

**WOMEN OF DIFFERENT DESIRES: DISRUPTING THE “BARREN MOTIF”
IN THE HEBREW BIBLE**

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ABSTRACT

In biblical scholarship it has often been assumed that all biblical women shared the same desires. Particularly, scholars will claim that all women desired children, and that barrenness posed a tremendous threat to their social standing, because, they argue, that without a child a woman has lower social standing. However, in this thesis I use feminist theory to deconstruct these claims that essentialize the desires of women, and necessitate motherhood. I examine the biblical stories of Rachel and Leah, Sarai and Hagar, Rebekah, the unnamed wife of Manoah (Samson's mother), and Hannah to demonstrate that these women have varying desires that do not center around children, or their desires on this matter are simply not stated in the text, and we should not assume otherwise.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Mary Callaway details the distinction between barrenness in the Hebrew Bible as described in legal and poetic texts in contrast to narrative materials. Callaway states, “Unlike the poetic passages...the narratives all deal with individual women and their stories. The women are not simply symbols or vehicles, but are real people with names and specific situations.”¹ Also she explains that these narratives are from different literary forms, and are situated in different contexts. “There is a tendency among scholars who mention the motif of barrenness in passing to lump all of these narratives together as witnesses to one motif.”² Building on Callaway’s criticism of biblical scholarship concerning barrenness and women, I would like to more closely, and in more detail, examine the women in the Hebrew Bible not as symbols but as individual women.

In this thesis I will focus on the desire for children in the Hebrew Bible to concentrate my analysis of biblical women as individuals. It is often left unquestioned that women in the Hebrew Bible desired children. Though this is highly probable, many scholars make the assumption that *all* women necessarily wanted children. Universalizing the desire for children reduces complex characters to stand-ins for a supposed motif. This also essentializes the role of a female character to that of child-bearer, when actually these women have many different roles. Furthermore, many scholars make the claim that having children is the only way for a woman to improve her status in ancient Near Eastern societies. Yet, as I will discuss, women did not always receive a change in status because of childbirth. Therefore, the reasons why women desire children are quite varied.

¹ Mary Callaway, *Sing, O Barren One: A Study in Comparative Midrash*, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986, 17.

² Callaway, Mary, *Sing, O Barren One: A Study in Comparative Midrash*, 17.

The stories of Leah and Rachel in Genesis 29 – 30 illustrate that though two women who are sisters and sister-wives have much in common, they are not identical characters that can be grouped together and universalized to represent all biblical women. By examining the issue of desire for children, I will show that though these women are sisters and sister-wives, their reasons for desiring a child differ from one another, and change during the story. Furthermore, I will challenge the claim that having children necessarily brought about an upgrade in status to a woman's life. To further support my argument I will examine the stories of Sarai and Hagar, Rebekah, the unnamed wife of Manoah (Samson's mother), and Hannah. The stories of these women are in part tied to issues of infertility and children, and are often cited as evidence of a larger motif. Yet, by looking more closely, I will demonstrate that though these stories contain similarities, they are not the same. Therefore, these women cannot be linked together to make universalized claims about women and motherhood in the Bible "in general".

I will begin by looking at two contemporary feminist theorists – Janet Jakobsen and Judith Butler. I will use the ways in which they challenge the normativity of the category of "women" to inform my critique of women in the Hebrew Bible. Then I will designate the fault lines in what scholars have claimed about women and the desire for children. Then I will work through the narrative in Genesis 29 and 30 and offer my analysis of Leah and Rachel's particular situations and consider what other desires they might hold. The stories of Zilpah and Bilhah (the respective maids of Leah and Rachel) contain points and issues that I would like to examine separately from Leah and Rachel. Therefore, I will discuss these women in the order that they give birth - Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah, and then Rachel. Following this, I will examine the stories of other women in the

Bible and mention the ways in which they are similar but different from Leah and Rachel.

I will consider other reasons behind why they may (or may not necessarily) desire children.

CHAPTER 2: FEMINIST THEORY

In this section I will briefly examine some of the work of two contemporary feminist scholars, Janet R. Jakobsen and Judith Butler, concerning issues about the incessant categorization of women. Their work has informed my analysis of disrupting the “barren motif”, and frames my discussion about how we should view biblical women in a more complex way.

Janet R. Jakobsen is a Professor of Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies and Director of the Center for Research on Women at Barnard College. Her book, *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference: Diversity and Feminist Ethics*, details some of the complications when referring to “women” as if it is a singular, homogenous category. Jakobsen states, “The moral commitments of feminism to resist domination and enable the well-being of women refer not to a simple or singular category but rather to a diverse and complex group of persons with varying interests, needs, and desires.”³ Furthermore, she explains, “Not only are there differences within the category of ‘women,’ but each woman is many different things.”⁴ Jakobsen’s overall point here is that feminist work must come from a place that acknowledges diversity, and even conflict, among women. And, feminist work must recognize that each individual woman both represents, and is represented by many different things.

Judith Butler is an American Philosopher and Gender Theorist. She is a Professor of Philosophy at the European Graduate School in Saas-Fee, Switzerland. Similar to Jakobsen, in Butler’s book *Gender Trouble* she explains that feminism is often faced

³ Janet R. Jakobsen, “Introduction” in *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference: Diversity and Feminist Ethics*, Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1998, 1.

⁴ Jakobsen, Janet R., “Introduction” in *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference*, 12.

with, “the assumption that the term *women* denotes a common identity.”⁵ She adds that even if one identifies as a woman, that does not account for all that she is. The claim that “the category of women is normative and exclusionary... [and] the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of ‘women’ are constructed.”⁶

As Butler describes, the assumption and insistence that there is an essential common identity amongst women is problematic because it precludes us from making radical inquiries into the construction and regulation of identity.⁷ Women are diverse and have varying desires. Also, each individual woman’s desires can change over time. Failure to recognize the ways in which women have intersecting positionalities will limit the kinds of questions and research we can ask and do. If we can see that this is true of women today, then we can extend our understanding to include women of antiquity. Why assume that all women, at any point in time, had the same desires and concerns? Yet, as I will discuss in the next section, scholars in Hebrew Bible, have repeatedly assumed that all women in the Bible shared the same desires, namely, motherhood.

⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, 1999, 4.

⁶ Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble*, 19.

⁷ Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble*, ix.

CHAPTER 3: SCHOLARSHIP CONCERNING WOMEN AND MOTHERHOOD IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

In reference to the ancient Near East more generally, Hennie J. Marsman claims that the most important role a women had was to be a wife. And the second most important role is to be a mother.⁸ Repeatedly, scholars of Hebrew Bible describe motherhood as the ultimate goal of all women in the Bible. These statements are most commonly reinforced through references to the stories of Sarai and Hagar, Leah and Rachel, and Hannah and Peninnah, and sometimes also through the stories of Rebekah and the unnamed wife of Manoah. Although these stories concern women who are barren, the particular contexts of each of these stories, and each of these individual women differs. Still, from these stories, scholars claim that all women in the Bible desire children. Furthermore, they conclude that motherhood necessarily provided an increase in status for women. In this section I will provide examples of scholarship that make both of these arguments, and I will show why their claims do not hold up. I will first discuss examples of how scholars selectively cite particular moments in different stories to support their claim that all women desired children.

Phyllis Bird states, “Barrenness was a shame and a reproach in Israel (Gen 30:1-2, 22-23; 1 Sam 1:3-7, 11); it was interpreted as divine punishment or at least a sign of divine displeasure (Gen 16:2, 20:18, 30:26; 1 Sam 1:5; 2 Sam 6:20-23).”⁹ This quote is footnoted in Jennie Ebeling’s work, and summarized as, “Children were considered a blessing, and the biblical writers compared barrenness to being dead (Gen. 30.1) and a

⁸ Hennie J. Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East*, Boston: Brill, 2003, 47.

⁹ Phyllis A. Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997, 35.

result of divine punishment or displeasure (Gen. 16.2; 20.18; 1 Sam. 1.5; 2 Sam. 6.23).”¹⁰

This is a prime example of how scholars lump together different stories to make their point, and how poorly constructed arguments become fact through recitation.

Yet, each of the verses that Bird/Ebeling notes are found within very different contexts. Ebeling first claims that, “biblical writers compared barrenness to being dead.” However, she references one verse that is a dialogue of one particular character (Rachel in Gen 30:1). Rachel’s quote is not the definitive representation of what all biblical writers thought about barrenness. We cannot even be certain of what the author(s) of Genesis 30 thought about barrenness based on one verse, spoken by a character, whose reference to death may have been hyperbolic.

Genesis 16 opens with, “Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children.” In Gen 16:2 Sarai states that it was God who had restrained her (עצר, “to restrain”) from bearing. The text provides no reason why God would be individually displeased with Sarai. Therefore, Gen 16:2 does not demonstrate divine displeasure/punishment, but just a natural occurrence, perhaps due to Sarai’s age. Similarly, in 1 Sam 1, we know that Hannah was barren. In the verse referenced by Bird, 1 Sam 1:5, the narrator explains that the Lord had shut (סגר, “to shut”) Hannah’s womb. סגר is different than the word used in Genesis 16, עצר, to describe the closing of the womb – neither of which imply displeasure by God, as these words are used to describe the closing of many things. For instance, עצר is also found in the Qal perfect in Gen 20:18 and in Dan 10:8. Though Gen 20:18 also concerns the closing of wombs, in Dan 10:8 this word is used to reference the

¹⁰ Jennie R. Ebeling, *Women’s Lives in Biblical Times*, New York: T&T Clark International, 2010, 97.

fact that after a vision Daniel “retained” no strengthen. סגר in the Qal perfect is used to describe the closing of a door in Gen 19:6, 10 and in 2 Chron 29:7, and the shutting of a gate in Jos 2:7.

The next referenced verse by Bird, Gen 20:18, is a statement from the narrator about the women of the household of Abimelech in relation to a complex sequence of events. Abram had lied to Abimelech, and told him that Sarai was his sister. Once Abimelech discovers he was lied to he gives Abram oxen, sheep, and servants so that Sarai is restored as Abram’s wife. Gen 20:17 states, “and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maids, so that they bore children.” And in Gen 20:18 the narrator explains that previously the Lord had closed their wombs – “for the Lord had closed fast all the wombs of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham’s wife.” This clearly does not suggest that God was displeased with Sarai.

Finally, in 2 Sam 6:23 children and conception are not the major concern of the story. The text does not say anything about the Lord punishing Michal; just that she had no children.

לֹא הָיָה לָהּ יֶלֶד עַד יוֹם מוֹתָהּ (there was no children to her, until the day she died)

Michal’s lack of children is also tied to political issues at work throughout this story. Michal is Saul’s daughter, and so if she were to have a child with David the linages of Saul and David would come together. Since David and Saul are rivals, the fact that Michal never bears children could reflect that David ignored Michal in order to separate David and Saul’s bloodlines, and reserve David’s place in power.¹¹ Another example in 2 Samuel where David ignores, and does not lie with women in his house is found in 2 Sam

¹¹ Jeremy Schipper, “Disabling Israelite Leadership” in *This Abled Body* ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007, 106.

20:3, “Then David came to his house at Jerusalem, and the king took the ten women, the concubines who he had left to keep the house, and placed them under guard and provided them with sustenance, but did not go in to them, they were shut up until the day of their death.” In both the case of Michal and of David’s concubines, the text is not stating that these women are barren, but that because David is ignoring them they do not conceive.

Also, the language used to describe lack of children is different than the language used in stories of Sarai, Leah, Rachel, and Hannah, which demonstrate the variety of ways that biblical women can be described as lacking of children, which suggests that these stories are not really synonymous. In the case of Michal, there is not necessarily a biological reason for why she does not have children. Furthermore, this reference to lack of children does not imply divine punishment.

Susanne Scholz explains that some feminists interpret Judges 13 as a story that empowers women because the messenger informs the unnamed wife of Manoah about Samson’s future. However, she comments, “a literary pattern that limits a woman’s significance to motherhood and childcare promotes androcentric gender bias.”¹² I will unpack this quote in a bit more detail in relation to the story of Judges 13 below, however I would like to call into question her use of the phrase, “literary pattern”. What is Scholz referring to when she says, “a literary pattern”? We can infer that Scholz is referencing the fact that issues surrounding infertility are continually described as a recurring “pattern”. The notion that there is a “pattern” that ties women to fertility has become so normalized in biblical studies that Scholz does not feel the need to explain what the “pattern” is in more detail. Yet, as I have described, and will further discuss throughout

¹² Susanne Scholz, “Judges” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, Jacqueline E. Lapsley, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, 121.

this thesis, this supposed “pattern” that marks an essential connection between women’s lives with motherhood is not supported by the text.

In a similar sense, in Athalya Brenner’s comparison of Sarai and Hagar’s relationship to that of Leah and Rachel, she states that these stories contain, “the basic motif – two women whose prime motivation is motherhood, who do not get along, whose behavior is ultimately destructive and causes family friction and damage to themselves through continuing competition between their children.”¹³ This is exactly what Calloway was referring to in the quote I used at the start of the thesis. These characters are being reduced to a motif, and being treated as stand-ins for a larger theme.

Brenner’s statement is problematic for a few reasons. First, we see motherhood described as the prime motivation of all four women. As I will describe more fully later in this thesis, Leah’s motivation is Jacob’s attention, and motherhood is a tool she uses in an attempt to be noticed by him. Rachel’s motivation is not as clear, but probably comes from jealousy of her sister. In the context of the Sarai and Hagar’s story, their desires for motherhood are never stated, and should not be assumed.

Second, it is not clear how the behaviors of these women are “ultimately destructive”, and how “damage to themselves” occurs because of competition between their children. In the story of Rachel and Leah, there does not appear to be any damage or destruction to the women’s lives. Though it could be said that the sons stand in competition to each other, this is not really unique to these stories. Many stories of brothers throughout the Bible deal with competition, rivalry, and conflict. Even in the case of Rachel and Leah’s children in Genesis 37 the conflict is not between the children

¹³ Athalya Brenner, “Female Social Behavior: Two Descriptive Patterns within the ‘Birth of the Hero’ Paradigm” in *A Feminist Companion To Genesis*, ed. Athalya Brenner, (The Feminist Companion to the Bible, 2) Sheffield” Sheffield Academic Press, 1993, 209.

of Rachel versus the children of Leah. Rather, it is Rachel's first son Joseph who is in conflict with the other sons, including those born to Bilhah and Zilpah. Therefore, this conflict has little to do with their mothers.

In the effort to make a generalized comparison with Rachel and Leah, Brenner glosses over some of the factors at play in Sarai and Hagar's story. Also, the relationship between Sarai and Hagar is structurally much different than that between Rachel and Leah. Sarai has been the only wife in the marriage for many years, and uses her maid Hagar in an effort to help build up Abram's household. Rachel and Leah, on the other hand, are biological sisters and are married to the same man within a week of each other. Moreover, the first story involves two women, while the second story involves four women.

Though their stories are similar in that there is tension between female characters concerning childbirth, the particular circumstance of Sarai and Hagar's situation is much different from Leah and Rachel's. The tension between Sarai and Hagar occurs when Sarai feels that this woman, who was once merely her maid, looks down upon her. Also, there is much at stake in this story because Abram has not had any children, but he was promised a great nation. The tension between Leah and Rachel, on the other hand, is quite complicated and concerns the different desires of Leah and Rachel. Though Jacob was also promised a great nation (Gen 28:13-14), his progeny is never at risk because Leah is initially fertile and has four sons at the beginning of the story.

Scholars also argue for the universal desire for children by women in the Hebrew Bible by claiming that motherhood brought about status, power, honor, and security to women that they could otherwise not attain. Ebeling states, "bearing children was the

ultimate goal of every woman in ancient Israel, and one of the few chances a woman had to achieve status in her family and community.”¹⁴ Later on she states, “a barren woman was deprived of the honor attached to motherhood, which, in ancient Israel, was the only position of honor generally available and the highest status most women could achieve.”¹⁵

Similarly, Susan Niditch states that there is a recurring motif in the Bible of “the marginal status of women who are prevented from fulfilling the roles defined for women in Genesis 3 (e.g. the barren women, the raped Dinah, and the abandoned Hagar, the childless widow Tamar, and the unloved Leah).”¹⁶ Yet, where in Genesis 3 is the role for women defined? Gen 3:16 states, “your desire shall be for your husband.” This says nothing about fulfillment of a women’s life through child bearing. Niditch also states that women who fail to fulfill this role of child bearing will fall between the cracks of the social structure. This may be true for some of the women that Niditch mentions here, but not for all of them. Many women who are described as barren are married, and members of a stable household structure (Sarai, Rebekah, Rachel, the unnamed wife of Manoah, and Hannah). Nonetheless, Niditch claims that in that world, “children were a women’s status.”¹⁷ Though, as I will explain in more detail, Leah though she has children, does not receive a change in status even though she is fertile. Also Carole R. Fontaine states, “If a woman’s most powerful positive aspect was her ability to give birth, then any condition

¹⁴ Ebeling, Jennie R., *Women’s Lives in Biblical Times*, 63.

¹⁵ Ebeling, Jennie R., *Women’s Lives in Biblical Times*, 97.

¹⁶ Susan Niditch, “Genesis” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, Jacqueline E. Lapsley, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, 33.

¹⁷ Niditch, Susan, “Genesis” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 35.

or situation that prevented that was grave indeed for the woman, her family, and her community.”¹⁸

Ebeling, Niditch, and Fontaine all argue that a woman’s status depended on motherhood, and failure to produce children would result in a marginalization in their community. However, the examples of Sarai and Leah counter this claim. Sarai was elderly by the time she voluntarily gives Hagar to Abraham in Genesis 16. Thus, at the very least we can see from the example of Sarai that life without children was possible. The text never describes Sarai’s life as impeded by the fact that she had not given birth. Furthermore, it is not clear that without children that Sarai would be marginalized.

Leah gives birth to four sons at the start of her marriage to Jacob (29:32-35). Yet, it is apparent that Leah’s status does not seem any greater than Rachel’s status, though Leah is the fertile wife. The text states that Leah was unloved wife, and it appears that Leah actually has a lower status than Rachel because she is ignored throughout the narrative.

Therefore, Sarai and Leah’s lack of children had no obvious effect on their standing in the household or in the society. It is not always the case, as some scholars claim, that motherhood necessarily brought about an increase in status in a women’s life, or vice versa. Furthermore, these scholars do not explain what an increase in status would mean. If a barren woman were already a married member of a household, what would a child offer to her? How exactly would this bring her honor?

Not only do scholars universalize the stories of women in the Bible, but they also tend to blend the individual characters together. For instance, in Claus Westermann’s

¹⁸ Carole R. Fontaine, “Be Men, O Philistines!” in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, Boston: Brill, 2007, 70.

commentary on Gen 30:1-2, he states, “It is the suffering of the childless wife, of which we hear so much in the Old Testament (e.g. 1 Sam 1; Ps 113).”¹⁹ It is true that in 1 Samuel 1 Hannah suffers because she is barren. However, how Hannah’s suffering is derived makes her situation unique and incomparable to Rachel’s situation. As I will discuss in more detail later on, Hannah’s sister-wife, Peninnah, torments her, which is why she is in distress. Yet in Genesis 30, though Rachel is barren, she is not tormented or treated badly by Leah or Jacob.

The other example cited here is Psalms 113. Typically Ps 133:9 is translated as “He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the Lord.” However, this verse is better translated as, “The barren woman dwells in the house; the joyous mother of children praise you, the Lord.” This is in keeping with the structure of the verses in Ps 113. Compare v.7, “Raising the poor from the dust; lifting the needy from the ash heap.” When we read the two phrases as separate clauses these two types of women (the barren and the mother) are both acknowledged as praising God, neither of which mentions suffering. In fact, from this verse we can consider the idea that perhaps a barren woman and a mother can live equally satisfying lives, because of the way that this verse places these women in comparison to one another.

Westermann goes on to explain Rachel’s statement in Gen 30:1, “Give me children, or I shall die.” He states, “It was pain until death (cf. Gen. 25:22; 27:16); the childless wife had no future.”²⁰ These examples are not at all related to Rachel’s situation. Gen 25:22 concerns Rebekah’s issues during her pregnancy, which is so painful that she questions why she should live. It is not barrenness that is painful for Rebekah,

¹⁹ Claus Westermann *Genesis 12-16: A Commentary*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985, 474.

²⁰ Westermann, Claus, *Genesis 12-16: A Commentary*, 474.

but the pregnancy. Gen 27:16 has no relevancy to Rachel's statement in 30:1. This verse depicts Rebekah conspiring with her son Jacob to make him appear as Esau. These two references concern Rebekah while she is pregnant or when she has already had her children. This is not comparable to Rachel's infertility.

Also the characters of Rachel and Leah are often blended together. In describing the characters of Rachel and Leah, Gale A. Yee states, "the identities of both women revolve around the common desire to bear sons for their husband."²¹ This statement is problematic when considered in the context of what these women actually state in the text. As I have mentioned, Leah's desire to have children is not merely, "for her husband", but it is a tool that Leah uses as an attempt to get the attention of Jacob. As for Rachel, there is no reason in the text why she would necessarily have to have a child for Jacob because Leah, the first wife, has already had four sons with him. These types of statements that gloss over the unique dimensions of these characters prevent us from seeing biblical women as individuals.

Laurel W. Koepf-Taylor has a different reading of barren women than the one that I present here. Koepf-Taylor makes the argument that children were of economic value to families in ancient Israel. She states, "childlessness is a form of economic hardship and threat to communal survival in addition to a personal tragedy."²² Though this is a certainly an acceptable statement concerning how ancient Israelites may have considered childlessness, I think that the examples found in biblical narrative do not conclusively support this. Throughout Koepf-Taylor's analysis of Genesis 29 and 30 she does denote

²¹ Gale A. Yee, "Leah", *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol. 4, ed. David Noel Freedman New York: DoubleDay, 1992, 286.

²² Laurel W. Koepf-Taylor, *Give Me Children or I Shall Die: Children and Communal Survival in Biblical Literature*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013, 43.

some of the differences between Leah and Rachel. In fact, when she briefly discusses the naming of Leah and Rachel's children she mentions that, "Leah expresses hope that the birth of sons will cause Jacob to love her", but then she backs away from this statement, and ultimately argues that the text is concerned with the future of the family.²³ Though Koepf-Taylor's argument about the economic value of children in ancient Israel may be valid, we cannot argue from the text that all women, especially Leah, were concerned with this. As I will demonstrate the names of Leah's children and the statements that she makes all point to her desire for Jacob, and nothing more. Even though Koepf-Taylor mentions how these women are different, ultimately she does not break from this pattern of universalizing the stories of biblical women.

I will now turn to the stories of Leah and Rachel. First I will examine the story of Leah, placing her statements one after the other so that we can get a better picture of what is motivating her story. Then I will consider the role of Bilhah and Zilpah in the household, and how their children figure into the family. Finally, I will look at the statements and actions of Rachel and consider what her desires are, and how they change in the story. Then I will discuss women whose stories are similar, but not the same, as Leah and Rachel, and point out the significant differences that make these women unique.

²³ Koepf-Taylor, Laurel W., *Give Me Children or I Shall Die*, 51.

CHAPTER 4: LEAH

In this section I will discuss the character of Leah by focusing on her statements and actions in chronological order. I will first introduce the unique circumstances of this story. Then I will discuss in detail the naming of Leah's children because they reflect Leah's emotions about her relationship with Jacob. Following this I will look at why Leah offers Zilpah to Jacob, after already bearing him four sons. And finally I will discuss the exchange of the mandrakes, and the additional children that Leah gives birth to at the end of the narrative. My analysis will demonstrate that the majority of Leah's statements and actions refer to her desire for Jacob's love and attention.

Leah and Rachel are sisters and sister-wives. This situation is uncommon in biblical literature, as most sister-wives were not biological sisters. Jacob had originally discussed with Laban (Leah and Rachel's father) that he wanted to marry Rachel, and agreed to work seven years for her hand. But, Laban switches Rachel for Leah on the night of the celebratory feast. Laban claimed that it was customary to marry the oldest daughter first. Laban agreed that if Jacob waited one week, he could marry Rachel also, at the price of an additional seven more years of service. Leah and her sister are married to the same man only a week apart from one another.

In Gen 29:31 the narrator states that Leah was unloved, and so God opened her womb so that she could bear children. Leah then has four children with Jacob. In this story each of the children's names, "refer to the circumstances of the mothers."²⁴ Leah names her first son, רֵאוּבֵן (Reuben) which means, "see, a son". Following this Leah states, "surely now my husband will love me." Leah believes that by having a son Jacob

²⁴ R.N. Whybray, "Genesis" in *The Oxford Biblical Commentary*, edited John Barton and John Meddman, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 57.

will love her. But the text does not indicate that Jacob's attitude changed towards Leah because she gave birth. Leah attributes the blessing of a second child to the fact that God has heard that she is unloved. "Because the Lord has heard that I am unloved, he has therefore given me this son also" (Gen 29:33). So she names him שמעון (Simeon), which comes from the root for "to hear". At the birth of her third son Leah states, "Now this time my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons" (Gen 29:34). Leah then named her son לוי (Levi), which means "attached". Leah conceives a fourth son, but here she states, "this time I will praise the Lord" (Gen 29:35). Therefore, Leah named her son יהודה (Judah), which means, "to praise". Though Leah has four children at the start of this narrative, Leah remains unloved despite the fact that she was fertile.

Then Rachel had two sons through her maid, Bilhah, and Leah stops bearing children (Gen 30:9). So then Leah has children through her maid Zilpah. One reading of this by J. Cheryl Exum slips into universalizing Leah's story. Though Exum's work often challenges gender normativity, in this case she states, "indeed, by having Leah also give her maid to Jacob, although she has already borne him sons, the biblical narrator reinforces the stereotype that women will go to any lengths to have children."²⁵ But does the character of Leah really reinforce a stereotype? Instead if we look at Leah as an individual woman with her own desires, we can reconsider why Leah gives Zilpah to Jacob.

²⁵ J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives*, Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1993, 122.

It is not until Rachel's maid, Bilhah, has a child that Leah decides to give Zilpah to Jacob as well. It is at this point in the text, which states that Leah had ותעמד מלדת (which literally means, "and she stood from bearing", but is usually translated as "ceased bearing"). Terence E. Fretheim in *The New Interpreter's Bible* states, "She may have 'ceased bearing' (29:35; 30:9) because Jacob avoided her."²⁶ Though Fretheim does not expand on this point, it is worth serious consideration. The phrase "ceased bearing" is not the usual expression in Hebrew for when a woman was not physically capable of having children. Typically the text would say that God closed the women's womb, or use the Hebrew word for barren (עקר) (Gen 11:30, 25:21, 29:31; 1 Sam 2:5). Or as I explained above, the word used to describe Sarai's barrenness is עצר (to restrain), while the word for Hannah's barrenness is סגר (to shut). Again, the fact that all of these words are different demonstrates the uniqueness to each of these stories involving infertility and childbirth. And in the case of Leah, this phrasing does not suggest that she was barren, but that she had stop bearing children because Jacob was possibly ignoring her. Once he could have children with Rachel's maid Bilhah, he no longer needed Leah to have more children.

In Gen 30:14 Rachel asks Leah for some of the mandrakes that Rueben, Leah's son, has gathered in the field. This leads into a bartering conversation between Rachel and Leah about the mandrakes. Mandrakes, מנדקאים, were known for "exciting sexual desire, and favoring procreation."²⁷ The BDB definition notes these verses in Genesis 30 as the example. The word מנדקאים comes from the Hebrew root נדק, which means "to

²⁶ Terence E. Fretheim "Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections: Genesis" in *The New Interpreter's Bible* Vol. 1, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994, 555.

²⁷ BDB, 188.

fondle, to love”. Nahum M. Sarna explains that, “the mandrake appears as a widely diffused folkloristic motif associated with aphrodisiac powers.”²⁸ The text does not explain why both Rachel and Leah are interested in the mandrakes. However, Sarna argues that the narrative dismisses the power of the mandrakes, because once Rachel receives the mandrakes she does not bare children right away. Rather, she remains barren for three more years (while Leah gives birth to three children). Mandrakes are also referenced in Song 7:13, “The mandrakes have given forth fragrance, and over our doors are all choice *fruits*, both new and old, which I have saved up for you, my beloved”. The word “beloved” also comes from the same root מָדַד. Song of Songs demonstrates that mandrakes were tied closely to the idea of love. Marvin H. Pope suggests that the name of the love-goddess Aphrodite is a derivation from the word מַדְדֵי אֵשׁ, which means “fruit of love”.²⁹ There is not much evidence to support the claim that mandrakes promoted fertility outside of Genesis 30. Those that claim that mandrakes promoted fertility can only reference Genesis 30 as their evidence.

Leah responds to Rachel’s inquiry about her the mandrakes by asking, “Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son’s mandrakes also?” (Gen 30:15). Even though Leah was the last in the story thus far to bear a child with Jacob (via her maid Zilpah), she is still hurt about Rachel and Jacob’s relationship. Yet, Leah agrees to give Rachel some of the mandrakes in exchange for lying with Jacob. Leah then confronts Jacob, and tells him that she has hired him through an exchange of mandrakes. This exchange between Rachel and Leah again demonstrates

²⁸ Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989, 209.

²⁹ Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs* in The Anchor Bible, New York: Double Day, 1977, 648.

Leah's desire. Leah accuses Rachel for taking away her husband, and she views Rachel inquiry for the mandrakes as another stab in the back. Yet, Leah agrees to this exchange, even though it hurts her, because Rachel has something that Leah does not – Jacob.

It is peculiar that Rachel offers Leah the chance to lie with Jacob, because we would assume that as the first wife Leah would have this opportunity. It is reasonable to infer that Jacob has been ignoring Leah, perhaps because he really did love Rachel and never wanted to marry Leah. Furthermore, if the contrary were true, and Leah was no longer fertile, and Jacob was ignoring her, we could read this as Leah wanting to lie with Jacob for her own pleasure, unrelated to the issue of child bearing. This would again be consistent with Leah's desire for Jacob's attention.

After this, Leah has two more sons with Jacob. Leah states at the birth of the fifth son, "God has given me my wages because I gave my maid to my husband" (Gen 30:18). And so she names her fifth son Issachar, which comes from the combination of two words: **יש** "being" or "existence", and **שכר** "wages", which together means "there is a hire". This is in reference to the exchange of mandrakes through which Leah hired Jacob to lie with her, and so Leah sees the birth of her fifth son as compensation for having to exchange the mandrakes.

At the birth of the sixth and final son Leah bears, she states, "God has endowed me with a good dowry; now my husband will honor me because I have borne him six sons" (Gen 30:20). And she names the sixth son Zebulun, which means, "honor" from the root **זבל**. Yet again, we see Leah's desire for Jacob's attention. And at this point in the text it seems that she is not only looking for attention but honor, or respect from her husband. This shows that though Leah was very fertile, her status in the eyes of Jacob

remained the same throughout the narrative. Lastly, Leah gives birth to a daughter and names her Dinah. Leah has a sum of seven biological children throughout the narrative.

The names of Leah's children, and that fact that she offers her maid to Jacob reflects a unique desire that drives most of Leah's statements and actions throughout the story. Leah giving her maid to Jacob is another effort by Leah to get Jacob's attention. Leah was already unloved, and now she had ceased bearing children, which was her main connection to Jacob. Therefore, Leah's use of maid was a response to Rachel building up Jacob's household by having children with Jacob through her maid. And the fact that Rachel has to offer Leah an opportunity to lie with Jacob reflects that Leah was being ignored. That Leah agrees to this exchange shows that she still desires Jacob's love and attention throughout the narrative.

CHAPTER 5: BILHAH AND ZILPAH

I have chosen to separate my discussion of Bilhah and Zilpah so that I can more clearly show that maids, even if they had children on behalf of their mistress, did not receive an increase in status. I will first define the Hebrew words used to describe Bilhah and Zilpah. Then I will walk through their brief moments in Genesis 29, 30, and also 35. Then I will trouble the commonly held argument that the children born from maids on behalf the mistress belonged to the mistress. By examining Genesis 33, 37, and 46, I will show that maids produce children for their mistresses in order to build up the household for the man's progeny. However this offering does not benefit either the mistress in their progeny or the maids in their household status. Finally I will look at the word אִשָּׁה and I will show that though this term is used when Bilhah and Zilpah are given to Jacob "to wife", לְאִשָּׁה this did not lead to a change in status.

Bilhah and Zilpah are described throughout the narrative in Genesis 29 and 30 as שֹׁפְחָה, meaning, "maid, maid-servant".³⁰ Throughout Genesis 29 and 30 שֹׁפְחָה is used eleven times. Only once does Rachel use the word אִמָּה to reference Bilhah. שֹׁפְחָה is also used to reference Hagar throughout Genesis 16.

It is important to first point out that Bilhah and Zilpah never speak; either the narrator, or another character speak about them. Zilpah is the first of the two maids to enter the narrative. When Laban gives Leah to Jacob, he also gives Zilpah to Leah as a maid (Gen 29:24). Then when Jacob marries Rachel in Gen 29:28, Laban gives Rachel Bilhah as a maid. The maids are not mentioned again until they start to bear children.

³⁰ BDB, 1046.

After Rachel states, “Give me children or I shall die” in Gen 30:1, she offers Bilhah to Jacob. She says, “Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her, that she may bear upon my knees and that I also may have children through her” (Gen 30:3). Bilhah then gives birth to Dan and Naphtali. In Gen 30:9 Leah recognizes that she has “ceased bearing” and so “she took her maid Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife.” Zilpah then gives birth to Gad and Asher.

After this Bilhah and Zilpah are mostly discussed in passing, although Bilhah is also mentioned in Genesis 35:22, “and Rueben went, and laid with Bilhah, his father’s concubine”, פלגש אביו. The word used for concubine is פלגש; this is not synonymous with wife. According to the Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, “a concubine had a lower social status than a wife.”³¹ Because Rachel and Leah give Bilhah and Zilpah to Jacob their status is still secondary to the wives of Jacob. Also פלגש is used in Gen 25:5-6, “Now Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac; but to the sons of his concubines, Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the east.” The sons of Jacob’s concubines clearly do not receive as much inheritance as his son Isaac.

According to Gerhard Von Rad, this practice of obtaining an heir through a proxy wife was common throughout Mesopotamian history. In these cultures, a wife could bring her own personal maid to the marriage.³² Von Rad, explains that, “If she gave her personal maid to her husband, in the event of her own childlessness, then the child born

³¹ G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (eds.) *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol XI, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001, 550.

³² Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis A Commentary*, (Revised Edition) London: SCM Press LTD, 1972.

of the maid was considered the wife's child: The slave was born 'on the knees' of the wife, so that the child then came symbolically from the womb of the wife herself."³³

Yet, further examination of the text does not support this notion that the maid's child is also considered the child of the mistress. Though the giving of the maid for the purpose of having children may have been customary, it does not seem to be the case that these children born from maids belong to the mistresses. This is clear from the fact that after Bilhah, Rachel's maid, bears two children Rachel still tries to have a biological child, which is demonstrated by her effort to obtain the mandrakes. Also, Genesis 33, 37, and 46 clearly state that the children born in Genesis 30 belong to the woman who bore them.³⁴

According to Gen 33:2-3, Jacob, "divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all." This same grouping is restated in Gen 33:6.³⁵ The children are grouped and distinguished by the women who bore them. Though the maids are not named here, their roles are still identified as mothers of Jacob's children.

Gen 37:2 states, "Joseph, when seventeen years of age, was pasturing the flock with his brothers while he was still a youth, along with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives". The narrator refers to Bilhah and Zilpah as wives of Joseph's father, נְשֵׂי אָבִיו "his father's wives". Here, they are not referred to as maids.

Additionally, we see Bilhah and Zilpah referred to by name, and still having an

³³ Von Rad, Gerhard, *Genesis A Commentary*, 191.

³⁴ Though Genesis 46 is from the priestly source, I am not concerned with that for the sake of this paper.

³⁵ It also appears that Jacob has deliberately arranged the women in order that ranges from least preferred to most preferred – the maids, Leah, and then Rachel (the loved wife).

association to the children that they gave birth to (they are not considered Rachel's and Leah's children).

Genesis 46 provides the lineage of Jacob's sons, and who bore them. And as with the other examples I noted, the children born to the maids are not accounted towards their mistresses. Gen 46:8-15 lists the sons biologically born from Leah. Then vv. 16-18 lists the sons born to Zilpah. In v.19 Rachel is only listed with the two sons she bore herself – Joseph and Benjamin. The sons born to Bilhah are listed separately (vv. 24-25). Though all the sons born through a proxy wife belong to Jacob's lineage, they are not in the lineage of the original wife. In other words, the sons born through Bilhah and Zilpah belong to Jacob, but they do not belong to Rachel and Leah. An almost identical grouping is also mentioned in 35:23-25. In Genesis 33, 37, and 46, we see that the children of the maids are still attributed to the maids, and not to their respective mistresses. This could explain why Rachel in Genesis 30 changes her mind, and decides that she desires to have a biological child. Perhaps she does not want to be the only woman in the house without children to her name.

Rachel and Leah give their maids to Jacob “to wife” (see Gen 30:4 and Gen 30:9). This creates an ambiguous relationship between Bilhah and Jacob, and Zilpah and Jacob, because the word $\eta\omega\lambda$ can be translated as both wife and woman. If this is translated so that when a maid is given to a man as his “wife”, it is uncertain whether this was a temporary role or a permanent position?

In Genesis 33:2 (discussed above), the narrator refers to Bilhah and Zilpah as the “two maids”, and again in Gen 33:6 as maids. In Gen 37:2, however, as discussed previously, Zilpah and Bilhah are referred to as “wives” of Jacob. In Gen 46:18 and 25,

though Zilpah and Bilhah are not referred to as maids here, it is explicitly mentioned after their name that Laban gave Zilpah/Bilhah to Leah/Rachel.³⁶ This inconsistency further demonstrates that there was not a clear, obvious, or certain upgrade in status for Bilhah and Zilpah simply because they give birth when they were given to Jacob “to wife”.

The word אִשָּׁה is also used in this way in the story of Sarai and Hagar in Genesis 16. In this story the ambiguity about the status of maid, once she bore a child on behalf of her mistress, possibly is why Hagar “looks down upon her mistress” (Gen 16:4). Yet we do not see this problem with Bilhah and Zilpah. Though Rachel, Leah, and Sarai, all have maids that are given to their husbands, as “wives”, when they are unable to have children, the contexts of these situations differ. Bilhah and Zilpah do not use their pregnancy to “look down upon” their mistresses in the way that Hagar does. This marks a difference between the desires of Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah.

Many of the scholars that I noted above made the claim that motherhood was the most important thing a woman could do in her life, and that this necessarily brought about an increase in status. Whether or not this is true in the case of Bilhah and Zilpah is unclear. Simply put, there is no obvious increase in status or honor for either of these women. It does seem, however, that because Bilhah and Zilpah are credited with the two sons they each bore, that are part of Jacob’s progeny, these women continue to get mentioned throughout Genesis as mothers of these children. This is not to say that their entire status was promoted to be wives with Leah and Rachel. Rather, motherhood for

³⁶ Though I have not been concerned with source criticism for the sake of this project, it is interesting to consider that these three examples are thought to be from different sources. According to Richard Elliott Friedman, Gen 33:2 is from E, Gen 37:2(b) is from J, while Gen 46:18, 25 are from P.³⁶ The different sources for each of these examples might account for why these women are referenced in different ways. Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote The Bible?*, San Francisco: Harper SanFrancisco, 1997, 248-249.

Bilhah and Zilpah allows them to continue to be named throughout the text. Therefore the use of the phrase “to wife”, does not necessarily bring about a permanent promotion of status.

Also, though it is possible that children may have increased the status of women in the Hebrew Bible, this is only true of women who already had a status to speak of. Maids and concubines did not benefit from having children, as I have shown with the examples of Bilhah, Zilpah, and Hagar. Therefore statements about what women in the Bible desired “in general” gloss over class differences, neglecting the variety of societal positions that women have.

CHAPTER 6: RACHEL

When compared to the other three women discussed above and to the women I will discuss in the section to follow, Rachel is unique because her jealousy about sister's fertility is stated in the text. This is the only time in which a woman who is described as barren is also described as jealous. For Rachel, remaining childless did not necessarily threaten her relationship with Jacob, for we know that she was the most loved. However, though Rachel was loved she was envious of her fertile sister. I will first discuss Rachel and Jacob's relationship and how it is different than Leah and Jacob's relationship. Then I will discuss Rachel's statement, "Give me children or I shall die" (Gen 30:1).³⁷ Then I will look how Rachel gives Bilhah to Jacob, and Rachel's feelings about Bilhah having children for her. Following this I will consider how and why Rachel seems to change her mind about the way in which she can attain children. This will lead me to consider why Rachel decides to pursue the mandrakes, even though Bilhah has already had children "for her".

Rachel, unlike Leah, was loved by Jacob. The narrator states "Jacob loved Rachel" (Gen 29:18), and that the seven years he had to work to earn her hand, "seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her" (29:20). In 29:29 the narrator clearly explains Jacob's feelings towards the two women – "he loved Rachel more than Leah." So at the start of this polygamous marriage, Rachel was already the favored wife.

In Gen 29:31 the narrator states, "Rachel was barren." Soon after we see that barrenness causes problems for Rachel. However, it is specifically after Leah had given birth to her four sons, that the narrator states that Rachel was **קנא**, "jealous", of Leah.

³⁷ This statement is commonly interpreted as foreshadowing how Rachel dies while giving birth in Gen. 35:16-19.

Rachel is not motivated by an increase in status, or the desire to be loved. Rather, Rachel is jealous of her sister's fertility.

If we assume that each child took a full nine-month pregnancy, and that Leah got pregnant the day after she gave birth, then a minimum of 36 months (3 years) would have passed before Rachel demands children from Jacob. The text does not state what was happening to Rachel during the time that Leah gave birth to four children. But it is only after Leah has given birth to these four children that Rachel feels as though she must have children as well. Again, Rachel is motivated by jealousy, rather than a desire to change her status or be loved.

After Rachel demands a child, the text states, “then Jacob’s anger burned against Rachel, and he said, ‘Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?’” (Gen 30:2). Jacob is not angry at the fact that Rachel has not had children. Rather Jacob’s anger is in response to Rachel’s threat regarding her own death.

As a response to Jacob, Rachel decides to give Bilhah to him. “Here is my maid Bilhah; go in her, that she may bear upon my knees and that I too may have children through her” (Gen 30:3). The phrase “have children” is an interpretation of the word בנה, which means, “to build”. A more literal translation of this would read as, “so that I may build also through her.” Therefore, Rachel is using Bilhah as a way to help “build up” the progeny of Jacob. This is the same language used in Gen 16:2. Sarai also uses her maid, Hagar, to “build” up Abram’s house. Though in the case of Sarai and Abram there may have been more at stake, because Abram had no children, when Sarai offers Hagar, while Jacob has four children with Leah already when Rachel offers Bilhah. And Rachel acknowledges this – she says so that she may “also” build up. So though Leah has had

four children, Rachel would also like a role in building up the household. This further suggests that Rachel is jealous of her sister's fertility. Not simply because Rachel desires children, but she desires children so that she can be a part of building up the household.

After Bilhah conceives and gives birth to דָן (Dan) meaning, “judge”, Rachel states, “God has pled my cause, and has indeed heard my voice and has given me a son.”³⁸ The root of the word pled, comes from the same root for Dan – דָן. Then Rachel has another child through Bilhah, and states, “‘With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and have prevailed’; so she named him Naphtali” (Gen 30:8). Naphtali comes from the word, פָּתַל, which means “wrestling”.³⁹ Therefore, Rachel interprets her situation of bearing a child through her maid as a maneuver in a fight with her sister – a fight, in this moment she believes she is winning.

At this point it seems that having children through her maid has satisfied her desire, because Rachel states that she was wrestling with her sister, and now has prevailed. However, once Leah builds up through her maid, Rachel seems to change her mind about what will satisfy her desire. Rachel notices that Leah's son Reuben had harvested mandrakes from the field, and so Rachel asks Leah if she can have some. After Leah responds by accusing Rachel of stealing her husband, Rachel decides to barter. In exchange for the mandrakes, Rachel offers Leah the opportunity to lie with Jacob. It is possible that Rachel felt she needed the mandrakes, not to excite sexual desire, but to help her conceive. Rachel is not satisfied with the children she had through Bilhah and is seeking out a way to have children of her own.

³⁸ BDB, 192.

³⁹ פָּתַל occurs four other times throughout the Hebrew Bible. In all of these cases פָּתַל can be translated as twisted or craftiness. (See: 2 Sam 22:27; Job 5:13; Psalms 18:26; Prov 8:8). Thus, Naphtali can be translated as “my twisting” and smoothed out to read as “my wrestling”.

But why is Rachel seeking to have a biological child, when earlier in the story she seemed satisfied with the children she bore through Bilhah? Thus far, Leah has had four children, and Bilhah and Zilpah have each had two children. As discussed, giving a maid to have a child on behalf of a barren mistress was not unusual, however, the children born to the maid are not, in the case of Genesis 30, attributed to mistress. Therefore at the point where Rachel barter for the mandrakes, she is the only named woman in the household that has not given birth. Perhaps Rachel seeks the mandrakes with the hope of having a biological child, in order to satisfy her envy of her sister and maids, and also to play a part in building up Jacob's house. This demonstrates that Rachel is not a stock character that simply wanted children, but she has specific desires that change throughout the story.

CHAPTER 7: SIMILAR, NOT THE SAME

In this section I will discuss stories of other women in the Hebrew Bible that also focus on childbirth and motherhood. Often scholars link these stories with the story of Leah and Rachel in an attempt to argue that all women desired children and create a “barren motif”. Here, I will look at these stories more closely, and show that though some components many seem comparable to Leah and Rachel, these other women have different desires, or their desires are simply not stated.

Sarai and Hagar

Sarai is the only wife of Abram for many years. Therefore, structurally, the relationships in this narrative are much different than the relationship between Leah and Rachel who are sisters in a polygamous marriage. Sarai is already elderly in Genesis 16 when she decides to give Hagar to Abram. We can calculate Sarai’s age at the start of Genesis 16 from information surrounding this moment in the text. Gen 17:17 (P) states, “Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” Therefore, we know that Sarai is ten years younger than Abram. We can look back to Gen 16:16 (P), which states, “Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to him.” Since we know that Sarai is ten years younger we know that she must have been seventy-six at the time of Ishmael’s birth. Which means that approximately a year earlier, when Hagar conceived, Sarai would have been seventy-five, which is past the age of when a woman would be fertile. As a seventy-five year old woman, with no children, Sarai must have been long aware of her state of barrenness, and she does not seem to desire nor state the need for children.

In 16:2 Sarai states that she wants to build up her family through Hagar, מִמְנָה אֲבֹנָה “I may build up through her” (Gen 16:2). Sarai had lived to a good age before even considering this, but for one reason or another she recognizes that Abram may desire/need children. This could possibly be because of the promise God has made to Abram (Gen 12:2, 7; 13:15-16; 15:5,18). Though we cannot be certain that Sarai was informed of this promise prior to 18:10.

Sarai then gives Hagar to Abram, and Hagar conceives. The narrator describes that once Hagar conceived, “she looked with contempt on her mistress” (Gen 16:4). The word translated as “with contempt”, comes from the verb קָלַל, which is translated in the BDB as trifling.⁴⁰ Therefore, this phrase can also read as, “she was trifling in her eyes.” Or in other words, Sarai was unimportant to Hagar. This could be read as Hagar putting herself on par with her mistress. In Prov 30:23 this behavior is specifically spoken against. This passage in Proverbs describes wrongful acts, including “a maid when she succeeds her mistress.” The word used for “maid” (שִׁפְחָה) and the word used for “mistress” (גַּבְרָתָה) are the same in both Genesis 16 and in Prov 30:23. The text does not indicate why Sarai was trifling in Hagar’s eyes, but just that Sarai was angered by the way in which Hagar looked at her. This situation is unique to Sarai and Hagar’s story. Unlike Sarai and Hagar, there is no conflict between the mistress and maids in Genesis 30, be it Rachel and Bilhah or Leah and Zilpah.

The fact that Hagar is Egyptian (Gen 16:1) is also evidence as to why Sarai and Hagar’s story is not comparable to Leah and Rachel’s story. Leah and Rachel are siblings, and thus from the same culture. Furthermore, the structure of the relationships in

⁴⁰ BDB, 886.

either story does not allow for a true comparison. Hagar is Sarai's maid, while Leah and Rachel are sister/co-wives. If any comparison could be made it should be between Sarai and Hagar to Rachel and Bilhah, or Leah and Zilpah. Though, still Bilhah and Zilpah are presumably from the same cultural as Rachel and Leah (we have no textual evidence to believe otherwise).

Sarai then reports to Abram that Hagar had looked at her with contempt, and Abram tells Sarai that she can deal with her maid as she please. He states, "your maid is in your hand", שפחהך בידך. The fact that Abram still refers to Hagar as Sarai's maid demonstrates that Hagar's status has not changed even though she has conceived Abram's child. Also, when Abram replies that Sarai can treat Hagar how she pleases, he is acknowledging Sarai's position as first wife, and her status over Hagar, despite her infertility. Fertility does not overrule the mistress/maid power relation in this story.

The narrator ends the scene by stating that Sarai dealt with Hagar harshly, and that Hagar ran away. Some argue that Sarai's anger toward Hagar is due to the fact that Sarai is jealous that Hagar conceived. Niditch explains that the reason Sarai treats Hagar harshly is because "it's a woman's world of competition concerning children."⁴¹ Again, we see the unique situation of Sarai and Hagar used to make universalized claims about womanhood in the Bible, particularly focused on desire for children. Yet, it would not make sense if Sarai was jealous of Hagar's conception, because Sarai arranges for Hagar and Abram to lie together. Rather, it is only after Hagar, "looked with contempt on her mistress", that Sarai becomes angered (Gen 16:4). Thus, Sarai's anger is not because she

⁴¹ Niditch, Susan, "Genesis", in *Women's Bible Commentary*, 2012, 35.

is jealous of Hagar's ability to have children, but rather she is angry because Hagar looked at her as unimportant.

Unlike Rachel, Sarai's desire for a biological child is never stated. Some may look to Gen 18:12 as evidence that Sarah desired children; "Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?'" Sarai is not laughing at the pleasure of bearing a child, but she is laughing at the idea that she will have sexual pleasure in her old age.⁴² Even in Genesis 21, when Sarai conceives she states, "God has brought laughter to me; all who hear will laugh with me" (v.6). This is unrelated to the fact that Hagar had Ishmael, and thus Sarai's is never jealous of Hagar's pregnancy, nor does she ever specifically state that she desires children. Furthermore, lack of children does not impeded Sarai's status.

Rebekah

Rebekah was loved by Isaac; "Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and he took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her" (Gen 24:67). Much like in the story of Rachel, we know that Rebekah was loved by her husband before we are informed of her barrenness. Genesis 25 briefly mentions that Rebekah was barren, but she quickly becomes fertile. The text states, "Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived" (Gen 25:21). Rebekah's barrenness is not dwelled on in the text.

Rebekah's opinion about her barrenness is not stated one way or the other. She never states that she desires children; rather, it is Isaac who prays for her to have children.

⁴² Susan Brayford, "Feminist Criticism: Sarah Laughs Last", in *Method Matters*, ed. Joel M. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009.

This is not to say that Rebekah has no agency. In fact, Rebekah inquires to the Lord in the next verse (v. 22). Also, throughout Genesis 27 Rebekah plays a major role in the narrative. In Genesis 27 Rebekah overhears Isaac promising Esau, the eldest son, a blessing. So Rebekah then works with her favorite son, Jacob, to help disguise him so that he may be blessed and not Esau. This display of agency suggests that Rebekah's character is perfectly capable of expressing an opinion regarding children if she wanted to.

Rebekah's story differs from other stories that concern barrenness because Rebekah's barrenness is only briefly mentioned. We do not know how much time goes by from when Rebekah's barrenness is discovered, to when Isaac decides to pray for Rebekah, and when God hears Isaac's prayer and allows Rebekah to conceive. Unlike the barrenness of Sarah, Rachel, Hannah, which go on for years and is a major part of the narrative, in Rebekah's story it is only mentioned in passing. In fact, the text discusses Rebekah's negative feelings about her pregnancy more than they discuss her feelings about infertility.

Gen 25:22-25 details the challenges of Rebekah's pregnancy. According to v. 22, "The children struggled together within her; and she said, 'If it be so, why am I thus'", "אם כן למה זה אנכי". This is typically smoothed out in translations to read as, "If it is to be this way, why do I live." Rebekah questions her current situation stating, "why am I thus", or "why do I live", because presumably she is in pain because of the pregnancy. Rebekah is clearly troubled about her pregnancy, and goes to ask God about why she is struggling so much. Therefore all we know about how Rebekah felt concerning children is that she struggled during her pregnancy so much so she questioned her life.

The fact that Isaac prays for Rebekah to conceive should not indicate that Rebekah necessarily desired children. Similar to Abram's situation, Isaac's progeny was threatened by Rebekah's barrenness. Both Abram and Isaac only had one wife for the majority of the narrative (Abram marries other women after Sarai dies), and they needed children to build up their household, so it is logical that Isaac would pray for Rebekah to conceive. However, the fact that Abram and Isaac's progeny were at risk, does not tell us anything about how Sarai and Rebekah felt about children. We do not know if motherhood was a concern for Rebekah. Furthermore, we do not know if childbirth brought about a change in status for her. In Gen 24:67 the narrator stated that Isaac loved Rebekah. Then we are informed that Rebekah is barren, and that Isaac prays for her because she was his only wife. This sequence of events does not suggest that Rebekah's status changed because of her infertility. The fact that Isaac prayed for Rebekah instead of taking another wife, or a maid could indicate he loved her and he valued her in spite of her infertility. Rebekah's attitude towards childbirth is just simply unstated, and cannot be assumed one way or the other.

The Unnamed Wife of Manoah

To refer back to Scholz's quote that I briefly criticized above, she states, "a literary pattern that limit's a woman's significance to motherhood and childcare promotes androcentric gender bias."⁴³ Scholz indicates that the problem is that some feminist scholars see this woman as empowered simply because she is informed about her pregnancy – as if pregnancy is the only thing that this woman might be concerned with. Yet we have no reason to believe that pregnancy was a concern for her. The text does not

⁴³ Scholz, Susanne, "Judges" in *Women's Bible Commentary*, 121.

describe how the unnamed wife of Manoah felt about her encounters with the messenger, or if she desired children. To assume that this woman desired children is certainly, as Scholz describes it, a gender bias.

Judges 13 opens by introducing Manoah and his wife, who is described as עקֶר “barren”. Throughout the text his wife is also referred to as “the woman”, הַאִשָּׁה. This is not unusual, as all of the women in Samson’s story are unnamed, except for Delilah. Most often scholars refer her to as “Samson’s mother”. Yet, this simplifies this woman’s story to the events that take place once she is a mother, and this woman is involved in the narrative before she gives birth to Samson. In fact, this woman is one of the central characters throughout Judges 13, which mostly covers events before she becomes a mother. Once a mother, she is only discussed in Judg 14:1-9, and no longer has any statements of her own – she only speaks in unison with.

In Judg 13:3, a messenger of the Lord appeared to the wife of Manoah, and told her that though she was barren, she would conceive. The messenger warns that she must not drink wine or eat anything unclean, and no razor shall touch her son’s head. Also, the messenger states that her son will be a nazirite “to God from birth”, and begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines (v.5). The woman ran to her husband and told him that a messenger appeared to her, and that she did not know who he was. When the wife of Manoah reports to her husband about her encounter with the messenger a few interesting things are revealed. First, she states in Judg 13:6, “a man of God came unto me”. The Hebrew for “came unto me”, בָּא אֵלַי, is often an idiom for a sexual encounter. The same idiom is used in Judg 16:1, “and he came into her”, וַיָּבֵא אֵלֶיהָ. Marc Zvi Brettler explains, that in this story the wife of Manoah cleverly uses this language to

explain that the reason she has conceived is because she has been with this messenger.

Yet, according to Brettler, her “dim-witted husband is too stupid to understand” and catch onto what she is saying.⁴⁴

Second, in the woman’s report of what the messenger states she edits as well as adds information to the message. She leaves out that no razor should be used on the boy’s head. And when stating that the boy shall be a nazirite “to God from birth” she adds “to the day of his death.” She also does not mention that the boy will “deliver Israel from the Philistines” (Judg 13:7). The messenger appeared to the woman again. She then retrieves her husband so that he can speak with the messenger.

At the end of Judges 13 Manoah realizes that the messenger was an angel of God (v. 21). He then worries that because they have seen the face of God they will die. But his wife assures him, “If the Lord had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering at our hands, or shown us all these things, or now announce to us such things as these” (Judg 13:23). In other words, the wife of Manoah comforts her husband’s fear by explaining that if God had wanted to kill them, he would not have accepted their offerings, and promised them a son.

Both times the messenger appears to the woman she does not reply to him. Therefore we do not know how she felt about the appearance of this messenger, or about his message that she will conceive. Additionally, when she reports this information to her husband, she never expresses her opinion about the pregnancy. She may have been happy with the messenger’s news, or angered, scared, confused, or sad. The text does not say, and so we cannot draw any conclusions about this woman’s desires.

⁴⁴ Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Book of Judges*, New York: Routledge, 2002, 45.

Much like in the case of Rebekah, that the unnamed wife of Manoah has agency and opinions. In her report to Manoah she improvises, and manipulates the message from the messenger. Additionally, at the end of the chapter we see her comforting her husband by rationalizing God's actions and intentions. She is able to interpret the events around her, possibly better than Manoah. Therefore, we can determine that if this woman wanted to state her opinion about having a child, she could have; yet she makes no such claim.

Hannah and Peninnah

1 Samuel 1 is often referenced as evidence that barrenness was considered shameful throughout the entirety of the Bible. For instance, Marsman states, "Barrenness was considered not only a shameful but also pitiable state" and references 1 Samuel 1.⁴⁵ Once more, we see that an example of one woman because universalized for all women in the Bible. This statement, even in reference to only Hannah's story is vague. In the context of this story we know that Elkanah does not care that Hannah is barren. Rather the text only suggests that barrenness was "shameful and pitiable" according to Peninnah, the disfavored wife. It is only Peninnah who treats Hannah poorly because of her barrenness. In this case, Marsman has focused upon one portion of a particular text to make a universalized claim.

Bruce C. Birch states that Hannah and Peninnah's rivalry in 1 Samuel 1 surrounding barrenness is also found in the stories of Rachel and Leah, and Sarai and Hagar.⁴⁶ However, Hannah and Peninnah's situation is not comparable to biological sister wives, or a mistress and her maid. In 1 Samuel 1, we are not told whom Elkanah marries

⁴⁵ Marsman, Hennie J., *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 224.

⁴⁶ Bruce C. Birch "The First and Second Books of Samuel" in *The New Interpreter's Bible* Vol. II, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994, 975.

first, just that Elkanah has two wives, Peninnah who had children, and Hannah who did not. Elkanah demonstrates his preference for Hannah as he gives her a double portion of the sacrifice because of his love for her (1 Sam 1:5). Since it is unclear as to whether or not Hannah was the first wife, we cannot assume that this is why she is favored. In 1 Sam 1:8 Elkanah states, “am I not more to you than ten sons.” Thus Elkanah does not seem concerned that Hannah has not had any children. But Hannah does not reply to Elkanah. Therefore, we cannot be certain that Hannah agreed or disagreed with this statement. Elkanah loved and favored Hannah, and he did not determine Hannah’s status based in her fertility.

Peninnah causes Hannah’s distress, not Elkanah. We know this because the text states, “Her rival used to provoke her severely, because the Lord had closed her womb. So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat” (1 Sam 1:5-7). It appears that Hannah was treated badly by Peninnah for some time. The narrator states that this torment went on year after year (but does not state how many years). Peninnah is irritating Hannah because, “the Lord had closed her womb.” It also may be that Peninnah is jealous that Hannah received a double portion from Elkanah. This torment greatly troubled Hannah, to the point that she would cry and stopped eating. Therefore Hannah’s distress is not solely from the fact that she is barren, but she is distressed because of the way Peninnah treats her.

This is both similar and different from what happens in Genesis 16 between Sarai and Hagar. Both of the fertile women, Hagar and Peninnah, use their fertility as a way to treat the other woman in the house poorly. Yet, the situations differ greatly. Hagar is a

maid, while Peninnah is a wife, the power relationship between Sarai and Hagar is much different than that between Peninnah and Hannah. Also, not only does the structure of the relationship make this situation incomparable, but also the length of time in which the infertile woman is tormented is significantly different. Hannah was provoked for years; though we do not know exactly what “provoking” entailed, we do know that which led her to cry and stop eating. Sarai’s experience of torment was only momentary, and she immediately gets revenge when she treats Hagar harshly.

Callaway states, “While Hannah, like the other mothers, is barren, her desire for a child is expressed more fully and deeply than in the other narratives...there is no stress on intense longing or suffering in the stories of Sarah, Rebecca or Samson’s mother.”⁴⁷ It does seem to be the case that Hannah has to endure more intense longing and suffering than other barren women throughout the Bible. Callaway claims that Hannah’s desire for a child is “expressed more fully and deeply” than in other narratives, however Hannah’s desire for a child seems to be more of a means to end. Therefore Hannah’s full and deep expression for a child could be derived from wanting to stop Peninnah from tormenting her, rather than the desire to actually have children.

After Hannah gives birth to Samuel in 1 Sam 1:20 she dedicates him to the temple at Shiloh (1 Sam 1:27). Establishing a connection to the temple at Shiloh might also be a way of ending Hannah’s torment from Peninnah. We could question if Hannah would even want children at all if Peninnah were not bothering her. A child for Hannah could be understood as a means to end of getting Peninnah to stop provoking her. Perhaps once she was able to conceive and bear a child, the provoking ended, and so Hannah was willing to give up Samuel.

⁴⁷ Callaway, Mary, *Sing, O Barren One: A Study in Comparative Midrash*, 41.

Additionally, having a son trained at Shiloh as a priest would directly connect Hannah to a major sanctuary.⁴⁸ This would be important because it could elevate the status of her family. Hannah's dedication of her son to Shiloh gives her a change in status, rather than her fertility that was enabled by God. Therefore children for Hannah possibly meant two things: getting Peninnah to stop tormenting her, and increasing her family's status by dedicating him to the temple at Shiloh. Though using a child as a means to get an increase in status was possibly a part of Hannah's agenda for desiring a child, this does not mean that all women desired children for this reason. As I have discussed, having children did not increase the status of any of these women. Having a child alone did not increase Hannah's status, but it was the fact that she dedicated her son to the temple that possibly gave Hannah and her family, a status change.

⁴⁸ Mark Leuchter, *Samuel and the Shaping of Tradition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 40.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In the beginning of this thesis I discussed the ways in which Janet R. Jakobsen and Judith Butler explain that we must resist our tendency to find coherence and unity amongst women, and look more closely at particular characteristics and desires. By using feminist theory to disrupt the “barren motif” and the desire for children in the Hebrew Bible, I have worked towards deconstructing the ways in which women in the Bible are universalized and essentialized. By looking more closely at Genesis 29 and 30 I have shown that Leah and Rachel are different women who have different positionalities and concerns that motivate their unique stories. Then there are other women who become mothers, such as Bilhah and Zilpah, whom we do know how they felt about motherhood, and we cannot make assumptions one-way or the other.

I have shown that motherhood and a woman’s status are not as interdependent as many have previously suggested. By removing the ties between motherhood and status we can ask other questions about why women may have wanted children. As mentioned above, children for each of these women could offer them different things. For Leah children presented her an opportunity to be with Jacob, and seek his attention. For Rachel, having a child resolved her jealousy of Leah (and possibly of the other women in the house). For Sarai, though she does not necessarily state the desire to have children, she could be understood as wanting to have a role in building up Abram’s progeny and fulfilling the promise through Hagar’s pregnancy. And for Hannah, having children put an end to her sister wife’s torments, and possibly connected her to the temple which would elevate her family’s status. As for the other women discussed in this paper,

(Bilhah, Zilpah, Hagar, Rebekah, the unnamed wife of Manoah) having children did not necessarily mean something to them in an obvious or particular way.

I have also demonstrated that though Leah and Rachel are continually compared to Sarai and Hagar, Rebekah, the unnamed wife of Manoah, and Hannah and Peninnah, all of these women have very different stories that are situated in unique contexts.

Although all of these stories discuss infertility and birth, these women have various dispositions and desires. Some of the desires of these women are unstated, and while other women's desires clearly motivate their actions and statements. These stories are not "typical", nor are they a part of a greater "motif". These women cannot be grouped together merely because their stories, rather than the women, contain similarities.

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