

BEHOLD, THE LORD HATH RESTRAINED ME FROM BEARING

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Synopsis – The Bible opens with a presentation of a whole string of infertile women: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Hannah are women suffering from years of agonizing attempts to get pregnant. Only as middle-aged or old women are their feverish attempts to get pregnant met with success. Their fierce desire for a (male) offspring must be seen in the context of the patriarchal society in which they live. A woman in the cattle-herding patriarchal tribes is worthless if her womb does not give forth male issue. Anna Goldman-Amirav argues that the existence of so many infertile women is not incidental, but rather a major theme in the depiction of Biblical women. These women come from an ancient Mother-centered culture: Mesopotamia. They leave the Mesopotamian cities, surrounded by an agricultural people worshipping the Goddess, for the cattle-herding tribes living at the outskirts of the desert. These tribes do not worship the Mother, but a new sexless, yet male God. This historically new God has to prove to the Mesopotamian women that He has usurped the powers of the Mother-Goddess. He chooses the bodies of the women as the battle-ground, by attacking the women at the very centre of what once was the source of their power: their ability to produce life. He “closes” the wombs of young women and “opens” the wombs of old women, past their menopause. The Biblical “battle-of-wombs” lay the foundation for the view of women, fertility and sexuality in the patriarchal society.

Give them, O Lord, whatsoever
Thou wilt give,
Give them barren wombs
and dry breasts.
Hosea 9:14

The very first information presented about Sarah in the Bible, is that she is Abraham’s wife and that she is barren, she has no children (Gen. 11: 29–30). The Hebrew word for infertility – *akara* – has nothing to do with fertility, but rather with its antithesis. The meaning of the word is to uproot, cut off, exterminate. Simultaneously, the root *akr* denotes the essential, the foundation, the origin. Sarah is a woman whose foundation and origin is uprooted and exterminated.

Sarah is not the only barren woman in the Holy Scriptures. Indeed, the Bible opens with a whole row of infertile women. Rebecca – the wife of Sarah’s beloved son Isaac – suffers from infertility during twenty years, before she gives birth to the twins Esau and Jacob. Jacob marries the ugly Leah and the beautiful Rachel. While Leah presents Jacob with a steady stream of male offspring; the barren Rachel cries out to her husband: “Give me children, or else I die”(Gen. 30:1).

Hannah, the mother of the Prophet Samuel, taunted and suffering because of her infertility, gets pregnant only by promising to give the baby boy to the priests and their God.

The theme of infertility, so dominant in the

tales about the first Biblical mothers, was a new one in the mythologies of the Ancient Near East. For thousands of years *before* the Bible was written, the peoples of what today is known as the Middle East, had conceived tales about gods and goddesses, about nature and sexuality, about men and women, about death and life. These stories were told and inherited from generation to generation, but they were also written down on clay. Many such clay tablets have been found during archeological digs in the area and deciphered by linguists, they have revealed a hitherto unknown world.

The oldest of the civilisations of the Ancient Middle East was the Mesopotamian culture. In the area of modern Iraq where the rivers Euphrates and Tigris meet, the most advanced civilisation of the ancient world came into being. Mesopotamia was an agricultural society organized around big cities. Writing was practised, mathematics and astronomy were highly developed, the gods were worshipped in elaborate temples. In the earliest times, most of the important gods were of the female sex. One of the most ancient divinities of Mesopotamia was the Mother Goddess Ninhursaga, also called Nintur.

She is the mother of man and the mother of the gods . . . “the mother of all children” . . . She is also called “The Lady of the Womb” . . . The power of the womb was especially the power to make the embryo grow and give distinctive

form to it. As such, Nintur is called “Lady of the form-giving,” “Lady fashioner,” “Carpenter of the insides,” “Lady Potter,” “Copper-caster of the land” or “of the gods” . . . When the fetus is fully developed and shaped she loosens it, a function to which she seems to owe her name A-ru-ru, “Germ-loosener.” A hymn to her temple in Kesh tells how:

Ninhursaga, being uniquely great,
makes the womb contract;
Nintur, being a great mother,
sets the birth-giving going
(Jacobsen, 1976, pp. 106–108).

The hymns of the goddess celebrate motherhood in an amazingly naturalistic way. Called “Mother spreading her knees,” the Goddess proudly presents her blood and the afterbirth, clearly visible between her widely spread legs. Woman and her reproductive organs are a source of wonder, worship and power in the Mesopotamian culture, in marked contradiction to the derision, shame and fear woman’s sex and the birth process are met with in our culture.

Where the mother is celebrated, there we find a different approach to woman’s sexuality. The other great goddess of Mesopotamia, Inanna (later called Ishtar) is the goddess of love. She calls her lover, the shepherd Dumuzi, and their lovemaking furthers the fertility of the land. The people imitated the gods in sexual rites during the New Years celebrations. Nature, fertility and sexuality were all bound closely together, personified in the Mother, the Woman, the Goddess.

It is not surprising that feminine divinities were worshipped in an agricultural society. “No one doubts that agriculture was discovered by women” (Beane and Doty, 1977, Vol. 2: 384) and woman was

mystically held to be one with the earth, child bearing is seen as a variant, on the human scale, of the telluric fertility . . . The sacrality of women depends on the holiness of the earth . . . It was woman who first cultivated food plants. Hence it is she who becomes owner of the soil and crops. The magico-religious prestige and consequent social predominance of women have a cosmic model – the figure of Mother Earth (Beane and Doty, 1977, Vol. 1:204–205).

But times were changing in the ancient Near East:

It was, as we have seen, the life-producing mother who was the dominant figure in the ancient Near Eastern religion. With the establishment of husbandry and domestication, however, the function of the male in the process of generation became more apparent and vital, and the Mother-goddess was then assigned a spouse to play his role as the begetter, even though, as in Mesopotamia for example, he was her youthful son-lover or her servant. From India to the Mediterranean, in fact, she reigned supreme, often appearing as the unmarried goddess (James, 1960: 77).

The Biblical mothers, the first women of the Judeo-Christian tradition, were all descendants from Mesopotamia. Every time one of the early patriarchs looked for a wife, he returned to Mesopotamia to find a woman of the *right* breed.

Abraham, the first Biblical patriarch, and his wife Sarah, emigrated from Ur, an ancient city in southern Mesopotamia. They wandered to Haran in the north and then further to the land of Canaan. Abraham’s son and grandson returned to Haran in the northwestern part of Mesopotamia to search for wives.

Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel left the most advanced civilisation in the world, for a new society, yet to be shaped. They left an agricultural society for nomadic shepherds. They left gardens and rivers for a life at the edge of the desert. They left a civilization where the female principle had been worshipped since time immemorial for an unknown, sexless, but yet distinctly male god. Encountering the Biblical god, Yahweh, the Mesopotamian women, worshippers of a fertility-goddess, suddenly turn barren.

The world of Biblical women is totally centered around the need to produce male offspring. The birth of sons is depicted in great detail, their family-tree is meticulously recounted. But the women who give birth to these sons are not born themselves. Sarah, like most Biblical women, comes into being, suddenly, when Abraham “takes” a wife (Gen. 11:29). She has no parents, no siblings, no birthday or place of birth. Although she is beautiful and rich, the indisputable First Lady of the great tribe, she is desperate and feels worthless, because she does not possess the only

thing of worth for women in the Bible – a fertile womb.

Yahweh has repeatedly promised Abraham a son. It is doubtful whether Yahweh's pledge is known to Sarah, as he does not speak to her, but only to her husband. Sarah has to rely on Abraham for information about the divine plans. When Sarah finally decides to act, she does not take Yahweh or his promises into account. Instead, she follows ancient magical instructions passed down by females through the ages. Anthropologists label it "imitative magic," but the Biblical text, always tactful, does not call Sarah's actions by a special name, but simply presents the domestic drama in six compressed scenes: "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children, and she had a handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said unto Abraham: 'Behold now, the Lord has restrained me from bearing, go in, I pray thee, unto my handmaid, it may be that I shall be builded up through her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai. And Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her handmaid, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to Abram her husband to be his wife. And he went unto Hagar, and she conceived" (Gen. 16:1–4).

Sarah, the Mesopotamian woman who Yahweh has chosen to ignore, uses the means at her disposal. Imitative magic (i.e., the belief that close contact with a desired state or attribute, can be contagious), is known and often used in folk societies.

One of the traditional methods to make a sterile woman fertile, practiced in certain Jewish communities down to recent times, was to let her sit on the birthstool immediately after it was used by a woman in parturition. Another method, used in Safed, Palestine, down to the twentieth century, was to take a piece of the dress of a woman who had just become a mother, to soak it in water, and to pour the water over the body of the sterile women. Also the navel cord and the afterbirth were used for the same purpose. It thus seems likely that a sterile woman was believed to become fertile if the birth of a child of her husband and her handmaid took place on her knees (Patai, 1959: 82–84).

If the magic fails, Sarah still has a son. For the future children of the handmaid will belong to Sarah, as the handmaid herself is Sarah's property. Hagar is totally at Sarah's mercy. The mistress can command her slave to sleep with her husband and

she can punish her as she sees fit.

Still Sarah risks something to obtain her goal. She gambles with her dignity: "... and when she (Hagar) saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes. And Sarai said unto Abram: 'My wrong be upon thee, I gave my handmaid unto thy bosom, and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes, the Lord judge between me and thee.' But Abram said unto Sarai: 'Behold, thy maid is in thy hand, do to her that which is good in thine eyes.' And Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her face" (Gen. 16:4–6).

Sarah is a heartless woman who throws a pregnant woman out in the desert. Hagar, laughing at a barren woman's pain and humiliation, is unfeeling and pitiless. Although one is a slave and the other a mistress, they are bound to each other. They share a common destiny; two women in service of a man's hope for sons, a man's dream of being a great nation, a man's need for fertile wombs. Two unequal women; one a free woman and the other a slave, one infertile and the other fertile, are fated to share oppression and mutual dependence.

Sarah asserts herself as a person by projecting unto another woman her own status as a womb that might prove fertile. It is not strange that women living in such a pecking-order can not relate to each other in a loving and mutually trusting way.

When Sarah is already an old woman, Yahweh suddenly decides to turn the tables. Abraham is visited by three angels and Sarah is, as usual, not addressed. Only through eavesdropping can she obtain information about Yahweh's future plans. The angels speak to Abraham: "And they said unto him: 'Where is Sarah thy wife?' And he said: 'Behold in the tent.' And He said: 'I will certainly return to thee when the season cometh round; and lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son.' And Sarah heard in the tent door, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old and well stricken in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. And Sarah laughed within herself, saying: 'After I have waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?' And the Lord said unto Abraham: 'Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying: Shall I of surety bear a child, who am old? Is any thing hard for the Lord? At the set time I will return unto thee, when the season cometh around, and Sarah shall have a son. Then

Sarah denied, saying: 'I laughed not,' for she was afraid. And He said: 'Nay, but thou didst laugh' (Gen. 18:9-15).

Sarah is an old woman, reared in an age-old culture where mothers and female deities were considered the source of life. And here she is, confronted by a new and unknown god. He promises a son to Sarah whose menstruation and sexual life have long ceased. The promise is made by a god who has not spoken to her, not demanded a sign or a sacrifice from her, who has not established a covenant with her or explained his plans to her. If this god has any power at all, he has not used it to prevent her suffering from humiliating barrenness all through her adult life. What does this new god know about women and their bodies? What is he capable of doing, when he has not listened to a lifetime of prayers by her husband, his faithful servant?

Sarah laughs heartily, and her laughter is still contagious after thousands of years. But the visiting angels do not find it humorous and Sarah becomes scared.

Further on, laughter is again connected with derision and humiliation. When Sarah finally bears Abraham a son, she neither praises nor thanks Yahweh: "And Sarah said: 'God had made laughter for me, every one that heareth will laugh on account of me'. And she said: 'Who would have said unto Abraham, that Sarah should give children suck? for I have born him a son in his old age'" (Gen. 21:6-7).

Who, indeed? That it could be the god of Abraham, obviously does not seem plausible to Sarah. Bible scholars who read the story about Abraham and Sarah as a domestic and divine idyll, interpret Sarah's laughter as an expression of happiness and an expectation that everybody will share her joy. But the original Hebrew text expressly states that Yahweh laughs *at* Sarah. The later folk legends also emphasize the awkwardness of Sarah's position:

After she had given birth to Isaac, many people claimed that the Patriarch and his wife had adopted a foundling and were pretending that it was their own. Abraham made a banquet on the day that Isaac was weaned, and Sarah invited many women. They all brought their infants with them and Sarah suckled them all, thus convincing the guests that she was indeed the

mother (Encyclopedia Judaica, 1971: 867).

During the feast, laughter reappears in a negative context. Sarah sees Ishmael, Hagar's son, laughing and playing. The same Hebrew word is used here and Sarah perceives this laughter as a threat. She demands of Abraham to cast out "this bondswoman and her son, for the son of this bondswoman shall not be the heir with my son, even with Isaac" (Gen. 21:10).

Through the ages, Jewish and Christian Bible commentators have found it difficult to explain or rationalize Sarah's hardness. But the relevant question is not why Sarah acts as she does. Living in a narrow and limited world, entirely focused on her womb's potential as bearer of male seed, there is no wonder that she sees herself forced to drive away the one who threatens her position. Instead we must ask why Yahweh punishes the woman he has elected as the progenitress of his chosen people?

The Biblical text makes it perfectly clear that infertility is perceived as a punishment: "And if a man lie with his uncle's wife, he hath uncovered his uncle's nakedness, they shall bear sin, they shall die childless. And if a man take his brother's wife, it is impurity, he hath uncovered his brother's nakedness, they shall die childless" (Lev. 20:20-21). In the Book of Job, the wicked is warned that he "shall perish from the earth, and he shall have no name abroad . . . He shall have neither sons nor son's son among his people" (Job 18:17-19).

Later Jewish tradition sees the connection between sin and sterility in unambiguous terms:

Later Jewish lore was even more outspoken on the subject of sin and sterility. In the apocryphal Book of Enoch, it is stated that women are afflicted with barrenness only as a result of their misdeeds (1 Enoch 98:5). A second century A.D. midrash embellishes the Biblical account of Sarah's barrenness: when the women of the neighborhood came to pay visit to Abraham's womenfolk, Hagar said unto them; "Sarah, my mistress, seems to be a righteous woman, but she is not; were she righteous would she not have conceived after all these years? And I, I conceived in one single night (Patai, 1959: 82-84).

But, if infertility is a punishment, wherein lies

Sarah's sin? Her behaviour is not entirely agreeable, but it has the support of Yahweh himself. If her actions, the things she *does*, do not arouse Yahweh's displeasure, we are left with her person, who she *is*.

Sarah is a woman from Mesopotamia, from the land where Ninhursaga and Ishtar reigned. She leaves Mesopotamia and its goddesses behind. She follows the new, unknown god. His position is yet to be assured, as the influence of the Goddess is still great in Mesopotamia, as well as in the new land, the land of Canaan. Therefore, Yahweh has to demonstrate his power precisely in the areas where the hegemony of the Goddess has been total. She who made the womb contract, she who started the birth process, she who was the mother and midwife of the nation, must be defeated and crushed.

Yahweh can guarantee Sarah's surrender to his power only by demonstrating to her that fertility is now a part of his domain, under his control. Only by revoking the accumulated experiences of females, only by rendering female knowledge meaningless, only by giving an old and dried-out woman a son, while letting a young, healthy woman remain barren, can Yahweh prove that the power of fertility now is in his hands. And where the will of a male god reigns, there the male seed, not the female womb, is in focus.

The Biblical god severs women's relationship to the fertile landscape, the rivers and the gardens. He takes them into the desert where nothing grows. In the Garden of Eden he damns both woman and earth. He separates humans from nature and

woman from her pleasure and her freedom. He is the first god who is beyond nature, neither heaven nor earth. He is anti-nature, making the world anew without the assistance of natural powers, of Mother Earth. He is spirit, logic, pure will. He turns nature up-side-down, emptying young women, filling the old.

Yahweh has to demonstrate his might to the goddess-worshipping women. The demonstration takes place inside of the women. The tool he uses is infertility. Later the empty wombs are replaced by a womb empty of seed. The infertility of Biblical mothers and the virginity of the Mother of God are two sides of the same coin: The important men in Judeo-Christianity are born through the will of an almighty god and not through the desires of women.

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