

“And God Remembered:” Barrenness and Hope in Genesis

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For a book of beginnings,¹ the book of Genesis is ironically replete with beginnings that almost were not. The motif of the barren woman, the woman unable to produce a new beginning in the form of a child, is so common it becomes almost redundant in the narrative. Fecundity—a trait most characteristic of God in Genesis—is painfully denied the matriarchs. This pain is heightened by the steadily increasing tension in the text regarding the fulfillment of God’s covenant with Abraham. God’s promise to Abraham that he will be “a great nation” (Gen 12:2 NJPS) with many descendants requires Abraham to have offspring in order for it to be fulfilled, yet nature repeatedly opposes the fulfillment of the promise. Through the repeated motif of the barrenness of the matriarchs, the reader is inducted into the struggle of the primary characters to have faith in a God “whose promise tarries too long.”² This paper examines the motif of barrenness in Genesis in order to argue that the barrenness of the matriarchs functions literarily as a “type-scene” that is meant to signify a complex series of messages in a few simple plot details. The motif also functions theologically: through negative contrast, the barren wombs recall the goodness of creation as well as God’s nature as the fertile giver of life. The repetition of the motif in Genesis, far from indicating a lack of creativity on the part of the redactors, instead serves to inculcate through repetition an expectation in the reader that God will do what God always does in these situations—namely, bring life from death. The motif’s power is in its predictability. In this way, the motif of barrenness in Genesis is a tutor in the school of hope.

While it may seem counter-intuitive, interpreting the motif of barrenness in Genesis must begin with a woman who was not barren, but was in fact, “the mother of all the living,” (Gen 3:20)

¹ Jon D. Levenson. “Genesis,” in the *Jewish Study Bible* (eds. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 8.

² Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapter 1-17* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990), 151.

Eve. Beginning the examination of barrenness in Eden is fitting, since one way the motif functions is as a reminder (in the form of contrast) of the original abundant fertility of the garden that God intended for humanity to enjoy and cultivate. The name of the garden—*Eden*—comes from a root word that “denotes fertility,”³ as Jon Levenson notes, and this is significant for the subsequent theme of barrenness, for “the negative of barrenness recalls the positive of creation.”⁴ The first chapter of Genesis portrays a God who transforms a barren earth into one that is lush and verdant by his simple *fiat*. When he creates the man and woman in his image, he commands them as he did the animals, to “Be fertile and increase” (Gen 1:28). Yet, the command to be fertile is also coupled with the command to “fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on the earth” (1:28). Genesis begins with the establishment of the twin themes of dominion and fertility that will continue to feature prominently throughout the rest of the narrative. God, who dominates chaos in order to bring forth life from the previously barren earth, in the Priestly source creation account, creates humanity in God’s image and enables them to share the God-like qualities of dominion and fertility.

This depiction of God is both supported and nuanced in the Yahwist source creation account beginning in Genesis 2:4. When God creates the man in 2:7, J emphasizes that it is “from the dust of the earth,” rather than in God’s image. While this presents man in a lowlier position than his position in the P account, as Levenson notes, it also highlights his nature as fundamentally dependent upon God for life.⁵ Rather than commanding the man to have dominion over nature, in the J account the man is placed in the garden in order “to till and to tend it” (2:15). When God creates the woman, it is from the rib of the man, which “lays the groundwork for the understanding

³ Levenson, “Genesis,” 15.

⁴ Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 76.

⁵ Levenson, “Genesis,” 15.

of marriage (and its association with procreation) in v.24.”⁶ Thus, with the P and the J accounts of creation placed together, we perceive God as the one powerful enough to bring abundant life from chaos and barrenness, the one who established the twin mandates of dominion and fertility for the man and woman, the one upon whom humanity is dependent for its sustenance, and the one who intends procreation to be a fundamental aspect of the union between the man and the woman.

After the man and the woman are deceived by the snake, violate the command of God, and eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they receive punishments directly related to the twin commands to have dominion and to be fertile. While the man is not directly cursed by God, the ground is, which renders humanity’s dominion of the earth more difficult.⁷ As for Eve, she is cursed with pain in fertility. The vocation, therefore, of the man and the woman to have dominion over the earth and to be fertile and increase will now be excruciatingly difficult. It is worth noting that it is only here, after the curse, that Eve is given her name “mother of all the living” (3:20). To end a tragic episode in this way is to indicate that there is hope for the future. As Irene Nowell, O.S.B. notes, “Paradoxically, Eve thus becomes a sign of hope, a sign of life in the face of death.”⁸

We pick up the theme of barrenness again with the most complex of the matriarchs. In Genesis 12, we hear of Abram and his wife Sarai. The author indicates that Abram took a wife named Sarai, and without further elaboration states that “Sarai was barren, she had no child” (11:30). While this seems unremarkable at first glance as it comes at the end of a genealogy, it immediately becomes significant, as it is a mere three verses later that God suddenly establishes his covenant with Abraham. As Esther Fuchs summarizes, the biblical barrenness or “annunciation type-scene” usually contains at least three distinctive elements--the initial barrenness of the wife, a

⁶ Levenson, “Genesis,” 16.

⁷ Genesis 3:17.

⁸ Irene Nowell, O.S.B, *Women in the Old Testament* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1997), 137.

divine promise of future conception, and the birth of a son.⁹ We will see all three of these elements in each of the barrenness scenes in Genesis.

God commands Abraham to leave his native land and his father's house in order to arrive in a land that God will reveal to him.¹⁰ God also promises to make Abraham "a great nation" (12:2) thus providing an etiological account (usually attributed to J) of the origins of Israel as a people-group. As Levenson notes, God's covenant with Abraham that includes land, numerous offspring, and blessing, "constitutes to a large extent a reversal of some of the curses on Adam and Eve—exile, pain in childbirth, and uncooperative soil."¹¹ Here the narrative begins to indicate that God's mercy will likely not allow humanity to live forever with the curses instituted at the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden, but rather, that God intends blessings for humanity. However, a certain anxiety about this possibility is also suggested by the text. As Phyllis Tribble notes, God's promise to Abraham introduces a major source of tension in the story,¹² for we learn that, "Sarai had stopped having the periods of women" (18:11). Sarah was beyond childbearing age. In order for Abraham and Sarah to believe God will fulfill the covenant, they must believe that God will be able to overturn the laws of nature. This tension is further heightened in Gen 15 when God appears to Abraham in a vision to remind him of the blessing. Abraham suggests to God that perhaps he ought to take one of his servants as an adopted heir in order to ensure the fulfillment of the promise of descendants. God assures him that, "no one but your own issue shall be your heir," (15:4) further heightening the tension by denying Abraham's seemingly reasonable solution to the obstacle of Sarah's barrenness.

⁹ Esther Fuchs, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible," *Semeia* 46 (1989), 161.

¹⁰ Genesis 12:1, 30.

¹¹ Levenson, "Genesis," 30.

¹² Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 9.

After a reminder in 16:1 that “Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children,” Sarah emerges onto the scene as a primary character facing the problem of the obstacle to the fulfillment of the covenant, as well as the shame of her barrenness. First, she attributes her barrenness to God—“Look the Lord has kept me from bearing” (16:2). Abraham, she suggests, should have a child by her maidservant Hagar. Sarah offers her own solution to the delay and seeming impossibility of the fulfillment of God’s promise. Although Sarah’s actions could be interpreted as a sign of her lack of faith, the practice of surrogacy was actually an accepted practice in ancient Near Eastern cultures as, “surrogate motherhood allowed a barren woman to regularize her status in a world in which children were a woman’s status and in which childlessness was regarded as a virtual sign of divine disfavor.”¹³ The text is mostly ambiguous about the actions of both Abraham and Sarah. Both, at times, indicate trust in God, while also, at other times, express their frustrations that God has not yet fulfilled the promise to Abraham of offspring. Therefore, both try to solve the problem of infertility through human means rather than simply waiting on God. The actions of Abraham and Sarah thus rehearse themes that have been developed earlier in Genesis. They continue to struggle with the twin mandates of having dominion over the land and being fertile that have been constantly reiterated in Genesis. Their inability to solve the problem of Sarah’s barrenness on their own recalls the contingency and fragility of human life. Furthermore, the painful yearning for fertility evokes by contrast memories of what was lost through the disobedience of Adam and Eve—namely, the garden of fertility. What was once overabundant is now scarce. Again, if interpreted as an etiology of the nation Israel, Abraham and Sarah’s angst regarding fertility reflects a certain “collective anxiety about cultural continuity”¹⁴ experienced by the Israelites as a people group during the exile. Additionally, the actions of Abraham and Sarah

¹³ Susan Niditch, “Genesis” in *Women’s Bible Commentary: Revised and Updated* (eds. Carol Newsome, Sharon Ringe, Jacqueline Lapsley, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 35

¹⁴ Michael Fishbane, *Texts and Texture* (New York: Schocken, 1979), 62.

demonstrate the persistent fluidity between divine and human initiative in the fulfillment of the covenant. When Sarah finally becomes pregnant with Isaac in Gen 21, the third element of the annunciation type-scene is achieved, and as the text indicates, “The Lord took note of Sarah as He had promised” (21:1). This statement recalls the Lord’s remembering of Noah in the Flood narrative and again highlights God’s nature as faithful, merciful, and powerful enough to create life. Given the brevity of this paper, I examined only one of the three instances of barrenness in Genesis, but the subsequent examples of Rebekah and Rachel follow the same literary pattern as the story of Sarah’s barrenness does.

The repeated barrenness motif in Genesis in many ways carries with it the themes of the entire book. With each barren woman, we recall, painfully, the lost fecundity of Eden. Every woman unable to bear children reminds us of the curse of Eve—difficulty in fertility. The propensity of barrenness to facilitate rivalries among women also recalls the horror of the first murder committed out of envy when Cain killed Abel. Yet the symbol of barrenness also inculcates hope in the reader. It reminds us of the power of God to bring life out of chaos, and the mercy of the God who remembers. Furthermore, every barren matriarch directs our attention back to the first barren matriarch—Sarah—who was indispensable to the fulfillment of the covenant and who demonstrated once again that God works together with human efforts to bring about his purposes for Israel and for the world. The barrenness of the matriarchs directs our eyes and worship to the God who is Mother, and who says to Israel,

“Till you grow old, I will still be the same; when you turn gray, it is I who will carry;

I was the Maker, and I will be the Bearer; and I will carry and rescue you.” (Isa 46:4)