Chapter 4

Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel: Beautiful and Barren

Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel are three women in Genesis who experience biological barrenness. As relatives, by blood and through marriage, these women’s infertility experiences form the basis of the ancestral narratives. This section will explore the circumstances surrounding infertility and examine the ways in which this biological barrier was overcome. The stories of Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel form the basis of the barrenness tradition within the HB.

Sarah’s Narrative

Sarah is first introduced as the wife of Abraham in the tôlĕdôt of Terah (Gen 11:29). Sarah is עֲקָרָה “barren” and this state is further emphasised by the phrase “she had no child” (Gen 11:30). It is not clear how long Abraham and Sarah have been married but one thing is certain, the continual and permanent nature of Sarah’s barrenness is denoted in the use of the imperfect verbal form. This notice makes for a jarring stop within the flowing rhythm of the tôlĕdôt in Genesis. The movement of life and generations comes to a halt at the announcement of Sarah’s infertility. At this point in the tôlĕdôt, Sarah is the obstacle to the continuation of Terah’s line through Abraham. As the narrative unfolds we find that this intentional announcement of the threat of Sarah’s infertility also complicates the larger plot of the promised seed and the great nation. However, this pregnant pause in the tôlĕdôt is an intentional device emphasising that YHWH is the only one who, through his initiative and intervention, can fulfil the impossible and perpetuate the promise.

1 Unless specifically referring to their name changes, the names Sarah and Abraham will be used throughout for consistency.

2 Indeed, understanding that the plot of Genesis is genealogy is vital to understanding the narratives; Steinberg, Kinship and Marriage in Genesis, 18. The tôlĕdôt or “the genealogies are of great importance; they are not merely a skeleton for the narratives”; Steinberg, “The Genealogical Framework of the Family Stories in Genesis,” 47.

3 “The blessing, mandate, and promise was to ‘Be fruitful and multiply’ (Gen 1:28; 9:1). And now barrenness! The incongruity between what is intended and what happens is overwhelming”; Brueggemann, Genesis, 95.
The function of marriage in the ancient world was not primarily companionship but the perpetuation of the family. The same holds true for many non-Western traditional societies today. In the Akan context, the purpose of marriage is to perpetuate one's matrilineage. Therefore, the narratives of Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel's infertility are read with great interest and more depth.

After YHWH has promised that he will give the land to Abraham's offspring, reciting an impressive list of peoples whom he will dispossess (Gen 15:18–21), the jarring announcement appears again “but Sarai, Abram's wife had borne him no children” (Gen 16:1). From the last barrenness announcement in the tôlĕdôt (Gen 11:30) until this point in the narrative it is Sarah's beauty that has been in focus. She is beautiful enough to attract the attention of Pharaoh and King Abimelech (Gen 12:14–15; 20:1–18).4 Despite her maturing years Sarah's beauty is singled out and makes her husband anxious about his own safety. Yet, now her prominent feature, her childlessness, is on centre stage once more.5

The juxtaposition of the phrases “Abram's wife” and “she had borne him no children” highlight the tension between the two realities (Gen 16:1). In the ANE context a “real” wife was by definition a woman who bore children for the perpetuation of her husband's lineage. Thus, at the very least Sarah's wifehood is called into question and, at the most, her status is at risk. The Akan reader, while acknowledging that in this context a woman's beauty is her glory, is disturbed about a woman who is aesthetically exceptional and yet cannot perform the primary function of childbearing. There is some suspicion cast on why this woman has been gifted with exceptional beauty but not with the “natural” function of childbearing.

The cause of Sarah's infertility, before her menopause, has been deliberated. Could it be that the cause of Sarah's infertility was initially vocational? Teubal suggests that Sarah is childless because she is a lukur or naditu, either of which belonged to a class of priestesses who did not give birth.6 Her hypothesis is based on the fact that Sarah's place of origin is Mesopotamia and therefore her

4 Steinberg asserts that despite Sarah's beauty Abraham sojourns to Egypt in an attempt to get rid of her because she is barren; Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis*, 54, 76. However, the primary reason given for the sojourn to Egypt is a famine (Gen 12:10), furthermore, if Abraham wanted to get rid of Sarah he likely would not have travelled to Egypt to do so.

5 The two elements of Sarah, her beauty and barrenness, are emphasised; Williams, “The Beautiful and the Barren,” 115.