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Suffering From Infertility in the Hebrew Bible

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Suffering From Infertility in the Hebrew Bible

Emma Sternberg

Suffering within the lives of the biblical characters is a repeated theme throughout the Hebrew Bible, and the discussion of suffering is prominent within biblical commentary. For biblical women, a major source of suffering is infertility. Although only described in short portions scattered throughout the stories, infertility plays a significant role in the lives of biblical women. The tales of Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah have prompted major discussion about infertility amongst scholars. Initially, the reason infertility causes suffering for these women seems obvious: their inability to give birth to a child eliminates their chance of experiencing the love motherhood offers. However, their suffering was rooted much more deeply; barrenness during biblical history threatened women's identity, lineage, and status, which reveals how infertility was perceived during ancient times. Today, these notions have carried forward, marking the lives of, and giving guidance to, modern women struggling with their own infertility.

Before exploring Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah's infertility, it is necessary to define the terms used to describe the ways infertility threatened women's lives. And, it will be important to show the relationship between these terms. Barrenness is found to exercise control over three aspects of a woman's life: her identity, lineage, and status. The first trait threatened by infertility is identity, which is the understood role of an ancient Israelite woman. There was a patriarchal expectation that women were to become mothers, which shaped biblical women's perceived identity. The second threatened trait is lineage, and its types are twofold. One type of biblical lineage is the importance of the continuous family line that carries with it the political and religious responsibilities given to the chosen family by God. The other type is matrilineal lineage, which emphasizes the necessity for mothers to have children so that future generations have evidence of their existence. Finally, the third threatened trait is status, which focuses on how competition between wives, sisters, and concubines in biblical marriages influenced their position within their relationship. While all the threatened traits can be examined in isolation as having a unique impact on a woman's experience, the threats to identity, lineage, and status heightened one another and were created by the same societal force of sexism, which contributed to women's suffering.

In ancient Israelite society, women's identities were threatened by infertility because their ability to give birth identified them as suitable women and wives. From the onset, the Hebrew Bible describes Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah as barren women. This early delineation indicates the influence fertility had in defining them. In *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness*, Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden explore fertility, children, and marriage in the Bible, and in their chapter "The Matriarchs as Models," they look closely at the lives and womanhood of Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah. In this chapter, they comment on how the descriptions of these women in their individual narratives emphasizes their infertility. In Genesis 16, Sarah is "almost entirely silent in the biblical text before giving birth to Isaac, [and] when she does speak it is either to Abraham, to complain about her infertile status when compared to her handmaid Hagar, or to herself, doubting God's ability to make her pregnant."ⁱ By only having a voice when talking about her infertility, Sarah demonstrates her feminine role as a child bearer and how that is the only area on which she has authority to speak; Sarah is

relegated to the realm of motherhood. Infertility as a defining feature of biblical women is not exclusive to Sarah's story but extends into the story of Rachel.

Like Sarah, Rachel's voice is rarely heard other than to discuss her infertility, which demonstrates the emphasis her closed womb had on her identity. Rachel is often compared to her fertile sister, Leah, and their handmaids, Bilhah and Zilpah, a comparison revealing the importance of motherhood to Rachel's identity. In Genesis 30, "Rachel's first words, addressed to Jacob, are '[g]ive me children or I shall die.'"ⁱⁱ The first words from a character in a story shed light on how they are to be perceived, and thus Rachel is immediately understood to be a childless woman whose survival depends on having a child; she feels that without a child, she may as well not exist. While Rachel's statement may have been hyperbolic, it is necessary to take it seriously to understand the importance of motherhood to the identity of a biblical woman. Rachel's existence and identity were so contingent on having a child that she told Jacob to "'couple with [Bilhah] and let her give birth on my knees, so that I too may have a son, through her'" (Gen. 30:3, *The Torah*).ⁱⁱⁱ Rachel's request to have a child through her maid illustrates the lengths to which she went in order to be able to identify herself as a mother. Her suffering comes from the dissonance between knowing she is supposed to bear a child and not being able to. This theme of suffering from infertility in Genesis continues into the book of I Samuel with the story of Hannah.

Similar to those of the matriarchs that precede her, the biblical descriptions of Hannah revolve around her inability to give birth and the suffering she endures because of it. Hannah's story, which takes place in only two chapters, is almost completely focused on her infertility and suffering. According to Moss and Baden, "[n]ot only is infertility Hannah's defining descriptive feature, it also seems to be all anyone can speak to her about. Before she bears Samuel, every word Hannah speaks... is related to her distress."^{iv} Hannah, herself, says to God, "I am a very unhappy woman... I have only been speaking all this time out of my great anguish and distress" (I Sam. 1:16, *Tanakh*).^v Here, it becomes clear that Hannah herself understands that her childlessness consumes her. Like Sarah and Rachel, Hannah's inability to give birth threatens her identity because of the expectation that biblical women were to be mothers. However, what makes Hannah distinct from the women of Genesis is that, while Sarah and Rachel turned outwards towards their husbands and sought motherhood through finding a surrogate, Hannah did not seek solace from her husband, nor did she have a maid to fill the hole in her identity. Instead, Hannah turns to God with her grief, which is why her pain is so strongly heard throughout her story.

The biblical descriptions set up Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah not as women who happen to be infertile, but as women whose infertility defines who they are. The focus of their stories around their childlessness indicates the societal expectation for biblical women to become mothers, and their suffering demonstrates that infertility dominates their lives. As Moss and Baden suggest, "[t]he laser-like focus on each woman's infertility, to the exclusion of nearly every other aspect of her identity, means that infertility is effectively her identity."^{vi} Their stories in the Bible are centered around their inability to give birth because the patriarchal society emphasized the connection between women's identities with their reproductive abilities. Nonetheless, those familiar with the stories of the Hebrew Bible know that these women do not remain childless forever but go on to give birth to sons that are chosen by God. However, the lineage Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah created was not initially foreseeable, and their barrenness posed a threat to their ability to produce and sustain the leaders of the chosen people of God.

Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah's infertility posed a threat to the lineage of their political and religious familial line, as well as their own matrilineal family. As the wife of the receiver of God's covenant, Sarah was under immense pressure to give birth to Abraham's heir. In Genesis 15, God speaks with Abram, telling him he will receive a bountiful gift (Gen. 15:1, *The Torah*). Abram responds to God saying, "what can You give me, when I am going to die childless... Look—to me You have given no offspring" (15:2-3). God responds to Abram by saying, "[t]urn your gaze toward the heavens and count the stars, if you can count them... So shall your seed be" (Gen. 15:5). Although God grants Abraham the gift of a nation of his own, God also places an enormous weight on Sarah, for she is responsible for giving birth to that nation. Sarah's infertility immediately threatened the promise of abundant offspring. In order to alleviate the suffering she experienced because of not being able fulfill God's promise, Sarah spoke to Abraham saying, "[s]eeing as God has kept me from bearing a child, have intercourse with my slave: maybe I will have a son through her" (Gen. 16:2). By transferring her responsibility onto her slave, Sarah demonstrates the suffering she was enduring because of infertility threatening their lineage. Sarah felt it was so imperative for her husband to have an heir that she gave up her role as the biological mother of that future child. However, having a child through Hagar did not alleviate Sarah's suffering, nor did it bring an adequate heir. Although God eventually opened Sarah's womb and gave her Isaac, Sarah had already suffered from the threats her infertility brought to the success of her family lineage. Just as Sarah and Abraham's family line was potentially compromised by their childlessness, so too did Rachel's infertility pose a danger to the continuation of her family line.

As the intended and favorite wife of Jacob, Rachel felt it was necessary to have a child of her own so that Jacob could continue the great nation that Sarah and Abraham had built through Isaac. God finally noticed Rachel's desperate act of giving her maid to Jacob as a method for having a substitute son of her own, for "God now remembered Rachel; God listened to her and opened her womb, so she became pregnant and bore a son" (Gen. 30:22-23). Rachel's infertility brought her so much suffering because, until God 'remembered' her, she was not able to give Jacob a son who would be the rightful heir of their family and the chosen one of their nation. Since Rachel was eventually able to give birth to Joseph, God's chosen people persisted through time; however, the threat to their lineage also carried with them into I Samuel.

Hannah's story follows in a similar pattern to that of Sarah and Rachel's, as she was childless and feared for the destiny of her family. She suffered from the threat that her family would not continue the nation God had created, so she prayed desperately, saying "remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to the Lord for all the days of his life" (I Sam. 1:11, *Tanakh*). Her childlessness posed a threat to the lineage of God's chosen people, and Hannah felt the weight of her inability to fulfill that duty on her shoulders. Eventually, Hannah's pleas were heard, and God gave her a son who she named Samuel, "meaning 'I asked the Lord for him'" (I Sam. 1:20). Samuel's name, as well as Hannah's action of asking God for a son, illustrate the importance having a child had for future of their family.

While the women's desires for a child demonstrated the necessity of giving birth to an heir for the nation, Moss and Baden suggest a different way to understand what the threat to the lineage meant. They write that "when Hannah expresses her desire to bear a child, it is not just the economic, historical, or familial pressures upon which she is acting. She is acting for herself," for Hannah's husband already has children through his other wife and could continue the nation with her.^{vii} Their observation illustrates that Hannah recognized a need for her

husband to have a child with her, specifically. It was necessary for Hannah to have her own descendants who would recognize her as the matriarch. Moss and Baden point out that “[s]imilarly, why is it important for Sarah to bear a child? Abraham already has a son, Ishmael. Why should Rachel care if she is barren or not, when Leah has already provided Jacob with son after son.”^{viii} Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah felt it was not only their husbands’ lineages that were threatened by their infertility, but also their own. Moss and Baden conclude that “[t]hese children are desired not for the sake of the continuity of the father’s name, nor for the economic well-being of the household... They are, rather for the safety of the mother’s social position and for the continuity of her name.”^{ix} The three women’s suffering had to do with the fact that their name, and they themselves, would disappear from history without having a child to be the evidence of their existence. The memory of their being was contingent upon having a child, which is why their infertility was such a threat to their lives and caused them such suffering. Infertility put in danger both the ongoing memory of these three women and their own internal understanding of who they are as people. The threat towards lineage and identity combine to illuminate the third danger all three women faced—the threat to their status.

Not only were Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah plagued with infertility that caused them internal suffering, but they also each had a female counterpart whose fertility further underlined their own barrenness. This complicated relationship to another woman posed a threat to their status as the chosen wife. Sarah so desperately felt the need to have a child that she offered her slave to Abraham to bear his child. The giving of Hagar did not fulfill Sarah’s broken identity, nor did it solve the issue of lineage; however, Hagar’s status as Abraham’s fertile wife did shift the hierarchical relationship between the two women. In *Give Me Children or I Shall Die: Children and Communal Survival in Biblical Literature*, Laurel W. Koepf Taylor discusses the implications of barrenness within the biblical setting. Taylor explains the change in dynamic between Sarah and Hagar by arguing that “Hagar looks down on Sarah’s horrifying condition as a barren woman... Hagar’s reaction reflects the nature of Sarah’s condition better than any description of Sarah’s experience could... [it] communicates that Sarah’s perceived inability to produce valuable children gives Sarah herself ambivalent value.”^x Taylor’s point keenly connects the threat of identity with the threat of status that Sarah faced. Because Sarah was unable to be a mother, she felt disconnected from her expected identity, especially by being removed from her position as the favorite and effective wife by Hagar. Hagar immediately recognized the power she had over Sarah because of Sarah’s infertility. Sarah sensed the shift in power and complained to Abraham that, “I put my slave in your arms; no sooner did she see that she was pregnant, I became for her an object of scorn” (Gen. 16:5, *The Torah*). Hagar was able to elevate her status because of the understanding that her fertility was more powerful than Sarah’s position as favorite wife. The story of Sarah’s threatened and uprooted status by her fertile slave occurs in an almost identical fashion in Rachel’s story.

In Genesis 30, barrenness threatens Rachel’s status as Jacob’s chosen wife. This threat is emphasized by the abundant fertility of her sister, Leah. The rivalry between Rachel and Leah began when Leah was given to Jacob in marriage before the favored Rachel. Because Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, God made Rachel barren and Leah fertile, which put into question which sister was of higher status: the chosen wife or the fertile wife. Unfortunately for Rachel, her barrenness forced her beneath Leah, for when “Rachel saw that she was not bearing children to Jacob, Rachel came to envy her sister” (Gen. 30:1). Rachel’s envy was a direct result of her infertility, which placed her below that of her fertile sister. In their *Women’s Commentary* on the Torah, Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss discuss how Leah’s fertility elevated her

above her sister's chosenness. They explain that "Rachel's infertility becomes doubly bitter in the shadow of Leah's celebrations of the births of her first four sons."^{xi} Rachel and Leah's rivalry illustrates that despite being the favorite wife, Rachel's infertility made her feel less than when compared to her fertile sister. In addition to being usurped by her own sister, Rachel became less than Bilhah and Zilpah, the maids that were given to Jacob to have children with. Similar to Sarah and Hagar, Rachel became inferior to her own servant because of her infertility. Rachel falls from the highest status of being the chosen wife of the chosen son all the way down to being a barren woman who speaks only of her infertility and the suffering she endures because of it. Both Rachel and Sarah are overpowered by the women to whom they are supposed to be superior because their infertility is what defines and weakens them. Hannah's story follows that of the preceding women's tales of infertility threatening their statuses.

Like Sarah and Rachel who came before her, Hannah also faced the reality that her status as favorite wife was threatened because of a female counterpart who could fulfill the role of mother that she could not. Moss and Baden explain the relationship between Hannah, the favorite yet subordinate wife, and Peninnah, the fertile yet malicious wife. They argue that "[t]hough Hannah was the favored wife of Elkanah, Peninnah, as mother of Elkanah's children was untouchable. The very fact of her fertility gave her an unbeatable edge in status."^{xii} Like Rachel and Leah, favoritism was not enough for Hannah to maintain her status against Peninnah and her fertility. Hannah suffered not only from the discordance in her identity and the fear that her lineage would disappear, but also because Peninnah used her heightened status to ridicule her co-wife and make Hannah feel both physically and emotionally barren. I Samuel 1 states that Hannah's "rival, to make her miserable, would taunt her that the Lord had closed her womb," causing Hannah to severely feel every type of pain that her infertility inflicted upon her (I Sam. 1:6, *Tanakh*). Hannah's infertility took away the relationship she had with her husband and replaced it with vulnerability that brought her incredible suffering. Moss and Baden point out that "[f]ar more than in most modern societies, Hannah lived in a world that was practically designed to make infertile women feel outcast and alone."^{xiii} Their assertion indicates not just Hannah's reality but the reality of all biblical women who faced infertility.

Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah lived in a time where barrenness stripped them of their status. They were a part of a society which emphasized the importance of having a child and therefore fostered competition between wives. Moss and Baden explain that "[i]n the bible, this pain is highlighted by the cultural and literary custom of polygyny, such that Sarah and Rachel and Hannah all live in the same home, literally face to face, with the living embodiment of their anguish."¹³ Their status was contingent upon their ability to give birth because of the emphasis placed on the necessity of bearing children. The society in which these women lived shaped how their infertility defined and controlled their lives.

The three biblical women's infertility threatened their individual identities, familial lineages, and personal statuses because of how their society, and they themselves, understood their barrenness. What tied the threatened aspects of their lives together and what caused the biblical women so much suffering was the gendered essentialism at play within ancient Israelite society. Biblical women felt that motherhood was an essential part of their identity because society evaluated a woman's worth primarily by her success in fulfilling her reproductive functions. The belief that to be a good woman was to be a mother was not a result of women's internal drive to care for a family. Instead, women believed they must bear children to bring familial continuity and success because of forced patriarchal expectations. Infertility would not have been a threat to identity, lineage, and status had ancient society not had such a restrictive

view of women's roles as being tied to their fertility. The narrowness of identifying the primary worth of the female with her uterus existed during biblical history, but in no way has that identification of women's worth remained purely historical. In an unfortunate yet unifying way, understanding infertility as a threat to women has travelled through generations and into the present day.

Infertility continues to be a modern-day source of suffering and therefore the same challenges that the biblical women faced remain relevant. Taylor draws the connection between biblical and present-day barrenness through her citation of research which indicated that a modern "woman's wish for a child is bound to include the hope that she will duplicate herself. This hope keeps alive a sense of immortality: the child will be a living testimony of one's continued existence."^{xiv} Similar to the biblical women, modern women express the same desire for their lineage to feel secure. Where biblical women wished for a child so that their name could continue through history, women today still feel that same need for a child to be the evidence of their life. Furthermore, Taylor noted that in a study it was found that the "strong, long-term effect of motherhood denied supports an argument that frustrated attempts to achieve motherhood threaten a central life identity."^{xv} Biblical and modern women both feel that a part of their identity relies on being a mother and that by not having a child, part of their identity is lost. Ancient and modern women demonstrate that a portion, if not more, of their worth lies in their ability to have a child. However, the need for a child does not seem to be necessarily tied to the actual gift of motherhood. Instead, the desire to be a mother is reliant on the patriarchally forced expectation that women are to be mothers. Taylor's analysis illustrates the continuities from biblical history into the twenty-first century. The threats infertility placed on ancient women still persist in the lives of modern women as well.

For Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah, infertility was the threat to their understood identity, familial and matrilineal lineage, and wifely status. Because of the societal expectations placed on their reproductive abilities, the three women's barrenness inflicted severe suffering upon them. Their suffering was amplified because of the emphasis their world placed on their ability to give birth. However, their suffering from the implications of infertility ties the biblical women's stories to the modern world. Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah's tales of pain, isolation, and grief will forever remain relevant as long as the world we live in still sees women's fertility as their defining feature. The biblical stories offer an example of how ancient women navigated their own infertility, and their experiences reveal their persistence not to be forgotten names in history. Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah's names were not preserved only because they had children to continue their family but also because of the power of their voices, which have echoed from ancient Israelite times into modern conversation. Their stories are not to be remembered only as being about overcoming infertility, but instead about raising their voices against the suffering they endured because of what society expected of them as women and their reproductive abilities.

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- ^x Laurel W. Koepf Taylor, “Interpreting (In)Fertility,” in *Give me Children or I Shall Die: Children and Communal Survival in Biblical Literature* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2013), 44.
- ^{xi} Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss, *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* (New York: URJ Press, 2008), 165.
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