's active presence, a testimony of His continued care.³ Ancient Israel believed that God worked through conception, pregnancy and giving birth to create and sustain His people.⁴

In light of the natural expectation of fruitfulness and the promise of posterity that begins the story of Abraham, Sarah's barrenness produces dramatic tension and suspense in the Genesis story. Because children are a basic blessing of creation as well as a specific promise to the founding father of Israel, the three-times repeated inability of the matriarchs to bear children introduces a thematically significant obstacle to fulfillment of -----

1. Hermann W. Beyer, "Eulogeo," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 757.

2. Gordon Wenham, Genesis 1-15 (Waco: Word, 1987), 238.

3. Otwell, 50-66.

4. Otwell, 87.

the promise. A humanly insoluble problem appears at the very beginning of the patriarchal story, and only the one who controls fertility can resolve it.

The Old Testament Presentation of Barrenness

Fertility is specified as one of the blessings of covenant obedience;¹ infertility, therefore, was not expected to trouble the covenant people. Barrenness, when it appears in the Old Testament, is often portrayed as part of God's judgment against sexual immorality or idolatry.² In Genesis 20:18, Yahweh closed the wombs of the women of Abimelek's household as warning for the potential sin of adultery. The prophetic writings connect sterility with idolatry and its evil consequences, as seen in Jeremiah 22:30 and Ezekiel 36:30.³ Famine, a disruption of the natural productivity of the land, is barrenness in the natural world due to the withholding of fertility.⁴ Both idolatry and adultery resulted in the same punishment: barrenness among humans and suspension of the normal course of fruitfulness in nature. The withholding of fertility indicates divine displeasure.⁵

1. Ex. 23:26, Dt. 28:11.

2. Wenham, 238: Leviticus 20:20 and Jeremiah 22:30.

3. Patai, 85.

4. Saggs, 25.

5. Victor Hamilton, Genesis: Chapters 1-12 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 443.

Mary Callaway has refined interpretation of the presence of barrenness in the Old Testament by proposing the existence of two distinct views of the problem. She identifies one attitude toward infertility in legal and poetic texts that mention it as punishment for sin.¹ This view, she states, is neither presented strongly nor is a common theme in biblical writings, especially when compared with its frequency in other ancient Near Eastern literatures. Callaway finds a second, more complex, view of barrenness in the narrative books, in the stories of Sarah (Genesis 11:30-21:6), Rebekah (Genesis 25:21), Rachel (Genesis 29:31-30:24), the wife of Manoah (Judges 13), Hannah (I Samuel 1-2) and the Shunamite woman (2 Kings 4:8-17). These passages deal with individual women, real people with specific situations. Except in the case of the Shunamite, these six narratives offer no reason for the presence of infertility (other than the indication that it was Yahweh who had closed the womb), the woman conceives when Yahweh sees, hears or remembers her, and the resulting child is significant in Israel's history.² Callaway's analysis highlights the difference between the view of barrenness as punishment for disobedience to the law of God as presented in legal and poetic references, and the incidence of barrenness in narrative texts, which signal the birth of a special child.

1. Leviticus 20:20-21, 2 Samuel 6:23, Job 18:19, Hosea 9:10-18, Proverbs 30:15-16 and Isaiah 14:22. It would seem that Genesis 20:18 would belong in this category as well, but that does not fit Calloway's interpretive scheme.

2. Mary Callaway, Sing, O Barren One: A Study in Comparative Midrash (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 16-17.

This description of two views of infertility corresponding to literary type does not exhaust the incidents of barrenness presented in the Old Testament. Psalms and Proverbs speak of the anguish of barrenness in a matter-of-fact manner: Psalms 113:9 speaks of Yahweh as the one who causes the barren woman to rejoice by giving her children, and Prov. 30:16 uses the figure of the barren womb in a comparison of unquenchable desires. Evidence in narrative material of infertility resulting from divine displeasure appears in the story of Abimelek's wives, Gen. 20:18, and is perhaps intended in the case of Michal, as a judgment of her criticism of David's devotion in II Sam. 6:23.

The six cases of initially barren individual women in the narrative material differ considerably from each other. The Genesis matriarchs--Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel--share the honor of being founding mothers of the Israelites. The presence of barrenness in their stories seems to emphasize the power of Yahweh over fertility¹ and His ability to fulfill His promise to establish His people in spite of an insurmountable obstacle.

The stories of the other three barren women lie outside of Genesis. Hannah, the mother of Samuel, is the humble sufferer who cries out to the Lord and receives His answer.² The story of Manoah's wife (the birth of Samson) appears to follow the folklore motif of the birth of a hero narrative. The Shunamite is childless rather than barren: the cause of her plight is associ-

1. Jeansonne, 75.

2. Callaway, 57.

ated with the advanced age of her husband.¹ She conceives after a word of assurance from Elisha, rather than as a result of a divine promise, prayer, or announcement by a divine messenger.² Unlike all the others, her child is not only not famous, he does not even have a name in the text. This story outline resembles folk tales of elderly childless couples rewarded for hospitality to the gods by being granted a child.

Barrenness functions as an effective metaphor for hopelessness in the Old Testament.³ The picture of the woman without a child was a powerful image of incurable grief. The desolation of the barren wife becomes a metaphor for the destruction of Jerusalem in Isaiah 54:1, and the rapture of the woman who finally conceives is compared to the joy of Yahweh's restoration of the city and the people.

Another wife in the patriarchal family who struggles to obtain a child is Tamar. Her case presents a more complex problem and a more ambiguous solution. Tamar is a childless widow rather than a barren wife,⁴ childless by circumstance, not by nature.⁵ The question in Genesis 38 is whether or not she will

1. II Kings 4:14.

2. Perhaps her story is best understood as one of a series of stories relating Elisha's power to bring life (revival of the dead boy, healing of the springs, etc.), rather than as an example of barrenness.

3. Walter Brueggemann, Genesis (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 116.

4. Jeansonne, 98.

5. Laffey, 46.

remain a barren widow, since she has a right to a child through the custom of levirate marriage.¹ The institution of levirate marriage, the basis of the stories of Tamar and Ruth, demonstrates the importance of sons to continue the name of the family.² Tamar's situation is due to man's wrong, rather than to Yahweh's plan. The credit for continuation of the family line is not due to Judah, but to Tamar's determination to have a child.³ In spite of her methods, deception and incest, Tamar's resolve is praised because she, unlike Judah, provides for the future survival of the family.

Barrenness in the Old Testament is shown to be foreign to God's intentions to bless His people. However, He chose three infertile women and one who was not desirable to her husband to bear the children who would inherit the covenant; the unreasonableness of the plan dramatizes the awe-inspiring qualities of the God of Israel.⁴ In the narratives of these barren wives, there is a definite connection between Yahweh's promised blessing of posterity and His power over fertility. It is because He is the Lord of fertility that this problem can become a way to demonstrate His faithfulness to fulfill His promises.

1. Coats, 274.

2. Otwell, 51.

3. Sailhamer, 232.

4. Jeansonne, 115.

Mesopotamian Solutions and Biblical Dilemmas

Ancient Near Eastern Solutions

Ancient Near Eastern literature reflects a concern for progeny and an understanding that fertility is a divine gift. Maintenance of fertility in crops, animals and humans formed the basis for their culture and religion for thousands of years. For Mesopotamians, as well as for Israelites, childlessness carried spiritual as well as a social overtones because of the specific identification of the gods with the process of fertility. Both legal and epic texts indicate how pervasive the desire for offspring was.¹

In the realm of Canaanite literature, the Ugaritic epics dealing with the exploits of Krt and Dnl/Aqt both include the complaint of the hero to the gods that he has no child. As a result of the intercession of Baal, the god of fertility, the stories show that the heroes are provided with a wife or with the power for conception.²

An important form of blessing was the blessing of fruitfulness, and a major form of curse is the curse of barrenness. The ancient Near East devised many legal and cultural remedies for childlessness, such as taking a second wife, adoption and fathering a child through the wife's slave.³ Provision for children and for legal inheritance appears throughout the legal texts from

1. Callaway, 13.

2. Westermann, 115.

3. Callaway, 15.

Mesopotamia. There has been a good deal of scholarly discussion concerning the validity of parallels between ancient Near Eastern solutions to the need for an heir and the remedies of the Old Testament to the problem of childlessness.

Old Testament Dilemmas

Ancient Near Eastern and Old Testament writings treat the subject of barrenness differently. The ancient Near East told stories of childless men, while the Bible focuses on stories of barren women.¹ Interestingly, with the exception of Gen. 25:21 and perhaps of Gen.15:2, the husbands in the Old Testament appear curiously passive about the barrenness of their wives.² It is the women who take the initiative to obtain sons, rather than the men,³ using whatever means they have to obtain children for themselves and to provide for those children.

Unlike ancient Near Eastern literature, the Old Testament contains virtually no legal material which provides means for a barren couple to obtain heirs. The only law relating to the provision for childlessness is levirate marriage, which seeks to guarantee security to a childless widow by giving her a son through her husband's brother (Deut. 25:5-10). But this is not a remedy for inability to conceive. In light of the blessings and curses in Deuteronomy 28, barrenness must have been understood to

1. Callaway, 16.

2. Coats, 101.

3. Westermann, 64. Also Callaway, 16.

be preventable: the language of covenant makes infertility a national spiritual consequence of disobedience rather than an individual physical problem.

Polygyny is an ancient Near Eastern solution to the problem of a barren wife, but, in the Old Testament narratives, there are no examples of taking of a second wife for this reason. Although Jacob had two wives, his first wife was the fertile one, not the second. In the story of Hannah, another favorite but barren wife, the text does not reveal whether she is the first or the second wife.

Adoption, another Mesopotamian remedy for infertility, is not directly mentioned in the Old Testament.¹ There is perhaps an allusion to it in Abraham's complaint that his heir is a servant of his household (15:3), but since this is not Yahweh's plan, this provision for the future ownership of his property comes to nothing.

In two of the Genesis narratives, the wife gives a slave or handmaid to her husband in order to obtain children for herself. This practice appears to have been acceptable in the Mesopotamian world and is presented without direct comment in the stories of Sarah (Gen. 16:2) and Rachel (Gen. 30:3). Although the maids prove to be fertile, the results of the strategy turn out to be

1. Melnyk, in her article on adoption in the ancient Near East and Israel, reviews Mesopotamian adoption customs, but does not appear to be able to cite any examples from the Old Testament of human adoption except the "built up through her" formula, 247, and perhaps the phrase describing Mordecai's care of the orphaned Esther, 249.

ambiguous. In the case of Hagar, Abraham obtains a son, but not the promised one, and the unity of the family is disrupted. In the case of the rivalry of Rachel and Leah, the use of the handmaids appears to be a stopgap measure rather than a true solution to the problem of competition through childbearing.

Both Sarah and Rachel express the desire to be "built up" through a child of the maid. Sarna has pointed out the double entendre of the verb "banah," meaning "build", but closely related to "son."¹ The general intent of this phrase is clear, but the specific meaning of this solution to the problem of infertility has been variously interpreted. Sarah's and Rachel's purpose has been explained as natural adoption, as a psychological cure for infertility, and as a resort to the power of magic.

As a remedy for barrenness, the formula "I will be built up through her" has historically been viewed as a form of adoption. Obtaining a son for oneself through another is adoption, a situation in which the child belongs to the wife, not to the biological mother. In this regard, it is significant that Rachel and Leah name the sons born to their maids, not Bilhah and Zilpah.²

However, Samson Kardimon explains the adoption process psychologically, stating that the early Talmudic sages regarded this as a remedy for infertility. He appeals to the popular belief, which enjoys some support in medical literature, that the

1. Nahum M. Sarna, Genesis (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 119.

2. Melnyk, 247.

adoption of a child does "sometimes, and not infrequently," help overcome infertility, and argues that the purpose of the handmaid's conception was to enable the wife to also become fertile. He is certain that this fact would have been known and practiced by the ancients as well.¹

Another explanation of being built up through another relies on sympathetic magic. In view of the fact that in both cases the wife herself ultimately conceived following the union of her husband and her maid, Patai suggests that the intended purpose was for the wife herself to achieve fertility by the power of contagious magic through bodily contact.²

However, neither of these explanations, the psychological and the magical, have taken the witness of the text seriously. Sarah ultimately conceives because Yahweh is gracious to her and does for her what He promised (Gen. 21:1). Rachel finally conceives because Yahweh remembers her, listens to her and opens her womb (Gen 30:22). Psychology is ruled out by Yahweh's direct action. If there were originally any magical elements to the process of conception in these stories, all traces have been removed by the appeal to the direct intervention of Yahweh. For the Biblical text, no effective power exists but His.

1. Samson Kardimon, "Adoption as a Remedy for Infertility in the Period of the Patriarchs," Journal of Semitic Studies 3 (Apr. 1958), 124.

2. Patai, 78.

It has been suggested that the incident of the mandrakes in 30:14-16 represents Rachel's recourse to magic¹ since mandrakes were superstitiously thought to promote fertility.² As in the case of the handmaids, even if a magical intent were originally referred to in the story, the present form of the text ridicules that idea. This is especially clear in the case of the mandrakes, since the opposite result is produced: it is Leah who conceives rather than Rachel. Again, she conceives because the Lord listens to her (30:17).

Prayer is mentioned only twice in Genesis as a recourse for infertility: in Abraham's prayer for Abimelek's wives (20:17-18) and in Isaac's prayer for Rebekah (25:21). In the story of Rachel and Leah, however, Yahweh's action in enabling them to conceive is spoken of as "remembering" or "listening to" them (30:6, 17, 22.), and His power over fertility is frequently referred to in the context of their struggle to produce children (29:31, 32, 33, 35; 30:2, 6, 17, 18, 22-24).

Significantly, none of the barren wives in the Old Testament resort to manipulation or magic in their attempts to conceive. The "manipulation factor" was successful with the gods of the ancient Near East, but it failed with Yahweh,³ and these stories do not consider it an option. Yahweh blesses in accordance with

1. The NIV Study Bible, note on Gen. 30:14, ed. Kenneth Barker (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 50-51.

2. Claus Westermann, Genesis 12-36, trans. John Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987), 475.

3. Walton, 239.

His plan, not because He is coerced into it. All power, positively (conception) and negatively (infertility) is concentrated in His hands. There is only one sovereign will in the universe.

Conclusion

Because of the economic, social and spiritual importance of children, the ancient Near East had many remedies for the problem of a childless wife, including adoption and taking additional wives and concubines. They also had a religious system that provided means to influence and manipulate the powers controlling fertility. The fact of the plurality of divine wills has important ramifications for those who live within a polytheistic worldview: the division of power means that there are possibilities of manipulation of divine will through magic or of influencing a more powerful being to intercede on ones behalf to obtain a desired result.¹ The possibility of manipulating the divine world to gain an advantage gave the ancient Near East significantly different spiritual options when faced with infertility.

Recourse to magic, divination and cult to coerce the gods or the forces apart from the gods² was a distinctive mark of Mesopotamian religious practice. The powers of fertility were thought to work through the principle of analogy to set in motion the

1. Gadd, 66, in Babylonia, every one had a god and goddess of his own; if he offended his god, he would appeal to a greater god to reconcile him with the minor deity he had estranged.

2. Kaufmann, 40.

corresponding powers in the land.¹ This gave human beings the power to affect their own destiny to a point.

In the Old Testament, Yahweh's gift of fertility is part of His overall intention of blessing on His creation, and is a blessing associated with covenant obedience. Barrenness in humans or in nature (famine) appears in many Old Testament locations as a punishment for sin or idolatry. In six narratives, including the stories of the three founding mothers of Israel, the barrenness of the wife is a prelude to the birth of a special child according to the power and word of Yahweh.

It has been argued whether or not religion in Genesis should be termed monotheist, monolatrous or henotheistic.² These definitions make for interesting, but somewhat irrelevant discussion, in light of the fact that Genesis clearly reflects a worldview in which there is only one sovereign, divine will, that of Yahweh.³ There is ultimately only one source of power in the world, Yahweh.⁴ Because He united all power in Himself, magic practice dwindled.⁵ Everything is attributed to Him, even the inexplicable denial of children to Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel.⁶

1. Ringgren, 167.

2. G. Ernest Wright, "How Did Early Israel Differ from Her Neighbors?" Biblical Archaeologist 6 (Feb. 1943), 13.

3. Saggs, 107.

4. Wright, 7.

5. Saggs, 108.

6. Genesis 16:2, 25:21, 30:2.

Because all power is concentrated in Yahweh's sovereign will, magic and manipulation are not biblical options as solutions to the problem of infertility. The stories of the patriarchs demonstrate His sovereign power over fertility, as well as the certainty of His plan for His people. Analysis of the narratives of Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel will demonstrated in a more detailed way Yahweh's complete control of fertility, the futility of attempts to achieve His promised blessing through human effort and His faithfulness to fulfill His promises.

CHAPTER 5

Sarah: The Barren Woman

Introduction

Women in the Ancient Near East and in the Old Testament received their power, protection and position through the men in their lives: their fathers, husbands and sons.¹ Of these significant figures, the son is the most important because his allegiance is undivided -- he has only one mother; he would be expected to outlive her and so could provide for her in her old age. Pregnancy and progeny, therefore, were a woman's road to whatever power and prestige she could attain in the culture.² The Abraham cycle is an eloquent witness to the desperate desire for children in primitive society; for women there was no alternative career to motherhood.³ This cultural dependence of women is clearly reflected in Genesis, where the life of a woman is seen as an integral whole "only when she is a member of a family in which she presents her husband with children."⁴

The specific context of the barren matriarchs is not only the patriarchal milieu, but the overarching framework of Yahweh's promise of blessing and progeny. The larger problem is Sarah's barrenness in the face of Yahweh's promise to Abraham. Because

1. Andre LaCocque, The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Traditions (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 7.

2. Laffey, 34.

3. Wenham, 273.

4. Westermann, Genesis, 239.

the problem of infertility is juxtaposed against the promise of progeny, the emphasis falls more heavily on the religious dimension than on the social. In Genesis, infertility becomes a spiritual problem because it calls into question the reliability and power of Yahweh to fulfill His promise in the face of obstacles that are insurmountable to human beings. The anguish of the social problem highlights the magnitude of the spiritual problem.

The question of whether Yahweh's promise to Abraham can be fulfilled if his wife is barren¹ is a central motif in chapters 12-21. In the Genesis consideration of the theme of barrenness, Sarah's narrative position gives her a paradigmatic role. The traditions about Sarah's childlessness are the most complex and the most extensively treated: they occur six times in the Abraham cycle.² The stories of Rebekah and Rachel, the other childless mothers of Israel, deal with similar themes. Therefore, a careful study of the way the issues are presented in the narratives about Sarah will illuminate the function of the motif of barrenness in Rebekah and Rachel.

The narrative preeminence of Sarah as the first mother of Israel suggests that her story is an integral part of the underlying issues that emerge as central concerns in Genesis. One of the striking characteristics of Sarah is her barrenness, her lack in essential areas of life. She is portrayed as a woman without
 -- a woman without a family to secure her past or future, without

1. Laffey, 34.

2. Callaway, 18.

blessing and without power. Beginning with Sarah's first appearance in Genesis, this chapter will examine the effect of the motif of barrenness and its contribution to the overall themes of the Abraham cycle.

The Woman Without a Family: Genesis 11-12

Without a Father

Genesis, the book of beginnings, is the story of families; genealogies provide a framework for the stories and serve to locate and identify the lines of human descent in relation to the promises of Yahweh. Unlike the others listed in the lineage of Shem in Genesis 11, however, Sarah is not identified by her family. The first characteristic of the mother of Israel is absence of ancestral information.¹ She appears as only a name, although in the same verse, Milkah's family connections are mentioned and Iscah, of whom nothing more is heard, has a father.² Sarah is given no parents or kinfolk, only a husband. She is the one woman without a genealogy.³

Various theories have been advanced to account for this apparent omission: that her father's name has fallen out of the text, or that the name was removed to harmonize with Genesis

1. Jeansonne, 14.

2. Sailhamer, 109, suggests that inclusion of Iscah's name was part of the author's pattern of listing 10 names between important individuals; with Iscah, the 9th and 10th names are Ishmael and Isaac.

3. Hamilton, 362.

20:12.¹ Sarna calls the omission intentional so as not to ruin the suspense of chapter 20.² It is possible that Abraham was telling the truth in chapter 20 when he stated to Abimelek that Sarah actually was his half-sister, the daughter of his father, though not of his mother. However, the narrative lateness of this solution, which would have been useful in Abraham's defense before Pharaoh, and the circumstances of duress under which it was offered, cast doubt on Abraham's truthfulness in this matter.³ It has been hypothesized that Sarah and Iscah are the same person, though the names are only vaguely related.⁴ The similarity of the names Sarah and Milkah to the names of goddesses in the Babylonian moon cult has suggested a connection between the patriarchs and religious centers in Ur and Haran.⁵ Westermann's opinion is that the name has been lost and is no longer known.⁶

Regardless of the reason for the lack of a father's name, the omissions of 11:29 begin to delineate the parameters of

1. Westermann, Genesis, 137. The first theory he attributes to Ewald and others, and the second to Gunkel and others.

2. Sarna, 87.

3. Westermann, Genesis, 326.

4. Wenham, 273, "suggestions that Iscah is an alternative name for Sarah or that she was Lot's wife are purely speculative."

5. Wenham, 273: Sarratu the wife of the moon god Sin and Malkatu his daughter; both Ur and Harran were important centers of moon worship. Westermann, 138: notes that Malkatu is a name or title for Ishtar.

6. Westermann, Genesis, 137.

Sarah's existence, emphasizing her defenseless position, a vulnerability dramatized later in chapter 12 when she is given away by her husband to avoid a possible threat to his life.

Without a Son

As depicted in Genesis 11:29-30, Sarah is not only a woman without a past, she is also a woman without a future. Even more significant than lack of a father is the lack of a son. Sarah's childlessness dominates most of the scenes that involve her.¹ The Bible presents barrenness as a woman's greatest tragedy,² and a woman who is barren is clearly a disgrace.³ For a woman of her time and culture, lack of sons meant reproach in the present and distress in the future.

The comment in 11:30 that Sarah was barren interrupts the genealogical listings at the end of chapter 11 with personal information about one of the names. Such elaborations in genealogies always say something particularly worthy of note and are an indicator of narrative importance.⁴ This genealogical aside that Sarah was barren introduces the plot line of chapters 12-21 which extends from a complaint about childlessness to the ultimate birth of a child.⁵

1. Jeansonne, 15.

2. Fuchs, 158.

3. Laffey, 11.

4. Westermann, Genesis, 138.

5. Westermann, Genesis, 126.

The form of the announcement of Sarah's barrenness accentuates her plight through parallelism and repetition. The fact is stated positively -- "she was barren" -- and then negatively -- "she had no child".¹ The form of "child" used here is unusual, written with waw instead of yod, "walad". Westermann takes this form, which appears only once in the Old Testament,² and the parallel phrasing which recurs in Judges 13:2 and Isaiah 54:1 as an indication of "the lapidary form of a well known and widespread narrative motif which generally functions as an introduction to a narrative."³ John Sailhamer also comments on the use of "walad" in verse 30, finding in its use further evidence that the central event of the forthcoming narrative is the birth of Isaac. He detects in Abraham's response to the announcement of Isaac's impending birth in chapter 17 a deliberate allusion to this unusual spelling which, accompanied by a play on the name Isaac, calls attention to Isaac's significance at the beginning of the narrative.⁴

Sarah is presented as a woman who lacks the basic provisions for security in Near Eastern society: a father and children. The elaboration of genealogical information, the use of parallel

1. In Hebrew this is an antithetic apposition clause for emphasis: Wenham, 266.

2. And as a Ketib in many manuscripts of the Eastern Masoretes in 2 Sam. 6:23 (BHS, 514)

3. Westermann, Genesis, 139. However, three occurrences hardly seem to qualify as "widespread."

4. Sailhamer, 109.

repetition and the unusual spelling of the focal word, "child", emphasize the importance of this information for the subsequent narratives. Her childlessness depicts her as a tragic figure, an example of vulnerability in the Near Eastern world. The terse style of the text does not dwell on Sarah's adversity, but, for cultures sensitive to this predicament, 11:30 would be sufficient to represent her anguish and to pose a serious problem that has both personal and spiritual dimensions.

The solemn parallelism of 11:30 emphasizes the future importance of the theme of barrenness for the patriarchal narratives and for the beginnings of the nation of Israel. In spite of the creation commandments to be fruitful and multiply, the natural expectation is that Sarah will never know the blessing of children. In light of the relationship between fertility and blessing, Sarah's barrenness identifies her as a woman without blessing.

The Woman Without Blessing: Genesis 12, 16

The Promise of Blessing: Genesis 12:1-3

The beginning of the Abraham narrative presents Sarah as a woman who lacks children and, therefore, is without Yahweh's blessing on her life. Blessing, as already noted, is an important theme throughout Genesis, beginning with the accounts of creation, and, perhaps not surprisingly, the root 'barak' occurs more frequently in Genesis than in any other part of the Old Testament. In the promises of 12:2-3, bless and blessing is repeated five times and refers to the power of fertility, growth

and success.¹ The purpose of Yahweh's call to Abraham is blessing and so that he can be a blessing to others. The promises of Yahweh are not only for Abraham, but extend beyond him to his descendants, to any who bless him, and to all the families of the earth.²

The concept of blessing ties the patriarchal narratives together, connecting them with the primeval history,³ and with contemporary Israel.⁴ The original plan of creation involved blessing and fruitfulness. Clines has observed that in the judgments on Adam and on Noah's world, God's gracious intention of blessing is pronounced before each punishment, mitigating the judgment; there is no such softening of the judgment on the builders of the tower of Babel and he suggests that the patriarchal narrative functions as the mitigation element of the Babel story. The divine promise to the patriarchs, then, demands to be read in conjunction with Genesis 1, as a reaffirmation of the divine intentions for man.⁵ In the face of this promise and intention of blessing, the fact of Sarah's barrenness sets the stage for the subsequent challenge to the fulfillment of Yahweh's promise to Abraham.

1. Westermann, Genesis, 149.

2. Clines, 78.

3. Wenham, 275.

4. Westermann, Genesis, 126.

5. Clines, 78.

Grasping for Blessing: Genesis 16

Sarah, as Genesis 16 shows, does not passively accept her situation. She has been denied one of the basic necessities of a woman's life in her culture, but she proves to be a woman of resourcefulness and determination within the options available to her. Recognizing that Yahweh has kept her from having children, she resolves to acquire a child, using Hagar, her Egyptian servant girl: hoping to be built up through her, 16:2. She seeks to counter divine action with human initiative,¹ by obtaining a child for herself.²

Chapter 16 is an example of an apparently good idea that turns out badly. The episode begins with the statement of the problem, "Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children," and it ends poignantly with the announcement that Abram was 86 years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to him.³ Sarah's attempt to provide herself with the blessing of a child achieves the opposite result. Instead of being blessed, she becomes despised: Hagar's attitude toward her is described using 'qalal,' a word frequently contrasted with 'barak.'⁴

The introduction of Hagar sets up a series of ironic contrasts between the unchosen, slave, powerless foreign woman and

1. Tribble, 11.

2. Coats, 130.

3. Tribble, 19.

4. John N. Oswalt, "Barak," Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, ed. R. Laird Harris (Chicago: Moody, 1990), 132.

the chosen, free, powerful Israelite wife.¹ Hagar's quick fertility is contrasted to Sarah's barrenness.² Sarah, the woman who appears to have all of the advantages, lacks the one thing that would make her life good; Hagar, who has nothing, is given a son. The one who started out to be built up, Sarah, sees that it is Hagar who will be built into a great people through Ishmael. Sarah calls on Yahweh to avenge the wrong done to her (verse 5), but He rescues Hagar instead. In addition, Hauge remarks on the contrast between the gift of the promised child and mechanical human fertility, a contrast further emphasized by both natural and supernatural births, chosen and unchosen sons, related to same father.³ The account of Sarah's barrenness serves to show the insufficiency of natural means and human schemes to achieve the blessings God has promised.

The Futility of Self-Effort

In analyzing Sarah's attempt to build herself through Hagar, Sailhamer has noted that the writer appears to present her plan as one more example of the futility of human efforts to achieve God's blessing. He cites three indications in the text which

1. This contrast is a mirror image of Exodus 1-2 where the fertile women are Israelite slaves; their ease of childbirth is compared favorably against that of the Egyptian women. Paul's analysis of the theological meaning of this contrast as one between flesh and spirit is found in Gal. 4.

2. Robert W. Neff, "The Annunciation in the Birth Narrative of Ishmael," Biblical Research 17 (1972), 54.

3. Hauge, 9.

suggest that Sarah's strategy is not acceptable: Yahweh disapproves of it because Ishmael is not the intended heir (17:15-19); Sarah's scheme to obtain a child is placed immediately after the establishment of the covenant with Abraham that affirms God's intention to provide the promised child (15:4); and the observation that the narrative closely reflects the story of the Fall and Eve's scheme to become like God. "Each of the main verbs (WAYYIQTOL forms) and key expressions in 16:2-3 finds a parallel in Genesis 3." The similarities suggest Sarah's strategy is an attempt to circumvent God's plan of blessing in order to gain a blessing on her own. Chapter 16, like the incidents in 11:1-9, 12:10-20, 13:1-12, 14:21-24, is another example of "the unacceptability of human effort in fulfilling the divine promise."¹

The Hagar episode in chapter 16 finds a parallel in the sojourn in Egypt in chapter 12. A famine (barrenness in nature) leads Abraham to seek what he needs for life in Egypt; to preserve his life, he needs the consent of Sarah; the narrative relates his request that she say he is her brother, but does not record her response. Subsequent events show the results of her agreement -- she is taken into Pharaoh's harem. The end of the matter is shame and rebuke for Abraham. A similar pattern occurs when Sarah attempts to provide relief for herself from her barrenness by means of Hagar. To preserve her life through children, she requests Abraham's help; his verbal response is not recorded, but the events of the narrative demonstrate his agree-

1. Sailhamer, 134-5.

ment. At the end of the incident, however, Sarah finds herself despised by her maid and this results in conflict and separation in the family.

The outcome of their schemes is not salvation, but humiliation. As a result of their attempts to provide life for themselves, both Sarah and Abraham are treated with contempt by an Egyptian (representing the highest and lowest ranks of society), although Abraham comes out ahead both times, gaining riches and a son. Sarah and Abraham both blame Yahweh for their need to provide for themselves (16:2 and 20:13). There is an extent to which these parallel episodes raise Sarah to the level of a person in her own right with an important role in the story and a place before God.

The adventures of Abraham and Sarah in chapters 12 through 21 are carefully and symmetrically crafted¹ as they move toward the resolution of the birth of the true heir. At every narrative turn, Abraham's attempts to gain security through his intellect,² and Sarah's to gain the blessing of children for herself, seem frustrated -- the family divides as Lot leaves due to a quarrel, the sojourns in Egypt and Gerar lead to embarrassing confrontation and expulsion, the attempt to obtain a son through Hagar produces domestic strife and the eventual sending away of Abraham's oldest son. It appears that there is nothing they can do to make the promise come true; human effort is of no avail.

1. Westermann, Promises, 58.

2. Wenham, 291.

The two accounts of Abraham passing his wife off as his sister in foreign lands have the effect of jeopardizing the promise through the potential loss of the mother. These incidents will not be considered in detail here, because they do not deal directly with the problem of the barrenness of the matriarch. However, these accounts heighten dramatic suspense and serve to delay the climax of the narrative. They function as part of the theme of Yahweh's complete sovereignty. He is more powerful than foreign kings and can protect His people from them. These two incidents also highlight the power of Yahweh to rescue Sarah from the situations where her husband's cleverness has landed her.¹ They are part of the underlying observation that things go wrong when men take the initiative.² The many obstacles to the fulfillment of the promise, both from nature and from wrong human choices, contribute to the perspective that Yahweh works through all obstacles to bring about His plans.³

The Obstacle to the Promise

Sarah's inability to bear children poses a major obstacle to the fulfillment of Yahweh's promise to Abraham in 12:2-3. The threat to the promises emerges as the principal theme tying the Abraham narratives together; the commitments Yahweh made to Abraham are imperiled by both circumstantial and human factors.

1. Wenham, 290.

2. Clines, 79.

3. Cohn, 7.

The function of the motif of barrenness has been described both as delay of the promise¹ and as an obstacle² to its fulfillment. Delay of the promise categorizes the motif of the barren woman as a simple literary device that enhances dramatic suspense and serves to retard the action. Slowing down the movement to the climax becomes a way to make a simple story more complex and entertaining. It is true the motif delays the climax of the plot. However, to analyze the motif as an obstacle or a threat goes further to suggest that barrenness functions as an integral part of the story, contributing to the depth of meaning behind the events that unfold in the story. As an obstacle to the promise, barrenness is a key to understanding the movement of the plot.

The structuring of the episodes points to the role of barrenness as an obstacle to the blessing of Yahweh. The promise of many descendants in 12:2 is preceded by notice of Sarah's barrenness in 11:30. The placing of the notice of Sarah's barrenness prior to the giving of the promise strongly suggests that her infertility is intended to be taken as a challenge to Yahweh's ability and willingness to keep His promises.

Further development of this obstacle can be seen in chapters 15 and 17. These chapters, which contain explicit reassurance of numerous descendants (15:4-5, 17:2, 6, 16, etc.), bracket Sarah's assertion that Yahweh has kept her from bearing children in 16:2. Although Yahweh's promise to Abraham of offspring comes at the

1. Westermann, Promises, 61.

2. Goldingay, 13, and others.

beginning of the story, the details of how the promise is to be fulfilled are not disclosed at that time. The narrative has been shaped to only gradually reveal the mechanics of fulfillment and the extent of the promise through repetitions that sharpen the focus of Yahweh's intentions. In chapter 15, He assures Abraham that he himself will be the father of the child (his heir will not be not Lot or an adopted servant). In chapter 17, Yahweh announces to Abraham that the mother of the promised child will be Sarah (not Hagar or another wife or concubine). The promise unfolds progressively through an "intricate pattern of selections, threats, separations, and contention."¹

The implication of this arrangement is that He deliberately chose this problem in order to reveal important aspects of His character. As Walton observes, the structure, arrangement, and emphasis within the material suggest that the obstacles "are used by the author to reveal Yahweh as a God who is so determined and faithful that no circumstances can deter him from carrying out his purposes." The figure of the barren wife appears to be one of those concrete verbal themes and patterns which recur in the patriarchal narratives and which seem to be the narrative's own pointers to meaning in the stories.²

The question arises in Scripture and in life of what to do when Yahweh's blessing or command is blocked or impossible. Israel's history begins with a situation over which humans have

1. Clines, 45.

2. Goldingay, 11.

only a limited amount of control: conception. Fertility can be taken for granted as normal, until it does not happen.¹ Then it becomes an impassible barrier to the fulfillment of desire. The conflict in Genesis between Yahweh's promise and the natural circumstances of Sarah and Abraham sets up ideal conditions for consideration of Yahweh's role in blessing and in withholding blessing -- a spiritual problem in all ages & religions -- as well as a challenge to His ability to overcome obstacles to His promises.

Summary

Sarah's effort to provide herself with the blessing she has been denied is a failure. Ironically, this episode is bracketed by chapters in which Yahweh reassures Abraham of His promise of a children. Either through lack of faith or from the conviction that there remains something to be done from the human side to help God out, the strategy to obtain a child through human schemes turns out to be a failure. Abraham and Sarah are not able to obtain God's promised blessings by their own efforts. The obstacle to the promise appears to be insurmountable. They have no human power to bring about God's promised blessing.

A Woman Without Power: Genesis 17-21

The failure of Sarah's attempt to provide herself with the blessing of children leaves her without family, without blessing

1. Hauge, 9.

and without power to obtain them for herself. She appears to be left outside the promise made to Abraham. Chapter 16 presents her as actively seeking a solution to the problem, but in the rest of the story of Abraham, she is passive and powerless.¹ Paradoxically, she is now about to receive the blessing of God.

The Turning Point: Genesis 17

Chapter 17 is the turning point in the narrative of the search for Abraham's heir. The sovereign intervention of Yahweh reverses the direction of the story as He reestablishes His covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17:9). The new phase of fulfillment of the promise is symbolized by name changes for Abraham and Sarah, and the final revelation of the plan: Sarah will be the mother of Abraham's son. The narrative does not provide a reason for Yahweh's timing or appearance, contributing to the overall sense of divine sovereignty.

Sarna observes the symmetrical arrangement of the chapter: verses 1-8 announce that Abraham will be the father of nations and kings, and his name is changed; verses 9-14 set forth the covenant sign of circumcision; verses 15-22 change Sarah's name and announce that she will be the mother of nations and kings; verses 23-27 set forth the carrying out of the law of circumcision.² The connection of circumcision with the turning point of the narrative of barrenness is a reminder that the "act of cir-

1. Fuchs, 154.

2. Sarna, 122.

cumcision shows an acknowledgement of God as the source of the family."¹

For Sarah, God's move to fulfill His promise represents a turn from barrenness and disgrace to fruitfulness and honor² as she is finally brought into the promise.³ Repetition is a significant feature of the announcements. Yahweh's declaration that He will bless Sarah is used twice to refer to giving her a son, continuing the notion that God's blessing issues in increase.⁴ Twice (Gen. 17:19, 21), Yahweh assures Abraham that Sarah will bear him a son; twice Yahweh announces the forthcoming birth of Isaac (chapters 17 and 18).

Abraham's response to the announcement suggests that he was already content with his son Ishmael and would have settled for less than God's full promise. He did not joyfully receive the news that the promised son would be a child of Sarah (17:18). Instead he responded with disbelieving laughter and pleaded for the blessing to go to Ishmael instead. It has been observed that through Ishmael all but one of the provisions of Yahweh's promises of chapter 12 were realized: many descendants who possess a land and constitute a famous people. But it was not through

 1. John H. Walton, Covenant: God's Purpose, God's Plan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 117.

2. Neff, "The Birth and Election of Isaac in the Priestly Tradition," Biblical Research 15 (1970), 6.

3. Westermann, Genesis, 267.

4. Westermann, Genesis, 267.

Ishmael, that Abraham would become a blessing to all the families of the earth, as Isaac has been.¹

Is Anything too Hard for Yahweh? Genesis 18

There is a double annunciation of the birth of Isaac using the phrase "at this time next year," in 17:21 and 18:10. This two-fold announcement is a sure indication that what has been promised will finally happen.² The news that the promise is about to be fulfilled comes first to Abraham in chapter 17 and then to Sarah, listening at the tent flap in chapter 18.

By the time Yahweh is ready to fulfill His promise of a son, the difficulties of fulfillment have increased: Sarah is not just barren, she and Abraham are both presented as too old for child-bearing. The additional factor of age accentuates the impossibility of the birth. The couple's incredulity calls forth the rhetorical question, "Is anything too difficult for Yahweh?" "Too hard" is the Hebrew "pl'," a denominative verb meaning wonderful, marvelous³, signifying God's sovereign control of Nature and the belief that there are absolutely no limits to His power.⁴

1. Dennis Kinlaw, lecture in "Old Testament Theology," Asbury Theological Seminary, Fall, 1993. However, given the present day world-wide spread of Islam, some would probably have grounds to contend that this final provision has also been fulfilled through Ishmael.

2. Wenham, 260, and Gen. 41:32.

3. Victor Hamilton, "PL'," TWOT, II:723.

4. Walther Eichrodt, Theology of the Old Testament, trans. J. A. Baker, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 2:163-4.

Human Initiative Condemned: Genesis 19, 20

There are two more narrative detours before the birth of Isaac which are found in chapters 19 and 20: the story of Lot's daughters and Abimelek's wives. These incidents contribute to the delay of the plot and narrative suspense, and they serve to fill in the time between the announcement and the birth. Because they are also related to the problem of conception and the importance of the continuation of the family, as well as to the issues of God's power and human initiative in obtaining blessing, they provide an oblique comment on the story of Sarah's barrenness.

The episode of Lot's daughters closely follows the announcement to Sarah that she will at last bear a son to continue her family line. Westermann has commented on the determination of the women in the Old Testament stories to take action to continue the family line, leading to a case like that of Lot's daughters. In their desperation, they devised their own outrageous solution for the preservation of the family, contributing to the implicit contrast between the course of Lot's family history and Abraham's.¹ Placement of this incident shortly after Sarah's attempt to obtain her own blessing through Hagar suggests that the story of Lot's daughters and the origin of Israel's enemies could be seen as an example of the same idea carried to revolting lengths.

Westermann does not interpret this incident negatively, but as part of "a distant past on which we cannot impose our crite-

1. Westermann, Promises, 64.

ria."¹ He compares Lot's daughters to Tamar as examples of women in the patriarchal narratives who depart from the prevailing standards of morality to continue the family line and to assure their only possible future. It is true that Tamar's strategy in Genesis 38 is praised, but she was a victim of Judah's wrongdoing, rather than a refugee from Yahweh's judgment. As a culmination of the Sodom and Gomorrah story, the episode of the daughters reads more like a sorry end than a righteous preservation of the family of Lot.²

The second incident is the mention at the end of chapter 20 of the wives of Abimelek who were struck with infertility because of Sarah was taken into the harem. Both the Sodom and Gomorrah episode and the incident with Abimelek turn on Yahweh's response to the prayers of Abraham. This case of punitive barrenness was resolved by the prayer of Abraham, perhaps foreshadowing the prayer of Isaac for his wife's conception and Hannah's prayer for a child. The story reiterates the absolute sovereignty of Yahweh: He also controls fertility outside of the boundaries of Israel and the chosen people.

1. Westermann, Genesis, 315.

2. Gerhard von Rad, Genesis: A Commentary, trans. J. H. Marks, revised ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 244, also refuses to condemn the daughters, but notes that the narrative contains a severe judgment: "Lot's life becomes inwardly and outwardly bankrupt."

The Promise Fulfilled: Genesis 21

Chapter 21 opens with the double announcement of Sarah's pregnancy. The emphasis on the fact that her conception was in response to Yahweh's word, according to His promise, which not only demonstrates His power over fertility, but also places the birth of her son within the context of the covenant plan for Israel. God has fulfilled His promise as He said, because He has the power to do so. There is no hint of magic or ritual manipulation and Yahweh is shown to have acted freely and in accordance with His previously expressed plans. He is in control over fertility and over time.

The theme of laughter in connection with Isaac reappears in 21:6, this time the laughter of incredulous joy rather than the bitter laughter of disappointed hopes and disbelief. As Isaac is the turning point for the childless couple, the laughter marks a complete reversal from sorrow to joy for Sarah. The laughter associated with the name of Isaac is a synonym for joy.¹

Polytheism versus Monotheism: The Place of Faith

One of the important decisions of Abraham is to believe Yahweh's promise of descendants (15:6). Faith, though it is not frequently mentioned in Genesis, is shown to be at the back of these stories,² as the key to relating to Yahweh, to fitting into His plans for blessing. Abraham's faith had to overcome many

1. Westermann, Genesis, 334.

2. Rad, 1:171.

obstacles, but the force of 12-26 is to show Abraham as the man of faith who relied on the promises of God. Abraham's strong faith, built through personal interaction with Yahweh, stands in contrast to the powerless figure of Sarah listening from her tent (18:9-15). She does not have the privilege of being encouraged directly by God, but the narrative shows that all along His intention is blessing for her as well. In some ways, Sarah's is a more complete blessing than Abraham's: he never possesses the land but she at last has her son and the joy that goes with him. The promise is fulfilled in God's time, in God's way.

Conclusion

Although Yahweh has made great promises to Abraham, Sarah is presented as a woman who is lacking the security of family, the blessing of children and the power to provide for herself. The narrative demonstrates over and over the futility of human effort to bring about the blessing Yahweh has promised. It also demonstrates, through the lives of Abraham and Sarah, the limitless power of God to fulfill His promises.

The motif of Sarah's barrenness brings a deeper dimension to the theme of the fulfillment of the promises. Sarah's inability to conceive is a major obstacle, but one which is qualitatively different from the others because it is caused by Yahweh Himself. God's control over Sarah's barrenness ties this motif to the major themes of His character, His promises and the meaning of faith. The obstacle of barrenness becomes a way to affirm His faithfulness and to emphasize the futility of trying to obtain a

blessing apart from His plan. Sarah's situation provides an avenue, in a culture dominated by male figures, to include women in the narrative of promise and to reflect the concern of Genesis 2 that true humanity is composed of male and female.

CHAPTER 6

Rachel and Rebekah: The Other Barren WomenIntroduction

The stories of Rachel and Rebekah continue to develop the theme of a founding mother of Israel who is unable to conceive without the intervention of Yahweh. Several elements of Rachel's story parallel those of Sarah's: the distress of the childless mother, the action of Yahweh in closing the womb, and the barren woman's determination to obtain her own son through a maidservant. For this reason, although Rachel's story is chronologically later, it will be studied before Rebekah's.

In the Abraham story, Sarah's barrenness is closely connected with the theme of the fulfillment of the promise. This humanly insurmountable obstacle to the fulfillment of God's promise accentuates the futility of attempting to obtain a blessing apart from Yahweh, and demonstrates His total sovereignty over life, including control of fertility.

In the narratives of Isaac and Jacob, new themes of rivalry and strife within the patriarchal family, an intensified struggle to obtain the promised blessing, appear. The threat to Yahweh's purposes for His people comes from a new direction, human conflict rooted in sibling jealousy. The theme of the barren wife would be expected to add depth to these themes as it added to the theme of the fulfillment of the promise in the Abraham cycle.

This chapter proposes to examine the use of the motif of barrenness in the stories of Rachel and Rebekah to determine if the problem of their infertility emphasizes the same narrative

and theological points as in the story of Sarah, with the goal of moving toward some general conclusions about the function of this motif in the Genesis matriarchs.

Rachel and Leah

Theme of Rivalry

In the story of the sisters Rachel and Leah, Rachel's barrenness functions as the major point of conflict in what appears to be a story of sibling rivalry in chapters 29-30. These chapters purport to narrate the birth of the founders of the tribes of Israel, but the focus of the story is actually the competition between the women to gain sons and the love of the husband.¹ One result of this narrative shaping is that the names of eight of the tribal ancestors have been related directly to the antagonism between Rachel and Leah.² The theme of the birth of the ancestors has been subordinated to the jealous rivalry of the sisters.

This bitter strife between the sisters mirrors the struggle between the brothers Esau and Jacob earlier in the story: the younger sibling desperately wants what the older has, and does whatever he can to obtain it. Even though the birth prophecy assured Jacob of the blessing, his efforts to secure it by his own cunning causes his exile from the family. The competition between Rachel and Leah also resembles a protracted form of the Sarah/Hagar conflict: the beautiful, favorite wife is barren and

1. Callaway, 26.

2. Westermann, Genesis, 471. Also, Callaway, 26.

the plain, unloved wife is fertile. The gloating attitude of the fertile woman ignites the fury of the barren woman who is powerless to conceive.¹

Yahweh's Control of Fertility

As in the case of Sarah, Yahweh is acknowledged to be responsible for Rachel's barrenness. Sarah confesses, "Yahweh has prevented me from bearing children" (16:2). In 21:1, the narrator announces, "Yahweh visited Sarah as He had said, and Yahweh did for Sarah as He had spoken" (21:1) and the following verse repeats the idea of Yahweh bringing about His promise at the time He told Abraham He would. The resolution of the problem of Sarah's barrenness is tied to the trustworthiness of Yahweh's word and the sureness of His purposes, not to any action by either Sarah or Abraham. He has the power to act when He chooses, according to His plan.

In Rachel's case, the narrative section begins in 29:31 with the statement, "Yahweh saw Leah was unloved so He opened her womb, but Rachel was barren", suggesting a deliberate action to compensate Leah and a refusal to bless Rachel. In the middle of the story, Jacob angrily reminds Rachel that God has withheld children from her (30:2). The drama of the competition between the sisters comes to a climax in 30:22-24 when God remembers Rachel, gives heed to her and opens her womb, permitting the conception and birth of Joseph. At the critical junctures of the

1. Callaway also notes some of these parallels, 28.

narrative, Yahweh is clearly indicated as the giver and the source of human fertility.

The centrality of the role of Yahweh in conception has been noted. As in the story of Sarah, there is no mythic background and no magic, except perhaps for the failure of the mandrakes; only Yahweh's sovereign power solves Rachel's problem. He even works through the human conflict to achieve His purposes. According to Westermann, the main concern of the narrative of the strife between Rachel and Leah is "to set in relief Yahweh's (God's) action in the birth of Jacob's children."¹ Coats remarks that the resolution of the conflict (the removal of Rachel's barrenness), shows that birth for the patriarchal family lies in Yahweh's hands.² Jeansonne suggests that the element of suspense in Rachel's situation serves to unequivocally express God's role as giver of fertility,³ a characterization which is dominant in the Hebrew Bible.⁴

Rebekah

Rebekah Contrasted to Sarah and Rachel

In the story of Rebekah, barrenness does not appear to be an important issue. In fact, it hardly appears. Rebekah's infertility is dismissed in one verse, 25:21, which begins with the

1. Westermann, Genesis, 472.

2. Coats, 215.

3. Jeansonne, 7.

4. Jeansonne, 75.

announcement of Isaac's action of intercession on her behalf because of her barrenness, and moves immediately to Yahweh's answer and her conception. The surrounding narrative does not depend on the fact of the barrenness of the matriarch; the story would be the same without verse 21, since there are no links with what comes before and no mention of it after.¹ The fact of Rebekah's barrenness comes almost as an elaboration of the preceding genealogical information,² and forms part of the narrative introduction to the birth of Jacob and Esau.

Mention of Rebekah's barrenness is dwarfed by the larger problem of her pregnancy: the struggles of the babies provide the occasion for the prophecy concerning their future. Westermann identifies the strife of the unborn children as Rebekah's time of anguish, the cause of her "primeval cry of `why?'" about the meaning of what was happening to her,³ rather than the earlier anguish of infertility. More than in the Sarah and Rachel narratives, the focus appears to be on the children rather than on the mother. The element of suspense over ability to conceive is missing and narrative interest in the mother appears subordinated to the future of the children.

There are other differences between the stories of Sarah and Rachel on the one hand and Rebekah on the other. Rebekah's

1. Callaway, 30.

2. Westermann, Genesis, 412. Both Westermann and Calloway attribute the "clumsiness" of this verse to a seam in the combination of Priestly and Yahwist sources.

3. Westermann, Genesis, 413.

feelings are not part of the narrative in the way Sarah's and Rachel's are. Another contrast is the apparent attitude of the husbands toward their wives' affliction. At the time of the Sarah/Hagar and Rachel/Leah conflicts, both Abraham and Jacob are passive, uninvolved.¹ But Isaac takes action in praying for his wife,² which solves her problem. There is also no delay in the answer to the prayer, although a twenty year time span stretches between news of the marriage in verse 20 and the birth of the children in verse 26. Callaway contrasts Rebekah's experience with Sarah's and Rachel's: Rebekah does not attempt to solve her problem herself and there is no anguish or human conflict over her barrenness.³

A significant factor that differentiates Rebekah's experience of infertility from Sarah's and Rachel's is the unique resolution of the problem in the Rebekah narrative. Although Yahweh is identified as the one who closes the wombs of Sarah and Rachel, these women do not turn to him for rescue. Instead, they determine to provide sons for themselves through their maids. Their stories bristle with emotional tension and anguish. By

1. Coats, 214. This is true, with the exception of Jacob's explosive rejection of Rachel's demand for children in 30:2.

2. Sailhamer, 182, takes 20:17 as evidence that Abraham prayed for his wife, but this verse actually says he prayed and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maids so that they bore children. There is not a verse that states Abraham prayed for his own wife.

3. Callaway, 30, suggests that if this is an insertion to continue the pattern of barren patriarchal wives, one of its functions could be to explain the twenty year gap in Isaac's life between his marriage and fatherhood (25:20, 26).

contrast, Rebekah's story is placidly pious: her husband intercedes for her with Yahweh and she conceives.¹ Sarah and Rachel turn to their husbands to help them in their schemes to obtain sons through their maids. In Rebekah's situation, however, the third party involved in overcoming barrenness is not the maid-servant, but Yahweh, the source of all fertility.

Function of Barrenness in the Rebekah Narrative

Given the relative insignificance of Rebekah's infertility, the question arises, why was it important for her to be barren? Callaway believes that Rebekah's barrenness is a literary creation of the Yahwist, part of the larger pattern of barren matriarchs, through which he makes the point that Israel is dependent on divine grace rather than on her own achievements.²

Hauge suggests Rebekah's barrenness provides further evidence that, in Genesis, God's intervention is needed in order for a child of promise to be born. Even a father who is the heir to the promise and the correct mother are not sufficient to produce the blessed child, because human effort is never sufficient to bring about the plans of God.³ Sailhamer agrees that the promised blessing through the chosen seed of Abraham cannot be accomplished merely by human effort; a specific act of God is re-

1. Westermann, Genesis, 412, remarks that this is in accord with patriarchal religion in that the father is the intercessor.

2. Callaway, 30-1.

3. Hauge, 10.

quired.¹ In Rebekah's case, the act of Yahweh comes in response to the intercession of her husband.

Once again, the blessing of the promise is shown to be available only through divine provision. The Rebekah story models recourse to prayer to overcome infertility. This implicit submission to Yahweh's sovereignty in the mystery of fertility, creates a substantial contrast to the stories the other two matriarchs. Although the motif of barrenness occupies a minor place in Rebekah's story, the uniqueness of her response and its outcome serves to highlight the chaos and failure that accompany the scheming efforts of Sarah and Rachel to obtain sons for themselves. The fact that this small incident forms part of the story of Rebekah suggests that the writer found this to be a significant contrast that suited the theological message of Genesis.

Conclusion

The stories of Rachel and Rebekah affirm the thrust of the theme of barrenness in the story of Sarah. Their barrenness is an obstacle to the continuation of the patriarchal family, a circumstance that nullifies the force of Yahweh's promise to Abraham of many descendants. Moreover, their condition is acknowledged to be caused by Yahweh Himself. In Rachel's story, the theme of barrenness is inserted into the story of sibling rivalry, posing a double threat to the survival of the family.

1. Sailhamer, 182.

The theme of the older serving the younger appears in the stories of Rebekah and Rachel in the conflict between the brothers. This theme of reversal, of the blessing of the weakest and least favored, also appears in the story of the women. Yahweh intervenes in the strife of the sisters to favor the least powerful, Leah, as He had in favoring Hagar with son. At the end of the story, He remembers the favorite wife, and blesses her as well. Behind these reversals is the theme of a sovereign plan of grace: blessing is not a natural right, but is extended to those who have no other claim to it.¹

The futility of the barren mother's attempt to obtain the blessing for herself, first seen in the case of Sarah, appears in both Rachel's and Rebekah's stories. Rachel, in her desperate desire to surpass her sister, schemes to obtain sons through her maid as Sarah had done. Although sons are born to the maids and claimed by Rachel, they do not resolve her problem. Rebekah, on the other hand turns to Yahweh and is favored with twin sons, suggesting divine approval of her action.² Although Yahweh is not spoken of as causing Rebekah's barrenness, as is the case with Rachel and Sarah, the difference in the tone of the narratives is striking. The contrast suggests the pattern of asking

1. Sailhamer, 183.

2. There would seem to be grounds to interpret this response as a polemic for prayer in adversity; however, the case of Tamar makes that somewhat problematic. Tamar, a childless widow rather than a barren wife, obtained twin sons through deception, not through prayer, though her childlessness was apparently the result of the unrighteousness of the men in her life.

Yahweh for a child which will be more clearly defined in the story of Hannah, I Samuel 1-2.

The narratives of the three barren matriarchs reveal a conviction that conception is clearly under Yahweh's direct control. Although there are many natural births in Genesis which are not commented upon, the birth of each of the three patriarchs is remarkable because his mother was barren and because it occurred as a result of a specific act of God. This circumstance provides an opportunity to demonstrate the power of Yahweh over the forces of fertility and to emphasize His ultimate intentions of blessing toward His people. Each of the barren women received her desire: a son.

In all three cases of barren women in Genesis, the turning point of the narrative is the direct action of Yahweh. The resolution of the obstacle or conflict comes when He acts. He does for Sarah as He promised (21:1), He remembers Rachel (30:22), He opens Leah's womb (29:31), Yahweh answers Isaac and Rebekah conceives (25:21). His power to cause fertility is shown to be direct, not mediated through the forces of nature. His decision to act is portrayed as free and unconstrained by other forces. Above all, His actions are an expression of His previously revealed promise and plan.

CHAPTER 7

The Significance of the Barren Woman

The Context of Covenant

The story of the origins of Israel begins with the covenant promises Yahweh makes to Abraham when He calls him out of his home in Mesopotamia. God's purpose in making a covenant with Abraham is to reveal His character, His will and His plan, and, in so doing, to provide a foundation for relationship with Him.¹ The major covenant commitment Yahweh makes to fulfill for Abraham is to provide him with a son. Genesis shows that Yahweh chooses precisely the area of impossibility in Abraham's life to speak to: he is a man with a barren wife. In line with Yahweh's purpose of self-revelation, the fulfillment of the promise of a son works to reveal His power and faithfulness to Abraham and to his descendants.

Although the promise of numerous descendants is a central feature of the covenant, the wives of the first three patriarchs are barren, unable to conceive without supernatural intervention. This study has undertaken to analyze the significance of this recurring motif of the barren woman and its meaning within the Genesis narratives.

The motif of barrenness is linked to important concerns of the Pentateuch: the relationship between past and future, the identity of the people of God and the fulfillment of the promises made to the patriarchs. The presence of a barren wife in the

1. Walton, Covenant, 29.

patriarchal family, repeated in three consecutive generations, has been shown to have a strategic narrative role as a major obstacle to the fulfillment of the Yahweh's promise of progeny. The stages in the resolution of this threat to the promise function as a vehicle for the illumination of significant spiritual realities, including the basic contrasts between the religion of Israel and that of her Mesopotamian neighbors, and the scope and nature of Yahweh's sovereign power.

What, then, is the significance of this motif? The motif functions as a way to reveal the extent of Yahweh's power over the created world and over life itself, and to make clear the character of Yahweh through His treatment of the needy, powerless figure of the woman who has no child. From the human side, the motif highlights what it means to live in relationship with this God, especially in the area of human self-effort and His blessings. Through this figure of barrenness, Genesis demonstrates the sovereign power and faithfulness to His word of the Israelite God, and, through the stories, communicates the importance of a trusting response to His promises.

Power Issues

Contrast with Ancient Near Eastern Thought

Yahweh's control of fertility brings out the contrast between the Israelite idea of God and the gods of the ancient Near East, who also claimed to control fertility. The issue of infertility is a fitting issue on which to challenge the Mesopotamian view of the universe, since control of fertility was a central

part of their religious world. Their worldview was characterized by a plurality of wills and the possibility that human beings could manipulate those wills into bringing about their desires.

The question of who controlled fertility was especially acute in later years of Israel's history, when many lost sight of the fact that, as Hosea 2:8-10 reminds them, Yahweh, not Baal, provided the material blessings they enjoyed. The power to beget life was understood by even the pagan to be a supernatural blessing, and, from Genesis 12 onward, God demonstrates that He alone has the power to bestow this blessing.¹

The use of the motif of barrenness in Genesis demonstrates that there is no other power beside Yahweh's, no other force that can bring about the creation of life. Genesis even gives Yahweh credit for causing the barrenness of the women: no other power can affect His people. Humans are powerless to bring about the blessings that God has promised them; in fact, Genesis portrays "a world where human initiatives always lead to disaster."² The experiences of Sarah and Rachel show the futility of human cleverness. The God of the Old Testament is approached through trusting prayer, as seen in the case of Rebekah, rather than through manipulation or scheming.

1. Oswalt, 132.

2. Clines 29.

The Intention of Blessing

Yahweh's power is shown in blessing. From the moment of creation, Yahweh expresses His intention to bless humankind. Blessing in the Old Testament is closely associated with fertility and is Yahweh's design for His world. His power is exercised through His word and is for blessing, according to the plan He reveals through His covenant.

Yahweh brings about conception through His word, as He created the world, not through the working of analogy, with the help of humans as in the Mesopotamian religions. Unlike those gods, He proceeds according to a long term plan of blessing worked out in history. His word is powerful and He is faithful to His word; He can guarantee it because there is no other power that can rival His. All three matriarchs conceive according to His word, in response to prayer to Him and when He remembers and opens the womb. This emphasis on blessing through His word is an emphasis on sovereign power.

The Issue of Trust

The stories of the barren mothers demonstrate the sovereign power of Yahweh, His intention of blessing and His faithfulness to His promises. What does the narrative show about human response to Him? Trust appears to be the proper attitude: Abraham believed, Isaac prayed; the barren wives did neither, although He blessed them anyway because it was His plan.

The issue of trust is a key to resolution of the difficulty the feminist writers have with the absolute power of Yahweh over

human life. Much of feminist concern is over power and its use or misuse. The narratives show the power of God used for blessing. Therefore, there is no power that can overcome God's promise, not even a patriarchal system can ultimately steal a blessing He intends.

Oriented toward the Future

Later generations of Israelites selected these particular events to write about to justify their position in the world and account for their uniqueness among the nations.¹ Goldingay finds significance in this theme for the time of the Exile. Isaiah's reminder that the barren forsaken wife will bear again becomes paradigmatic for Israel. In Isaiah, this theme conveys a simple clear message: Yahweh's commitments to the patriarchs were permanent so they also apply to exile generation.²

Callaway finds that barrenness demonstrates three points about Israel's identity and how she should live to fulfill that identity: that Yahweh is the one who has the power over fertility; that Israel needs to depend on Yahweh for life in the present as the patriarchs had in the past; and that Yahweh can be relied on to fulfill His promises.³

The answer to the question of what to do when God's promises seem to fail, when magic is not effective, is to wait for the

1. Exum, 96.

2. Goldingay, 26-7.

3. Callaway, 32.

goodness of God. Trying to make the blessing happen not only does not work, it makes for worse trouble. As seen in the role of prayer in Rebekah's case, the sovereign Lord can be entreated and He will hear. The message of the barren woman is that the promises are sure because Yahweh is faithful.

The theme of the withholding and granting of fertility, personified in Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel, emphasizes both the total sovereignty and the gracious faithfulness of Yahweh. Because He is all powerful, as demonstrated by His control of life itself, His people can respond to His promises in faith. Because His intention is one of grace and blessing, His people can wait for Him in confidence. Because He is all powerful and faithful to His word, His plans will be fulfilled so His people can live in hope.

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