

“The curse of infertility and the obsession with the  
womb”: A re-reading of the patriarchal narratives of  
Rachel, Rebecca and Hannah.

by

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## Declaration

I declare that “‘ The curse of infertility and the obsession with the womb’: A re-reading of the patriarchal narratives of Rachel, Rebecca, and Hannah” is my original work and that it has not been published in any other university except the University of the Western Cape. I have referenced the sources I have used in the form of in-text references and the provided bibliography at the end of this thesis.

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## ABSTRACT

When one reads about women in the Old Testament, their primary- and often only- roles seem to be that of wife and mother. It is made abundantly clear in some of the narratives found in the Old Testament that a woman's worth was tied to her womb. The stories of Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah are three examples of this. However, there are some women in the narratives of the Old Testament, including these three, who were initially incapable of falling pregnant and only conceived after a long time of intense struggle due to their infertile state. Barren women were viewed as outcasts in society. Some women, however, were not willing to settle for this classification. Hence, Hannah pleaded with God to provide her with offspring.

Barren women were not only considered as outcasts but also as cursed. The question arises: was the socially constructed curse that followed infertility a patriarchal or matriarchal one?

Much like in the narratives found in the Old Testament, many women today struggle with the plight of infertility. Many females are still raised to believe that their worth is tied to their wombs. Within contemporary Christian communities, these Old Testament narratives are oftentimes used to give infertile couples hope and encouragement. It is this way of dealing with these texts that necessitates a re-reading of the patriarchal narratives of Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah.<sup>1</sup> A textual analysis of the texts will be done from a liberal feminist perspective.

Keywords: infertility/barrenness, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah, womb, patriarchy, matriarchy, shame, curse, honour, and blessing.

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<sup>1</sup> By patriarchal narratives I mean that these texts originated in a patriarchal context and were written by men for men.

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## CHAPTER 1:

### Introduction to this study

#### 1.1. Introduction

The Christian Canon commonly known as the Bible is filled with many remarkable narratives about great women and men. Within the Old Testament, we find Genesis and the Book of Samuel which both contain narratives about some prominent female protagonists such as Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah. Their stories are unique, and all share a common thread: they were all initially unable to fall pregnant, but eventually, each of them conceived. The stories of these women are often used as pillars of hope for Christian couples, and more especially for women who are struggling with infertility.

As a Christian, academic and feminist, the narratives of Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah struck a chord with me. As is the case with many women in society today, I too was given the medical diagnosis that bearing children may not be a possibility for me. It was only after hearing this bleak verdict, that the deep desire to be a mother dawned on me. A part of me, however, wondered whether the only valuable position females have in society is in fact that of a mother, a position I might never be able to fulfil through a biological route. As a Christian, one believes that miracles are possible, but they do not always happen as people desire them to. As an academic in the discipline of biblical studies who reads the texts through a critical lens, one realises how cruel it is for false hope to be given to women and men, especially because that hope does not always materialise.

I am also aware of the stigma that comes from not being able to give birth. From a feminist viewpoint, one sees how the womb is used as a tool to restrict women. As a biblical scholar, I know that the narratives used to inspire hope in women today were “written, extended, and interpreted by men from their predominantly androcentric perspective” (Fischer 2012:15). The question arises: How could a man understand a female’s struggle with infertility?

In the time of the Old Testament, people believed that the cause of infertility always originated with the woman. Today we know that men can also be infertile, however, their experience is seemingly very different from infertile women who will never be able to give birth to a life.

A re-reading of the narratives of Rebekah (Gen 25:19-26), Rachel (Gen 29:31- 30:1-24), and Hannah (1 Sam 1:1-20) will be done, with the focus being on their infertility. This will be done

in three parts: by firstly looking at the social-historical context that these women came from. Secondly, a textual analysis of these narratives will be done from a feminist perspective. Thirdly, the work of scholars who have investigated and written on these narratives will be analysed. The final chapter will conclude with suggestions on how these narratives could be read in Christian communities, to respect the text within its context and in so doing not interpret and- oftentimes unknowingly- manipulate the texts to provide easy answers and false hope to infertile women.

## 1.2. Context and Relevance of the Study

Many unmarried, childless women are bombarded with questions and statements such as: “When are you going to get married?” “When are you going to have children?” and “God’s plan is for women to settle down and multiply.” The last two are also often aimed at married women who are childless. When a married friend was asked why they had no children, she felt ashamed to say that she was unable to have children. “Do not worry!” the woman enquiring said, “simply ask God to open up your womb as He did for the barren women in the Bible”.<sup>2</sup> These statements attest to a very literal way of interpreting the Bible, and it makes one question whether we should still read and apply texts in the same way today. Biblical texts are indeed used as answers to problems experienced even in the present day. However, many feminist scholars, myself included, believe that a female is more than her womb. One cannot accept that this is the only way to read these narratives. Thus, I am doing a re-reading of these narratives to determine whether there is another, more life-affirming way of interpreting these texts.

Phyllis Bird’s (1974:41) much quoted statement that “[t]he Old Testament is a collection of writings by males from a society dominated by males,” is often put under intensive scrutiny. Carol Meyers certainly agrees with Bird’s statement and argues that the Hebrew Bible should be described as an “elitist, urban, male-orientated document” (Brenner & Van Dijk-Hemmes 1993:17). If texts were written by patriarchs for patriarchs, it is certainly important to re-read such texts. Meyers (1978:92) states that “it is being discovered that the position and role of women in society were very different in some crucial areas than what they became subsequent to the beginning of Israel”.<sup>3</sup> Meyers (1978) captures this argument in her article *The Roots of Restriction: Women in Early Israel* by stating the following:

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<sup>2</sup> Anonymous friend, personal communication, March 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Meyers (1978:92) states that Israel as a nation was developed by the covenant that was made by God through the leader Moses. This coincides with the closing of the Late Bronze Age (Meyers 1978:92). Meyers (1978:91)



“Concern for the evaluation of the social history of women during the early Israelite experience arises from the fact that this is precisely the period in which one of the major – if not *the* major transitions occurred in the history of the position and role of women in the world. Some three thousand years of male dominance in western civilization, and in particular in religious institutions, have clouded our vision of the pre-biblical past and have led to the belief that the exclusion of females from regular leadership, at least in public and/or religious life, has been in the norm in human history.” (Meyers 1978:92).

If Meyers’ (1978:92) argument is correct that our vision of the pre-biblical past has been clouded, then certainly our interpretation of the Bible could be clouded as well. Thus, a re-reading of these texts in their context is required.

### 1.3. Literature Survey

The literature survey will focus on introducing some of the key features found in this research. These features are patriarchy, matriarchy, infertility, the role of God in infertility, and honour and shame.

#### 1.3.1. Patriarchy

Ancient Israel was a patriarchal society. This patriarchal society was made up of communities that consisted of extended families and households that were headed by the father (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:7). These patriarchal societies (male-headed households) were defined by two characteristics: it was a ‘patrilocal’<sup>4</sup> society and a ‘patrilinear’<sup>5</sup> society (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:22; Meyers 1997:34; Perdue 1997:166). Rosemary Radford Ruether (1996:205) states that the word ‘patriarchy’ means “the ‘rule of the father ‘”. Thus, patriarchal societies were run by the male heads of the households. The word patriarch is also given to the ancestors or fathers of Israel namely Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

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states that “[d]uring the Late Bronze Age, wars, famines, and plagues created a demographic crisis which intensified the role of women in domestic affairs and childbearing. When the crisis passed, the restriction of women to domestic circles was ingrained in Israelite society and ultimately became the basis for their subordination through the remainder of the biblical period and on into modern times.”

<sup>4</sup> This means that a wife lives in her husband’s household (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:22). However, this is not the case for Jacob as he lives in his wives’ household.

<sup>5</sup> Meaning that the heir must be a biological or adopted son of the father (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:22).

According to Jo Ann Davidson (2002:169), feminists such as Naomi Goldenberg, Cynthia Eller, Mary Daly, and Rosemary Radford Ruether argue that the patriarchy of the Old Testament has a huge impact on the repression of women today. This is because Christian societies and theology have been shaped by patriarchal ideologies and social patterns that can be found in these early civilisations like ancient Israel (Ruether 1996:205). As a feminist, I agree with these feminist scholars that this is true. Women are still being governed in the present day by men, and Meyers (1978:92) alludes to this having its roots in males' interpretation of the patriarchal society found in ancient Israel. This is a strong premise to make that ancient Israel's patriarchal society determined how women are governed by men today. I agree that the ancient Israelite society is among many other societies of that time and together these societies had an influence that can still be seen in today's context.

Ruether (1996:205) does indicate that, while it is difficult to “define a single system that would be true of all patriarchal societies at all times, one can generalize about the characteristics usually found in patriarchal societies”, the general characteristic in patriarchal societies is that the status of women was one of subjugation (Ruether 1996:205). Chapter 3 will expand on the understanding of a woman's identity within a patriarchal society such as ancient Israel. In short, the female identity was tied to the males in her life- namely her father, husband, and brother. Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah formed part of this patriarchal society.

### **1.3.2. Matriarchy**

The term “matriarch” is often used to refer to the wives of the patriarchs in Genesis, namely Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel (Davidson 2002:169-178). Two of these matriarchs (Rebekah and Rachel) are looked at in this study as they contribute to our understanding of what barrenness was like in the Old Testament. “Matriarch” is also a term that can be given to the head or eldest woman of the household or “matriarchy” could refer to a society where women have complete authority.

The position of the matriarch within ancient Israelite society is often downplayed in the present day. Women were thought of as only having two main tasks: to maintain a household and to birth and rear their children. (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:22) However, matriarchs also played an important role in educating their children about the roles and responsibilities within the household (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:28). Part of these teachings included passing down their knowledge of how to run a household to their daughters. Women were taught that once

they got married, they had to have children to continue their husbands' names. The role of women will be further explained in chapters two and three.

Women were expected to be dutiful, perfect wives -which included having children. There are instances where women were not able to live up to the duty placed before them. Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah are three women who initially could not fall pregnant. This begs the question: did they place pressure on themselves or experience pressure by outside influences such as their husbands and other male figures to fulfil this ideal? Moreover, did they experience this pressure from the other women in their lives? This thesis explores the experiences that Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah had under these circumstances.

### **1.3.3. Infertility**

Meyers (1978:92) states that fertility was an underlying concern, not only to the ancient Israelite society but also to the surrounding Near Eastern civilisations. People were concerned with two kinds of fertility- the fertility of the land, and the fertility of the womb. Both were of vital importance for human survival. The fertility of the land was important, as ancient Israelite society was an agrarian civilisation, which meant that they lived off the land (Meyers 1997:3). Thus, the land was important to grow crops for survival. Secondly, the fertility of the womb was very important as children were needed to carry on the name of the father. Furthermore, children (in particular sons) were also needed to inherit the family land, but they could also help with chores, harvest and could become warriors in times of war. Due to the Israelites being faced with war, famine and disease that continually threatened their existence, it was therefore important that fertility of the land and womb were possible (Meyers 1978:93).

Susanne Heine (1988:47) states that infertility was essentially one of the worst things that could happen to a female. This is because the ability to multiply was a way in which the blessing of God manifested (Van Rooy 1986:225). Herrie Van Rooy (1986:225) speaks into this by stating that a female was thought to be highly blessed if she could multiply but cursed if she failed to bear children. This stems from Van Rooy's argument that fertility as a blessing and infertility as a curse, is linked to the covenant. Blessing and curses are reliant on whether the covenant made, was being kept. Van Rooy uses the covenant made between God and Abraham (Gen 12, 15 and 17) to show that the promise of descendants was linked to this pledge. Being obedient to this covenant meant a blessing would be bestowed upon them, however, punishment in the form of a curse would occur to those who broke it (Van Rooy 1986:232). Furthermore, Van

Rooy (1986:232) argues that obedience to the covenant and fertility are connected, while “infertility was a punishment for sins”.<sup>6</sup>

The logic behind Van Rooy’s argument is plausible, as ancient Israel might have perceived all forms of infertility as a curse. Although this argument is reasonable considering the context of ancient Israel, the infertility texts of Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah do not use the word ‘cursed’. My title “The curse of infertility” is taken from scholars’ understanding of infertility in the Old Testament. Curse is defined as “a prayer or invocation for harm or injury to come upon one”, “evil or misfortune that comes as if in response to imprecation or as retribution” and “a cause of great harm or misfortune” (Merriam Webster n.d:n.p). Equating curse with infertility was thought of as being a result of great harm or misfortune. This is how scholars like Susan Niditch (1979:144) have applied the word curse when looking at the barren narratives of Rachel, Rebekah, and Hannah. However, instead of the word curse the word ‘shame’ is specifically used in Rachel’s narrative when she gives birth for the first time (Gen 30: 23; NET). Shame will be discussed later.

Cynthia Chapman (2020:n.p.) points out that “modern medicine has made it possible to recognize infertility as a medical problem, often with identifiable causes and treatments, the main remedy for barrenness in the Bible was prayer and divine intercession”. However, even with modern medicine and treatments, many couples and/or women still revert to prayer as their primary hope of remedy. Ancient Israel did not have access to the medical knowledge that we have today. Thus, “if a couple were unable to conceive, the assumption in ancient Israel was that the problem invariably was with the woman” (Jeansonne 1990:62).

### **1.3.4. The Role of God in Infertility**

Fertility was something that could not be controlled by humanity, and due to this, people created practices in which they could “control” fertility or at least attempt to (Meyer 1978:92). These practices were fertility cults, fertility rituals or looking to the “gods” for assistance. In ancient Israel, barrenness and fertility can be traced directly to God (Roncace & Whitehead 2009:114).

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<sup>6</sup> Van Rooy (1986:232) uses the following texts to substantiate his argument; Hos 9:14; Jer 5:23-25, and Gen 4: 11-12.

Phyllis Trible (1978:34) states that “the wombs of women belong to God”. If one looks at accounts about barrenness within the Old Testament, specifically Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah, they had diverging encounters with God. Their barrenness ended when “God remembered them” thus indicating that in some way God was present with issues about fertility. Tikva Frymer-Kensky (2000:139) says that these barren accounts do not only emphasize that God was actively present in fertility but it also “heightens the drama of the birth of the eventual son, marking [them] as special”. Frymer-Kensky (2000:139) argues that God is involved in giving women children and uses the account of Leah as an example of this. Gen 29: 31 states that “when the Lord saw that Leah was unloved, he enabled her to become pregnant” and gave Leah four sons, thus showing God was involved in blessing Leah with children (NET).<sup>7</sup> It emphasizes that pregnancy is an act of God. The role God played in matters of women’s wombs, had a tangible impact on them in the society and culture they found themselves in.

### **1.3.5. Honour and Shame**

Ancient Israel formed part of a ‘shame and honour’ culture. Louis Jonker and Douglas Lawrie (2005:53), defined honour as “a claim to worth that is publicly acknowledged by a broader group or community”. The opposite can be said for shame, as having shame or being shamed meant that you were denied your worth publicly (Jonker & Lawrie 2005:53). This shame and honour culture was tied to the fertility of women’s wombs in ancient Israel (Van Rooy 1986:225). Jonker and Lawrie (2005:53) make the distinction that “to ‘be shamed’ is always a negative thing” whereas “to ‘have shame’ is always positive, for it means a deep concern about one’s honour”. To that end, the honour and shame culture affected both men and women.

### **1.4. Research Problem**

In this thesis, I will look at Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah’s experiences of infertility, and investigate whether the curse of infertility was a patriarchal or matriarchal construction. The following will be investigated:

- What the relationships between husband and wife looked like?
- What did the relationship between co-wives look like?
- How did the broader society play a role in female experiences with infertility?
- How did Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah experience infertility?

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<sup>7</sup> NET stands for New English Translation.



- How do western male scholars and feminist scholars present these infertile women?

The first three research questions serve as secondary questions that investigate the societal context of ancient Israel and will be addressed in chapter three. The last two questions are the primary questions and will be dealt with in chapter four. Chapter three provides context and is the background for the narratives of Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah. Chapter four will focus on the three women's experiences of infertility by doing a re-reading of their narratives. Furthermore, I will end chapter four by looking at how western male scholars and feminist scholars have presented these infertile women.

### **1.5. Research Hypothesis**

The key hypothesis of this thesis is that the idea of infertility being a curse, was a way in which ancient Israel viewed infertility. Even though the term 'curse' is not used in the narratives of Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah scholars do link the word curse and infertility to female's wombs. It will become clear that the word 'shame' is a term that is used in these narratives. This thesis hypothesizes that the idea of infertility having a negative connotation of shame was situated in a patriarchal context but was internalised and often perpetuated by women. Infertility was and still is difficult for women to deal with. It is something that many women must live with. However, the sense of shame about infertility is unfairly imposed upon them.

I will address my research problem, questions, and hypothesis within, the method of textual analysis will be used, which will be expanded on in Chapter 2.

### **1.6. Conclusion**

In the next chapter, I will discuss the methodology that will be used throughout this thesis, namely textual analysis. The chapter will also expound on the major themes that are used within this thesis in more detail- which include patriarchy, matriarchy, infertility, the role of God in infertility, and honour and shame. Using textual analysis as a method first requires one to explore the context in which Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah found themselves. Thus, chapter three will consist of a literature review of the Old Testament's patriarchal context, which looks at the place and role of women not only in society but also in their households. The importance of posterity in ancient Israel will also be investigated.

A re-reading of the narratives of Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah will be done in chapter four. The voices of many different scholars including the more conservative western male scholars who are largely responsible for contributing to the biblical commentaries of Genesis and Samuel will be used. The concluding chapter will compare these three women's experiences with initial barrenness and how they overcame it.<sup>8</sup> It will further explore more life-affirming ways of dealing with these texts in the present day.



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<sup>8</sup> This can be a problematic way of phrasing this and can be open for misinterpretation. We are not sure whether the women actively did something to overcome their barrenness or whether they eventually fell pregnant for another reason (e.g., intervention of God). However, I have taken it over from scholars like Brueggemann (1982:254) who use this term when discussing Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah as no longer being childless.

## CHAPTER 2:

### Research Methodology

#### 2.1. Introduction

In this thesis, the method of Textual Analysis will be utilised. Hence, this chapter will define and explain what Textual Analysis is. I will also explain how this method will be used in my thesis. More specifically, an in-depth reading from a liberal feminist perspective of Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah's narratives will be done concerning their experience with initial infertility. Furthermore, my research looks at scholars who have worked on these three barren women found in Genesis and Samuel. The following concepts are very important: patriarchy, matriarchy infertility, the role of God in infertility, and honour and shame. While these concepts have been introduced in chapter one, I will explain these concepts in more detail in this chapter.

#### 2.3. Textual Analysis

Textual Analysis (TA)<sup>9</sup> is a method that “gather[s] information about how other human beings make sense of the world” (McKee 2003:1). For example, how are the narratives of Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah read? Another aspect of TA is that it attempts to understand several interpretations of a text that has been made by various people who have read it (McKee 2003:2). This is because all people make sense of the world differently; thus, TA is a method that attempts to deduce what some of the most common interpretations of a text would be (McKee 2003:2-4). However, this does not mean that TA is trying to identify what is or ought to be the correct way of interpreting a text (Lockyer 2012:865). Instead, this method tries to recognise the various ways one could interpret the text (Lockyer 2012:865). It is important to note that a text is limited in the ways it can be interpreted as its meaning is derived from the context of the text (Lockyer 2012:865). Therefore, readers cannot make a text mean what they want it to mean (Lockyer 2012:865). Using TA as a method not only helps a researcher to interpret a text but also looks at other researchers who have interpreted the same text from a different perspective.

This method was chosen as it assists in realising the focus of the thesis in examining the infertility narratives of Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah. Not all the texts that these women appear in will be investigated, but rather, only the texts which pertain to the topic of infertility. The

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<sup>9</sup> I will be using the acronym TA for Textual Analysis from here onwards.



texts that will be dealt with are- Gen 25: 19-26 (Rebekah), Gen 29: 31-30: 24 (Rachel) and 1 Sam 1:1-20 (Hannah). It will also investigate how western male and female scholars have read and interpreted these texts. Thus, TA allows one to not only focus on the biblical text but also scholarly material.

Before embarking on this reading of these three women's narratives, one must first look at the socio-historical context in which these three texts are embedded. This will be done as according to Bauer, Biquelet and Suerdem (2014:xxiv), TA looks at texts as being cultural artefacts, thus it is important to begin one's research by first looking at the context of the text. The context of a text is very important as it provides one with the foundation that is needed when analysing the text. Every text has a preferred way of being read which is based on the context of the text (Bauer, Biquelet & Suerdem 2014:xxiv). This does not mean that texts do not fall prey to being read in other ways than how it was intended to be read. This is where TA can assist. The method encourages the researcher to seek the context of the text first before reading the text. Therefore, my next chapter will focus on the socio-historical context of these three narratives. This will be done by relying on scholars who have written about the social and historical context in which these narratives were in. Specific attention will be paid to family life, and the role women had within the family and society at large.

TA is a fruitful method that has contributed to the understanding of a variety of texts (Lockyer 2012:865). It is important that researchers critically reflect on their ideologies and perspectives that they might be subjecting the text to (Lockyer 2012:866). Often what has been left unsaid bears a mark on the ideology of the interpreters.<sup>10</sup> It is also important to note that interpretation always has a level of consciousness that is affected by one's history (Bauer, Biquelet & Suerdem 2014:xxviii). Therefore, one must escape eisegesis and acknowledge any prejudices one might have (Bauer, Biquelet & Suerdem 2014:xxviii).<sup>11</sup> The texts of Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah will be textually analysed from a liberal feminist perspective.

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<sup>10</sup> Eryl Davies (2003:47) states that very few texts are free from ideology. This is because "whenever people engage in the act of writing they almost invariably do so from a particular standpoint. Even the most seemingly neutral narratives are laced with particular values, presuppositions and ideologies. Sometimes the ideology is clearly manifest in what the text actually says; at other times it is merely suggested by its eloquent silences." (Davies 2003:47).

<sup>11</sup> Eisegesis is when one tries to "impos[e] one's own agenda on the text" (Bauer, Biquelet & Suerdem 2014:xxviii).

## 2.4. Liberal Feminist Reading

Miranda Pillay (2015:2) has pointed out that there has been a need amongst female biblical scholars to find ways to read the Bible in such a way to challenge the patriarchal roots. New possibilities were introduced by feminist scholars like Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Phyllis Trible. Feminists found the patriarchal roots found in the Bible extended into the oppressive experiences and subjugation of women throughout the ages (Pillay 2015:2). Feminism is difficult to define as it is a diverse concept (Jonker & Lawrie 2005:200). In a broad sense of the word, feminism centres on the assumption of equality (Jonker & Lawrie 2005:201). Jonker and Lawrie (2005:201) define a feminist as someone “who seeks justice and equality for all people and who is especially concerned for the fate of women – all women – in the midst of ‘all people’”. There might be many different definitions and understanding of feminism however I am inclined to use Phyllis Birds' definition that feminism is “a critical and constructive stance that claims for women the full humanity accorded to men, insisting that women be represented equally in all attempts to describe and comprehend human nature and that they be full participants in the assignment and regulation of social roles, rights, and responsibilities” (Bird 1999:124).

Laurel Schneider and Cassie Trentaz (2008:788-9) argue that feminism is more than what one can define but if this had to be done it would refer to the concern about “the subordinate status and roles of women in society”. What ‘woman’ means is central to feminism and the meaning differs “across contexts of race, nationality, sexuality, class, culture, and so forth” (Schneider & Trentaz 2008:789). The central concern is the many issues including gender injustice and oppression that women face resulting from patriarchal domination (Schneider & Trentaz 2008:789). Feminism is not only an academic discipline, but it also attempts to try to change the patriarchal systems that exist (Schneider & Trentaz 2008:792). To change the powers that are “exercised by one gender over another” (Brown 2017:248). According to Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan (1994:9), this is done by not simply demanding that women should receive equal access in an unequal society but rather feminism reflects on the inequality that exists. If we are to change history then we need to accept women’s experience of patriarchy as legitimate and attempt to understand the structures that restrict women (Isherwood & McEwan 1994:10). One could argue that this is a passive resistance approach to the inequalities that are brought on by an unjust social structure like patriarchy.

I make use of feminism as my framework for this study. I identify as a liberal feminist, thus the lens used when reading the texts will be from this standpoint. Liberal feminism seeks liberation from oppression within a specific context (Mercer 1996:168). Hence, unjust barriers that prevent equality need to be removed (Davies 2012:526). According to Ruether (1989:133) argues that liberal feminists “believe that equality of the sexes is the real meaning of the Scriptures. This can be made evident by better translation and exegesis”. Letty Russell (1985:11) states that as the interpretations by feminists have grown it has become copiously clear that the scriptures still need liberation. Scripture needs to be liberated from previous interpretations and the patriarchal biases that are attached to the scriptures. This liberal feminist approach does not in any way assume that men are responsible for female injustices, but it is aware that they do benefit from it (Davies 2012:526). According to Brown (2017:247), a starting point for feminism is to begin to explore “how women are characterized within the world of the biblical texts, what is said about them and by them, and what is done to them”. This is what this re-reading is attempting to do through the lens of liberal feminism. It is trying to zoom in on the experiences of Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah with infertility.

Though this research project will be approached from a liberal feminist perspective, it will not be confined to only reading the contributing works of female scholars. To do an extensive literature survey of these texts, one also needs to consult the male scholars who have contributed to the field of Old Testament studies. Western male scholars have and still dominate in the field. As I do not have access to the original texts and am unable to read Biblical Hebrew, I will strongly rely on the NET translation of the Bible. This version of the Bible is useful as it contains translator notes which is helpful to someone unable to read and translate Biblical Hebrew. Biblical commentaries, academic books and articles that were written about the narratives of Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah will also be consulted.

The main scholarly commentaries which will be used in the re-reading of the texts are those of Claus Westermann (1981), Walter Brueggemann (1982), David Toshio Tsumura (2007), Gerald Janzen (1993), G. Ch. Aalders (1981), Robert Bergen (1996), and Tony W. Cartledge (2001), as well as the *InterVarsity Press Women’s Bible Commentary* (2002) and the *Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (2012). Moreover, this thesis will incorporate the voices of various feminist scholars and their views on these three women. These scholars include Rosemary Radford Ruether, Carol Meyers, Alice Bach, Mary Evans, and Juliana Claassens. Additionally,

this thesis will consist of scholars who explore the theme of barrenness in the Old Testament context- such as Carol Meyers, Athalya Brenner, Rachel Havrelock and Samuel Dresner.

## **2.5. Key Concepts**

When doing my initial reading of Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah I came across key concepts that were rooted in all three narratives. I have briefly explained these concepts in Chapter 1. In this chapter, I will expand more on these key concepts that will be used within this research project.

### **2.5.1. Patriarchy**

Patriarchy in a general sense of the word can be given to any legal, social, economic, and political system that embodies a male-dominated structure (Ruether 1996:205). This male-dominated structure can be classed as being a patriarchal society (Meyers 2014:8). The Old Testament was ruled by a patriarchal society. As stated in chapter one, the patriarchy that existed in the biblical world was defined by the head of the household (Ruether 1996:205). In most cases, the head of the household was the father or elder male in the house. The dependants in the household included wives, daughters, sons, and slaves (Ruether 1996:205). The male head dictated what every member of the household's role and duty was.

Patriarchy is a concept that changes and redefines itself. Societies and civilisations change with time, and those found in ancient Israel developed over time. According to Ruether (1996:205) society developed from "food gathering and gardening, to plough agriculture, private landowning, urbanization, and class stratification". Initially, a patriarchal society meant that the household was governed by the male head. Then society changed into a civilisation with a hierarchy, this patriarchy grew and redefined what patriarchy meant. It no longer only meant being governed by the male head of the household, but that the entire civilisation was governed by male leaders with the king being at the top of this hierarchy.

The key to any kind of structure is "power", thus, the hierarchal patriarchal structure found in the Hebrew Bible awards power to some, and denies it to others (Bach 1999:xv). In the Hebrew Bible, the men hold the power, while the women are subservient to them. Victor Matthews and Don Benjamin (1993:22) state that it might be realistic for the party responsible for the cultivation of land and children to have the authority to determine when and how power should be used. However, having power does not mean you will have the authority to use it (Matthews

& Benjamin 1993:22). Ironically, the party with authority over both the land and children, do not necessarily know how to rear and cultivate (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:22).

Paula Cooley (1987:17) rightly points out that the nature of patriarchy does not simply mean women being ruled by men; instead, it signifies that the ruling class of men defines or determines the identity of “woman” according to the men she is affiliated with, or subordinate to. Moreover, patriarchy determined that the roles which women held were namely that of a daughter, wife, and widow (Ruether 1996:205).

### **2.5.2. Matriarchy**

Matriarchy can be defined as “the mirror image of patriarchy, its female twin” (Sanday 2002:xi). If patriarchy refers to a social system in which the male is the head of the household, then matriarchy would refer to a social system in which the female is the head of the household. Ancient Israel was not a matriarchal society, but a patriarchal one. Women in ancient Israel formed part of this society, meaning that women were always under the authority of men. Thus, the matriarch in this research project refers to the ancestors of Israel’s wives that including Rebekah and Rachel. It is also a more general reference to the mother or elder female of a household. However, she remained under the authority of the patriarch of the household.

Women were assigned specific roles and duties namely that of a wife, mother, or daughter (Ruether 1996:205). A wife was under the authority of her husband. A daughter was under the authority of her father. Even a widow was under the authority of a man. A widow was governed either by her son who took the place of the head of the household or if she had no children she was governed by her deceased husband’s brother. The least important role was a widow as she was considered a liability, especially if she had no children. In this case, the levirate marriage was invoked. Levirate marriage was used to try to correct a widow’s liability issue of not having children (Packer, Tenney & White 1982:49).<sup>12</sup>

A female’s role in the household and society was dictated to her by the male under whose authority she fell. When one reads the Bible, one notices that women are introduced as being the daughter of so-and-so, or the wife of so-and-so. For example, Rebekah is introduced as

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<sup>12</sup> According to Packer, Tenney and White (1982:49) a levirate marriage was when the brother of a widow’s deceased husband would marry her to give her an heir. Once she received an heir her brother-in-law’s duty was complete. However, what happened to a widow if she had no brother-in-law? She was then given to the nearest next of kin of her deceased husband to complete the levirate marriage (Packer, Tenney & White, 1982:49).



being “the daughter of Bethuel, the son that Milcah bore to Nahor” (Gen 24:24), Rachel is introduced as “his (Laban, Nahor’s grandson) daughter” (Gen 29:6), while Hannah is introduced as being one of Elkanah’s wives (1 Sam 1:2). This points to the notion that even in name, women were subordinate to and under the authority of a male.

Each role that women held, came with responsibilities they needed to maintain. Wives, mothers, and daughters were all contributing members of the household. Failure to do so might lead to the label of “shame” being ascribed to her until she could contribute to the household again. A wife’s duty was to provide offspring; an heir to continue her husband’s name. One could then argue based on Matthews and Benjamin’s theory of shame that if she failed to do so, this would lead to the wife bringing “shame” to her family. If this is the criteria for women, one can understand why Rachel and Hannah were so intent on being able to contribute to the household as their role as wives dictated it.

### **2.5.3. Infertility**

In the time of the Old Testament, the concept of infertility and fertility was used to refer to the fertility of the land and fertility of the womb. The infertility of the land was when it failed to produce crops due to barren soil. This barrenness of the land is often associated with women (Ochs 1976:56). There are two reasons for this. The first was that planters and harvesters were women (Ochs 1976:56). The second is an “analogy between women as mother and earth as mother” (Ochs 1976:56). Therefore, the land produces crops, and a woman bears children.

Fertility of the land was extremely important as people needed the land to grow crops to eat and to own livestock (Van Rooy 1986:225). However, the fertility of the womb was equally important as there would not be the next generation. Candida Moss and Joel Baden (2015:28) give some reasons as to why the fertility of the womb was vital for survival. Having children meant that the household and community would have security. Children, especially sons, meant that there were more bodies to protect the household and community should there be an attack or invasion. Having heirs was also important to ensure the transmission of property and land. Having children meant security for parents should they reach old age, as children were responsible for looking after their elderly parents. Children were also a resource to keep their family history alive by passing on their traditions and past customs to the next generation. Without children being added to the household, there would be fewer people to till the land and prepare for crops. Furthermore, having children in ancient Israel was a necessity as they

struggled with issues of underpopulation, and there was an extremely high infant mortality rate (Moss & Baden 2015:30). Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah lived in this society, where children were highly valued because of what they would be able to contribute towards ensuring the survival of the household. Knowing these reasons, one can understand why children were valued and why it was a vital part of the very identity of females to be able to bear children.

However, there were instances where women were unable to contribute to increasing the population of their household. Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah were examples of these women. Even though they overcame their barrenness, there must have been other women who remained barren. According to Van Rooy (1986:225), these childless women were thought less of as human beings. For this reason, I argue that Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah were initially viewed in this way, but their status as women changed when they eventually bore children. Moss and Baden (2015:30) argue that in the Bible, being barren is often placed alongside other social vulnerabilities like poverty (see Ps 113: 7-9; Job 24: 21). Therefore, one can concur that being barren was regarded as a disadvantage to women.

While infertility was still considered to be a curse in a wealthy household, there was a possible solution. A maidservant could be taken as a concubine and bear children in the wife's name. It was also possible for a second wife to be taken. Although these methods could alleviate the social status of the barren wife, they could also cause conflict in the household (Moss & Baden, 2015:31). An example of this is Rachel, who gives her maidservant to her husband to ensure that she may have surrogate children to continue the family line (Gen 30: 4-8).

If a female did not fall pregnant, she was viewed as being cursed, as it was important for a female to bear offspring- specifically a son that could carry on the name. Van Rooy (1986:225) states that a woman could bring honour to her family by having a child, as children were viewed as bringing honour to the household. In contrast, infertility would result in a woman being viewed in contempt for not contributing to the reproductive capital in society. In a very real way, a woman was only regarded as such – a woman - if she could bear children.

#### **2.5.4. The Role of God in Infertility**

In the Ancient Near East, it was thought that the gods and goddesses were the ones who were responsible for a female state of fertility (Grohmann 2011:546). Marianne Grohmann (2011:546) mentions that “[i]n the myth *Enki and Ninmah* “the woman who does not give birth” is mentioned among other human beings with defects”. A person was regarded as being an

incomplete human being if they were childless (Van Rooy 1986:225). According to Joel Baden (2011:13) “Jeremy Schipper has argued that in the Hebrew Bible, barrenness or infertility can be presented as a disability”. There are three reasons why Jeremy Schipper argues this. Firstly, “barrenness is mentioned in close context with illness (Deut 7:14-15); secondly, that barrenness is said to be “healed” (Gen 20:17); and lastly, that barrenness appears to be “under the control of a divine ‘sender/controller’” (Baden, 2011:13). Some biblical texts do treat barrenness as a curse (Baden 2011:17; see Gen 20:17-18). Hence, it is possible that barrenness was indeed seen as a form of disability and thus could be considered a curse. Knowledge about disabilities and medical diagnoses were not as advanced in the biblical world as in the present day.

Within the Old Testament, God makes a covenant with Abraham that he will have many descendants. Yet the patriarch’s wives struggle with infertility at the beginning of their narratives (Grohmann 2011:546). According to Grohmann (2011:546), the ‘barren mother’ type is a pattern that can be seen in the Old Testament. God shows an act of grace when intervening in these barren mothers’ lives by opening their wombs (Grohmann 2011:546). Divine intervention must take place (Grohmann 2011:546). Children are viewed as being a blessing in the biblical context (Grohmann 2011:546).

God is seen as explicitly closing the female’s womb as in the case of Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah. One could assume that they are being punished for human misbehaviour, and thus are cursed (Van Rooy 1986:225; Baden 2011:18). However, it is stated nowhere that Rebekah, Rachel, or Hannah had misbehaved in any way, or that God closed their wombs to curse them. If barrenness is not a divine affliction, it does not mean that the origin of their suffering is not divine (Baden 2011:18). The narratives of Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah state that their wombs were closed by God, thus their barrenness originated from God. Although they suffered because of their barrenness, their narratives do not indicate that this suffering was God’s intention. Maybe there was another divine plan for this barrenness that was inflicted on these three women.

According to Carol Ochs (1976:56-57) “[t]he Old Testament focus on the barrenness of women whose miraculous power of transformation is blocked by an angry god”. In a personal view, this is a far-reaching argument, as the tone of the barren narratives does not reflect anger nor does the text state that God is angry. Ochs (1976:57) says that barrenness is from God, but can be overcome by God’s intervention, likely because God is the one who opens and closes the



womb (Grohmann 2011:547). This is shown in the narratives of Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah, as God does eventually intervene by opening their wombs.

### **2.5.5. Honour and Shame**

John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina (1993:95) and F. Gerald Downing (2009:212) states that honour and shame were core values found within the Mediterranean world in general and can be seen in ancient Israel as well. Scholars diverge in how they understand these core values. The most common understanding is that shame is the opposite of honour (Pilch & Malina 1993:95; Downing 2009:212). Both honour and shame were acknowledged publicly, however, the result was different (Pilch & Malina 1993:95). To publicly acknowledge that someone had honour meant that they had worth, while acknowledging that someone had shame was denying them any claim to worth (Pilch & Malina 1993:95-6).

Honour and shame are group values- thus if one individual is labelled as having honour, the whole group share in this honour (Pilch & Malina 1993:96). Pilch and Malina (1993:96) note that honour is embodied by adult males, while positive shame is embodied by adult females (Pilch & Malina 1993:96). This is based on Pilch and Malina's understanding of the values which accompanied these labels. According to Pilch and Malina (1993:96), the values that accompanied 'male' honour included "strength, courage, daring, value, generosity, and wisdom". However, 'male' shame or lack of honour was complemented with values such as "weakness, cowardice and lack of generosity" (Pilch & Malina 1993:96). Based on Pilch and Malina's argument of honour and shame, they do not think women can embody values that are attached to honour. Women are more vulnerable to shame (Pilch & Malina 1993:96; Downing 2009:212). Women's shame is "maintained as a veil of privacy and personal and sexual integrity. Shame is therefore not associated with strength or wisdom or courage, but rather with privacy, reserve, and purity." (Pilch & Malina 1993:96). Pilch and Malina (1993:97) and Matthews and Benjamin (1993:143) both link honour to the highest value of life and shame is linked to death.

Downing (2009:212) argues that the loss of honour, or an increase in shame, is only open to men. This suggests that women had no chance of overcoming their status of shame. According to Downing (2009:212), the Bible says that fathers and mothers are expected to be honoured,

so too is the ‘good wife’.<sup>13</sup> Downing makes it clear in his argument that there are two instances where women are viewed as having honour: being a mother and being a good wife. If a couple were childless in a patriarchal society like ancient Israel it would be much easier for men to avoid shame at any cost than it was for women. A man had the option of taking a second wife or taking a concubine if his first wife did not fall pregnant. If the second wife or concubine fell pregnant this would prove his fertility and his shame would be removed. Men will avoid shame at any cost (Downing 2009:212). On the contrary, women would also want to avoid shame at any cost however the only solution to this would be to fall pregnant.

An honourable household was revealed by whether the household could take care of its members and neighbours if there was war, drought, or an epidemic (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:143). Shame meant not having the necessary means to fulfil one’s responsibility towards the household or neighbouring partners (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:144). It only disappeared once a household could contribute again (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:144).

Mathews and Benjamin (1993:144) argue that a significant understanding of shame is by stating that shame was also ascribed to “the loss of land and children.” (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:144). Hence indicating that the possession of land and children were important commodities for families in ancient Israel. This argument which Matthews and Benjamin make is echoed in the Bible. If one looks at Exodus 21: 22-25, the law stipulates that in ancient Israel if a woman was injured by a man while she was pregnant, and this led to the loss of her child, the punishment was death. Subsequently illustrating again, the importance of children. Therefore, if shame were ascribed to the loss of a child, one could argue that shame could also be applied to the loss of a woman’s ability to have a child.

Johanna Stiebert (2000:256), an Old Testament scholar, states that shame is common in traditional societies that are seen within the Hebrew Bible. Shame language is often linked to widowhood or barrenness, without any insinuation that they have done something wrong (Stiebert 2000:257). According to Stiebert (2000:260), the difference between honour and shame is gender. This is seen in Pilch and Malina’s discussion on honour and shame. However, Matthews and Benjamin (1993:146) state that “[m]en did not possess sole claim to labels of

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<sup>13</sup> Children were required to adhere to the commandment “honour your father and mother” (Exod. 20: 12; Matthews & Benjamin 1993:10; Meyers 1997:31). When a son failed to honour his parents by fulfilling his duties for the household, the father decided what the judgement would be (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:10). Downing (2009:212) uses Proverbs 31: 10-31 to express why a good wife is to be honoured.

honour, nor were women only subjected to labels of shame.” Women could be physical classifications of either honour or shame for their households (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:146). One is inclined to agree with Stiebert’s argument that shame and honour were determined based on gender as it reflects the patriarchal and hierarchal structures that were present in the ancient Israelite society.

Honour is attached to men as they must compete and defend their reputation and that of their household (Stiebert 2000:260). It is also seen as being hierarchical, and for a man to gain more honour, he must compete with someone of equal status to gain his honour (Stiebert 2000:260). Shame is attached to women “in a specialized sense: it signifies restraint and elicits shyness, blushing and modesty deriving from emotional inhibition and fear of exposing oneself to comment or criticism.” (Stiebert 2000:260). The worst kind of shame stems from a female’s sexual misconduct (Stiebert 2000:260). Seduction is a sign of shame (Wolff 1974:174). It was a disgrace if women were not married, as it essentially “means that man is prevented from realizing a complete life” (Wolff 1974:175).

## **2.6. Conclusion**

This chapter discussed and defined the qualitative research methodology which will be used in this thesis. TA will specifically be used as a facet of qualitative research in my in-depth reading of the texts utilizing the NET translation and scholars who have interpreted and done research on the three narratives of Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah. Key concepts that will be used throughout this research project were also discussed. In the next chapter, a socio-historical analysis of the context of the texts will be done. The next step in TA is trying to find the meaning behind the text, which will be done by doing a liberal feminist reading of the three texts to find the connotation of these barren narratives of Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah. This step is followed by gathering data from other scholars who have done a reading of the same narratives. Only when all perspectives of the same text are seen, can one get a full understanding of the text.

## CHAPTER 3:

### The societal context of Ancient Israel

#### 3.1. Introduction

The curse of infertility and the obsession with the womb is something that can be seen within the Old Testament, especially when we look at the narratives of Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah.<sup>14</sup> Before looking at this statement, it is important to contextualise the role of women in Israelite society. This chapter will look at the kind of society these women found themselves in. This will be done by looking at what scholars have said about the role of women within their society, family, and married life. The importance of children will also be investigated.

#### 3.2. The Social Context of Ancient Israel

Bird (1974:41) argues that the Old Testament stems from a male-dominated society. Alice Bach (1999:xvii) states that the legal and social structures in which the authors and readers of the Hebrew Bible found themselves, was a patriarchal canvas on which males and females were painted.<sup>15</sup> Niditch (1979:144), a feminist theologian, states that the book of Genesis alone is about narratives that are embedded in male-headed households. However, Meyers (2000:10) says that the book of Genesis has the most women mentioned, as opposed to the rest of the Bible.<sup>16</sup>

Meyers (1978:91) states that scholars have made efforts in trying to understand the social dynamics within Israel. Attempting to reconstruct these social dynamics must be done with extreme sensitivity and consideration for the entire historic-cultural sphere that affects the group or individual (Meyers 1978:91). Who were the Israelites that we read about in the Hebrew Bible and what were their daily lives like? The Old Testament focuses on the lives of the Israelites who were diverse “in theology, in culture, and even in racial characteristics”

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<sup>14</sup> This is not only seen in the Old Testament but also throughout the Near Eastern cultures from which Israel had emerged (Meyers 1978:92).

<sup>15</sup> Authors of the Bible wrote from their perspective and social setting which they found themselves in. Patriarchy was part of their social structure. Feminism was not a social construct at the time in which the Hebrew Bible authors found themselves, thus it is no surprise that authors wrote from a patriarchal stance.

<sup>16</sup> I agree with Niditch that Genesis is seeping with narratives about male-headed households. However, Meyers makes an important point that although Genesis is seeping with narrative about men Genesis is one of the Old Testament books where the most women are mentioned (32 named and 46 unnamed) compared to the other books in the Old Testament.

(Anderson 1967:2). According to Bernhard Anderson (1967:2), these distinct features along with events from the past gave Jews a sense of history and identity. Israel was influenced socially, politically, and religiously through its interaction with other cultures, families and institutions that existed in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Canaan, and the Hellenistic world (Perdue 1997:163). The historical and geographical presuppositions must have made it difficult or nearly impossible for the Israelites to preserve their distinct features of who they were (Fohrer 1976:33).<sup>17</sup> The cultural presuppositions, on the other hand, included elements of their nomadic culture with some Mesopotamian or Egyptian influences which the Israelites brought with them when they settled in Canaan (Fohrer 1976:33).

It was not long after the second millennium B.C., that Israel's ancestor, Abraham, migrated from Mesopotamia to the land of Canaan (Anderson 1967:3-6).<sup>18</sup> The narratives found in the book of Genesis shows how the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob moved about within the land of Canaan (Anderson 1967:6; Albertz 1994:28). Due to famine Jacob and his family migrated to Egypt to avoid the danger of extinction (Anderson 1967:6). In the period before the state, "the family was the basic economic and social unit among the shepherd and farmer population of the hill-country." (Albertz 1994:29).

Scholars believe that family was a vital thread and the heart of the Israelite society (Packer, Tenney & White 1982:18). Thus, there was no concept of individual identity. Individual identity was determined by the contributions that were made to the household's survival (Meyers 1997:19). Thus, an individual was not an independent being but rather existed as "someone's father, mother, daughter, son, grandparent, and so forth." (Meyers 1997:22). The extended family with the father as the head of the household was the basic community seen in the Bible (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:7). There was also a level of interdependence between husband and wife, however, the term "bêt'āb<sup>19</sup>" (father's house), clearly indicates that the household was dominated by males (Meyers 1997:33). This kind of family consisted of many childbearing adults and their children; making them strong enough to not only feed themselves but also protect themselves (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:7). In a basic family unit, there were most commonly "two parents and between two and four children" (Blenkinsopp 1997:51). However, the more wealthy and royal families could afford to maintain more than one wife

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<sup>17</sup> These features include their political, cultural, and intellectual way of life (Fohrer 1976:33).

<sup>18</sup> The land of Canaan is known today as Palestine (Anderson 1967:3-6).

<sup>19</sup> This was the basic tribal structure (Blenkinsopp 1997:51).



and a greater number of children, thus increasing their status and honour (Blenkinsopp 1997:51). The high mortality rate contributed to the number of children found in a basic family unit (Blenkinsopp 1997:51).

No two households looked the same, however, there were basic functions such as “[e]conomic (production and consumption of goods), sexual-reproductive, educational, and perhaps judicial.” (Meyers 1997:23). Ancient Israel was referred to as being an ‘agrarian society’ (Meyers 1997:3). This meant that Israel’s identity and survival were dependent on the land (Meyers 1997:13). Labour was required to cultivate the land, but the labour could be demanding and therefore the more able bodies, the better (Meyers 1997:18). Household duties were divided amongst men, women, and children based on their age and gender to sustain their home (Meyers 1997:23; Blenkinsopp 1997:57). As a result of labour being divided in this way, this meant that both men and women held knowledge about surviving which the other did not. Without this knowledge, the chances of survival would decrease (Meyers 1997:33). Thus, all roles were important for the survival of the household (Meyers 1997:33; Perdue 1997:166).

Religion was a key feature of this society. With their understanding of religion, God (Yahweh) played a central role. Rainer Albertz (1994:30) states that in the pre-state period, the male head of the household was considered the priest and thus he was responsible for matters regarding their religion. God was the one who “shaped their past, sustained their present, and promised their future” and was especially important for the founding ancestors (Perdue 1997:166). Thus, God was given three different depictions in the earlier Genesis traditions: “God of my/your father”, “God of Abraham/Nahor” and “God of Isaac” (Albertz 1994:30). The idea of God which takes place in Israel later with the Davidic family has its roots in this early traditional expression of religion (Albertz 1994:30). The requirement for membership in ancient Israel was the covenant (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:8).

Matthews and Benjamin (1993:22) argue that “[A]ll cultures expect women to contribute differently to their households than men, and the roles of men and women vary greatly from one culture to another”. As a result of the work of Meyers, a possible image of the lives of both men and women have been sketched (Brenner & Van Dijk-Hemmes 1993:17). Therefore, what did this life look like and what were the specific roles of men and women within the Israelite society?

### 3.3. The Role of Men in the Israelite Society

Scholars such as James Packer, Merrill Tenney and Williams White (1982:19) state that the Israelites were under the impression that men were more important than women in society. This is due to the various roles/duties and positions that men held within Israelite society. The social roles held by males were that of grandfather, father, husband, son, brother, nephew, uncle, and cousin (Perdue 1997:179-180). Duties of the male in a household included “procreation, agricultural labor, education, judicial decisions, religious instruction and practice, and protective associations.” (Perdue 1997:180). However, herding and farming were regarded as duties which both men and women were responsible for (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:24).<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, men were thought to have the main responsibility of herding and farming- especially when women were pregnant or not strong enough to fulfil this duty (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:24). Adult men ploughed the land for the growing of crops, but also cleared land to build homes and terraces (Meyers 1997:24). Men were also given the task of making and maintaining tools (Meyers 1997:24). Seasonal tasks like harvesting made use of both men and women (Meyers 1997:24). The milking of animals, tending to the orchards and vineyards, were tasks given to both genders and various age groups (Meyers 1997:24).

In a man’s work, there were often shortfalls in their production due to natural disasters, droughts, hailstorms, plagues, and blights (Meyers 1997:26-7). However, this was not a reflection of a man’s success in the work field (Meyers 1997:26). Senior males were required to pass down their experience to the older male children (Meyers 1997:30). A father did not only have to protect and provide for his family, but he was also in control of the following: “adopt or excommunicate sons and daughters”, “recruit workers and warriors”, “negotiate marriages and covenants”, “host strangers” and “designate heirs” (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:8).

The father has authority over the household and thus, the responsibility of family members in the home lies with him (Wolff 1974:182). It was, therefore, the duty of the father, or eldest in the family, to make decisions on behalf of the family, and women had no say in these decisions (Packer, Tenney & White 1982:19). According to Matthews and Benjamin (1993:9) “[T]he father exercised the power of life and death in the household. But the authority of the father

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<sup>20</sup> Women were responsible for helping to “manage herds, clear new fields, construct terraces, harvest, thresh, and winnow the fields, orchards, and vineyards (Meyers 1988:146; de Vaux 1961: 39). They also planted, hoed, weeded, and picked household gardens.” (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:24).

was not absolute”. This is because he had no power over life and death when it came to certain members such as his uncles, grandfathers, father, brothers, and grandsons (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:9). His power over life and death was exercised by adopting<sup>21</sup> children and resolving conflicts<sup>22</sup> of his children (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:10). In cases of assault of one member by another, measures were put in place (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:10). These measures included compensation for assaulting a female by calculating the woman’s ability to bear children afterwards (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:10). If the assault led to a miscarriage, the father would determine a fine that would “be approved by the village assembly (Exod. 21: 22-24; Matthews & Benjamin 1993:10). The father also had the task of passing down the family inheritance to his chosen son, daughter, or a surrogate child (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:17). Inheritance was mostly passed on to the eldest son.

Men were also viewed as being superior to women because they had a stronger legal position than women in Israel (Packer, Tenney & White 1982:21). However, some laws suggested that both men and women should be treated equally (Packer, Tenney & White 1982:22). There were even some laws that protected women; especially in the case of men being allowed to take a second wife (Packer, Tenney & White 1982:22).

### **3.4. The Role of Women in the Israelite Society**

Joseph Blenkinsopp (1997:74) claims that “there is no ‘Old Testament view of women’ but rather a plurality of views determined by variables such as epoch, literary genre, and social class.” Mary Evans (1983:24) states that it was very common for women to only be considered by the man whose authority they were placed under, being father or husband. To make her statement stronger, Evans (1983:24) quotes Ryder Smith who says, “[t]he Old Testament conception of [a woman’s] status in society is determined almost completely by the valuation which was placed upon them by their husbands and sons”.

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<sup>21</sup> According to Matthews and Benjamin (1993:10), when a baby “was born, the father had to decide whether or not to adopt it into the household (Patai 1959:135; Qur’an 16:58-59). In the world of the Bible, life began not with a viable birth, but only with adoption. Regardless of the status of the new-born at the moment of delivery, without adoption it was considered stillborn. If the father did not adopt the child, the midwife took it from the birthing room and left it in an open field to declare it eligible for adoption by another household (Ezek 16:3-5; Stager and Wolff 1984; Patai 1959:127).”

<sup>22</sup> Such conflicts included those between siblings and disagreements between children and parents.



Although there were instances where women were seen to take the lead, this was scarce- and by a fair majority, the women were in a subordinate position to men, especially when their role was daughter and wife (Perdue 1997:180). The patriarch of the family was responsible for his daughter and thus this limited their occupational choices (Meyers 1978:99). A female's role was then "legally defined and determined by men" (Perdue 1997:181). Social roles women held were that of grandmother, mother, daughter, wife, sister, niece, aunt, and cousin (Perdue 1997:180). Consequently, the only choice a woman could make was a family-centred life (Meyers 1978:99). Due to Israel being a patriarchal society, it was not surprising that women's rights were often overlooked. According to Meyers (1978:102), women hardly partook in any part of the public political life.<sup>23</sup> Women were central to the domestic realm and thus were generally confined to this realm and agricultural duties. Based on this, women may see the institutions and activities that accompany males as being "inaccessible, restricting, irrelevant, or censoring" (Bird 1999:6).

Women's labour included tasks such as, "reproductive work, including care of children and associated household tasks, with a consequent identification of the domestic sphere as the female sphere, to which women's activities may be restricted in varying degrees." (Bird 1999:6). Female participation in labour was especially important when men were not available (Meyers 1978:98). The division of labour had consequences on the role and status of women within society (Bird 1999:6). However, adult females labour in the house was not less important than male's duties (Meyers 1997:24). Indoor labour consisted of "keeping the home in order, caring for small children (with the help of the mother-in-law, older children or unmarried sisters-in-law), tending gardens and small animals, producing textiles and taking responsibility for food preparations and preservation." (Meyers 1997:25). Women carried a huge but diverse workload (Meyers 1997:25). Female's labour "required a higher degree of expertise, judgement, and skill than did male tasks." (Meyers 1997:26). They also had more control over the outcome of their labour, unlike men who relied on nature (Meyers 1997:27).

Other duties of the mother included "arranging other wives to bear children", "manage the household by supervising domestic production, rationing and preparing food processing", "teach clan traditions", "mediate domestic conflicts" and "designate heirs" (Matthews &

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<sup>23</sup> If Carol Meyers is correct, then whoever controls the political sphere of life controls how people are seen and what roles they are given and expected to participate in.

Benjamin 1993:22). Irrespective of all the duties women had, they never had complete power and authority over a society (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:22).

Females were excluded from responsibilities such as priesthood (Meyers 1978:102; Brenner & Van Dijk-Hemmes 1993:19). This was because female priests were not allowed to have children, however, there were few- if any- female priests in early Israel (Meyers 1978:91-103; Matthews & Benjamin 1993:29). According to Matthews and Benjamin (1993:30), this was because there were fewer women than men, and women were necessary to bear children. If a woman were menstruating or pregnant, she was to be excluded from service, but she could still partake in the cultic celebration from the door of the tent (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:30). In traditional societies, teachings about “virginity, marriage, divorce, infidelity, adultery, promiscuity, and rape are concerned not only with the sexual relationships of individuals or couples but also with the social and economic relationships between the households in the village as a whole” (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:31).

There were mainly two roles that women could play in society, namely: an unmarried virgin/productive worker or a childbearing wife/reproductive worker (Niditch 1979:145; Meyers 1999:38). According to Packer, Tenney and White (1982:26), Jewish women accepted this role willingly.<sup>24</sup> Blenkinsopp (1997:77) argues that women showed a desire to be married and have children; this was “not because they were ideologically naïve and unenlightened but because they had few, if any, other options.”

### **3.4.1. Marriage**

Information was passed down from females to younger children (Meyers 1997:30). Due to females’ skills being easier to transfer than the male’s, daughters were married-off rather than sons (Meyers 1997:30). The Old Testament does not have a word for the institution of marriage (Wolff 1974:166; Perdue 1997:182). However, the idea of marriage is to continue “the father’s house” (Wolff 1974:166). Hence, a woman joins the family of the man however other arrangements can be made (Wolff 1974:166). There is evidence that marriage feasts took place, but it was more commonly seen in court circles (Wolff 1974:167). After getting married, a man

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<sup>24</sup> Motherhood was “used as a tool to consolidate the subordination of women” (Grenholm 2011:xv). If this was a technique used to oppress women, it then validates why women accepted this role willingly as this was all they knew.

was free from military obligations for a year so that he could be devoted to his wife (Wolff 1974:168).

Law dictated that a husband owned his wife (Wolff 1974:166; Perdue 1997:183).<sup>25</sup> This is due to the man having to pay a “marriage gift” (mohar) to the father of the bride (Wolff 1974:166; Matthews & Benjamin 1993:14). However, service in the father in-law’s house was also considered a form of payment (Wolff 1974:166).<sup>26</sup> Subsequently, the man takes “possession” of his wife, and God is seen as being the witness to the marriage (Wolff 1974:167; Matthews & Benjamin 1993:14). An unmarried daughter was an asset, as the bridal dowry could increase the economic status of the household (Blenkinsopp 1997:60; Perdue 1997:183). The dowry given was an indication of the status and honour of the bride’s house (Blenkinsopp 1997:60). The father oversaw the decisions regarding who was an eligible partner for his children while protecting their status (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:13). Most often the parents arranged marriages and did not always consult their children about it (Perdue 1997:183). There was love in marriages, but it was more important to secure “the household’s economic interests and property rights.” (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:13; Perdue 1997:183).

Various kinds of marriages were entered into because of trying to continue the family line (Blenkinsopp 1997:73). Monogamous marriages were more common, though there is evidence of concubines, and polygamy (Wolff 1974:168; Perdue 1997:171, 185; Cartledge 2001:27). Concubines and polygamy occurred to help produce male heirs and to increase the workforce (Albertz 1994:33; Perdue 1997:171, 185; Cartledge 2001:27). Not having a child could end a household (Tsumura 2007:108). I agree with Alexander Abasili (2015:585) that polygamy serves the interest of men. However, Leo Perdue (1997:185) argues that polygamy also gave women a type of support system. Albertz (1994:33) disagrees and states that this often resulted in family conflicts among wives, as is the case of Rachel and Hannah. Perdue (1997:185) does admit that there is no way of knowing how two wives managed a household together (Perdue 1997:185). There is also no evidence about whether the favoured wife had a superior status to the other wives (Perdue 1997:185). I hope that my research done in chapter four will shed some light on this.

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<sup>25</sup> See also Gen. 20:3; Ex. 21:3, 22; Deut. 22:22; Deut.24:4 and II Sam. 11: 26.

<sup>26</sup> This is the case for Jacob who works for Laban to marry Leah and Rachel (Gen. 29: 15-30).

According to Mara Donaldson (1981:84), Le`vi-Strauss there are three marriage types evident in the narratives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, namely: incest, parallel cousins and matrilateral cross-cousins.<sup>27</sup> There is also a patrilateral cross-cousin marriage (Donaldson 1981:84).<sup>28</sup> The ideal kind of endogamy was cross-cousin marriage as is the case of Jacob (Blenkinsopp 1997:73; Meyers 1997:36).<sup>29</sup>

A key feature of marriage was that the prospective bride had to be a virgin. Virginity was an important political power that a female held as this made her a suitable woman to marry (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:176). Virginity brought honour to a household, and it was important to protect this honour (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:178). A man's honour was reflected in the woman's virginity when marrying her (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:178). The social and economic status of a household was endangered if the female's virginity was lost (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:178).<sup>30</sup> If an unmarried or married girl engages in sexual relations with someone other than her husband, she becomes a misfit in society, and thus must be destroyed (Niditch 1979:146). The foremost purpose of a woman was thus to get married and give birth to children (Niditch 1979:144; Packer, Tenney & White 1982:26).

Divorce could occur if the husband found "something improper, indecent, or at least objectionable in her." (Blenkinsopp 1997:64). Tony Cartledge (2001:27) states that being married to a female who could not have children could be grounds for a divorce. Thus, the ultimate reason for marriage was so that reproduction could take place- along with protection and love (Perdue 1997:170).

### **3.4.2. Reproduction**

Production and consumption were imperative to early Jewish history (Perdue 1997:168). This required not only labour but also social cooperation (Perdue 1997:168). Another important role in the family was reproduction (Perdue 1997:170). The desire for many children is frequently mentioned in the Hebrew Bible (Perdue 1997:189). Meyers (1978:91) says that there were factors that helped to create a demographic crisis which was a leading cause to why women's

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<sup>27</sup> Matrilateral cross-cousin marriage is when a male marries his mother's brother's daughter (Donaldson 1981:84).

<sup>28</sup> This is when a male marries their father's sister's daughter (Donaldson 1981:84). This kind of marriage is not as obvious but is present (Donaldson 1981:84).

<sup>29</sup> This would be when "a man married the daughter of his mother's brother" (Meyers 1997:36). Thus, the woman is outside the family unit but closely related to it (Meyers 1997:36).

<sup>30</sup> A woman could lose her virginity by means of rape or promiscuity (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:178).

roles were intensified in the domestic area and added pressure to giving birth. These factors were war, famine, and plagues (Meyers 1978:91). Thus, an increase in population or an attempt to recover the population was a societal goal (Meyers 1978:93). Perdue (1997:182) argues that “the desire to have many children may reflect the extremely high infant mortality” that was present. At least 35% of individuals were expected to die before the age of five, and almost half of children would not survive till the age of eighteen (Meyers 1978:94). Life expectancy varied from 21 to 66 years old, with the average lifespan being 44 years (Wolff 1974:119).<sup>31</sup> However, kings lived much longer than any other member of society as they were more protected (Wolff 1974:119). When this crisis had ended, the role of females remained ingrained in the domestic sphere of the Israelite society and became the reason why women stayed subordinate through to modern times (Meyers 1978:91). As a result of children being so valuable, there is a law regarding injuring a pregnant woman with the result of miscarriage (Blenkinsopp 1997:69; Ex. 21: 22-23).

Cristina Grenholm (2011:xvii) states that the understanding of motherhood has remained relatively constant. Motherhood has been “largely equated with the meaning of life for women” (Grenholm 2011:xvii). Women are mainly assigned the task of bearing children and nursing them (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:22; Perdue 1997:170; Meyers 1999:38). Bearing children was not seen as a role that prohibited or interfered with women’s other social and economic roles (Meyers 1999:38). For households to have good economic conditions they required a big family, thus childbearing was a valuable component in a female's life (Meyers 1997:27). Accordingly, childbearing began shortly after a female reached puberty (Meyers 1997:28). Parenting included the socialization and education of their children (Meyers 1999:39). Thus, women oversaw the transferring of information about their culture, social values, and modes of behaviour (Meyers 1999:39). Women held power in being a mother to children, as she was responsible for their primary education (Blenkinsopp 1997:78).

At times, some women had trouble producing offspring to continue the family line (Niditch 1979:144). It was these barren women who felt that they were cursed and were often victims of scorn by women who were able to bear children (Niditch 1979:144). The sociological existence and identity of women were dependent on them producing offspring for their husbands (Niditch 1979:144). If a man married a woman who was a foreigner to his clan, she

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<sup>31</sup> According to Hans Walter Wolff (1974:119) “the Chronicles of the kings of Judah” gives “the only exact and historically reliable statements of age spanning several centuries”.



was only integrated into his clan once she bore a child; as the child was a physical representation of her tie to her husband (Niditch 1979:144). This tie would remain intact even if her husband were to die. However, if she did not have offspring, she was not a fully-fledged member of his clan or family (Niditch 1979:145). Evans (1983:24) agrees with Niditch (1979:145) that there are also economic and legal factors that impacted women. However, these factors “were secured and safeguarded for them, not by themselves, but by the men under whose authority they were at the time” (Evans 1983:24). Women could be under the protection of a woman’s father, husband, and children (Niditch 1979:145). Should a woman have none of these forms of protection, she could be classified as being a misfit in society (Niditch 1979:145).

Women were classified as beautiful not just because of their physical appearance but also because of “their physical ability to menstruate, engage in sexual intercourse, conceive, bear, and nurse a child.” (Mathews & Benjamin 1993:146). If a woman did not possess these physical abilities she was classified as being “barren” (Mathews & Benjamin 1993:146). If a female could not bear children, she threatened the identity of the family and its survival (Alberty 1994:33). According to Alberty (1994:33) “it is no surprise that in early Israelite families the saving intervention of their God was expected and experienced particularly at this vulnerable point.” If a mother was infertile, she was responsible for giving her husband a surrogate (Mathews & Benjamin 1993:33). A surrogate was a legal method to protect the mother’s honour, and thus she did not have to feel ashamed (Mathews & Benjamin 1993:33). She chose a slave who was a member of their household and would always have a place in the household (Mathews & Benjamin 1993:33). Alternatively, husbands could take a second wife (Mathews & Benjamin 1993:33).

Barrenness was seen as a disgrace, and it was considered evidence of being divinely disfavoured (Perdue 1997:182). Being a divorced or widowed woman without any children was a very threatening situation for women, especially if they were unable to remarry (Perdue 1997:182). Sons were valuable as they could look after their mothers (Perdue 1997:182). A household was concerned about having children because they could contribute to the home and provide it with a future heir (Perdue 1997:189). Children also provided the security that parents would be looked after in their old age (Perdue 1997:189).

### 3.5. The Importance of Children within Society

Blu Greenberg (1990:4) argues that the best way to see the attitude of society towards females was at their birth. In Judaism the birth of a child is more than a biological fact, it is the admission into the covenantal community (Greenberg 1990:4). Males are received into the community through a ceremony, whereas females enter without any public acknowledgement (Greenberg 1990:4). The question that arises is: ‘would it be more valuable to be accepted automatically into the community, or does it show that males were more valued by receiving a public ceremony’ (Greenberg 1990:4)? Does this ritual-less acceptance of women into a community have a domino effect on women’s place in society (Greenberg 1990:4)? Life began “with the legal process of adoption” and “not with the physical process of birth” (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:73). A wife who gave birth could adopt her child after giving birth (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:73). However, a surrogate could give birth to an heir but had to have another woman adopt her child (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:73; Perdue 1997:189). If no one wanted to adopt the child after being born, the midwife would leave the baby in an open field where someone else could adopt it (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:73; Wolff 1974:50).

According to Priestly law, on the eighth day after a son was born, circumcision was required (Blenkinsopp 1997:68; Perdue 1997:191). There is no mention of a parallel ceremony for girls. Circumcision was the way a boy entered into the covenant that was made between Abraham and God (Lev. 12:3). Yet another way of determining that boys were more important, is by looking at the naming of the child. When sons were given their names, it was accompanied by an explanation of why the son had been given that name. (Brenner & Van Dijk-Hemmes 1993:103; Perdue 1997:189).<sup>32</sup> There was no explanation or motivation given when the name of a daughter was given (Brenner & Van Dijk-Hemmes 1993:103). Athalya Brenner and Fokkelen Van Dijk-Hemmes (1993:103) says that “[I]t is probably more credible that, by and large, the authors/editors of the Bible were not much interested in the interrelations between mothers and daughters.”

In general, there were three phases to life; “children”, “young but fully grown men and grown-up women” and “mature, elderly men and women.” (Wolff 1974:120). If a baby survived the

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<sup>32</sup> Naming speeches always have a pun that “creates a phonetic link between the name and its interpretation” (Brenner & Van Dijk-Hemmes 1993:97). According to Brenner and Van Dijk-Hemmes (1993:97) naming speeches took place in two ways. Firstly, “She called his name X, because she said...(explanation/motivation for the name)”; or secondly “She said...(explanation/motivation), therefore she called his name X.” (Brenner & Van Dijk-Hemmes 1993:97).

first month, the chance of infant mortality decreased substantially (Wolff 1974:121). The upbringing of children was the duty of both parents (Wolff 1974:178).<sup>33</sup> During the initial stages of the child's life, the mother is entrusted with the child's upbringing until the child has been weaned (Wolff 1974:178).<sup>34</sup> Once weaned, the mother was completely devoted to her daughter, while the father trains his sons to follow in his trade (Wolff 1974:178-9). A child was weaned at the age of 3 (Wolff 1974:121; Perdue 1997:189; Blenkinsopp 1997:68). At 5 years old, the child could start working (Wolff 1974:121). Children were given tasks such as gathering fuel, looking after younger kids, picking, and watering vegetables and assisting in the making of food (Meyers 1997:27). Physical maturity came when the child reached 13 years of age (Wolff 1974:121). At 13, children were also considered to be adults and their labour consisted of more than nine hours of work per day (Meyers 1997:27). It is at this age that young adults were given gender-specific tasks (Meyers 1997:27). Wolff (1974:121) says that at the age of 20, you were not only responsible for military service but also taxes. The final task of the father was to bestow a blessing, which begs God to bestow freedom and fruitfulness onto their child (Wolff 1974:180).

Children were taught the core values of family and society from birth. How girls and boys were brought up, portrays the value that each child had. An important aspect of family life which children were taught from an early age, is to be subordinate to the authority of the patriarch (Pilch & Malina 1993:128). Physical punishment was a means used to instil obedience and subordination (Pilch & Malina 1993:128).

Harsh discipline was common for adolescent boys, while infants and children were under the mother's control, and they were pampered for the first seven to nine years of their lives (Pilch & Malina 1993:129). Boys were pampered, whereas girls were hastened to become women. According to Pilch and Malina (1993:129), boys were more valued as they were breastfed twice as long compared to girls. Hannah could be an example of how important it was for boys to be weaned, as she first weaned Samuel until he was old enough to stay in Shiloh (Pilch & Malina 1993:129). When boys reached puberty, they stopped being pampered by the women and entered the harsh and authoritative world of men (Pilch & Malina 1993:130). The drastic change could be a shock to the boys, making sure they often ran back to the women; however,

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<sup>33</sup> See Deut. 8: 5 and Prov. 31: 1.

<sup>34</sup> Breast feeding could be done by the mother or a wet nurse (Blenkinsopp 1997:68). During these three years of weaning, "children endured many illnesses that led to their death" (Perdue 1997:171).



they were to be redirected back to the men (Pilch & Malina 1993:130). When a male child was put under the authority of the father, his childhood was over (Blenkinsopp 1997:57).

Meyers (1997:31) states that parent interaction was confined to raising children to contribute to the production in the household. This needed a level of authority (Meyers 1997:31). Both children and parents were dependent on each other (Meyers 1997:32). Parents needed children to work but children needed parents to give them the resources to survive (Meyers 1997:32). Parents also required their children to look after them, should they reach old age (Meyers 1997:32). Owning land was important for the survival of the family (Blenkinsopp 1997:54). Property transfer within the family was important, and thus reproduction was vital as it produced old age security (Meyers 1997:33). Transferring of the property could be done through inheritance; once the head of the household had died it would go to the eldest son (Blenkinsopp 1997:54).

We cannot presume to have a full picture of the early Israelite family religion, but we have some indication (Albertz 1994:33). An example of a religious event was the promise of a son (Albertz 1994:33). It was important for the economic side of the family to have sons being born (Albertz 1994:33). Sons were not only necessary for the workforce but also for the safety and survival of the family (Albertz 1994:33). Albertz (1994:33) states that this promise of a son was given to the wife (Gen 16:11) and thus it is a female religious experience. This promise is given unconditionally, thus God sees to the survival of the family irrespective of how the family members behave (Albertz 1994:34; Gen. 12:10-20). Furthermore, men hoped for descendants who would continue the household (Perdue 1997:170). Children were not only an economic commodity but the future generations of the household into which they were born (Perdue 1997:170). They helped to continue the name and traditions of their households (Perdue 1997:170). The bulk of inheritance usually went to the firstborn son, with the rest going to younger siblings (Blenkinsopp 1997:72). Arrangements were made by the head of the house if there was no son (Blenkinsopp 1997:72). A daughter could only inherit property if there were no sons who could inherit (Blenkinsopp (1997:55). However, she had to marry within the tribe (Blenkinsopp 1997:55). If there were no heirs, the land would go to the closest family member (Blenkinsopp 1997:55). A relationship between parents and children was important (Wolff 1974:177). Children were a gift from God and as a result, one can better understand the relations between family members (Wolff 1974:177).

### 3.6. Conclusion

The roles of men and women were very specific in ancient Israel. Men were the protectors and labour force for food production, while women were necessary for domestic chores like bearing and breastfeeding children and educating them till they could become part of the labour force. Children were of great importance as they were essential for adding to the workforce and survival of their household. However, sons were more important as they were to be the heirs to the inheritance of the household's land. There was an amount of pressure placed on women to conceive as their household depended on it for survival. Hence it is understandable that if this was not possible, women were willing to do anything to ensure they were successful in growing their households. Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah are three women who felt this pressure to conceive. It is necessary to comprehend the context in which these narratives were written to understand their experience with initial barrenness. The next chapter will look at these three women's experiences of initial infertility with this context in mind.



## CHAPTER 4:

### A re-reading of the narratives of Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah

#### 4.1. Introduction

In chapter 3 it was made clear that in ancient Israel it was important for a female to follow a set order in her life. It was the norm in society for a woman to get married and become a mother. However, for Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah, this order of events did not work out as effortlessly as it might have for other women. These three women found themselves in a temporary predicament, where they were thought to be barren. The texts reveal that in the end, they became pregnant. This chapter focuses on exploring these females' experiences with infertility, which will be done by doing a TA of Gen 25: 19-26, Gen 29:31-30:24 and 1 Sam 1:1-20 as recorded in the NET Bible (2019) and interpreted by scholars in their reading of the text. A TA of scholars' interpretations of these texts will be included.

#### 4.2. Rebekah's struggle with infertility as narrated in Genesis 25: 19-26

Rebekah is the daughter of Bethuel, sister of Laban, wife to Isaac<sup>35</sup>- and becomes the mother to Jacob and Esau. Rebekah is more than just a daughter, sister, wife, mother, and matriarch; she is also a woman who is known for her 'barren status' changing when she fell pregnant and gave birth to twins. Matthew Schwartz and Kalman Kaplan (2007:128) confirm this as they state that Rebekah is not an extension of Isaac, but rather a great woman on her own. The story of Rebekah is much more fascinating and captivating than simply another story of a woman who overcame infertility.

We first meet Rebekah when Abraham- after the death of his wife Sarah- sends out a servant to find a wife for his son Isaac (Gen 24). This opens the gateway for a new matriarch to continue

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<sup>35</sup> Isaac and Rebekah have a double relationship with one another. According to Mara Donaldson (1981:83) Isaac and Rebekah are both patrilineal parallel cousins and matrilineal cross-cousins. Patrilineal parallel cousins because Rebekah is Nahor's granddaughter who is also Abraham's brother. Their matrilineal cross-cousin relationship is a result of Sarah, Isaac's mother, being Nahor's half-sister. Their relationship is not as close as Abraham and Sarah were, however, Donaldson (1981:83) states that it "is nonetheless incestuous". It is not incest between brother and sister, but between parallel cousins (Donaldson, 1981: 84). Donaldson (1981:83) makes a big statement by claiming that this incestuous relationship is the reason for Rebekah's barrenness. Although this view might seem plausible, there is no way of knowing for sure whether this is the reason for Rebekah's barrenness. The fact that Rebekah eventually bears children could perhaps prove this theory wrong.

the family line. Abraham's servant comes across Rebekah at a well,<sup>36</sup> begins negotiations with her brother, and brings Rebekah back to his master for approval. Rebekah struggles with barrenness and then gives birth to twins- Jacob and Esau. Subsequently, Rebekah plays a central role in helping Jacob to deceive Isaac to obtain the birthright blessing.

Once one has read Rebekah's entire story, one could describe her as being a woman who takes charge, is courageous, brave, a devoted wife and mother, and finally, a woman who gets less credit in society than she deserves. However, this description of Rebekah does not initially come across in that way. This thesis will only focus on Rebekah's barren status as recounted in Genesis 25: 19-26.

#### **4.2.1. Genesis 25: 19 – 26 (NET)**

**19** This is the account of Isaac, the son of Abraham. Abraham became the father of Isaac. **20** When Isaac was forty years old, he married Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean from Paddan Aram and sister of Laban the Aramean. **21** Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife because she was childless. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. **22** But the children struggled inside her, and she said, "Why is this happening to me?" So she asked the LORD, **23** and the LORD said to her,

"Two nations are in your womb,  
and two peoples will be separated from within you.  
One people will be stronger than the other,  
and the older will serve the younger."

**24** When the time came for Rebekah to give birth, there were twins in her womb. **25** The first came out reddish all over, like a hairy garment, so they named him Esau. **26** When his brother came

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<sup>36</sup> Sharon Pace Jeansonne (1990:9) states that the narrative of Isaac and Rebekah is a type-scene. A type-scene is used to prompt, "associations in the reader's mind because they are typically used in the Hebrew Bible to evoke specific expectations" (Jeansonne 1990:9). Examples are "a young man who comes to a well will find a woman to be his bride" and "[a] barren woman will eventually have a child due to God's intervention" (Jeansonne 1990:9). There are other type-scenes that occur at the well, such as "Gen. 29: 1-14, where Jacob meets Rachel, and in Exod. 2: 15-21, where Moses encounters Zipporah." (Jeansonne 1990: 57). However, Jeansonne (1990:57) argues that in this narrative, Isaac being absent heightens the suspense of the narrative. Esther Fuchs (1999:45) refers to this as the betrothal type-scene.

out with his hand clutching Esau's heel,  
they named him Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when they were born.

#### **4.2.2. An introduction of the patriarch and matriarch, namely Isaac and Rebekah**

The beginning of this passage about Rebekah's barrenness follows the death and burial of Abraham (Gen 25: 7-10). At first glance, the narrative appears to be about Isaac because the passage begins with the phrase, "[t]his is the account of Isaac, the son of Abraham" (Gen 25: 19). It would make sense, as Isaac's role in the household has been elevated. Isaac is now the male-head, and what better way to begin his story than at the end of his father's story. This formula is commonly used in Old Testament narrative accounts, to introduce or shift focus to a new character. However, it is pointed out in a NET (2019:note 54S) study note that this is not the case, as what follows is the account of Jacob and Esau. Scholars reckon that Abraham's death being mentioned to introduce Isaac emphasised that the history/future of Israel is dependent on Isaac and Rebekah (Aalders 1981:77; DePreter 2011:49; Jeansonne 1990:55).

Although the text claims to be a narrative about Isaac, his role in the narrative is short-lived, and the focus shifts when Rebekah falls pregnant. Claus Westermann (1981:412) acknowledges that this is the point where Isaac's story begins. Furthermore, he states that this narrative is essentially about Isaac being married to Rebekah, and how the family gains offspring (Westermann, 1981:412). Scholars argue that this narrative has a *toledot* formula<sup>37</sup> which means that the account is about Isaac's descendants (Clifford & Murphy 1990:28). It is not an ordinary genealogy account that can often be found in biblical texts, as there is a slight level of suspense because it is not revealed from the beginning that Isaac will indeed have children. This is made apparent later in the text, and the *toledot* formula could be the reason why most scholars title their interpretation of this passage as the 'Jacob and Esau' account. Westermann (1981:411-412) and Michael Maher (1982:146) interpret Rebekah's infertility account as being part of the story of Jacob. Hence this suggests that this narrative is merely an introduction to Jacob. However, if one looks at the pericope of this passage it starts and ends with Isaac.

After Isaac is introduced, there is a recap of his marriage to Rebekah, in which the narrator also includes Isaac's age when he married her. Although Rebekah's age is not recorded, there is a recap of the family that Rebekah comes from. This is done by mentioning who her father and

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<sup>37</sup> *Toledot* means "children" and its basic function is to list the father's descendants (Schwartz, 2016: 3).

brother was. Rebekah's mother is not mentioned, although this was not unusual as one was identified by the male head of your household. Intriguingly, the author does not draw a link between Rebekah and Isaac as being cousins. However, Westermann (1981:412) makes a valid argument that Rebekah's origins were specifically mentioned as an important piece of information. Perhaps this was the author's subtle attempt at alerting readers to their connection with each other because if it were not important, the author would most likely have left it out.

#### **4.2.3. Isaac's prayer about Rebekah's barrenness (Gen 25: 21)**

After the introduction of Isaac and Rebekah, the author states that "Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was childless" (Gen 25: 21). Westermann (1981:412) comments that "verse 21 is stylistically clumsy" as one would anticipate a sentence that begins: "But Rebekah was barren...". Westermann makes a valid point, as there is no coherence between verse 21 and verse 20. Verse 21 starts abruptly, and perhaps the problem is the gap of twenty years which the author does not account for. Yet the author purposefully adds Isaac's age as an important piece of information. Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah and at the end of the narrative, the narrator adds that he was sixty years old when his sons were born. Twenty years are covered in a few sentences. For twenty years Rebekah was childless. Rebekah waits 20 years, yet the audience does not wait long to see the shift in her infertile status.

Rebekah's barrenness is recorded in a brief sentence. Scholars who have interpreted this text, have done so very briefly too, by merely noting that Isaac prayed because Rebekah was barren (Fretheim 1994:520; Meyers 2000:143; DePreter 2011:50). Joan Comay (1995:283) and Esther Fuchs (1999:130) have added some dramatic flair to their interpretation, by claiming that Isaac pleaded with God in his prayer. On the other hand, Mark Roncace and Deborah Whitehead (2009:114) argue that Isaac is appealing to God about his wife's infertility. Rachel Havrelock (2008:160) states that Isaac is acting as a proxy for Rebekah, yet this is not made apparent by the author in the text- which merely states that Isaac 'prayed'.

Consequently, the author could be linking barrenness to God. Isaac praying to God about his wife's barrenness shows that God was responsible for opening and closing women's wombs. According to Walter Brueggemann (1982:214) "[t]he role of the mother and the father in this birth narrative is that of prayer. It is their task to cast themselves solely on God (cf. Ps. 55:22). To pray as they must is to know that life is given as a gift". If Brueggemann's argument is accurate, then a single sentence can prove Isaac was a man of God. One who went to the source which could fulfil the continuation of his lineage. Gerald Janzen (1993:94) states that Gen 25:



21, gives “the impression that Isaac’s faith consists simply in praying, believingly and receiving an immediate positive answer”.

It is made clear after Isaac and Rebekah got married, that he loved her (Gen 24: 67). One could conclude that Isaac’s prayer to God comes from a compassionate and loving husband. Yet the debate is whether Isaac’s intentions were self-serving, out of love towards his wife, or both? No indication is given in the text as to Rebekah’s situation as a woman without a child. Isaac’s prayer causes scholars to question when he prayed, and when he received God’s response. Scholars have many hypotheses, Olivia DePreter (2011:50) argues that the prayer took place before Rebekah had endured the twenty years of barrenness. DePreter (2011:50) makes this argument based on the text stating that “Rebekah face[d] twenty years of barrenness before God hears Isaac’s prayer”. Whereas Cheryl Exum (1985:78) and Meyers (2000:143) state that after twenty years of marriage that Isaac prays to God about Rebekah’s infertility, shortly before she conceives. They follow a chronological order to the text. I do not agree with either argument. I think it would be more sense had Isaac prayed after some time of marriage and no children were conceived yet.

According to G Charles Aalders (1981:78), the twenty years of barrenness could be viewed as a response to Isaac’s faith being tested, and thus when Isaac goes to God in prayer, he finds refuge in God answering his prayer. This statement made by Aalders could suggest that Rebekah’s barrenness was not about her, but rather the result of Isaac’s faith being tested. However, DePreter (2011:54) states that childbearing is a gift from God; thus Rebekah “experience[s] barrenness as a test of [her] faith.”. DePreter’s argument is speculative as the text does not reveal anything about either Rebekah’s or Isaac’s faith. The author is only concerned about Isaac who prayed; therefore, Aalders’ argument is more plausible since Isaac is the one seen praying to God for children. Hence, the more likely scenario is that Isaac’s faith is being tested and not Rebekah’s.

Brueggemann (1982:212) argues that Isaac and Rebekah must trust in the power of God. This narrative is not about a problem in biology, but rather a statement about God’s power and the need for His promise to be fulfilled (Brueggemann 1982:212). Aalders (1981:78) states that God’s promises are not fulfilled the way humans expect them to be. Isaac and Rebekah are put into the same situation as Abraham and Sarah, hence serving as a reminder but also a climax to Isaac and Rebekah’s narrative. It serves to keep the audience on the edge of their seats in anticipation of whether Isaac and Rebekah would have the same fate as Abraham and Sarah.

Brueggemann (1982:212) reasons that birth for Isaac and Rebekah had to happen out of barrenness, as it did for Abraham and Sarah (Gen 11: 30). Arthur Herbert (1962:70) states that Genesis 25: 21 displays how birth is proof of God's activity; as father, mother and God are all partners in procreation.

Isaac's prayer is followed by God granting his request, yet the author does not indicate why and when God responds to Isaac's prayer. Due to the narrative not mentioning the precise time it took for God to answer, scholars are forced to resort to a more generalised interpretation. Some scholars interpret God's response as being an immediate one (Janzen 1993:94; Kroeger & Evans 2002:16). Others take a safer route and merely record that God granted Isaac's prayer (Comay 1995:283; Westermann 1981:412; Clifford & Murphy 1990:28; Meyers 2000:143). The author could be attempting to express that the importance is not in the time God takes to answer Isaac's prayer, but rather the act of answering which holds more value. Thus, I concur with the scholars who merely acknowledge that God answered Isaac's prayer.

Westermann (1981:412) rightly argues that "we cannot derive from this what happened and what was said". However, this is a story brought to us from a patriarchal period; so, the details are lost and all that exists is this brief narration (Westermann 1981:412). Scholars cannot determine the motifs behind why Isaac prays to God for a child, or why Rebekah remained infertile for all those years. However, one could theorise that there was a perceived need, and therefore Isaac asked God to meet the need. It could also be a prayer that serves as a reminder to God, being the one who promised a long line of descendants to Abraham.

#### **4.2.4. Rebekah's unborn babies struggle in her womb (Gen 25: 22)**

A twist occurs in Rebekah's pregnancy, as the account reports that Rebekah felt "the children struggled inside her". This leads to her asking the question "Why is this happening to me?" (Gen 25:22). It does not appear that she is posing the question to anyone, thus it appears to be a rhetorical one. It is also possible that Rebekah was talking to herself. When reading Rebekah's response to what she is feeling, one can sense that there may be a feeling of concern and worry. The NET Bible (2019:note 54W) states that "[t]he Hebrew word used here suggests a violent struggle that was out of the ordinary".<sup>38</sup> It is no surprise that when Rebekah

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<sup>38</sup> The NET Bible (2019) has various translator notes which I have consulted with while do a re-reading of these narratives. The letters like "W" refers to the name of the specific note on page 54 that I refer to here. This applies to all other citations that I make use of in this chapter.

experienced the babies ‘jostling’ within her womb, she protested by going to inquire of the Lord.<sup>39</sup> The question that is posed by Rebekah “reflects a growing despair over the struggle of the unborn children” (NET, 2019:note 54X).

Scholars have various interpretations about the jostling of unborn babies, and the protest that Rebekah makes. Some scholars merely report what the text says (Fuchs 1999:130; Fretheim 1994:521; Kroeger & Evans 2002:16; Schwartz & Kaplan 2007:125), while Westermann (1981:413) says that Rebekah thought the babies ‘tangling’ in her womb was a bad omen, and thus cried out in lament. There is no way of knowing whether this is what Rebekah thought, as the text only indicates her questioning what was happening in her womb. The question does suggest a level of concern and urgency to find out what was occurring, as the text says that Rebekah felt a struggle- and some scholars interpret this as her having pregnancy “troubles” or “pain” (Clifford & Murphy 1990:28; Schwartz & Kaplan 2007:125). However, there is a difference between the feeling of jostling and pain- and at this stage, Rebekah was probably not aware that she had two foetuses in her womb. The narrator does not indicate how far along Rebekah was in her pregnancy. Thus, one could assume that perhaps this was Rebekah’s first-time experiencing movement in her womb, and being a first-time mother, she might have felt concerned. What we do not know, is whether Rebekah’s concern is for herself or her unborn children (Clifford & Murphy 1990:28). Westermann (1981:413) argues that Rebekah’s lament is a result/ expression of fear of death, having a miscarriage, or possibly fearing the destiny of the child that is yet to be born. It could also be a matter of whether life is worth all the suffering Rebekah was enduring (Fretheim 1994:521).

Scholars disagree about the exact translation and implication of Rebekah’s cry/protest. Brenner and Van Dijk-Hemmes (1993:92) and Catherine Kroeger and Mary Evans (2002:16) argue that Rebekah’s cry is a prayer to God portraying that she has reached rock bottom, which is why they translate her question as “if it is to be this way, why do I live?”. Rebekah is seen as no longer relying on her husband for help and answers; instead, she takes the initiative to ask God about her situation (Kroeger & Evans 2002:17). Kroeger and Evans (2002:22) state that

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<sup>39</sup> By this I mean that as a first-time mother you are not always aware of what it would feel like to be pregnant, and thus some mothers are overly cautious. Some mothers-to-be are also overly cautious because perhaps they had miscarriages prior to or are intent on ensuring that nothing bad happens to their unborn baby. If a woman struggled to fall pregnant, this could also be a reason for her to be careful and cautious during her pregnancy. It is also possible that feeling something different in your womb could lead one to become concerned about what might be happening? Technology was not as advanced as it is today, where mothers can have ultrasounds to check that everything is okay with their unborn babies.

Rebekah asks God about her complications without Isaac, although this is not explicitly stated. However, the cry is interpreted- it indicates Rebekah's anxiety about what was occurring in her womb.

#### **4.2.5. Rebekah encounters God (Gen 25: 22-23)**

God responds to Rebekah's question, and Brueggemann (1982:215) argues that "the narrator wants us to know we are not faced with a physiological problem of pregnancy. Rather, we are confronted with a theological reality (v. 23)". A theological reality that God had given Rebekah important sons to give birth to. Especially Jacob who would continue the line of Abraham and Isaac. Westermann (1981:412) states that the oracle in these verses is independent of the rest of the narrative. This could be accurate according to how the narrative is structured. There is a possibility that this oracle was added later, as it is extra information that, if left out, the narrative would still be comprehensible.

The answer which Rebekah receives appears to be both theological and prophetic, as it seems to be a prophecy about the sons she is carrying. The prophecy could be about how the birth will take place, or it could be about her son's future- which would explain why later Rebekah deceives her husband to ensure that the prophecy comes true. The jostling in the womb is thus symbolic of the prophecy as sibling rivalry is already taking place within the womb. Havrelock (2008:160) argues that Rebekah has a divine encounter while being pregnant, instead of before conception. This statement leads one to ask: did Rebekah's elevated status as a pregnant woman allow her to encounter God?

Furthermore, scholars question who Rebekah was consulting about her complications, and according to Herbert (1962:70) and Westermann (1981:413), if one spoke of "enquiring of the Lord" in ancient Israel, it would mean that someone was "consulting the oracle at the shrine". This is done by going to an "unspecified shrine where a priest or prophet would communicate a divine message to her about the meaning of the strange struggle within her." (Maher 1982:146). Scholars agree that people consulted God, whether through direct prayer, oracle, priest, or prophet (Fretheim 1994:521; Schwartz & Kaplan 2007:125).

The response to Rebekah's inquiry is explained in verse 23, in which God tells Rebekah that she is going to give birth to twins who will be the founders of great nations and will be rivals

to each other- with the one son being subjected to the other.<sup>40</sup> Maher (1982:146) and Meyers (2000:143) state that the oracle depicts how future relations between siblings and descendants will look. This prophecy given to Rebekah makes her the only matriarch to ever receive a direct message from God (Meyers 2000:143). However, she is not the only woman, as Hagar also received a direct message from God (Gen 16).

Aalders (1981:79), Fuchs (1999:130) and DePreter (2011:50) argue an important detail: that God gives a verbal response to Rebekah's enquiry, while Isaac does not get any verbal response other than his request being granted. Thus, could Rebekah be a more prominent figure in this narrative than Isaac? DePreter (2011:50) argues that this is the case, as Rebekah receives God's plan for her children, and is tasked with ensuring that His plan comes to fruition. According to Kroeger and Evans (2002:17), the fact that Rebekah was the recipient of the oracle about the future of her children, indicated that she is elevated within the narrative. Rebekah's encounter "binds the divine and the female in the plan to upset the hierarchy of birth order." (Havrelock 2008:160). Another way that this prophecy upsets the balance, is that the genealogical pattern of the male ancestors prepares readers to encounter Isaac's role- yet the focus of the narrative is shifted to Rebekah (Havrelock 2008:160). Fuchs (1999:136) states that God's promise puts an end to her pregnancy pains, but the text does not specify whether Rebekah was in pain with the struggle in her womb. Although it is a possibility, it is more probable that Rebekah is now aware that she is pregnant with two sons and this knowledge eases her concern.

#### **4.2.6. The birth and naming of Isaac and Rebekah's children (Gen 24 - 26)**

When the time came for Rebekah to give birth, she birthed twin boys. The birthing of these two sons is quite a memorable one, as according to Westermann (1981:413), giving birth to twins was undeniably a special situation. However, it could also be a bad omen if it were boys. The reason for this is the question of which son would be the eldest (Westermann 1981:413). This is a reasonable question, as seniority determined who would receive the birthright (Westermann 1981:414). The narrative ends by saying that after twenty years of marriage, Rebekah gave birth.

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<sup>40</sup> These two nations are said to be that of Israel and Edom (Westermann 1981:413). Names are not mentioned in this oracle, and they are only hinted at (Westermann 1981:413).



#### 4.2.7. A comparison of male and female scholars reading of Genesis 25: 19-26

Having analysed the narrative of Rebekah's barrenness I have found that there is much that the male and female scholars that I have consulted agree and disagree upon. Both male and female scholars agree that the Abrahamic line is dependent on Isaac and Rebekah (Aalders 1981:77; DePreter 2011:49; Jeansonne 1990:55). The author starts with Rebekah being barren which places a climactic emphasis on the need to continue the family lineage of Abraham. Scholars like Richard Clifford and Roland Murphy (1990:28) argue that this narrative is solely based on Isaac's descendants while other male scholars like Westermann (1981:411-412) and Maher (1982:146) argue that this narrative's sole purpose is to act as an introduction to the narrative of Jacob. Female scholars like DePreter (2011:49) and Sharon Pace Jeansonne (1990:55) do not comment on this but rather focus on the important role that Rebekah will play in birthing the descendants of Isaac for the future of Israel.

The text reveals in one sentence that Isaac prayed to God on behalf of Rebekah because she was barren. Female scholars like Comay (1971:283), Fuchs (1999:130) and others interpret this part of the text differently as they argue that Isaac is doing more than just praying. They argue that he is pleading and appealing to God to give Rebekah children by acting as her proxy. Male scholars such as Janzen (1993:94) differ by remarking on the act of Isaac's praying as being a display of his character. They argue that this shows that he is a faithful man of God. Both male and female scholars agree that Rebekah's barrenness is a test of faith however they differ regarding who is being tested. Male scholars like Aalders (1981:78) argues that Isaac's faith is being tested whereas female scholars such as DePreter (2011:54) argues that it is Rebekah's faith that is being tested. Feminist scholars go further and focus on the time that Rebekah must endure being barren before Isaac's prayer is answered and Rebekah conceives (Exum 1985:78; Meyers 2000:143; DePreter 2011:50). This is not something that male scholars focus on.

After Rebekah conceives, she experiences a jostling in her womb and cries out. Both male and female scholars alike argue that Rebekah's response to the jostling is received with a verbal response from God. Female scholars argue that this response was a divine encounter and that Rebekah had been given important information regarding her son's future (Havrelock 2008:160). Contrary to this, male scholars like Westermann (1981:412) argue that this response was most likely an interlude that was added in later.



I conclude that there are both similarities and differences in how male and female scholars read the narrative of Rebekah. However, female scholars tend to spend more time giving a voice to a previously neglected character whereas male scholars tend to downplay Rebekah's role within this narrative.

#### **4.2.8. Concluding remarks**

Rebekah is painted as being a striking second matriarch who is more than just her beauty (Jeansonne, 1990: 53). Rebekah played a very influential role within this narrative. The text reveals that she endured twenty years of barrenness. Isaac prayed on her behalf because she was barren, and God granted this request as she fell pregnant. However, her pregnancy was not a smooth one as she had begun to feel jostling in her womb. This feeling might have felt strange. Consequently, this led to her actively going to seek guidance from God. It is at this point that Rebekah received an oracle about the two sons whom she would give birth to. Through Rebekah giving birth to Jacob and Esau, she has helped to ensure that the Abrahamic lineage continues. Rebekah then plays an active role in ensuring Jacob gets the birth right from Isaac. When Jacob flees to Haran to escape the wrath of his brother, he refers to himself as being "Rebekah's son" (Gen 29:12). This highlights the important role that Rebekah played in this narrative. It is at this point where the narrative of Rachel begins.

#### **4.3. Rachel's struggle with infertility as narrated in Genesis 29:31 – 30: 1-24**

Rachel's story is closely connected to that of Rebekah, since by marrying Jacob, Rachel became Rebekah's daughter-in-law. This occurred because Rebekah and Jacob deceived Isaac for the birthright blessing that belonged to the eldest son, Esau. Successful in their ploy, Rebekah feared for Jacob's life and sent him to her homeland. With the birthright, Jacob leaves his mother and father and sets out for Haran, and Isaac gives him strict instructions to find a wife from the house of Bethuel.<sup>41</sup> Jacob's search for a wife parallels Abraham's servant who was sent to search for a wife for Isaac. As Jacob approaches Haran, he meets Rachel at a well<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Bethuel was the father of Rebekah and the maternal grandfather of Jacob.

<sup>42</sup> Jacob, like Abraham's servant, finds a bride at the well. Jeansonne (1990:70) argues that this similar well scene causes readers to expect that Jacob will have a successful negotiation of a bride. Jeansonne (1990:71) refers to Jacob meeting Rachel for the first time, as being a pastoral scene that suggests fertility. It is therefore ironic that Rachel struggles with fertility (Jeansonne 1990:71). Jacob unsuccessfully tries to be alone with Rachel, but the shepherds are waiting for the other shepherds to come so that they may open the well (Jeansonne 1990:71). The shepherds waiting is a foreshadowing of the years that Jacob must wait to marry Rachel (Jeansonne 1990:71). Jacob tries to impress Rachel by removing the stone at the well (Jeansonne 1990:71). Janzen (1993:115) agrees

in the field, and immediately captivated by her beauty, Jacob sets forth to marry her. When Jacob meets Laban,<sup>43</sup> he agrees to let Jacob work for him for seven years to marry Rachel, yet no input is given as to whether Rachel feels the same way about Jacob, and whether she wants to marry him. The time comes for Jacob to marry Rachel, but Laban deceives him into marrying Leah instead. Jacob, still intent on marrying Rachel, makes another deal with Laban; and this time marries Rachel. Jacob has two wives from whom he may gain heirs.

Scholars interpret this narrative which encompasses the heirs of Jacob as an interlude that forms part of a bigger narrative. Karin Andriolo (1973:1667) states that the narrative of Leah and Rachel “is a symmetric inversion of the Jacob-Esau story”. Westermann (1981:463) argues that this narrative is part of the Jacob-Laban episode. Brueggemann (1982:207-8) says that the structure of the narrative involving Jacob is “arranged in concentric circles” and “at the very centre is the story of the birth of the children (29:31 – 30:24)”. However, Clifford and Murphy (1990:31) state that this narrative appears to be a story within a story, incorporating the genealogy of two rival sisters. Finally, John Scullion (1992:216) argues that this narrative is arranged in such a way that it follows a birth formula/pattern which hides the many years it could take to have twelve children. This formula is presented in a narrative framework that consists of many events, lots of tension, climaxes, and resolutions (Scullion 1992:216). Brueggemann (1982:252) states that the skilful narrating guides the audience from tranquillity to deception, and finally to love and favouritism which leads to the next scene.

Based on the consensus that Gen 29: 31-30:23 is merely seen as an interlude/genealogy of Jacob’s children; it is my view that scholars do not give this specific narrative enough credit. Not enough validation is given to the wives and surrogates who give birth to Jacob’s children. Due to the theme being infertility, I have demarcated this chapter to only do a re-reading on the sections which incorporate Rachel’s experience of barrenness; Genesis 29: 31 - 30: 1-24.

#### **4.3.1. Genesis 29: 31 – 30: 1- 24 (NET)**

**29: 31** When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he enabled her to become pregnant while Rachel remained childless. **32** So Leah became pregnant and gave

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that there could be a link between Jacobs’ opening of well scene, and the opening of the four women’s wombs (Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah). I think Janzen’s view is mere speculation.

<sup>43</sup> Laban is Rebekah’s brother, Jacob’s uncle. Laban has two daughters, Rachel, and Leah. Thus, Laban is Jacob’s uncle and Rachel, and Leah are his cousins.

birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, “The LORD has looked with pity on my oppressed condition. Surely my husband will love me now.”

**33** She became pregnant again and had another son. She said, “Because the LORD heard that I was unloved, he gave me this one too.” So she named him Simeon.

**34** She became pregnant again and had another son. She said, “Now this time my husband will show me affection, because I have given birth to three sons for him.” That is why he was named Levi.

**35** She became pregnant again and had another son. She said, “This time I will praise the LORD.” That is why she named him Judah. Then she stopped having children.

**30:1** When Rachel saw that she could not give Jacob children, she became jealous of her sister. She said to Jacob,

“Give me children or I’ll die!” **2** Jacob became furious with Rachel and exclaimed, “Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?” **3** She replied, “Here is my servant Bilhah! Sleep with her so that she can bear children for me and I can have a family through her.”

**4** So Rachel gave him her servant Bilhah as a wife, and Jacob slept with her. **5** Bilhah became pregnant and gave Jacob a son. **6** Then Rachel said, “God has vindicated me. He has responded to my prayer and given me a son.” That is why she named him Dan.

**7** Bilhah, Rachel’s servant, became pregnant again and gave Jacob another son. **8** Then Rachel said, “I have fought a desperate struggle with my sister, but I have won.” So she named him Naphtali.

**9** When Leah saw that she had stopped having children, she gave her servant Zilpah to Jacob as a wife. **10** Soon Leah’s servant Zilpah gave Jacob a son. **11** Leah said, “How fortunate!” So she named him Gad.

**12** Then Leah’s servant Zilpah gave Jacob another son. **13** Leah said, “How happy I am, for women will call me happy!” So she named him Asher.

**14** At the time of the wheat harvest Reuben went out and found some mandrake plants in a field and brought them to his mother Leah. Rachel said to Leah, “Give me some of your son’s mandrakes.” **15** But Leah replied, “Wasn’t it enough that you’ve taken away my husband? Would you take away my son’s mandrakes too?” “All right,” Rachel said, “he may go to bed with you tonight in exchange for your son’s mandrakes.” **16** When Jacob came in from the fields that evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, “You must sleep with me because I have paid for your services with my son’s mandrakes.” So he went to bed with her that night. **17** God paid attention to Leah; she became pregnant and gave Jacob a son for the fifth time. **18** Then Leah said, “God has granted me a reward because I gave my servant to my husband as a wife.” So she named him Issachar. **19** Leah became pregnant again and gave Jacob a son for the sixth time. **20** Then Leah said, “God has given me a good gift. Now my husband will honor me because I have given him six sons.” So she named him Zebulun. **21** After that she gave birth to a daughter and named her Dinah. **22** Then God took note of Rachel. He paid attention to her and enabled her to become pregnant. **23** She became pregnant and gave birth to a son. Then she said, “God has taken away my shame.” **24** She named him Joseph, saying, “May the LORD give me yet another son.”

#### **4.3.2. Rachel’s Barrenness (Genesis 29: 31)**

The author informs the readers in Gen 29: 31 that Leah was fertile while Rachel was barren. The text reads that “[w]hen the Lord saw that Leah was unloved, he enabled her to become pregnant while Rachel remained childless” (Gen 29: 31). This meant that “as Jacob’s true love and the primary object of his affections, [Rachel] had an advantage over Leah” (NET, 2019:note 64I). Jeansonne (1990:74) rightly questions what the consequences of Jacob's preference for Rachel have for the rest of the characters in this narrative, namely: “Leah and Rachel, who are forced to live their lives inextricably bound together through no desire or plan of their own”.

This claim that “Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah,” introduces a conflict/tension which is inescapable (Westermann 1981:468; Scullion 1992:216). Most scholars interpret this verse as

God “saw that Leah was hated”, thus God blessed her with children while Rachel was barren (Aalders 1981:116; Brueggemann 1982:253; Jeansonne 1990:6, 74; Scullion 1992:216). Westermann (1981:473) argues that God intervenes according to what God sees (saw and opened). Thus, God displays mercy and righteousness (Aalders 1981:116). One can agree with Westermann that because Jacob preferred Rachel to Leah, it caused conflict/tension in their household. This can be seen in the naming of Leah’s children which will be discussed later.

Schwartz and Kaplan (2007:118) state that this narrative proves that the rights of Jacobs’ wives are to be protected, yet even though Jacob is more favourable of Rachel, he does not reject Leah (Schwartz & Kaplan 2007:118). Schwartz and Kaplan present Jacob as being a man who lives up to his responsibility as head of his house. Jeansonne (1990:74) questions the author’s portrayal of Jacob as a noble character, however, Jeansonne has a point- as focusing on Jacob’s preference for Rachel, draws one’s attention away from the fact that Jacob could be greedy. Jacob insisted on having the woman he “loved”. Yet one can agree with Schwartz and Kaplan that irrespective of whether Jacob could be greedy, he takes his responsibility as a husband to both wives seriously.

It can, however, be argued that the reason for Rachel’s infertility was because of Jacob, as he did not love his wives equally. Scholars such as Aalders (1981:116), Maher (1982:172) and Schwartz and Kaplan (2007:118) argues that God compensated Leah because Jacob loved Rachel more than her. Schwartz and Kaplan (2007:118) also argue that by making Leah fertile and Rachel barren, God is changing the family dynamic. Surely this could have led to Jacob changing his impression of Leah (Schwartz & Kaplan 2007:118). Andriolo (1973:1667) states that God is allowing Leah to be fertile. According to Tribble (1978:34), Leah was fertile because she was used by her father to trick Jacob, thus God intervened on her behalf. The text gives a clear reason for God allowing Leah to be fertile, as she was ‘unloved’. Scholars may be correct that God is compensating Leah.

Herbert (1962:92) and Tribble (1978:34) argue that God is intervening on behalf of a mistreated/neglected woman. One could question this, as is the author implying that Leah was more mistreated? Tribble (1978:34) answers this as she argues that the favour God displays towards Leah does not mean He discriminates against Rachel; hence He is not punishing her.



Instead, God is blessing Leah (Trible 1978:34).<sup>44</sup> Aalders (1981:118) agrees with Trible (1978:34) and states that “it would be difficult to interpret Rachel’s barrenness as an act of wrong against her”. Clifford and Murphy (1990:31) disagree with Trible (1978:34) and Aalders (1981:118) as they state that being infertile was an intense and powerful form of anguish for Israelite women.<sup>45</sup> This could therefore lead Rachel to feel as if she was being punished. I am in favour of Clifford and Murphy’s understanding.

Furthermore, Irmtraud Fischer (2012:23) argues that God is compassionate towards Leah but seems to show no compassion towards Rachel as she remains infertile. The narrator explicitly leaves no room for doubt about how God feels about Rachel and Leah, as this is determined by whether the women could have children or not (Janzen 1993:113). However, Janzen (1993:113) places the blame for Rachel’s barrenness/punishment on Jacob. Jacob’s preferences have consequences, and Rachel suffers because of it, yet Janzen sees God’s punishment as being aimed at Jacob by making his preferred wife childless. Rachel suffers greatly because of her barrenness (Claassens 2020:20).

Westermann (1981:473) states that the report of Rachel’s barrenness instils suspense in the audience regarding what will transpire. The narrator also amplifies Rachel’s barrenness by Leah successfully bearing children (Brueggemann 1982:253; Jeansonne 1990:75). It is these “two motifs of the unloved and childless wife [that] determine what follows.” (Westermann 1981:473). The narrative leaves no room for doubt about Jacob’s feelings, as it is mentioned three times that Rachel is loved by Jacob (Havrelock 2008:161).<sup>46</sup> However, it is not clear what Rachel and Leah feel for their father, husband, or each other (Jeansonne 1990:74). This could be because the author was male and hence is only interested in the feelings of the male characters. It is no surprise to find that Rachel, like the two matriarchs (Sarah and Rebekah) before her, is faced with barrenness (Brueggemann 1982:253). Brueggemann (1982:253) says that for now, all that is known is that the mother who will give birth to “the next generation of Israel is barren”.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Although Trible (1978:34) makes a valuable point, her theory seems flawed. If one says that God is intervening on behalf of the mistreated woman, why would God do this by mistreating another woman? Though Trible (1978:34) says that God is not punishing Rachel, her barrenness is a form of punishment.

<sup>45</sup> 1 Sam 1:5-8 could be evidence of this statement made by Clifford and Murphy.

<sup>46</sup> See Genesis 29: 18, 20 and 30.

<sup>47</sup> Rachel is not the only mother to give birth to the next generation. Leah and the handmaids/surrogates Bilhah and Zilpah give birth to children who form part of the twelve tribes of Israel, yet their stories are downplayed.



#### **4.3.3. The impact that Leah's fertility had on Rachel (Gen 29: 32-35)**

God saw that Leah was unloved and thus He opened her womb (Gen 29: 31). Subsequently, Leah gave birth to four sons whom she named Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. All four sons are named based on how she felt. Leah links her relation to Jacob and God in her naming of her sons (Janzen 1993:115). The first two indicate her relation to God and her husband (Gen 29: 32-33). The third son emphasises that her husband should show her 'affection' (Gen 29: 34). Leah has named these three sons with the hope that she too will be loved/favoured by Jacob. Her fourth son focuses only on giving God praise (Gen 29: 35). The author could be showing Leah has no hope anymore of having Jacob's affection or she could have received it and thus does not mention it anymore. Juliana Claassens (2020:20) argues that the names Leah gives to her sons is a reflection of the rejection she feels from Jacob and subsequently this shows the pain she experiences by not being the focus of Jacob's love.

The sons that Leah has magnified the envy that Rachel felt, and it is a constant reminder that she does not have children (Frymer-Kensky 2000:139). According to Aalders (1981:117), Leah's fertility is a deep source of jealousy for Rachel. It leads to her going to question Jacob and demand that he gives her children too. Brueggemann (1982:254) argues that the names that are given to the children are devices used by Leah to celebrate but also to gloat. The text makes it clear that the names Leah gives to her four sons are celebratory, but also a reminder to Rachel of the reason why she is barren. It is because she is favoured, and Leah is not. Thus, it is understandable that Rachel would take this matter up with Jacob.

#### **4.3.4. Rachel protests her barrenness (Gen 30: 1)**

Rachel noticed that after Leah had given birth to four sons, she remained childless. The author states that "When Rachel saw that she could not give Jacob children, she became jealous of her sister." (Gen 30: 1). In this verse, the author makes it clear that Rachel wanted to be equal to her sister, and that it was similarly important for her to be a mother. According to Fuchs (1999:130) and Claassens (2020:20) argue that Genesis 30: 1 depicts Rachel to be a jealous co-

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Perhaps Rachel's son Joseph does play a bigger role than the other children, but that does not mean Rachel should be the only female who is given recognition for continuing the family line. Bilhah and Zilpah remain silent throughout the narrative. They are merely dutiful handmaids oppressed by the hierarchal structure found in this narrative.

wife<sup>48</sup> who is desperate to be a fertile wife. Scholars record that Rachel was jealous and envious of her sister (Aalders 1981:117; Jeansonne 1990:76; Dresner 1991:448). Surely, Rachel must have wondered why her sister was able to have children while she had none. This is where one can begin to see the effects of God only opening Leah's womb.

The author continues by allowing Rachel to speak for the first time, and she makes an accusatory statement to Jacob. She said to Jacob "Give me children or I'll die!" (Gen 30:1). It appears that her not having children was so bad she would rather die, as there was no point in the future if she were not able to be a mother. This direct speech emphasised the importance of a female having children, as to parallel it with death was quite a statement. According to Westermann (1981:473) and Fischer (2012:24), this speech appears to be a marital argument. Jeansonne (1990:76) states that Rachel's first words are dramatic and provoke readers to sympathise with the distress that she could be feeling while pouring her heart out to her husband. It is hence reasonable that she attacks her husband as someone needs to hear her plea (Westermann 1981:473). Rachel may confront her husband because she acknowledges her limits and turns to the one whom she thinks holds the power, Jacob (Havrelock 2008:163). Jacob is now in conflict with his second wife over the lack of children, as she not only blames him but also places guilt on him for her lack of children (Brueggemann 1982:251). Samuel Dresner (1991:448) says that Rachel is accusing her husband of not fulfilling his duties as a husband.

This begs the question of whether Rachel was driven to make this request out of envy or despair. Scholars ask this question when looking at this text, and Comay (1995:281), Janzen (1993:116), Dresner (1991:448) and Havrelock (2008:163) says that it was Rachel's envy of Leah leads to her statement. Some scholars state that Rachel complained because of her despair (Westermann 1981:474; Fuchs 1999:130; Dresner 1991:448; Kroeger & Evans 2002:20). Though it is a possibility that Rachel was driven by both envy and despair.

This author makes it clear that Rachel is suffering, and therefore she decides to cry out in demand to her husband (Westermann 1981:474). Her suffering is intensified with bitterness as Leah and her sons are a constant reminder to Rachel of what she does not have (Westermann 1981:474). Terence Fretheim (1994:555) states that Rachel blames Jacob for not being able to conceive. Westermann (1981:474) argues that Rachel had no future without children. The

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<sup>48</sup> Fuchs (1999:135) argues that there is a link between the motif of motherhood, and that of female rivalry. Rachel is jealous because she is barren, while her sister/co-wife has given Jacob children.

mention of dying could reflect her concern about having security and inheritance should something happen to Jacob (Fretheim 1994:555). This narrative shows the desperation and desire that women like Rachel had to bear sons (Fuchs 1999:136), as her plea reflects the position in which women were valued (Kroeger & Evans 2002:20). Thus, if women were incapable of having children, they did not have a life and risked losing the life they could have had (Kroeger & Evans 2002:20). Irrespective of doubting that Rachel will die because of the suffering she endures being barren, one cannot deny the intense feeling that she must have felt (Jeansonne 1990:76). If this were the case, it would stand to reason why Rachel protested about her infertility in the way she did. It is subsequently ironic that Rachel dies- not because she was barren but rather due to her fertility (Fuchs 1999:136; Kroeger & Evans 2002:20).<sup>49</sup>

Although Jacob's need for heirs has come from Leah, he must keep Rachel's legacy intact (Havrelock 2008:163). Rachel's choice of words indicates that infertility is equated with death and that her story will not be told if a child is not born by her (Havrelock 2008:163). This statement of protest does not only oppose infertility but also the limits of a female's independence (Havrelock 2008:163). Tension climaxes between Rachel and Jacob, and there is a build-up of frustration from both parties which causes discord between them (Scullion 1992:216).

#### **4.3.5. Jacob's response to Rachel's protest (Gen 30: 2)**

The author indicates that "Jacob became furious with Rachel". Here Jacob was angered and offended by Rachel's accusation, and immediately responded with the question: "Am I in the place of God,<sup>50</sup> who has kept you from having children?" Jacob points out that there is no way he can be blamed for Rachel's lack of children, and that only God can control matters of the womb. Indirectly Jacob is shifting the blame from himself to God, as he does not want to take any responsibility. The author presents Jacob as an unsympathetic husband (Jeansonne 1990:76), thus Jacob's interest could seem self-serving. Kroeger and Evans (2002:20) and Jeansonne (1990:76) both state that Jacob's response indicates a level of frustration, however, this could be toning down what he really must have felt when Rachel approached him with her request. Janzen (1993:116) argues that Jacob's anger may be masking the fact that he is frustrated because he has not had a child with the wife he loves. Both Fuchs (1999:130) and

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<sup>49</sup> Rachel dies on the road after giving birth to her son Benjamin.

<sup>50</sup> Westermann (1981:473) argues that "the king of Israel says the same when he too is faced with an impossible demand (2 Kings 5:7)". - "Am I in the place of God?"

Roncace and Whitehead (2009:114) state that the author expects the reader to “sympathize with Jacob’s angry response”. However, Fuchs (1999:130) argues that Jacob’s response was chastising Rachel both angrily and self-righteously.

Scholars agree that Jacob’s response implies that Rachel’s infertility is something that is out of his control, and he cannot accept any responsibility (Aalders 1981:117; Brueggemann 1982:253; Jeansonne 1990:76; Fuchs 1999:130; Frymer-Kensky 2000:139; Dresner 1991:448; Havrelock 2008:163). Some scholars argue that Jacob was placing the blame elsewhere, as he has already fathered children with Leah, and thus could not be to blame (Brueggemann 1982:253; Fretheim 1994:253; Dresner 1991:448). Furthermore, the mere fact that Jacob has heirs from Leah, could suggest that he is not concerned about gaining children from Rachel (Fuchs 1999:130; Frymer-Kensky 2000:139). Jacob’s reply could be him theologically correcting Rachel, as the future is up to God- yet it is his anger that suggests otherwise (Brueggemann 1982:253; Fretheim 1994:555).

Rachel who complained out of desperation is accused of interpreting the situation incorrectly (Havrelock 2008:163). If she had never spoken out about her situation, she might not have known where to direct her unhappiness (Havrelock 2008:163). Jacob does not possess the power to create/give life; however, God does (Havrelock 2008:163). Whether it is birth or barrenness, fertility, or the denial of fertility, it all remains in God’s hands (Brueggemann 1982:253). The question is whether God will cooperate and give Rachel what she longs for (Havrelock 2008:163).

#### **4.3.6. Rachel takes matters into her own hands (Gen 30: 3-8)**

At first glance, Rachel does not express in which way Jacob must give her children (Gen 30: 1). Reading further, we see that she figures out a plan to get children from him (Gen 30: 3). She is thus not relying on God to fix her problem of infertility, but rather, taking measures, to acquire children. She decides to give Bilhah to Jacob as a surrogate.<sup>51</sup> Jacob agreed to Rachel’s

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<sup>51</sup> The reader is “reminded of the earlier case of surrogate motherhood”, in Genesis 16:2 between “Sarah and Hagar. Will this event prompt similar tragedy? Surprisingly, the cases could not be more different.” (Brueggemann 1982:253; Jeansonne 1990:76; Dresner 1991:448). According to Havrelock (2008:166) “[S]urrogacy is a measure taken by Sarah, Rachel and Leah as a means of bypassing the obstacles to conception by claiming the body of another woman as an extension of their own. In addition to the patriarchal reverberations of wives compelled to reproduce for their husbands forcing their servants to give birth for them, surrogacy also shows how birth is an occasion in which multiple female bodies operate in tandem. In biblical narrative birth is a moment of female

demand for him to lie with Bilhah so that she can be a surrogate.<sup>52</sup> Kroeger and Evans (2002:20), states that Jacob was a powerless husband who was dictated to by his wives.

It is noticeable that the author does not indicate for how long Rachel was barren, and how long she pondered about her plan to use Bilhah as a surrogate. However, Aalders (1981:110-111) argues that she did not wait long before deciding to give Bilhah to Jacob as a surrogate mother, which could have been due to Leah's prompt pregnancy. Aalders (1981:117) states that Rachel makes use of the same expression that Sarah used, "that through her I too can build a family". Surrogacy was a possible solution to Rachel's childlessness. According to Frymer-Kensky (2000:139), Rachel is not concerned about the family line, but rather that she too has children through a surrogate. This is understandable, as Rachel could be concerned about her future. As seen in chapter 3, a son became the head of the household should his father die. A woman was secure if she was under the authority of the male head.

Scholars disagree about the reason why Rachel opts for a surrogate. Some suggest she was in a 'dire situation and acted out of 'desperation' (Clifford and Murphy 1990:31; Jeansonne 1990:76). The author does not say this; however, Rachel's actions indicate that there must be some urgency behind her demand. The text indicates that Leah has already had four children so this could be a reason for Rachel's sense of urgency. Janzen (1993:116) states that Rachel 'resorts' to giving Bilhah to Jacob as a surrogate, while Fischer (2012:24) positions that she wants children of her own from Jacob, and thus opt to have a surrogate mother. These scholars suggest that Rachel had no other option but to use a surrogate. Frymer-Kensky (2000:139) states that it was out of Rachel's envy of Leah, that she forcefully demanded that Jacob give her children. Comay (1995:281) and Kroeger and Evans (2002:20) argue that Rachel is responding to Jacob's previous protest by giving Bilhah as a surrogate so that she may have children. Dresner (1991:448) states that Jacob's response was demeaning and thus "Rachel sacrifices her pride and brings him her maidservant". These scholars are possibly suggesting that Rachel's decision to take matters into her own hands is either because of envy or because

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communitas when the boundaries between distinct bodies collapse". Having a surrogate is not an easy task for both women involved (Brenner & Van Dijk-Hemmes 1993:100).

<sup>52</sup> Why does Jacob decide to agree to Rachel's demand to have children through Bilhah? Is it because Jacob's love for Rachel was so powerful that he was willing to do anything to make her happy? Is it possible that Jacob wanted more children? Why did Jacob not assert his patriarchal authority over Rachel and deny her request? Unfortunately, there is no information about this, however perhaps the author is showing how much of a role woman played in deciding when and how they acquired children.



of how Jacob responded to her. Comay and Kroeger and Evans argued convincingly on this matter, as it is possible that Rachel felt there was something he could do about her childless situation; namely giving her surrogate children. Essentially, she is indirectly pointing to Jacob's lack of ability to be creative.

Rachel's plan to acquire children through a surrogate is successful, and Bilhah gives birth to two sons whom Rachel names Dan and Naphtali. One questions whether history will repeat itself in Rachel taking Bilhah's children as her own, as scholars are not completely sure whether Rachel truly takes ownership of Bilhah's children. Scholars state that Gen 30: 3 "giving birth upon my knees", could be viewed as an adoption ritual (Herbert 1962:92; Comay 1995:281; Westermann 1981:473; Clifford & Murphy 1990:31; Jeansonne 1990:76). However, Aalders (1981: 117) argues that the text should be interpreted literally, as he states that Rachel wanted to be part of the actual birthing process. Maher (1982:172) disagrees and positions that this verse indicates that Rachel had laid a lawful claim to the children and had followed the legal procedure to become the mother of Bilhah's two sons. Aalders (1981:117) states that only when Rachel named Bilhah's two sons, had she undertaken the role of their mother. Westermann (1981:473) and Dresner (1991:448) make a point of stating that although Dan and Naphtali were born by Bilhah, they will be Rachel's children.

Fretheim (1994:555), states that God seemingly approves of Rachel giving Bilhah to Jacob as a surrogate, and this argument is based on the notion that God Himself is the giver of life. Therefore, Bilhah bearing children shows God has opened her womb. Havrelock (2008:166) says there is a gap between God and Rachel's relationship which needs to be bridged by symbolic acts of progression from barrenness to fertility. Havrelock (2008:166) indirectly argues that Rachel had to understand that God is the giver of life, and until this happens, Rachel will not be able to bear children of her own. Furthermore, Havrelock (2008:166) argues that Rachel is playing the role of a deity by making Bilhah conceive, so that she too may be fertile.

Rachel names her first surrogate son Dan, and the narrator explains the reason for the name when Rachel indicates that "God has vindicated me. He has responded to my prayer and given me a son." (Gen 30: 6). This statement points to Rachel having a relationship with God, as she prayed to Him, and He answered her prayers. The author does not indicate when and how this prayer took place, yet scholars tend to link the name Dan to the reason which Rachel gives (Clifford & Murphy 1990:31; Frymer-Kensky 2000:139; Havrelock 2008:167). Aalders (1981:117) argues that the use of the word 'vindicated' is not a revelation from God, but rather



Rachel's feelings about the situation she finds herself in. Westermann (1981:473), Jeansonne (1990:76), Scullion (1992:217), Janzen (1993:117) and Frymer-Kensky (2000:139) all state the meaning of Dan could also be that 'God judged Rachel favourably'. Herbert (1962:92-93) further suggests that Rachel naming Bilhah's first son Dan- meaning God has judged me- could imply that God is restoring what has been wrongly afflicted. This argument allows one to query what Rachel did that led to her needing restoration from wrongful affliction? Is she being punished for something? One can assume that Rachel's naming Dan has more to do with how she feels, than with how God feels. The name indicates her predicament and distress, but also the positive turn that took place when Bilhah became a successful surrogate.

Bilhah's second son 'Naphtali' is also given this name by Rachel. Rachel names Naphtali on the basis that she has "fought a desperate struggle with my sister, but I have won" (Gen 30:8). Fischer (2012:24) states that the naming of Rachel's second adoptive son "is disconcerting, in that it shows women as being exclusively preoccupied with bearing children". Fischer (2012:24) further argues that this validates the Old Testament accusation that women are reduced to birthing machines. Scholars such as Herbert (1962:93), Brenner and Van Dijk-Hemmes (1993:98) and Havrelock (2008:167) suggest that Naphtali means the "wrestling of" or "I have wrestled". Aalders (1981:117) and Clifford and Murphy (1990:31) state that his name relates to the Hebrew word for 'struggle'. Westermann (191:475) argues that Naphtali could mean "I have fought a fight".

Brenner and Van Dijk-Hemmes (1993:98), Frymer-Kensky (2000:139), and Havrelock (2008;167) suggest that Naphtali means "I have prevailed", thus, indicating that Rachel is winning. Yet what does Rachel think she has won? She has not birthed children yet, and Leah still has more children than her. The text suggests that Rachel has won because she has adopted children and thus overcame her childlessness by way of surrogacy. Janzen (1993:117) and Frymer-Kensky (2000:139) argue that Rachel's focus was to compete with Leah. Thus, she utilises the naming of Bilhah's two sons as a tool to prod Leah with (Havrelock 2008:167). One can see the female rivalry between the two sisters (Westermann 1981:473), yet irrespective of the rivalry, Rachel has been victorious in her plight. However, being able to adopt these two sons does not take away the anguish of not being able to carry a child (Jeansonne 1990:76).

#### **4.3.7. Rachel protests her barrenness a second time and acquires Mandrakes (Gen 30: 14-15)**

The mandrakes narrative interrupts the birth process of the four women namely, Rachel, Leah, and their surrogates Bilhah and Zilpah. One could interpret the interruption as a plot twist about to unfold. Up until this point the narrator has not made any mention of Leah and Rachel's interaction with each other, and it appears as though they have only co-existed as Jacob's wives. Although the narrator does portray the sibling rivalry between them. One sees this through the birthing and naming of their children, and the mandrakes scene shows the full extent of their sibling rivalry. More importantly, the scene shows Rachel's determination to have a child of her own. She was willing to try anything- first surrogacy and now mandrakes. The narrator indirectly showed the readers that for Rachel, surrogacy was not enough- she needed to bear children of her own.

Thus, when Reuben- Leah's son- finds mandrakes during the wheat harvest, Rachel takes this opportunity to request some from Leah (Gen 30: 14). Certain foods or aphrodisiacs were used as a method to increase fertility (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:69). According to Matthews and Benjamin (1993:69) "aphrodisiacs were often shaped like or smelled like the reproductive organs they were expected to stimulate." For example, mandrakes were seen as being an aphrodisiac and a fertility potion that could promote pregnancy (Maher 1982:173; Clifford & Murphy 1990:31; Scullion 1992:217). It was also referred to as being a "love apple" that had magical powers (Aalders 1981:119; Clifford & Murphy 1990:32). Not much is known about mandrakes, other than it was "believed to increase sexual effectiveness." (Brueggemann 1982:251). However, did this mean that it could assist with pregnancy? (Brueggemann 1982:251). Love apples "are the fruit of the yellow flowering mandragora (mandrake)" They are reddish with a soft, tomato-like centre, (Scullion 1992:217; Westermann 1981:475).

The narrator does not show Rachel's request as being a polite one, but rather her tone was more of a demand. Westermann (1981:475) argues that this was the case. Nonetheless, whether it was her tone or the fact that Rachel is the object of Jacob's affection, that leads to Leah declining; her refusal is not a normal one. She denies Rachel by asking two questions, and it is in these questions that we see Leah's envy and hatred towards her sister. Leah says: "Wasn't it enough that you've taken away my husband? Would you take away my son's mandrakes too?" (Gen 30: 15). One queries the first question that Leah is asking, as it reveals that she blames Rachel for capturing the attention of her husband. However, Rachel was under the authority of

her father when marriage arrangements were made, and Jacob was supposed to marry her, not Leah. Why does Leah blame Rachel for something which is out of her control? Nevertheless, Rachel ends up bargaining one night with Jacob for some mandrakes, and Leah agrees to this trade. This verifies that having children was far more important to Rachel than her husband. It also proves that women held more power than what they were given credit for. Jacob was merely a dutiful husband who went with whatever his wives demanded of him. Furthermore, the text does not indicate that Jacob refused to have two surrogates birthing children for his wives- Rachel and Leah. It also does not show Jacob refusing to spend a night with Leah after she and Rachel agreed to the arrangement.

Clifford and Murphy (1990:31) and Frymer-Kensky (2000:139) all agree that this mandrakes scene is a turning point in Rachel's infertility narrative. Andriolo (1973:1667) questions the time frame of Rachel's barrenness before Rueben acquired some mandrakes, and Westermann (1981:475) states that Rachel's demand may stem either from a feeling of entitlement- as she is the favoured wife or from her hope that it will help her to have a child. However, Jeansonne (1990:77) argues that Rachel approaches Leah politely for the mandrakes and points out that the mandrakes are her son's more than they are Leah's. Jeansonne's argument seems highly unlikely, as the mere fact that Rachel points out the mandrakes are Leah's sons and not Leah's to refuse, might come off as being a bit patronising; thus, Leah's response is reasonable.

Leah's response is a sarcastic one (Havrelock 2008:169), and Westermann (1981:475) states that it borders on bitterness. Her response shows the deepness of her anger and annoyance toward her sister (Jeansonne 1990:77). Leah's rhetorical question shows how Rachel has superseded Leah's position as the first wife. It may also be proof that Rachel has acquired sexual control over Jacob (Jeansonne 1990:77). However, the narrator does not clarify whether Leah is ignored because of Jacob's choice, or due to Rachel's dictatorship (Jeansonne 1990:77). Jeansonne thinks that Rachel is in control of when Jacob spends time with Leah, as the fact that Leah must bargain for a night with her husband, could suggest that Jacob spends more nights with Rachel.

Scholars interpret Rachel's response as an avoidance of the accusation that leads to her bargaining with/bribing Leah for a night with Jacob (Andriolo 1973:1667; Jeansonne 1990:77, 79; Frymer-Kensky 2000:139; Havrelock 2008:169). Thus, Leah gets what she sarcastically complained about (Havrelock 2008:169). Leah's acceptance of the offer possibly means that Jacob spends more nights with Rachel (Westermann 1981:475; Aalders 1981:119; Clifford &

Murphy 1990:32). The conflict between Rachel and Leah ends with a compromise that benefits them equally (Westermann 1981:475). This arrangement is especially beneficial to Leah as she has three more children (Havrelock 2008:169). Ironically, the women who are constrained, “by their scheming father and insensitive husband presently control Jacob’s sexual activity.” (Jeansonne 1990:77-8). Yet, irrespective of the sisters’ control of Jacob’s sexual activity, they remain powerless in their fertility (Jeansonne 1990:78). Fischer (2012:24) states that Jacob is being objectified by his wives- Rachel and Leah- to become pregnant.

Rachel wanted the mandrakes to try and enhance her fertility, and so doing, solve her barrenness (Kroeger & Evans 2002:20; Fischer 2012:24). Aalders (1981:119) says that Rachel hoped the mandrakes would assist her with her barrenness, while Maher (1982:173) argues that she intended to use the mandrakes to overcome the humiliation of being infertile. Fretheim (1994:555) states that this scene suggests Rachel thought a non-divine factor could assist her in solving her infertility. The narrative is not clear on whether Rachel uses the mandrakes after all. However, Havrelock (2008:169) argues that we can assume Rachel consumed the mandrakes.

The mandrakes scene is “a powerful reminder of Rachel’s anguish over her childlessness.” (Jeansonne 1990:5). The desire that the sisters have for Jacob is driven by their need and desire for children (Rachel) and love (Leah) (Jeansonne 1990:77). Jeansonne (1990:79) states that the struggle that arises between Rachel and Leah comes from the patriarchal structures and expectations that were present. This scene also indicates the power the women have on deciding Jacob’s sexual partner (Jeansonne 1990:5). Furthermore, tension remains as Leah ends up giving birth instead of Rachel.

#### **4.3.8. Rachel’s encounter with God**

After the mandrake’s scene, Leah gives birth to three more children, and at this point, the climax of Rachel’s infertility narrative is reached. The narrator informs us as readers, that “[t]hen God took note of Rachel. He paid attention to her and enabled her to become pregnant” (Gen 30: 22). Rachel’s encounter with God is not a direct one- instead, divine intervention occurs, and she becomes pregnant. The author emphasises God’s direct role in matters of the womb by mentioning that God ‘took note’, ‘paid attention’ and ‘enabled’ Rachel to fall pregnant. Scholars in their readings translate the text as God ‘remembered her’ and opened her womb (Comay 1995:281; Tribble 1978:34; Brueggemann 1982:255; Fuchs 1999:130). The question arises; why does God only remember Rachel at this point in the narrative? Herbert

(1962:94) argues that remembering is not only a mental activity but also an action. While Janzen (1993:117) argues that “just as Yahweh had responded to Jacob’s preference for Rachel by opening Leah’s womb, now Yahweh responds to Leah’s sense of triumph by remembering Rachel”.

Other scholars interpret that God ‘heard’ Rachel and granted her a son (Aalders 1981:120; Brueggemann 1982:255; Jeansonne 1990:78). This interpretation “heard her” suggests that Rachel prayed to God for a child (Aalders 1981:120; Janzen 1993:118), and what Jacob was unable to do, God has done (Janzen 1993:118; Fretheim 1994:555). Although the mandrakes did nothing to cure Rachel of her barrenness, Havrelock (2008:173) states that it does reveal to God how desperate she is, and what lengths she might be willing to go to.

There is a balance in this narrative, as there are devices at play such as handmaids, mandrakes, and names that reflect powers of fertility, hence suggesting that births can take place with cautious planning (Brueggemann 1982:255). However, there is also an “overriding theological affirmation: God is the only cause of new life” (Brueggemann 1982:255). The ambivalence reflected in the narrative shows how one’s faithfulness is constantly an issue (Brueggemann 1982:255).

According to Havrelock (2008:173), Rachel protests her infertility in three ways: “articulation of discontent, surrogacy, and medicinal aid. God likewise responds with three actions: “God remembered—God heard—God opened!” (Brueggemann 1982:255; Havrelock 2008:173). It is God who is responsible for opening her womb (Scullion 1992:216; Roncace & Whitehead 2009:114). Fretheim (1994:554) states that “God serves as the subject of the following activities: God sees the affliction of the women, hears their cry, remembers them, takes away their disgrace, and vindicates/rewards them. God both opens the womb and withholds”.

The tension of this narrative lies in the progression from barrenness to birth, and the climax was only reached once Rachel gave birth to a son. The aforementioned was not accomplished by any ‘human action’ or ‘mandrakes’, but “by the faithful, inexplicable remembering and hearing of Yahweh.” (Brueggemann 1982:255). The only hope for Israel is the act of God remembering, as without having the faith in God’s promise, “there is no reason to expect an heir or a future” (Brueggemann 1982:255). Thus, He blesses Rachel with a child (Maher 1982:173, Kroeger & Evans 2002:19).



#### 4.3.9. Rachel gave birth and named her son (Gen 30: 23-24)

As a result of God ‘taking note’ or ‘remembering’ Rachel, her womb is opened, and she conceives and gives birth to a son. Rachel’s fertility is spoken about very briefly. Scholars like Comay (1995:281) and Kroeger and Evans (2002:20) report that Rachel conceived and bore a son. These scholars focus and emphasize the birth of a son, and not on Rachel’s fertility. After the birth of her child, she says that “God has taken away my shame” (Gen 30: 23). Here the author makes a distinction that shame was tied to the womb, and we can presume that being infertile meant that you were labelled as having shame. When God opened Rachel’s womb, the shame was taken away. Consequently, one questions whether this label was given to her by society, her husband, her sister, or herself? The author does not indicate from where Rachel received this title of shame. Aalders (1981:120) states that Rachel says this because “in the ancient East a childless woman was not looked upon with pity but with disdain”. Claassens (2020:21) argues that this statement “reflects something of the great emotional and psychological anguish associated with the shame a barren women would have had to endure in a world that valued fertility”.

Rachel named her firstborn son Joseph, and the text suggests that the name Joseph has two meanings which she alludes to during the naming of her son (Gen 30: 23-24). Westermann (1981:471) says that the children’s “names are given by the mother” and “all explanations refer to the family”. Jacob does not dispute that his wives name their children, excluding his son Benjamin<sup>53</sup> (Fuchs, 1999:130). The first meaning is based on verse 23 that God has taken Rachel’s shame away, and Brueggemann (1982:255) argues that finally, Rachel’s shame has been overcome. Other scholars read the text as “God has taken away her reproach”, ‘humiliation’ and ‘disgrace’ (Westermann 1981:476; Jeansonne 1990:78; Scullion 1992:217; Frymer-Kensky 2000:139). All these interpretations are negative, as they point to the type of suffering Rachel endured by not being able to conceive. According to Dresner (1991:448) if Rachel did not have a child of her own “she would not have fulfilled her role as a wife nor as a matriarch.”

The second meaning given by the author is that Rachel says “[s]he named him Joseph, saying, ‘[m]ay the Lord give me yet another son’” (Gen 30: 24). Though the meaning gives the readers

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<sup>53</sup> Benjamin is Rachel’s second son, and it is at his birth that Rachel dies (Gen 35: 16-19). Rachel names him Ben-Oni (which means “son of my troubles”) but Jacob changed his name to Benjamin, which means “son of my right hand” (Gen 35: 18).



an idea of the joy which Rachel must have felt, but also that she was not satisfied with one son (Frymer-Kensky 2000:139). It also expresses her hopes, wishes, and desires that God would give her more children (Jeansonne 1990:10; Westermann 1981:476; Brenner & Van Dijk-Hemmes 1993:99). Herbert (1962:94) and Janzen (1993:118) state that this meaning is to be read as a prayer, fulfilled by the birth of Rachel's second son Benjamin.

#### **4.3.10. A comparison of male and female scholars reading of Genesis 29:31 – 30: 1-24**

When I started analysing the way scholars read this narrative, I immediately noticed that male scholars refer to this narrative of Rachel as either being part of the Laban-Jacob cycle or the Esau-Jacob cycle (Andriolo 1973:1667; Westermann 1981:463). Male scholars like Brueggemann (1982:207-8) argued that this narrative is merely a genealogy account of Jacob's descendants. On the contrary female scholars do not argue for this but rather recognise the roles that Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah play in bearing children for Jacob and the future of Israel.

Both male and female scholars highlight the important role that God plays in this narrative by opening Leah's womb and closing Rachel's womb (initially). Male and female scholars alike argue that this is because of Jacob's favour and love for Rachel. However, female scholars argue that Jacob's favour brings about unfair consequences for Rachel but also recognises that God is acting on behalf of the neglected/ mistreated wife (Leah) (Trible 1978:34; Jeansonne 1990:74).

Scholars argue that Rachel's envy was caused and amplified by Leah having sons (Frymer-Kensky 2000:139). Rachel's situation is further amplified through the torment of Leah naming her sons. Female scholars continue to focus more attention on the impact that Rachel's barrenness has on her status in both her household and society (Kroeger & Evans 2002:20). They also discuss the despair and desperation that Rachel must have felt whilst she was still infertile (Fuchs 1999:130). Rachel proceeds to blame her husband for her lack of children. Rachel's complaint "Give me children or I'll die!" (Gen 30:1) is used by female scholars to argue how desperate Rachel felt by not having children of her own (Jeansonne 1990:76; Fuchs 1999:136). It was as bad as death.

Jacob's response to Rachel's plight is one out of anger and frustration. Scholars state that Jacob's response is meant to evoke sympathy from the readers as he is being wrongfully accused (Fuchs 1999: 130; Roncace & Whitehead 2009:114). Female scholars like Jeansonne

(1990:76) and Fuchs (1999:130) argue that Jacob's response is unsympathetic and chastising towards Rachel. Jacob already has heirs and thus his future and lineage is secure, however, Rachel's position is not. Both male and female scholars acknowledge that Rachel's infertility is out of Jacob's control. He is theologically correct in his response as only God can open and close one's womb (Brueggemann 1982:253). Rachel opts for surrogacy and female scholars argue that this shows how important and desperate women were to have children (Jeansonne 1990:76).

Rachel names her first surrogate son Dan meaning I have been vindicated. Her position in society has changed. Her second surrogate son is argued by female scholars as proof that women desired to have many children (Fischer 2012:24). The naming of this son is an indication of the female rivalry between Rachel and Leah. Rachel has acquired children through surrogacy. The second son Naphtali is argued by scholars to mean "I have wrestled" or "I have prevailed" (Gen 30:8; Havrelock 2008:167). The female rivalry between sisters can be seen in their competition to have more children (Frymer-Kensky 2000:139). The mandrakes scene is a further indication of this rivalry between co-wives. After Leah has three more children "God remembered" (Gen 30:22) Rachel and she gives birth. Gen 30:23 is clear that only once Rachel gave birth her shame was removed. This makes one question whether surrogacy benefits women at all as Rachel shows she is still not satisfied until she has given birth herself. In the naming of her son, she asks God to bless her with more children as she is still competing with her sister.

#### **4.3.11. Concluding remarks**

Rachel is a remarkably strong and persistent woman who does not give up irrespective of the odds of barrenness being against her. The text is quite clear in pointing out that Rachel was barren. However, through her envy and jealousy of her co-wife and sister whose womb was open, she proves to be determined to have children through any means necessary. She confronts her husband and in doing so reveals her desperation that being barren was worse than death.

Rachel's barrenness is the foundation behind the sisters' rivalry and their competition with one another. This competition motivated them to use their maids as surrogates. It is also the reason behind the names that they give to their children (Brueggemann, 1982: 254). There are two ways in which the family tried "to overcome the disaster of barrenness (vv. 3-21)" (Brueggemann, 1982: 254). The one device is using their maids as surrogates. Rachel is the

first sister to attempt this (Gen. 30: 3-8) followed by Leah (Gen. 30: 9-12). Both sisters are successful with this device. Bilhah and Zilpah their maidservants had no say in Rachel and Leah's plan to make them their surrogates. The other device that is used is mandrakes. Rachel makes a deal with Leah to obtain some of the mandrakes that her son acquired. Nothing more is said about whether the mandrakes had worked. The text then states that God remembered her, opened her womb, and she gave birth to a son.

#### **4.4. Hannah's struggle with infertility as narrated in 1 Samuel 1: 1- 20**

1 Samuel begins with an introduction to all the characters and their relationship to one another. Shortly after this, the narrative shifts to Hannah's experience. Hannah is the protagonist in this narrative, as it speaks about her struggle and journey to becoming a mother. Bruce Birch (1998:973) argues that Hannah is a metaphor for Israel's infertility.<sup>54</sup>

What makes this narrative significant, is the divine dimension that accompanies it, as God is active in the lives of the characters mentioned (Kroeger & Evans 2002:153). Although the book of Samuel is a report of the transition into kingship, the message that accompanies it proclaims that God is the ruler of all (Kroeger & Evans 2002:153). The attention attributed to Hannah shows her faith, perseverance, and devotion to God which proves to be a turning point in her life and the history of Israel (Kroeger & Evans 2002:154).

##### **4.4.1. 1 Sam 1: 1-20 (NET)**

**1** There was a man from Ramathaim Zophim, from the hill country of Ephraim. His name was Elkanah. He was the son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. **2** He had two wives; the name of the first was Hannah and the name of the second was Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. **3** This man would go up from his city year after year to worship and to sacrifice to the LORD of Heaven's Armies at Shiloh. (It was there that the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, served as the LORD's priests.) **4** The day came, and Elkanah sacrificed.

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<sup>54</sup> Israel's infertility was a lack of a king during a time that was uncertain (Kroeger & Evans, 2002: 153). However, I side with scholars who do not disregard Hannah to such an extent to say that she was just a metaphor but rather with those who see her as a real woman who struggled with not having children.

(Now he used to give meat portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters. **5** But to Hannah he would give a double portion because he loved Hannah, although the LORD had not enabled her to have children. **6** Her rival used to aggravate her to the point of exasperation, just to irritate her, since the LORD had not enabled her to have children. **7** This is how it would go year after year. As often as she went up to the LORD's house, Peninnah would offend her in that way.) So she cried and refused to eat. **8** Then her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why are you crying and why won't you eat? Why are you so upset? Am I not better to you than 10 sons?" **9** So Hannah got up after they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh.

At the time Eli the priest was sitting in his chair by the doorpost of the LORD's sanctuary. **10** As for Hannah, she was very distressed. She prayed to the LORD and was, in fact, weeping. **11** She made a vow saying, "O LORD of Heaven's Armies, if you would truly look on the suffering of your servant, and would keep me in mind and not neglect your servant, and give your servant a male child, then I will dedicate him to the LORD all the days of his life. His hair will never be cut." **12** It turned out that she did a great deal of praying before the LORD. Meanwhile Eli was watching her mouth. **13** As for Hannah, she was speaking in her mind. Only her lips were moving; her voice could not be heard. So Eli thought she was a drunkard. **14** Then he said to her, "How much longer do you intend to get drunk? Put away your wine!" **15** But Hannah replied, "Not so, my lord! I am a woman under a great deal of stress. I haven't drunk wine or beer. But I have poured out my soul before the LORD. **16** Don't consider your servant a wicked woman. It's just that, to this point, I have spoken from my deep pain and anguish." **17** Eli replied, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant the request that you have asked of him." **18** She said, "May I, your servant, find favor in your sight." So the woman went her way and got something to eat. Her face no longer looked sad.

**19** They got up early the next morning. Then they worshiped the LORD and returned to their home at Ramathaim. Elkanah was intimate with his wife Hannah, and the LORD called her to

mind. **20** Then Hannah became pregnant. In the course of time she gave birth to a son. And she named him Samuel, thinking, “I asked the LORD for him.”

#### **4.4.2. Introducing Elkanah and his wives Hannah and Peninnah**

The narrative begins with an introduction to Elkanah, and this is done in a reporting style by stating that “[t]here was a man” (1 Sam 1:1). The narrative continues with an introduction of Elkanah’s wives, claiming that the first wife was Hannah and the second was Peninnah. It is made apparent that there is an imbalance in this introduction of Elkanah’s wives, as only one (Peninnah) has children while the other (Hannah) has none. The author is not explicit as to which woman Elkanah married first, therefore; scholars deduce- based on the order in which these women are introduced- that Hannah was wife number one (Bergen 1996:64; Klein 2000:90; Kroger & Evans 2002:154; Berlin 2004:227; Abasili 2015:585). However, Lillian Klein (2000:90) states that Peninnah having had children has superseded Hannah. According to Abasili (2015:585), this reversal of order is “a subtle way of underlining the grave negative social implications of childlessness for a woman like Hannah living in a cultural context where having an heir is very important.” As a result of Peninnah being fertile, she might have felt superior to Hannah, thus depicting “inequality between two equals” (Berlin 2004:227). Hence, Hannah may have been viewed as an “inferior, a failed wife, in her own eyes and in the eyes of society.” (Berlin 2004:227). Cartledge (2001:27) rightly argues that this does not matter, as the marriage between Elkanah and Hannah was one of love- which continued even with Hannah being barren.

The scene is being set, and the audience knows that Hannah is infertile. This information is followed by a picture of Elkanah being a man who is devoted to God, as “year after year this man went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the Lord Almighty at Shiloh” (1 Sam 1: 3).<sup>55</sup> Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg (1964:24) questions why Elkanah goes up to Shiloh and not another sanctuary closer to his home, such as Bethel, Mizpah, and Shechem. However, perhaps Elkanah wanted to serve God at the place where God’s ark was. It could also be an introduction to Samuel’s association with Shiloh (Hertzberg 1964:24). Elkanah can be deemed as being

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<sup>55</sup> According to Cartledge (2001:31) “[T]he ruins of Shiloh are usually associated with the modern village of Khirbet Seilun, a site in the hill country of Ephraim, 18-20 miles north-northeast of Jerusalem. Although it enjoyed a brief fluorescence as an established cultic centre in late pre-monarchic times, archaeological studies suggest that it was not a very important city either before or after that period. The temple in Shiloh may have been a temporary affair, a sturdy tent surrounded by a courtyard, bearing an altar for sacrifices.”



adherent to the laws of the Torah- a “churchman”, and a strong leader of his household, because he takes his family to Shiloh annually (Hertzberg 1964:23; Bergen 1996:65).

This introduction is deceiving at first, as it gives the impression that the narrative is about Elkanah, when in fact it is about Hannah’s experience as an infertile woman. Therefore, Hannah is the real protagonist of this narrative, as will be revealed later on. It is important to note that the introduction was done in this way to set the scene for Hannah’s context, and Elkanah is only mentioned because he is the husband of the woman who will give birth to a very significant son (Cartledge 2001:26). The narrator introduces Elkanah so that one knows which family Hannah belongs to,<sup>56</sup> even though most scholars claim that this narrative merely forms part of the larger story of Samuel. However, David Toshio Tsumura (2007:108) argues that this account should be called the “Hannah narrative”.

The narrator continues to speak about the festival at Shiloh, and how Elkanah can be viewed as being a generous husband; because even though Hannah is infertile, he gives her a double portion (1 Sam 1: 5). This according to the author, was done out of love for Hannah; yet although Elkanah’s intentions may be pure, the effect it has on her is negative. The effects are revealed later in the narrative, as Cartledge (2001:28) states that this annual festival<sup>57</sup> at Shiloh only brought Hannah more grief, and it was by no means a joyous occasion for her. This is because Hannah’s situation is escalated when Elkanah divides the sacrifice, as it intensifies her sorrow (Klein 2000:90; Cartledge 2001:29) Although Hertzberg (1964:24) says that this was a kind gesture. The scene is set as each wife was given a portion of meat according to the number of children she had birthed, and so doing, shared it with her children (Bergen 1996:66). Hannah should not have received a double portion, as she had no children to share with. Hence it became a kind gesture that turned into a horrible reminder.

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<sup>56</sup> This theory is supported by Klein (2000:90), who says that the wife’s significance is positioned in the relationship they have with their husband, and their capability of bearing children, which is reflected in the introduction of the two wives. They are introduced without any reference to their genealogy (Klein 2000:90).

<sup>57</sup> According to Cartledge (2001:28) this “festival was a celebrative time when pilgrims gathered at Shiloh to pay their tithes from the harvest and to offer sacrifices of thanks to “Yahweh of Hosts”. Part of the sacrifices of thanksgiving was offered to “be burned on the altar as an offering to Yahweh and that a part of it be kept by the priests to provide for their support, but most of it was returned to the family.” (Cartledge 2001:28-9) All returned sacrifices had to be consumed within two days, and thus this was a time filled with lots of feasting and joy (Cartledge 2001:29).



#### 4.4.3. Hannah's Barrenness (1 Sam 1: 1-7)

Hannah's barrenness is the focus of this narrative, as up until this point, it is repeated three times that she was barren. This occurs firstly when she is being introduced and compared to her co-wife Peninnah who has children, while she has none (v2). Thereafter, it is accentuated twice that Hannah is infertile as "the Lord had not enabled her to have children" (v5,6). The author is portraying that God is in control of matters about a female's womb. Yet Cartledge (2001:27) and Kroeger and Evans (2002:154) are among the scholars who argue that in the case of a wife being barren, the husband was permitted by law to either opt for a divorce or to marry a second wife<sup>58</sup>. This might very well have been the case with Hannah and Elkanah, as many scholars state it was common practice in the Old Testament- especially if the husband's economic status permitted a second wife (Hertzberg 1964:23; Klein 1983:6; Kroeger & Evan 2002:154; Abasili 2015:584). From the text it appears that Elkanah had a high economic status, so he could afford to have two wives, but the author is not clear whether barrenness was the reason for Elkanah having two wives. However, the duty and desire of a man were to have male heirs (Cartledge 2001:27). It is, therefore, possible that Elkanah took a second wife because his first wife appeared to be barren. Abasili (2015:585) states that polygamy was practiced for various reasons, of which Elkanah's reason could be seen in the way his two wives were introduced.<sup>59</sup>

Robert Bergen (1996:65) states that having two wives should not disparage Elkanah's character. Ralph Klein (1983:6) and Bergen (1996:65) argue that Elkanah took a second wife because Hannah was (initially) infertile and he did not have faith to wait and acquire an heir.<sup>60</sup> However, Cartledge (2001:28) says that Elkanah chose to not accept responsibility for why they did not have children, and thus sought children elsewhere. Cartledge (2001:28) questions whether Elkanah's age and pressure from his parents, friends, or community, added to his decision to take another wife- but the text does not indicate his reasons for seeking other options

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<sup>58</sup> Kroeger and Evans (2002:154) says that Hannah was barren during a time in which continuing the "family line and name were of paramount importance, descendants were essential".

<sup>59</sup> According to Abasili (2015:585) Childlessness, "is one of the commonest reasons for polygamy in the Hebrew Bible."

<sup>60</sup> The circumstance of barrenness links Elkanah to the patriarchs- Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob- who found their wives were initially unable to produce offspring (Bergen 1996:65). Bergen (1996:65) suggests that this link is a favourable one, as it points to a child being born that will be important for God's kingdom. Polygamy provides assurance that at least one son will be born to bear the family name and continue the family line (Abasili 2015:585-6).

to obtain children, or why he chose to have a second wife instead of a surrogate. Irrespective of Elkanah having another wife, Hannah remained the one he favoured (Cartledge 2001:28).

Nonetheless, scholars argue that this narrative depicts the oppressed woman who is infertile and endures the scorn of her rival Peninnah (Trible 1978:34; Campbell & Flanagan 1990:146; Fuchs 1999:132; Kroeger & Evans 2002:154). Peninnah celebrated her fertility, even though it was at the expense of Hannah (Kroeger & Evans 2002:154). Regardless, Robin Gallaher Branch (2002:155) states that Hannah- like other women in the Bible- was destined to give birth to a remarkable son, although she was initially barren. Scholars point to God as the one who has closed her womb (Trible 1978:34; Roncace & Whitehead 2009:116; Firth 2009:313), but no reason is given as to why God has done so (Trible 1978:34). Thus, there is a sense of mystery that remains (Trible 1978:34). Abasili (2015:591) states that Hannah's infertility has a purpose. However, her barrenness is a problem, as Klein (2000:90) argues that women's significance lies in their capability of bearing children.

Every year the family would take a trip to Shiloh, and this annual excursion revealed: "how Hannah is treated because of her childlessness." (Abasili 2015:588). It also portrayed the dynamics of the family, and Adele Berlin (2004:227) points out that everything which happens between family members is done in public view. Hannah's predicament is especially worsened by the allocation of sacrificial portions, as this demonstrates the importance of the women based on the share they were given (Klein 2000:90). The portions given are also a determinant of how many children they have, they would thus receive a bigger portion the more offspring they birthed (Klein 2000:90). Scholars state that Elkanah was generous in the portion he gave, but this does not relieve Hannah of the fact that she has not borne any children yet- therefore the extra portion does not comfort her (Klein 2000:90; Cartledge 2001:30; Tsumura 2007:113; Abasili 2015:588).

Yet Hannah got a double portion to portray how much Elkanah loved her (Trible 1978:34; Cartledge 2001:30; Tsumura 2007:114; Abasili 2015:588). Elkanah through his favour is not only showing love but also compensating Hannah for being childless (Abasili 2015:588). This message was 'lost on Hannah' as she remains sad, and this only infuriated Peninnah (Trible 1978:34; Cartledge 2001:30). Comay (1995:128) states that Hannah "grieved" at the fact that she was childless, and Kroeger and Evans (2002:154) relay that "[i]n ancient society barrenness was regarded as a curse from God (1 Sam 1:6), a personal disaster that condemned a woman to an uncertain future." Hence children- specifically sons- were important, as they were an

insurance policy in case anything happened to their father (Kroeger & Evans 2002:154). This distribution went on every year (Cartledge 2001:30), and it was a constant reminder of Hannah's infertility.

Ilse Müllner (2012:141-142) states that "childlessness is presented in the Bible as the harshest fate a woman can suffer." This is personified through Peninnah, who depicts the social scorn that faces the infertile woman and is a biblical tradition that exists between motherhood and female rivalry (Brenner & Van Dijk-Hemmes 1993:95; Müllner 2012:142). According to Berlin (2004:227), Peninnah was jealous of Hannah for receiving special treatment, and thus taunted her for being childless. Yet there is a possibility that Hannah would not have received mocking if Elkanah had not given her a special portion at the festive meal (Berlin 2004:227).

Peninnah not only mocks Hannah personally but also teases her for being childless (Abasili 2015:588). This verbal attack led to her becoming irritated by Peninnah, but Peninnah was persistent in provoking Hannah, who had to endure this constant torture and eventually could not handle it anymore; after which she began to weep and abstained from eating the sacrifice (Cartledge 2001:31; Berlin 2004:228; Abasili 2015:589). According to Berlin (2004:228), refusing to eat in the Bible could have been a sign of depression, but only Hannah truly understands her suffering (Abasili 2015:589). Abasili (2015:589) agrees with Mary Evans (2000:15) who says that "since Peninnah had many children, including several sons, Hannah's childlessness was to Elkanah little more than a minor inconvenience, one easily overcome by mutual affection (v. 8). But to Hannah, it was a personal tragedy." Peninnah taunting Hannah must have made her feel substantially worse about her situation than she was already feeling (Berlin 2004:228), but Hannah chooses to keep her suffering to herself (Klein 2000:90). Accordingly, she does not complain to her husband- even though he might have been witness to Peninnah's taunting.

The author mentions that the abovementioned taunting continued year after year, and Hannah was constantly reminded that she was not able to have children. One detail that the narrator leaves out is how long Hannah endured the torture of being infertile. The torment Hannah went through caused her to cry and refuse to eat. This shows the tremendous effect that Peninnah's taunting of Hannah's womb had caused. There is a tension present among women (Klein 2000:90), and according to David Firth (2009:313), Peninnah tries to irritate Hannah to "thunder". The NET Bible (2019:note 485K) translates it in the same way, that Peninnah was trying to irritate Hannah to the point of anger. Thus, although there was a purpose for Hannah's

initial infertility, the immediate effects were unpleasant (Abasili 2015:591). God left Hannah open to receiving ridicule which led to her weeping and not eating (Abasili 2015:591). Abasili (2015:591) states that “some feminist readers accuse YHWH of violence against women.” Yet this is mere human speculation, as we are not capable of being omniscient. Beyond the negative implications which accompany the closing of Hannah’s womb; this “was in fact God’s design” (Abasili 2015:591). It was God’s strategy to close Hannah’s womb “to prepare for the birth of an important figure” (Abasili 2015:592).

#### **4.4.4. Elkanah protests Hannah’s concern of being barren (1 Sam 1: 8)**

Peninnah’s taunting contributes to Hannah’s feeling of anguish, and the text reveals that Elkanah does not understand Hannah’s suffering. After all, he gives her special treatment- what more could she wish for. Thus, Elkanah could be seen as a good man in the patriarchal context, however, he did not understand the torment of his wife whom he loved. Hence, he confronts Hannah by asking her questions like, “Hannah, why are you crying and why won’t you eat? Why are you so upset? Am I not better to you than ten sons?” (1Sam. 1: 8). She does not respond, so one could assume that these questions were rhetorical. The first two questions portray Elkanah as a loving husband who is concerned about his wife and her feelings, however, the latter centres his concerns on himself.

Scholars paint Elkanah in a good light, as they claim his questions indicate his concern for Hannah (Fuchs 1999:132; Tsumura 2007:115). It also shows a feeling of helplessness towards the situation, and Dresner (1991:447) says that Elkanah is trying to assure Hannah that she does not need to be sad. Elkanah tries to comfort Hannah out of love by asking questions, but his comfort is not a substitute for what she is going through (Heine 1988:48). It also cannot eradicate Hannah’s barrenness (Trible 1978:34). Elkanah was not able to console Hannah (Comay 1995:128; Cartledge 2001:31; Berlin 2004:228; Abasili 2015:589). Klein (2000:90) argues that Hannah suffers more from Elkanah’s ‘comforting’, as his questions could either show that he was genuinely concerned about her, or that he was irritated by her response to his generosity. Yet Elkanah already had children, and thus he had heirs to continue his family line, meaning that he could likely have given up hope of Hannah having offspring (Berlin 2004:228).

Elkanah is narrated as being obtuse, as there is no way he cannot know why Hannah does not want to eat, or why she is sad, while his last question reflects his complete lack of understanding. (Cartledge 2001:31) Scholars like Klein (2000:90) and Berlin (2004:228) argue that this form of ‘consoling’ could be viewed as a moving gesture by a husband who is being

sensitive and sympathetic to his wife. Berlin (2004:228) points out that this is something that other husbands would not do, but simultaneously Klein (2000:90) states that Elkanah could be seen as insensitive as he does not realize how badly Hannah wants children of her own. Berlin (2004:228) states that several modern commentators find Elkanah to be less heroic by posing these questions to Hannah. After all, gifts and compliments cannot take away her longing to be a mother (Berlin 2004:228). Elkanah's questions could be viewed as being rhetorical as Hannah did not get the opportunity to answer and remains silent to the final question (Klein 2000:90; Berlin 2004:228). Consequently, Cartledge (2001:31) argues that "Hannah's silence shouts."

Elkanah lacks an understanding of how the Bible presents a woman's biggest tragedy (Fuchs 1999:132). Hence, he is unable to see that his love cannot compensate for Hannah not being able to have children (Fuchs 1999:132). Berlin (2004:228) questions whether he is trying to dull "the shame and longing felt by Hannah because of her infertility" and does he feel responsible for Hannah's situation? Perhaps if Elkanah had not taken a second wife who could have children, it would have lessened the pain that Hannah felt. However, Berlin (2004:228) claims that it does not matter how one sees Elkanah, he is not a major character, he merely serves to make Hannah's feelings more dramatic.

Tsumura (2007:115) states that one is inclined to think that Elkanah is conveying his thoughts, as having a husband should mean more than having no children. Yet irrespective of how much Elkanah loves Hannah, he cannot give her what she wants most (Tsumura 2007:115). Being married to Peninnah solves Elkanah's problem of not having children, but what about Hannah (Abasili 2015:586)? Can Elkanah truly empathise with Hannah (Abasili 2015:586)? Kroeger and Evans (2002:154) say it is all good and well that Elkanah protests by saying; "Am I not more to you than ten sons?" (1 Sam 1:8). However, were Elkanah to die, Hannah would have to endure a harsh future with no heir to inherit from his father (Kroeger & Evan 2002:154-155). This could be what led Hannah to act and try to fix her situation on her own. Susanne Heine (1988:48) suggests that Hannah views her husband merely as a means to gain children.

#### **4.4.5. Hannah protests her situation and acts (1 Sam 1: 9-11)**

After Elkanah's rhetorical question stating: "Am I not better to you than 10 sons?" (1 Sam 1:8) This could have been the moment when Hannah realised that Elkanah was not concerned about her womb, but more about the notion that he should be good enough for her. The author states that "Hannah got up after they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh" (v9). Thereafter it is mentioned where Hannah had gone- the Lord's sanctuary where Eli was sitting by the



doorpost. It is not clear whether Hannah could go into the Lord's sanctuary, and we are only told that "Hannah was very distressed. She prayed to the Lord, and was in fact weeping" (v11). The weeping affirms Hannah's distress, as not being able to have children was a massive concern for her. After years of being put through such torment over her childlessness, what made this year different, was that she decided to take the matter into her own hands.

Scholars state that Hannah did not ask Elkanah for help, but instead takes her plea straight to God without him knowing (Comay 1995:128; Fuchs 1999:132; Berlin 2004:228; Schwartz & Kaplan 2007:131; Abasili 2015:594). This could be because Elkanah proved by way of his rhetorical questions that he was not concerned about her womb. Consequently, she was the only one who could do something about her situation. Abasili (2015:594) questions whether Hannah knew that it was God who closed her womb. If she had known, would she have humbled herself the way she did before God, or would she have expressed anger? Hannah is the first biblical female to turn- in the misery of her childlessness- to God for help (Fuchs 1999:132; Havrelock 2008:164; Müllner 2012:142). She goes above the authority of Elkanah and Eli (Fuchs 1999:132) and is so desperate to have a child that she challenges conventions as a woman by praying at God's temple (Havrelock 2008:164). Once there, she protests her situation by appealing to God for a son (Roncace & Whitehead 2009:116). Furthermore, Hannah goes to the source of her problem; the one who can open and close the womb- God (Abasili 2015:592).

Hannah is being isolated and tormented by Peninnah which makes life miserable (Klein 2000:90; Branch 2002:155). Cartledge (2001:31) describes her as being "brokenhearted", "miserable", "afflicted" and "sorrowful in spirit". She is also described as experiencing "bitterness of soul" (Abasili 2015:594). Thus, as a last resort and in anguish, Hannah goes to the temple of God at Shiloh<sup>61</sup> (Klein 2000:90; Branch 2002:155). Cartledge (2001:31) states that Hannah had taken all the misery she possibly could and tearfully left to go to the temple door. It is here that she weeps/sobs (Cartledge 2001:31; Branch 2002:155; Berlin 2004:229). Scholars are not exactly in agreement as to where precisely Hannah's prayer took place; however, this is not significant rather the act of prayer which follows.

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<sup>61</sup> Tsumura (2007:117) questions "Why is Shiloh mentioned here when the audience already knows the setting? It may be "intended to formalize the turn of events." Or it may be that "Shiloh" is mentioned to officially introduce Eli, the priest there. Or it may simply be a reminder that this scene is set there since it has not been mentioned since v. 3."

Part of Hannah's prayer to God was a vow. This vow was a plea that if He "would truly look on the suffering of your servant, and would keep me in mind and not neglect your servant, and give your servant a male child, then I will dedicate him to the Lord all the days of his life. His hair will never be cut" (v11). Hannah refers to herself as God's servant three times when she emphasises that she is suffering and pleads with God not to neglect her. She sounds desperate to give birth to a child, but she is simultaneously willing to give the child back to God. This begs the question: is Hannah's concern about having a fertile womb, or having children? Perhaps she was under the impression that if she could give birth once, she would be able to do so again, and therefore giving one child back to God was a worthwhile deal to make.

Cartledge (2001:31) states that Hannah "poured out her heart to the Lord" and made "a desperate bargain with God". Klein (2000:90) says that Hannah's prayer was a passionate one, while Schwartz and Kaplan (2007:131) argues that she was miserable but that her prayer was not made from pride or individual need. She does not seek a child who will continue the family name, but rather she wants a child whom she can raise to serve God (Schwartz & Kaplan 2007:131). Hannah wants to be able to physically give birth to a child. Hannah is protesting her situation in two ways; prayer and an oath (Havrelock 2008:164), and so does she also display direct action to try and resolve her problem (Abasili 2015:594). Berlin (2004: 28) believes that only after Hannah prays, she starts to feel better about her circumstances.<sup>62</sup>

Hannah refers to herself three times in her prayer as being God's servant, and thus her need for a child is due to her devotion to God and to further His purpose (Schwartz & Kaplan 2007:131). She takes on an active position irrespective of the restrictions that were later placed on women in the cultus (Kroeger & Evans 2002:155). Hannah prays to God to remove her affliction (Trible 1978:34; Abasili 2015:594). Kroeger and Evans (2002:155) argue that the use of active verbs in 1 Sam 1:11: "look", "remember" "not forget" and "give" are all an indication of Hannah's "confidence in Yahweh, her conviction of his interest in her affairs and his ability to radically alter her situation".

Scholars all mention the vow that Hannah made, and state that in her agony she is willing to give her most precious possession- which she is yet to receive- back to God (Fuchs 1999:132;

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<sup>62</sup> Berlin (2004:229) states that Hannah's prayer follows the format of a prose prayer. First there is "an address invoking God", then there is "a petition (which is the heart of the prayer) and lastly there is "the motivation" for the prayer (Berlin 2004:229). She addresses God, asks that He gives her a child, and then motivates that she will give the child back to Him (Berlin 2004:229).

Kroeger & Evans 2002:155; Berlin 2004:229; Tsumura 2007:117; Abasili 2015:595). Klein (2000:90) argues that Hannah displays desperation because bearing a male child will secure herself within her community.<sup>63</sup> She is willing to give up the experience of raising a child to birth one (Klein 2000:90). Tsumura (2007:118) states that if a female struggles with barrenness, she will not give up her child once born; however, Hannah seems to be the exception to the rule as she is willing to voluntarily give up her firstborn (Abasili 2007:595).<sup>64</sup> Her vow shows that she had faith in God (Tsumura 2007:118). Yet the audience is left in suspense as to whether Hannah lives up to her vow. The vow assumes the responsibility that in this patriarchal society, the husband was to maintain the vow made by his wife (Klein 2000:90). Accordingly, Hannah wants a child, but not simply any child- she is specific that it should be a boy (Abasili 2015:595).

#### **4.4.6. Hannah's encounter with the priest Eli (1 Sam 1: 12-18)**

Hannah does a great deal of praying and Eli watches her mouth. Perhaps she was unaware that anybody was watching her, as the author says that “for Hannah, she was speaking in her mind” (v13). Perhaps Hannah prayed in her mind because she did not want anybody to hear what she was praying for. Hence, Eli watching her and not hearing anything while seeing her lips move could have been suspicious. One can understand why Eli would conclude that Hannah must be drunk, as it was an annual festival where drinking took place and Hannah was acting rather odd.

Tsumura (2007:116) says Hannah knew that Eli was sitting at the doorway of the temple, and if this is true, perhaps she wanted privacy during her prayers and therefore prayed in her mind. Scholars debate whether Eli's hearing or eyesight was impaired (Cartledge 2001:33; Berlin 2004:229) Berlin (2004:229) argues that Eli could not grasp what he was seeing and hearing. Numerous scholars debate Eli's assumption that Hannah was drunk, and his judgement of her (Fuchs 1999:132; Berlin 2004:230; Schwartz & Kaplan 2007:131).<sup>65</sup> Cartledge (2001:33) tries to defend Eli's assumption as there must have been something about Hannah's appearance or

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<sup>63</sup> It appears that Hannah is more desperate to receive the title of mother and be elevated within society and in her household than having a child.

<sup>64</sup> Abasili (2015:595) compares Hannah's vow with Abraham. Abraham “was ordered by YHWH to give” Isaac back to him (Abasili 2015:595). The similarity between the two narratives is that both Hannah and Abraham have strong faith in God (Abasili 2015:595).

<sup>65</sup> Eli's assumption is not an absurd one as “drinking of wine, sometimes to the extent of getting drunk, is a frequent concomitant of sacrificial meals” (Abasili 2015:597).

actions that led to this supposition. Havrelock (2008:170) argues that Eli's distance from Hannah led to him misunderstanding the situation. Hannah's prayers are prayed with so much intensity that it leads the priest to think that she is drunk (Müllner 2012:142). Matthews and Benjamin (1993:196) state that Eli himself must have been sober, but he was too blind to see that Hannah was not drunk. After all the author tells us that Hannah was too upset to eat, though there is no mention of whether she drank anything (Berlin 2004:229; Tsumura 2007:117). Abasili (2015:597) argues that Hannah's "drunkenness" was not a result of wine, but rather of childlessness, and her muted voice might be symbolic of the 'muted' position of females (Klein 2000:90). She is under the impression that God can hear and respond to a woman's prayer (Klein 2000:90). This passage displays a motif of appearance versus reality, especially noticed when Eli misreads Hannah; but also, that Eli is not as spiritually competent in his office as he should be (Bergen 1996:63).

Scholars interpret Eli's response to Hannah as "commands", "rebukes", "reprimands" and "accuse[s]" her harshly to put down her wine (Fuchs 1999:132; Branch 2002:155; Schwartz & Kaplan 2007:131; Tsumura 2007:121). Through his accusation, Eli has begun a conversation with Hannah (Tsumura 2007:121). Matthews and Benjamin (1993:196), Havrelock (2008:170) and Müllner (2012:142) state that Eli tried to banish Hannah from the temple, but this is not made clear in the text. Cartledge (2001:33) argues that the way Eli first responded was not a pastoral response.

Hannah addressed Eli with an exclamation that he has judged her incorrectly. She stands up for herself and claims that she is merely a woman dealing with stress and has just poured out her soul to God (v15). For the first time, Hannah is seen defending herself, as she asks that Eli does not see her as a 'wicked woman' but rather one who is dealing with deep pain and anguish (v16). In this context, 'wicked woman' could also be translated as "daughter of worthlessness" (NET, 2019:note 487A). Hence Hannah could be asking indirectly for Eli to show mercy and compassion, and it is in this instance where the author shows the amount of pain she is dealing with due to her circumstances.

Scholars state that Hannah responded 'humbly', 'eloquently' and 'graciously' to the false accusations and judgement posed upon her (Fuchs 1999:132; Klein 2000:90; Branch 2002:155). Hannah was very respectful to the priest, but she also spoke straightforwardly to Eli (Schwartz & Kaplan 2007:131). Hannah did not want to be dismissed in such a manner and thus responded accordingly by firmly telling him that she is a woman in pain and not a drunkard

(Cartledge 2001:33; Schwartz & Kaplan 2007:131; Tsumura 2007:121). She was pouring out her soul to the Lord and asked that Eli not think of her as a ‘worthless woman’<sup>66</sup> (Cartledge 2001:34; Havrelock 2008:170; Abasili 2015:597). Eli does not directly call Hannah this, however, she assumed that he might have judged her as such, and she refused to be classified as a deviant woman (Cartledge 2001:34; Havrelock 2007:170). Havrelock (2007:170) argues that Hannah was standing up for herself by justifying her conduct.

Immediately Eli replied to Hannah’s defensiveness by saying “Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant the request that you have asked of him” (v17)<sup>67</sup>. This is strange, as Eli did not inquire about the hurt which Hannah experienced, yet irrespective of this, her spirits were lifted. The author is not clear whether it was speaking to Eli, laying everything she felt before God, or perhaps both, that had lifted her spirits. Eli’s response can be viewed as a retraction of his harsh accusations (Fuchs 1999:132), but he offered no apology- except for a few stale words (Klein 2000:90). Berlin (2004:230) says that Eli regretted making false accusations towards Hannah, but the text does not clarify what he felt. Fuchs (1999:132) suggests that Eli is merely wishing Hannah well, while according to Cartledge (2001:34), he cannot provide Hannah with a word from God or a promise- just a wish. Other scholars state that Eli’s response is a blessing for Hannah, and a prayer that her request will be granted by God (Branch 2002:155; Berlin 2004:230; Schwartz & Kaplan 2007:131; Firth, 2009: 312).

Eli is merely seen as reacting to Hannah’s plight; however, he fails to anticipate the outcome of her plan; which could be because he is unaware of the nature of her prayer (Fuchs 1999:132). Hannah receives Eli’s blessing and is cheerful and hopeful that God will fulfil her prayer request (Trible 1978:34; Comay 1995:128; Schwartz & Kaplan 2007:131; Tsumura 2007:122). Cartledge (2001:35) is not sure about what Eli’s intentions were for blessing Hannah, however, it became a gift of hope and an assurance that God would hear her prayers. This changes her attitude and allows her to go back and share in the festivities, trusting that God has heard her

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<sup>66</sup> Cartledge (2001:34) states that “‘Worthless woman’ is, literally, “a daughter of Belial.”” This “Hebrew word Belial means “worthlessness,” but it was also regarded as a proper name, later attributed to Satan (2 Cor 6:15).” (Cartledge 2001:34). Tsumura (2007:122) questions how one should interpret “the daughter of Beliyaal” as most scholars say it means “a worthless woman”. Abasili (2015:597) argues that “[T]he expression (daughter of beliya`al) – is a vague but very negative OT expression used for depicting people showing strange or evil tendencies (akin to the prince of evil-Belial in 2 Cor 6:15).”

<sup>67</sup> Berlin (2004:229) argues that it is at this point in the narrative where the “stories of the rise of Samuel and the decline of Eli’s line come together”. Ironically, Eli does not know what he is endorsing when he blesses Hannah without knowing what she was praying for (Berlin 2004:229).



(Cartledge 2001:35; Berlin 2004:228; Tsumura 2007:122; Abasili 2015:597). The reader can only speculate the surprise Elkanah must have had when Hannah returned to the festivities, and the narrator implies that she not only had joy but that there was a new spark in her relationship with her husband (Cartledge 2001:35). Soon after the blessing Eli gave Hannah, she gives birth to a son (Kroger & Evans 2002:155).

#### **4.4.7. God answers Hannah (1 Sam 1: 19)**

The author makes a point of stating that after they returned to their home “Elkanah was intimate with his wife Hannah, and the Lord called her to mind” (v19). This verse is often translated as “remember” and is “often used in the OT for considering the needs or desires of people with favor and kindness” (NET, 2019:note 487K). Following this, the author reports that Hannah became pregnant (v20) but does not specify why God had remembered her at this point. Was it the outpouring of her heart to the Lord, or was it Eli’s statement of ‘may the Lord grant your request’? Berlin (2004:228) argues that throughout the years Hannah remained silent until this specific year. Yet it was in Shiloh that Hannah poured out her heart to God (Klein 2000:90). Scholars interpret God having answered Hannah’s prayers as Him ‘remembering’ her (Trible 1978:34; Klein 2000:90-91; Cartledge 2001:35; Havrelock 2008:174; Roncace & Whitehead 2009:116; Abasili 2015:125). God has opened Hannah’s womb, as the womb is controlled by Him (Trible 1978:34; Klein 2000:91).

#### **4.4.8. Hannah gives birth to a son and names him (1 Sam 1: 20)**

Hannah becomes pregnant, and in due time gives birth to a son. It is important to note that it was a son she gave birth to, as that is exactly what she had asked God for. Therefore, her prayer had been answered fully. The author displays that Hannah names her son “Samuel, thinking, ‘I asked the Lord for him’” (v20). In this way, the author is recounting and linking the prayer Hannah prayed in Shiloh to God. The NET Bible (2019:note 487M) affirms this, as it states that “[t]he name ‘Samuel’ sounds like the Hebrew verb translated ‘asked’.” Samuel gets his name from Hannah having asked God for him, and one wonders where Elkanah is- as he was only mentioned when he was being intimate with her. He remains in the background even during the naming.

Hannah is the irrefutable heroine in her narrative (Fuchs 1999:132), as she conceives and gives birth to a son. Most scholars include that it was a son who Hannah birthed, except Comay (1995:128) who says that Hannah gave birth to a child. The birth of Samuel is a direct result of

God's intervention (Roncace & Whitehead 2009:116; Müllner 2012:140). Hannah's struggle ends due to the faith-filled vow she made with God, which allowed her to bear Samuel (Bergen 1996:58).

According to Cartledge (2001:35) "[T]he narrator has so skilfully built the level of suspense that when the child is born, it is almost anticlimactic". This leads one to think that the focus is on the vow which Hannah made that instils peace (Cartledge 2001:35). God not only fulfils his promise, but also shows divine favour, and yet Abasili (2015:597) argues that God gives Hannah a son for her; not for Elkanah. This is depicted in how the author portrays Hannah's childless tragedy as a personal one (Abasili 2015:597). Consequently, Hannah is seen as a character who is "lonely", as she prayed alone, made a vow alone, and rejoiced alone (Abasili 2015:597). Giving birth to a child indicated her status had changed<sup>68</sup> (Abasili 2015:598).

Once Hannah gave birth, she chose the name for him- thus indicating her authority over her child (Klein 2000:91). Elkanah is not mentioned as having anything to do with naming Samuel (Klein 2000:91). It might be surprising to the audience that Elkanah does not choose the name, as surely it would be more culturally acceptable for the father to name his child (Cartledge 2001:35). However, scholars differ in the way they report Hannah's naming of Samuel. Some merely record that the name Hannah gives is Samuel, but no definition or meaning of the name is given. Scholars argue the child was named Samuel, as it is a play on the verb "to ask" (Fuchs 1999:132; Klein 2000:91; Branch 2002:155). Comay (1995:128) and Cartledge (2001:36) suggest that Hannah called him Samuel as it means "the Lord heard".

According to Antony Campbell and James Flanagan (1990:146), the impact of this narrative is very clear, "Samuel is the Lord's gift to an oppressed woman in Israel". In return, Hannah gifts God with Samuel's life (Campbell & Flanagan 1990:146). Hannah cannot keep Samuel, as she has made a vow that she must uphold. Thus, Hannah does not get to keep Samuel, as she made a vow to God that she would give him back (1 Sam 1:11). Accordingly, when he has been weaned, she takes him to Shiloh and gives him to God; meaning Hannah paid the ultimate price for receiving the gift of fertility.

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<sup>68</sup> Abasili (2015:598) says that in the Hebrew Bible, if a woman falls pregnant her status is automatically elevated (see Gen 16:4).

#### **4.4.9. A comparison of male and female scholars reading of 1 Samuel 1:1-20**

Male scholars begin their reading of this narrative by arguing that it is an introduction to the narrative of Samuel (Campbell & Flanagan 1990:145). Some male scholars like Birch (1998:973) go as far as to state that this narrative is a metaphor for the anxiety that Israel felt about not having a king. However, female scholars begin by acknowledging the important role that Hannah plays in the history of Israel in birthing a hero (a future leader of Israel) (Kroeger & Evans 2002:154). Tsumura (2007:108) goes against the grain by arguing that this narrative should be titled the Hannah narrative.

Male and female scholars agree that how Hannah and Peninnah are introduced is an indication of their position or status within the household. However, male scholars such as Klein (2000:90) states that Peninnah has superseded Hannah as she has children. Female scholars argue that this is a sign of the adverse social implications of not having children in this patriarchal society (Abasili 2015:585). Moreover, these adverse effects are further seen at the festival at Shiloh.

It is at this festival that male scholars focus much attention on proving Elkanah to be a man of God, and a generous husband (Hertzberg 1964:23; Klein 2000:90; Cartledge 2001:30). Elkanah gives Hannah a double portion of food even though she is barren. This scene intensifies the scorn that Hannah must have felt and was a reminder of her barrenness. Female scholars argue that this special treatment from Elkanah is why Peninnah torments Hannah for not having children (Fuchs 1989:161-2; Müllner 2012:142). They go on to argue that Hannah grieved about her barrenness which can be seen by her weeping (Abasili 2015:589). Additionally, female scholars like Abasili (2015:589) argue that Hannah could have been depressed by her situation as she has also refused to eat. Male scholars do not go into as much depth as female scholars do regarding the torment and emotional distress that Hannah must have felt being constantly tormented by Peninnah for not bearing children.

Elkanah questions Hannah about her weeping and refusal to eat. Male and female scholars alike argue that this shows Elkanah's concern for his favoured wife. However female scholars state that irrespective of Elkanah's concern this does not alleviate, comfort, or eradicate Hannah's barrenness (Trible 1978:34). His love is not capable of changing the scorn she receives from not having children. Feminists argue that Elkanah is unable to understand or compensate Hannah for what ancient Israel deemed as a woman's biggest tragedy (Evans 2000:15). Male scholars do not go into as much depth here as female scholars do. Hannah goes forth to seek

help from God and makes a vow with God that in return for a son she will dedicate the son back to God. This could prove that being able to biologically have a child is more important than raising a child. Male scholars argue that Hannah wants a child who will serve God (Schwartz & Kaplan 2007:131).

Female scholars such as Fuchs (1999:132) and Havrelock (2008:164) credit Hannah as being the first female to go directly to God for assistance with her barrenness. Both male and female scholars discuss the vow made in detail. They go on to discuss Hannah's encounter with Eli. Female scholars like Berlin (2004:29) argue that Eli was unable to grasp what he witnessed whereas some male scholars like Cartledge (2001:33) come to Eli's defence with reasons or speculations as to why Eli has made assumptions regarding Hannah. Eli realises his mistake and gives Hannah a blessing. Hannah is positive and hopeful after receiving Eli's blessing. God remembers her and she gives birth to a son named Samuel. Female scholars such as Fuchs argues that Hannah should be portrayed as a heroine as she endured much before her womb was opened.

#### **4.4.10. Concluding remarks**

Hannah had to endure much scorn from her co-wife before she received the status of the mother. Elkanah's generosity in giving her a double portion at the festival in Shiloh only amplified the scorn she would receive from Peninnah. This was also a constant reminder that she was barren. Hannah goes to God in prayer and makes a vow that she will give her son back to God. This important vow shows that being able to bear children was more important than raising them. Through Hannah's experience, she displays endurance and strength.

This narrative is more than the prayers of a devout woman being answered, it is about a female who gives birth to the one who would launch kingship in Israel (Tsumura, 2007: 104). Hannah ensures that the Israelite people will have a future as Samuel is the important bridge between the old and new and is influential in anointing a king for the Israelites (Schwartz & Kaplan, 2007: 132). Therefore, Hannah is recognised as being the mother of an important son who becomes a prophet, judge, and king maker (Klein, 2000: 91).

Hannah has secured herself in her community and family setting (Klein, 2000: 91). When the next pilgrimage comes around, Hannah who feels strengthened by her new title as a mother decides to stay home until Samuel is weaned. This narrative ends with Hannah and Elkanah

going to honour the vow made and bringing Samuel to Eli. God blesses Hannah with three more sons and two daughters (Klein, 2000: 91).

#### **4.5. Conclusion**

This chapter intended to do a TA of the narratives of three barren women: Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah. Their experiences with barrenness and their role in society were the same. All three women “fell victim to society’s expectation of women’s destiny that is categorically linked to their ability to bring a child into the world” (Claassens 2020:12). They were childless wives. Thus, they were uncertain about their status as women as they remained barren for an extended period. The text is clear regarding how long Rebekah remained barren, however, there is no clear indication of time given for Rachel and Hannah. The importance of having children is made clear in the context of research gathered in chapter three.

The texts indicate that Rachel and Hannah endure much suffering due to their barrenness. Their suffering is made worse by the taunting and female rivalry that they have with their co-wives. Their co-wives had children however, they remained childless. The response from their co-wives is made clear through the texts. Leah taunts Rachel when she has more children than her. Leah’s hatred is expressed explicitly in the naming of her children and the mandrakes’ scene. Peninnah ridicules and taunts Hannah for not having children. This is made worse by the generous portion that Elkanah gives Hannah at the yearly festival. How the co-wives taunt and ridicule these infertile women reveals the worldview of the society that these women found themselves in. They found themselves in a patriarchal society with values of honour, shame, blessings, and curses. Their status as women were challenged by the fact that they were still not mothers. After Rachel gave birth, she says that her shame has been removed. This indicates that women felt shame for not being a mother. This was implied by the values held with this patriarchal society however it was enforced through the taunting and scorn that these women endured from their co-wives.

These three narratives are clear that God had a very prominent role in controlling the wombs of females. God had closed these women’s wombs for a reason unknown to them. Each narrative reaches a climactic end with God opening their wombs and all three women giving birth. The scorn has been removed. They are now able to take their rightful place in society as mothers removed from the pressure and scorn of not having children.



What I have noticed in the investigation of Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah is that male scholars and feminist female scholars are similar in some parts of their reading of the narratives. However, there is as expected a major difference in the value that is extended to the female and male characters within these texts. Male scholars tend to title their reading of the narrative after the male figures whereas women title according to the female figures. Clifford and Murphy (1990:28,31) title their commentary of Rebekah and Rachel the birth of Esau and Jacob and Jacobs children whereas Kroeger and Evans (2002:15,180) title their commentary Rebekah and Isaac and Rachel, Leah, and Jacob. Campbell and Flanagan (1990:147) title their commentary of Hannah as the birth of Samuel however Kroeger and Evans (2002:154) title their commentary a mother's prayer. Both male and female scholars pay attention to the male and female characters in these texts. Subsequently, a major difference is the amount of time and detail that they spend on each character. Male scholars tend to focus more time on the role of male characters and paint them as being men of God. On the other hand, female scholars focus more time on looking at the role of the female scholars. Female scholars also spend more time looking at the impact that barrenness had on the lives of Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah. They paint them as the heroines in their narratives. Female voices also spend a little extra time looking at the interaction between co-wives and the feelings that these women must have felt considering the context and situation they found themselves in. However, as a liberal feminist scholar, I was surprised by some male voices like Tsumura (2007) that seemed to lean towards a feminist reading of the text. Now I will endeavour on a comparative study in chapter five.

## CHAPTER 5:

### Comparing the narratives of Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah

#### 5.1. Introduction

A re-reading of these narratives using TA as a method has helped to gain a clearer understanding of the contexts that these women found themselves in. It has also presented various scholars' opinions and theories about Rebekah, Rachel and, Hannah's circumstances surrounding infertility in ancient Israel. Phyllis Bird's (1974:41) much quoted and debated argument that these narratives were written by men for men, could be a reason for some of the gaps in the stories about female's wombs. Based on what we know about the narratives of Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah, there appear to be many more similarities than differences in their experiences of infertility. This chapter will compare the similarities and differences in the narratives of Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah, with the focus on the following themes: patriarchy, matriarchy, infertility, the role of God and shame.

#### 5.2. Comparison of Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah

##### 5.2.1. Patriarchy

These narratives begin with the men being present, a shift occurs where they are absent, and then reappear towards the end, as it became clear that the childless women would conceive. Fuchs (1999:138) argues that it is common that narratives about infertility begin with the introduction of the husband, and end with the son. Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah fell under the authority of Isaac, Jacob and Elkanah, respectively. All three narratives are very clear that these men loved/favoured their childless wives, though the author does not clarify whether there is a connection between this love/favour and the women's childlessness. Rachel is the exception though, as it is stated that "When the Lord saw that Leah was unloved, he enabled her to become pregnant while Rachel remained childless" (Gen 29: 31).

All three men played different roles in their wives' childlessness, but Isaac is the only male who is said to have prayed to God on behalf of his wife. One could argue that Isaac was the only husband who was concerned about his wife's fertility. This can be understood against the background of the text as Isaac was the only one without heirs by a second wife, unlike Jacob and Elkanah. Isaac's concern could also be for himself and his lack of an heir. Jacob and Elkanah's family line were secured, thus, they were less interested in matters concerning their

childless wives. Jarrell (2002:3) states that men used women “to ensure the continuity of the covenant”, while DePreter (2011:53) argues that even though this is true, women “are not passive characters in these stories” they are active “and often more concerned about bearing children than their husbands”. This is undoubtedly the case for Jacob and Elkanah, as the author does not indicate that they are putting pressure on their barren wives in any way. In my research problem, I said that this whole problem stems from the fact that women were part of a patriarchal society. I have come to realise that the values found within this patriarchal society have played a huge role in how barren women were viewed in society.

In these narratives, it is not the husbands who placed any pressure on their wives, ridiculed them, shamed them, or divorced them for not falling pregnant. Even in the case of Isaac where one would have expected him to place pressure on Rebekah as he was not married to a second wife who could provide him with offspring. He still did not go to the length of pressurising Rebekah or being negative towards her in any way. He rather turned to God to ask God to change the situation. Contrary to what I expected that the ridicule and shame came from the patriarchal context it was not implemented by the husband characters. The same cannot be said for the strong female voices in the texts namely the co-wives. They did indeed shame and ridicule the women who did not fall pregnant. However, even though this was implemented by the co-wives, it still came from the values system (a culture of shame and honour) and expectations of this patriarchal society.

### **5.2.2. Matriarchy**

Fuchs (1999:138) says that “motherhood is the most exalted female role in the biblical narrative” and accordingly, the Bible paints women as only having the position of a mother (DePreter 2011:53). Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah initially did not have this position of a mother, as they were childless wives. Rachel and Hannah are seen in the narratives as being vocal and upset about their barren status, with Rachel complaining to her husband and comparing childlessness to death (Gen 30: 1). Hannah is seen crying in front of her husband and co-wife (1 Sam 1: 7) but is not portrayed as vocal to them; rather she takes her petition to God (1 Sam 1: 10-13). Nothing is mentioned about how Rebekah felt about her situation, and the author only mentions her sentiments after she had already conceived and felt a struggle in her womb (Gen 25: 22).

The author does not express whether Rebekah or Hannah demanded that their husbands assist in their infertility predicament. However, Rachel does demand this of Jacob (Gen 30:1), which

is strange, as it appears she is not aware that God is in control of her womb. Rebekah and Hannah seem to know this, and it is seen in Rebekah's seeking help from the Lord regarding the struggle in her womb (Gen 25: 22). Meanwhile, Hannah goes directly to God in prayer, asking for a son (1 Sam 1: 10-13).

These women are portrayed as being active in their quest to have children. More so Rachel and Hannah, whilst Rebekah has her husband interceding for her. Rachel asked to have children through her handmaiden and acquired mandrakes to fulfil her need to become a mother, while Hannah prayed and made a vow to God to accomplish her need to conceive. Both Rachel and Hannah were faced with female rivalry- taunted and reminded that they are childless. To that end, Leah having children was a constant reminder to Rachel of what she did not have (Gen 29: 32-35). Leah's first three sons were named based on how she felt, which further indicated that Rachel was the favoured/loved one. Peninnah tormented Hannah every year for being childless (1 Sam 1: 6-7), while Elkanah gave Hannah special treatment which only exacerbated how she felt about being childless. This special treatment included receiving a double portion of meat, which she should have been able to share with her children- if she had any (1 Sam 1: 5). Judging by the way the co-wives treated Rachel and Hannah, one could conclude that women played an immense part in shaming and placed much pressure on women who were childless.

These barren females overcame their struggle with infertility "by an act of God" (Donaldson 1981:83). The text states that all three women conceived after God had remembered them. Thereafter they all named their sons, with Rebekah and Hannah naming the boys according to their births. The naming of Rachel's son Joseph was more personal and expressed how she felt, as she said that God had removed her shame. Rachel's narrative depicts how women were shamed for not having children, and this barrenness was endured differently by every female (Donaldson 1981:83). Rachel and Hannah were shamed and taunted by their co-wives (fertile wives) for not having children. Leah taunted Rachel through the naming of her children and Peninnah mocked Hannah at the festival in Shiloh for not having children. The co-wives were more than just reminders of their childlessness, but they also placed pressure on these women for not having children.

### **5.2.3. Infertility**

The society presented in the Old Testament is one where the value of women was determined by the number of sons they gave birth to (Jeansonne 1990:79). From the narratives investigated

it is clear that women were desperate to give birth to sons so they might have high regard in the community they lived in (Jeansonne 1990:79; Fuchs 1999:137). Rachel and Hannah are specific about wanting sons, as Rachel demands Jacob must give her sons (Gen 30:1), and Hannah prayed to God for a son (1 Sam 1: 10-13). Fuchs (1999:137) points out those sons are eventually born to these previously barren women.

Yet the blame was always placed on the female if a couple found it difficult to conceive (Jeansonne 1990:62). Women that did not have children were willing to do anything to overcome their childlessness (Abasili 2015:589). The Old Testament reveals how women dealt with their struggle of infertility, as Rachel sent her husband to their maid to conceive children, and Jacob willingly obliged to her demand (Heine 1988:47). Heine (1988:47) argues that the silence of men in these narratives- namely Jacob and Elkanah- was an indication that “descendants are of more value [than] the personal relationship between man and woman.” (Heine 1988:47).

The question that comes up after doing a TA of these narratives, is whether our understanding of infertility today has been imposed on the text but also whether how fertility was regarded in ancient Israel has been imposed on our current understanding? The NET Bible explicitly uses the word barrenness. Most translations that I have consulted also use the word barrenness. I know now having done this study why this word is important and used over against the word infertility. In these narratives, barrenness meant that women were childless, not that they were unable to conceive as is the understanding today. No one knew that it was a possibility that women could not medically conceive. It seems like in the time of the Old Testament when women could not fall pregnant it was because God closed their wombs. The main difference between that time and this time is that in the texts that I have studied the women were not ultimately conceived as being infertile because eventually, they did fall pregnant. They were barren for longer than society expected them to be. They were without children for an extended period after they got married.

It appears that in these narratives’ barrenness meant that these women were childless, but not that they were unable to have children, as we understand infertility today. The texts introduce these women by stating that Rebekah “was childless” (Gen 25: 21), “Rachel remained childless” (Gen 29:31), and “Hannah had no children” (1 Sam 1: 2). Moreover, the author informs readers that “The Lord answered [Isaac’s] prayers, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant” (Gen 25: 21). In Rachel’s narrative, the author states that “God took note of Rachel.



He paid attention to her and enabled her to become pregnant” (Gen 30: 22). It is interesting to note here, that the NET Bible (2019:note 65Z) states that this verse indicates God opened her womb. The NET (2019) translation says that in the narrative about Hannah “the Lord called her to mind. Then Hannah became pregnant” (1 Sam 1:19-20). This could also be translated as God “remembered” (NET, 2019:note 487Y). The common component in each woman’s struggle with childlessness is God, one could interpret their barrenness as God closing their wombs. These narratives show that in the end, God did open their wombs and thus they cannot be considered from a medical and biological perspective as having been infertile.

#### **5.2.4. The role of God in infertility**

God’s first command and blessing in the book of Genesis was “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1: 28; Jeansonne 1990:79; Eilberg-Schwartz 1999:56; Schwartz & Kaplan 2007:23). Abasili (2015:592) asks the question of whether God is contradicting this command by closing the wombs of women like Hannah. The same could be asked of Rebekah and Rachel’s wombs, as God commands in Genesis to be fruitful and multiply (Abasili 2015:592).

God’s blessing was in giving humanity the ability to give birth to another human (Perdue 1997:226; Schwartz & Kaplan 2007:30). The command “Be fruitful; and multiply” was appropriate, as there were “high infant mortality rates and the often fatal complications of childbearing” (Meyers 1978:98). Thus, women were eager to have children, yet they had setbacks like barrenness (Schwartz & Kaplan 2007:30); hence the struggle of Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah. Women were important not only in their family and marriage but also in contributing to the narrative of God (Schwartz & Kaplan, 2007:25).

These narratives present a theological theme, that “God’s promises and God’s role in the people’s continuing existence are developed also by withholding information.” (Jeansonne 1990:7). This is done to reflect and express the indisputable role that God plays as “the giver of fertility” (Jeansonne 1990:7). God is seen as being present during procreation within the Bible, and the Giver of life (Alter 1981:47-52; Fuchs 1999:127; Roncace & Whitehead 2009:113). Thus, motherhood and deity are viewed as being closely related (Roncace & Whitehead 2009:113). God is seen as the one who controlled the opening of wombs (Klein 2000:91; Roncace & Whitehead 2009:113). The men’s roles in these narratives are “minimized, omitted, or left ambiguous”, while the women and their “relationship with God are elevated in importance.” (Roncace & Whitehead 2009:117). Thus, men and women alike

had to recognise that God had the power of giving children as a gift (Havrelock 2008:174; DePreter 2011:56).

The understanding of that time was that if women did not fall pregnant there was a theological reason for it. It was because God closed their womb for some reason. When God visited you, it could either be to punish you or to bless you. I want to propose that in the mind of the people of that time, these women were viewed as being cursed because for some reason unknown to them God decided to close their wombs. Only at a time when God decided to open their womb and He did with all three of them were they able to fall pregnant.

### **5.2.5. Honour and shame culture of infertility**

In the Old Testament, married women had to have children, and if a woman failed in her duty, she was viewed as being a disgrace (Abasili 2015:589). Abasili (2015:591) argues that barrenness was “a curse or affliction sent by God. If fertility were one of God’s blessings on Israel, how else could barrenness be interpreted?” To be barren could have been the worst thing to happen to a woman (Heine 1988:47). This is because fertile women brought honour to their household if they give birth to a son (Jeansonne 1990:79). According to Perdue (1997:226), reproduction was the result of receiving a divine blessing for being faithful to God. I think Perdue is being speculative here as he does not indicate what being faithful to God would look like. Would being faithful to God be like Rebekah who waited twenty years before having a child? Would being faithful mean pleading with God for a child as in the case of Hannah and Isaac? Furthermore, would it mean giving a surrogate to your husband like in Rachel’s case? Perhaps it could be all the above hypothesizes. The biggest curse was being barren and not being able to give birth to heirs because it would lead to the fall of their households (Perdue 1997:227; Deut. 28:18).

Having children proves your womanhood, and not having them could be equivalent to saying she “is not a real woman.”; therefore, it was humiliating to be viewed as a “barren” woman (Abasili 2015:590). This is certainly something that the text reveals about Rachel and Hannah’s experiences of being childless, as there is cultural pressure to give birth; and having a co-wife who could have children was a constant reminder of a female’s barrenness (Abasili 2015:590). In some cases, co-wives taunted the barren wife for not having children, and this was the case for Hannah who endured constant taunting. Not having a child could also threaten a woman’s position within the family, and her status as the first wife (Abasili 2015:590). One can

understand why it was so vital for these women to secure not only their future but their position within the home.

The word “shame” is mentioned when Rachel gave birth, she named her son Joseph because “God has taken away my shame” (Gen 30: 23). The NET Bible (2019:note 65b) states that this “shame” was directed at Rachel’s barren state, which was thought of as shameful in this culture, and was thus the reason why she was being taunted. This proves that it was a common way of thinking during those times, hence I propose that the label of shame accompanied barren women.

### **5.3. Conclusion**

Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah had similar experiences with barrenness. This chapter explored these similarities by comparing the three women’s experiences. The focus of their similarities was the themes that have been discussed throughout this thesis namely: patriarchy, matriarchy, infertility, honour and shame and the role of God. In doing this comparison I have found that all three texts are clear that Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah were loved by their husbands. The text indicates that Isaac played an active role in trying to overcome Rebekah’s barrenness by praying to God on her behalf. However, this could have been self-serving as Jacob and Elkanah both had children from their other wives, Leah and Peninnah. Thus, Isaac does not have another wife from whom he may gain an heir.

Rachel and Hannah both have co-wives who seek the attention of their husbands. Leah and Peninnah as co-wives recognise the favour and special treatment that Rachel and Hannah receive. There is a clear female rivalry between Rachel and Hannah and their co-wives. This female rivalry is seen in the torment and ridicule that Rachel and Hannah receive for being barren in a patriarchal society where having children were highly valued. Their struggle with barrenness is increased due to the taunts and expectations of society at large. However, their struggle ends when God opens their wombs, and all three women give birth to sons. Their sons become important figures in ancient Israel.

## CHAPTER 6:

### A contemporary look at infertility

#### 6.1. Introduction

The Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah narratives are read by many Christian women who are struggling with infertility. These three narratives although written more than three thousand years ago is still relevant for women today (Carr 2010:17). It is because of this distance in time that this chapter looks at bridging the gap between barrenness in the ancient world and infertility today. This chapter will also attempt to give recommendations for possible life-affirming ways in which the texts of Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah could be read. Life-affirming ways that can respect the context of the narratives and be sensitive to couples dealing with infertility today instead of ways that will lead to giving couples a sense of false hope.

#### 6.2. Bridging the gap between the ancient world and today

Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah found themselves “in a culture that defined the value of women by their fecundity” (Cartledge 2001:36). Women needed to be able to biologically reproduce as their role in society was contingent on childbearing (Neufeld 2006:134; Birch 2007:189). If a female was unable to biologically reproduce, she was considered as less than human (Neufeld 2006:134). According to Dietmar Neufeld (2006:134) problems with fertility “were by far the greatest contributor to a female’s despair, illness, and hopelessness and source of sexual shame”. Carol Meyers (1978: 93), argues that infertility was a major problem, as there was a constant need for children due to the struggle with outbreaks of war, famine, and diseases. These narratives also reflect a “general vulnerability of a people that greatly suffered from infant mortality and maternal deaths in childbirth” (Claassens 2020:24). Moss and Baden (2015:29-30) argue that “a family could survive neither literally nor figuratively without children to sustain it”. Today, the world is faced with challenges of overpopulation and scarce resources yet having children is still an important aspect in most societies.

Women today face similar difficulties as barren women in the Old Testament (Cartledge 2001:36). Both struggle with the persistent problem of what should be done when the life they imagined and hoped for does not meet their expectations (Miller 2003:19). The narratives of Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah are some of the biblical stories that Christian couples relate to or resonate within their struggle with infertility. These narratives are used as a means to bring

couples to hope that if these childless women in these narratives could eventually bear children, then perhaps this could be their outcome. However, this study has revealed that Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah were not infertile but rather childless. Comparing women today and using these narratives as a form of hope is perhaps well-meaning, however, it is insensitive and unfair.

Nowadays women all around the world struggle with infertility, and the societal demands and pressure of having children (Nwaomah & Dube 2018:410). Keith Miller (2003:16) argues that “the human desire to have children is strong”. Initially when this desire could not be met couples had two choices, they could remain childless, or they could adopt (Miller 2003:20). Ellen Glazer and Susan Cooper (1988:75) argue that the biblical narratives about barrenness reveal characters who are afflicted however “none of them passively accepts their infertility”. The same can be revealed in society today that is constantly working on advancing medical procedures to try to assist couples with infertility.

Modern medicine has expanded and introduced an array of possible options that have tried and oftentimes succeeded in assisting females to fall pregnant through other methods<sup>69</sup>, and many women seek assistance for their childlessness; however not all women can financially afford the help of a medical practitioner or the very expensive fertility treatments (Abasili 2015:593). Reproductive technology is a method that couples turn to when their desire to have children has been painfully negated (Miller 2003:16; Monroe & Monroe 2005:50). Present-day medical tests and procedures have helped us discover that in some instances it is the man who is infertile (Abasili 2015:593). Moss and Baden (2015:37) argue that “the closest the Hebrew Bible comes to recognizing the possibility of male infertility is in the law of levirate marriage.” However, there are some instances in the African context where wives are accused of being barren irrespective of whether it has been proven by a medical test (Nwaomah & Dube 2018:410). Evans Nwaomah and Sikhumbuzo Dube (2018:412) argue that this is a result of “the African worldview that does not consider man to be infertile – the cause of childlessness is always attributed to the supposedly infertile woman”. This African worldview is still very much dominated by patriarchy.

Blaming the woman for childlessness “was an unjust and unfortunate fact of life for women in Hannah’s world” (Cartledge 2001:27). It remains a fact of life still today. Due to the ancient

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<sup>69</sup> These methods include, “in vitro fertilization (IVF), gamete intrafallopian transfer (GIFT), zygote intrafallopian transfer (ZIFT), and intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI)” (Miller 2003:20).



social stigma attached to infertility, it was almost always considered a disability (Birch 2007:189). Modern women may consider infertility “as a major sorrow but would not usually consider themselves disabled, at least in societies with expanded opportunities for women” (Birch 2007:189). However, Yohanes Susanta (2021:1) argues that infertility is blamed on the woman today could make her feel ashamed from a social perspective, depressed from a psychological perspective and guilty from a religious perspective. Susanta (2021:1) reasons that the guilt that some women may feel is because they might feel they have committed a sin in their past that has led to their inability to have a child. This view stems from the biblical understanding that God is the one who opens and closes a woman’s womb.

It is difficult to deal with infertility. Infertile couples suffer the same anguish and heartbreak that Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah did (Monroe 2005:51). A study done showed that “63% of women who experienced both infertility and divorce rated their infertility as more painful than their divorce” (Monroe 2005:50). Another study that was done concluded that women “ranked the emotional pain of infertility at similar levels to that of terminal illness” (Monroe 2005:50). According to Kimberly Monroe (2005:50), a woman who has struggled with infertility herself argues that one’s identity is shattered by infertility. The picture that you imagined for yourself is gone. Monroe states that going through infertility and infertility treatment is like a never-ending hope and despair cycle that eventually led to her bargaining with God. Studies have also shown that couples “may begin to feel resentment and rage toward his or her partner” or they may fear that they are responsible for their struggle with infertility (Zucker & Benjamin 2020:184). David Zucker and Alison Benjamin (2020:185) argue that studies also show that infertile couples may suffer from depression or feelings of shame.

In some instances, some women cannot accept the blame and anguish that they feel from being infertile. It is also possible that these women seek other assistance by partaking in rituals and cultic practices to try and fall pregnant. This could be because they cannot afford medical procedures, or perhaps the doctors were unable to assist in their specific case. Rachel’s tomb has become an example of a cultic practice that takes place to assist women with matters of the womb (Sered 1995:137). After Rachel’s death, she was viewed as having a “tragic, womanhood” (Fuchs 1999:140). She is now viewed and regarded as a mother who laments and intercedes from the grave for her children (Trible 1978:40; Fuchs 1999:140). According to Claassens (2020:21) Rachel’s suffering “becomes a symbol of the suffering people”. Today,

women from all over the world visit Rachel's tomb and ask her to intercede for them with God to help them in their suffering with infertility (Sered 1995:137).

I agree with Miller (2003:16) who argues that there is silence surrounding infertility within the church even though the experience with infertility is increasing. Millicent Feske (2012:3-1) argues that infertility is relatively invisible in society at large as it is a topic that makes people feel uncomfortable. I agree with Miller (2003:17) who argues that there is a need for religious communities to find ways in which to speak about issues regarding procreation or difficulty thereof. Miller (2003:17) states that one way to get individuals in religious communities to open up about their struggles is by using these narratives like Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah in sermons. The Bible reveals that it is a natural impulse for humanity to want to procreate even though it might be difficult or impossible for many couples to pursue (Miller 2003:17). These Biblical narratives expose the pain that comes with the inability to conceive or bear children (Miller 2003:18). Pastoral care and preaching about "infertility should sensitively address the various aspects of pain" that these texts reveal (Miller 2003:18). Miller (2003:23) argues that "well-meaning people often say insensitive things to struggling couples about God's will, about just needing to relax". In the work of Feske (2012:3-4) who interviews couples who are struggling with infertility and their experience with the Church and their faith she argues that when one hears "from the pulpit things like, 'the blessing of children' ... it seems like there's something wrong with you if God hasn't blessed you with children. That's what I'm hearing".

### **6.3. Suggestions for reading these texts in a more life-affirming way**

Having done this thesis by analysing the texts and voices of the scholars I am concluding that these three women were never examples of infertile women, to begin with. Admittedly, they were barren for many years, however, they were not infertile as they had biological children of their own. Today we use these barren women to compare them to women who have been diagnosed as being medically infertile. We can prove this with the advancements that have been made in the medical field. In my study, I realised that we should not compare infertile women of ancient Israel to the infertile women of today. It is an unfair comparison to compare barren women whose wombs were closed for a few years or a long period but then were opened by God with women who are infertile today. The examples given and described in the narratives of Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah are examples of women who were never diagnosed with infertility. They were barren because God closed their womb. Today there can be barren women, and they might have the same belief system that God closed their womb and if they

prayed long enough, they might fall pregnant. However, this is unfair and encourages the stigma that if God closed your womb, you must have done something wrong when in fact there is a medical explanation as to why a woman is unable to bear children. Many women are not only barren they are diagnosed as infertile. Therefore, we cannot compare these barren women namely, Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah to today's women. We can maybe compare them to women of today who are barren for a period but then fall pregnant. This is not the same as being medically diagnosed with infertility. Even if comparisons could be made between women in ancient Israel and women today, it is important to acknowledge that every woman's story and circumstances are unique and should be regarded with sensitivity.

Once we begin to respect this difference then we will know to read the texts for what they are. DePreter (2011:45) argues that "instead of reading into these characters with modern conceptions of misogyny we have to consider the context of these stories and, in doing so, we can realize these women for the strong leaders they were". Therefore, these texts can be read with the perception of celebrating these women and the personal journeys that they went through. These texts can be used to celebrate other women and their joy with motherhood.

Additionally, we may use these texts to start a dialogue within our faith communities so that the silence of infertility may be spoken about openly. These narratives can open discussions about the hidden pain that is experienced by women and couples suffering from infertility. We may reflect on the resilience that Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah displayed in their suffering and celebrate the resilience of women today.

When reading the text, I propose we follow Eric Seibert's (2012:54, 56) method of reading the text. Instead of being compliant readers, we become conversant readers. According to Seibert (2012:54), a compliant reader is an individual "whose basic instinct is to read the Bible trustingly" and who chooses "to agree with – and submit to – the Bible's assessment of things, even when this may be difficult to understand or morally troubling". As an alternative, conversant readers are readers who do not "simply acquiescing to the text, their fundamental disposition is one of active engagement, sustained conversation and critical evaluation" (Seibert, 2012:56).

Claassens (2015:165) argues that these texts can be used to "counter harmful gender stereotypes". Reading these narratives and being aware of the context from which these texts emerge will lead us not to impose these ancient value systems of shame and honour to our present-day context. We do not need to make these narratives the norm that should be applied

as a kind of recipe for how our lives as women and couples should be. Our measure of success as women does not need to follow the same guidelines as expressed in these barrenness narratives that by having or bearing children, we are successful. Let us thus be conversant readers to avoid texts being used to condone gender stereotypes.

Respecting and acknowledging the text in this way will lead to a more life-affirming way of reading these narratives. This will also lead to one not unknowingly misinterpreting the text as a way of providing infertile couples with false hope.

#### **6.4. Conclusion**

Infertility today affects many couples just as it did throughout history. There is still a need and desire for many to become biological parents. This is influenced by the patriarchal society that couples find themselves in. This patriarchal society is silent around discussions of infertility yet, there is no silence in asking a question like “when will you have children?” The narrative of Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah is used as a model for infertile women today. If you pray and be patient, then God will open your womb as He did for the women in the Bible. This model cannot be used as the women from the Bible were not infertile as is the understanding today but rather, they were barren. We can read these narratives differently and in such a way as to not give false hope to couples struggling with infertility. Instead, we can celebrate Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah’s journeys. We can create more awareness surrounding infertility and be more sensitive to the plight that couples face when dealing with the struggle to conceive.

## CHAPTER 7:

### Concluding this study

#### 7.1. Final Conclusion

This thesis started because of many married, childless couples being bombarded with questions of when they will have children. Often this question is directed unknowingly to couples who are struggling with infertility or who have been diagnosed by a medical practitioner as being infertile. The narratives of Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah are narratives of three women who struggle with barrenness and when God deems it, He opens their wombs, and they give birth. These narratives are used today to bring comfort to couples struggling with infertility.

In chapter one, I set out to look at Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah's experiences with barrenness. I also stated that I aimed to investigate whether the curse of infertility was a patriarchal or matriarchal construction. I outlined that I had many research questions that I would be investigating, such as: What did the relationships between husband and wife look like? What did the relationship between co-wives look like? How did the broader society play a role in female experiences with infertility? How did Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah experience infertility? How do western male scholars and feminist scholars present these infertile women? The first three research questions served as secondary questions that investigated the societal context of ancient Israel and this was addressed in chapter three. The last two questions were the primary questions and were dealt with in chapter four.

My hypothesis of this thesis was that the idea of infertility being a curse, was a way in which ancient Israel viewed infertility. This thesis hypothesized that the idea of infertility having a negative connotation of shame was situated in a patriarchal context but was internalised and often perpetuated by women. Infertility was and still is difficult for women to deal with. It is something that many women must live with. However, the sense of shame about infertility is unfairly imposed upon them. In Chapter 4 I proved that this hypothesis was accurate. I did this by using the methodology of textual analysis. I gave an in-depth description of this methodology in chapter two.

Chapter three provided a social and cultural context of ancient Israel. This was the background for the narratives of Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah. These three women lived in a patriarchal society whereby the male was the head of the household. Women were governed by the males



whom they fell under. Women had two main roles in society, a marriageable daughter, and a mother. To not be able to become a mother was one of the worst things that could happen to a woman. Having children was very important especially because it was important for the lineage of a family to continue. If a wife was unable to reproduce a man had two options, he could either divorce his wife or he could take another wife. Bringing another wife into the household meant that women competed with their co-wives not only for their husband's attention but also to give birth to more children. This patriarchal society was governed by societal values of honour and shame. It was important for members of a household to bring honour to the household. Not being able to bear children was seen as bringing shame onto your household. Other values that were also seen in this society was that fertility was considered a blessing whereas infertility was thought to be a curse. Blessing and curses were given by God and God was also seen as being responsible for opening and closing women's wombs.

Having looked at the context that these three women found themselves I then proceeded to do a re-reading of their narratives. The focus was looking at how these three women experienced their infertility. I also looked at what scholars had to say about these three narratives. I found that Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah had similar experiences with infertility. I also discovered that they were never infertile rather they were barren for a period until God remembered them and opened their wombs.

During their wait for God to open their wombs, the texts reveal that Rachel and Hannah experienced much scorn and torment from their co-wives. For Rachel, this was seen in Leah's naming of her sons and in the mandrakes scene where Leah informs the readers of how she feels. For Hannah, the taunting that she received from her co-wife is seen at the festival in Shiloh. Both women experience female rivalry that makes their suffering from being barren heightened. Both women are active in trying to change their barren states. Rachel tries surrogacy and mandrakes as devices to change her status of barrenness while Hannah prays and makes a vow. Rebekah is active too in finding out what the jostling in her womb was from.

I ended each narrative in chapter four by comparing how western male scholars and feminist scholars have presented these infertile women. I found a clear distinction between male and female scholars' reading of the texts. Male scholars tended to focus more time on the male characters within the text and argued how important the sons were to the future of Israel. Contrary to the male interpretation of these narratives female scholars focused more on the

female characters and their experience with barrenness. They argued that these women were heroines in their own right.

I proceeded to chapter five where I did a comparison of Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah's experiences. This was done by specifically focusing on the themes of patriarchy, matriarchy, infertility, honour and shame, and the role of God. I found that these women shared very similar experiences. They were governed by a patriarchal society that valued women for their ability to give birth and by doing this they would bring honour to their household. These women were not pressurised by their husbands to have children but by the very patriarchal society that they found themselves in. They were further pressurised by their co-wives who taunted them for not having children. These values were then internalised and perpetuated by the women. Rachel, once she had given birth claims that her shame had been removed. This indicates how shame was internalised in the minds of women who did not have children. This value system was also internalised by women who did have children and it led to them taunting those who were barren. God was important, especially regarding matters of the womb. God was seen as the one who opened and closed a woman's womb. The text revealed Isaac and Hannah praying to God for children. This indicates the view that ancient Israel had, that God was indeed important and the giver of life.

I end with chapter six which attempts to bridge the gap between barrenness in the ancient world and infertility today. Many couples today find themselves faced with a medical diagnosis of infertility. There are some cases where treatments and procedures can be done to improve the chances of conceiving or to increase their fertility. However, many couples cannot afford these treatments or have a final diagnosis that they will not be able to have biological children. The narratives of Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah are narratives that Christian couples look towards for comfort or hope. Some infertile women get compared to these barren women of ancient Israel. It is an unfair comparison. Thus, this chapter ended off with possible recommendations for life-affirming ways in which the texts of Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah could be read. Life-affirming ways that could respect both the context of the narratives and be sensitive to the couples dealing with infertility today. A way that will not lead to couples receiving a sense of false hope.

I found this thesis challenging at times but also very insightful and rewarding. I hope that this thesis will be used as a tool for further discussions surrounding the stigma attached to infertility.

May we be less silent in the suffering that goes along with infertility. May this thesis encourage the celebration of biblical women and women of today.

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