

REFLECTION 18 JUNE 2023 "GOD AND BARRENNESS"

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Before we talk about barrenness and infertility I want to ask you a question from the other extreme: how old was the youngest person in the world to give birth to a baby? The answer is very disturbing, Lina Medina 5 years old from Peru.

When Lina Medina's parents noticed her growing belly, for them it seemed that Lina had a tumour, especially as she allegedly mentioned being in pain. Given how large her belly had gotten, the parents had reason to be concerned if it was a tumour. After all, something that size could be fatal. So, they took their daughter to see a doctor to get some answers, their first thought wasn't that she was expecting a child. Even the doctor didn't look at the little girl and immediately assume that she was pregnant. Why would they? However, as they ran tests on her, it soon became clear that Lina wasn't dealing with a tumour. All the tests indicated that someone had gotten the five-year-old pregnant, and quite a while ago too.

Apparently, by the time Lina learned she was having a baby, she was already seven months pregnant. While the age of consent does vary around the world, Peru considers five far too young for such intimacy. In fact, Lina wasn't even that old when she actually conceived the child. She would have been four at the time, which makes things even worse. However, despite the serious nature of her situation, Medina didn't reveal the father's identity. Lina Medina delivered a baby boy on May 14, 1939, via C-section

It's claimed that abuse from a very young age can sometimes cause precocious puberty in girls. That means it's possible that Lina's body accelerated the way it did because someone was inappropriate with her when she was incredibly young. It's possible that the same person might have continued abusing her, eventually resulting in her pregnancy. Precocious puberty isn't hugely common, reportedly affecting roughly one in every 10,000 kids.

From fertility to infertility. Barrenness and childlessness are very often difficult topics we don't choose to talk about particularly if you know someone a family member or friend who has been unable to have children for whatever reason or have carried babies only to miscarry or be stillborn. Sadly, my nephew and his wife had a stillborn baby 5 years ago, 3 miscarriages last year and another still born on the 2nd March this year. The first still born we had a funeral for little Faith, by the time little Hopey was born not alive this year they had a private cremation and buried her ashes with little Faith at the cemetery and told no-one. They just didn't want anyone else to have to go through the heartache again, they wanted to grieve privately as parents. It seems cruel and very unfair. A dear friend that I grew up with had 5 stillbirths and took her grief to the grave of the person that had sexually abused her as a child, her father, and cursed him for her inability to bear living children. Eventually, she gave birth to a son and daughter after so much grief.

In the Bible and until quite recently, the problem of infertility was attributed physiologically to women, though ultimately it was God who was seen as holding the keys to opening and closing the womb (Mishnah Taanit 3:8). The Bible presents all forms of fertility as a gift from God. Pregnancies occur when Yahweh "remembers" women and "opens their wombs." Biblical women who experience periods of barrenness often understand their inability to conceive

as a divine withholding of blessing, a punishment, or even a curse. God was often blamed for closing the womb of barren women. God seemed to have the power to open and close a woman's womb as God chose or desired. There are six barren women mentioned in the Bible: Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel, who were matriarchs, Hannah, mother of the prophet Samuel, the anonymous wife of Manoah, mother of Samson, and the "great woman of Shunem," an acolyte of the prophet Elisha. In some cases, the presence of a fertile co-wife exacerbates the barren woman's distress. The son of each barren woman is ultimately dedicated back to God. Some women in the Bible who were initially barren later conceive, while others, like Michal, remain barren for their entire lives. In Israel, barrenness was considered a woman's and a family's greatest misfortune.

In the biblical stories of barren women, maternity is further complicated in order to heighten the drama of the arrival of the promised son, emphasizing the divine role in conception and birth. In the case of the patriarchal stories in Genesis, the matriarchs' barrenness emphasizes that it is God who disrupts continuity, in the transition from one generation to the next, and then selects the true heir to the covenant."

In the large section of Genesis devoted to the stories of the patriarchs, wives are seen as part of the household entourage. The stories centre around the family heads. Thus, we are told that when Abraham left Haran he "took" Sarah (Gen. 12:5). Sometimes the women are not even mentioned. The Pentateuch the chosen people is repeatedly referred to as the "sons of Israel." Women are valued for their ability to bear sons. The Biblical text deplores the barrenness of Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel. The assumption that pregnancy bestows status leads to tales of rivalry and conflict between pairs of women vying for the same

man: Sarah and Hagar, Leah and Rachel. , certain women enter these stories in roles that are crucial to God's plan for Israel.

In a polygynous society where one man is married to several women, the barren woman was often compelled to share her husband with a more fertile rival (though often less beloved) wife. In some cases, this was at the initiative of the barren woman herself, who would use her handmaid to bear children for her in a kind of proto-surrogacy: Sarah, for example, takes the initiative in the plan for Hagar to bear Abraham's child in her place. Abraham follows her advice both at this point, and again when she wishes to cast out Hagar and Ishmael. So, Sarai uses Hagar ([Genesis 16](#)), Rachel uses Bilhah (30:3-8), and Leah uses Zilpah (30:10-13). In some cases, the presence of a fertile, though less beloved, co-wife exacerbates the barren woman's distress. In each of the stories, the son is ultimately dedicated back to God—in service or even in sacrifice. These women appear as strong and independent figures. (Gen. 16:2, 6; 21:12). A woman's infertility might also be marked by the phrase "she had no progeny" (as in [Genesis 11:30](#), [Judges 13:2](#), [2 Kings 4:14](#)). Often these biblical women suffered deep shame as a consequence, their barrenness attributed to some hidden wrong, sin, or flaw. Sarai confronts Abram, when she is slighted in Hagar's eyes: "May the wrong done to me be on you!" ([Genesis 16:5](#)).

When Sarah was told she would become pregnant and have a son, she laughed. Impossible she thought, I'm too old, my body can biologically no longer can produce a child. However, from the barren womb of Sarah, God brought the son that was promised, Isaac. Sarah's successor, Rebekah, was also barren (Gen 25:21), but through the prayers of her husband, Isaac, Rebekah birthed twins. Jacob, the younger son, came out fighting for his own

way, and he kept at it for much of his life. Renamed Israel, he was an appropriate namesake for the nation that would also fight stubbornly for its own way. Like her two matriarchal predecessors, Rachel was barren (Gen 29:31) until God opened her womb with Joseph. It was through this long-awaited son and the adverse circumstances of his life as a captive in Egypt that God preserved the fledgling tribes of Israel during the years of severe famine in Canaan. After Rachel, barren women disappear from the biblical story until the desperate days of the judges. When enemies of Israel threatened to destroy them, God visited the barren wife of Manoah and promised a son that would deliver the people (Judges 13:2-23). Through Samson's supernatural strength, God protected the Israelites from their archenemies, the Philistines.

At the end of the period of the judges, barren Hannah pleaded for a son, whom she promised to give back to God (1 Sam 1:2, 5, 11). God raised up Samuel to speak His word and intercede for His people in those dark days when people who spoke the word of Yahweh were rare (1 Sam 3:1). The sixth barren woman in the Bible is Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist (Luke 1:7). Her story echoes that of the first barren woman, Sarah, who was also long past the years of childbearing. Her son, was the voice calling in the wilderness to prepare people for the coming of the Messiah

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Gen 30:2). Barrenness in the Bible may not be the seen as the same as what we call infertility in the modern world. For many Western nations infertility has become a medical problem and not a divine problem. However, even today despite advances in the diagnosis and treatment of infertility, many individuals and communities still hold beliefs about barrenness that are similar to those expressed in the Bible.

I want to end with a quote from Phyllis Trible God and rhetoric of sexuality. The womb is a physical object upon which the deity acts. Control of it belongs neither to women nor to their husbands, neither to the fetus nor to society. Only God close and opens wombs in judgement, in blessing, and in mystery. Not only does Yahweh control fertility by closing and opening the womb, but also this deity works in the organ itself to mold individual life. (See Jeremiah 1:5). Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you came forth from the womb I set you apart. Amen.