

Human Reproduction and Infertility in the Hebrew Bible

Vivian, Eleanor

DOI:

[10.1177/1476993X221104182](https://doi.org/10.1177/1476993X221104182)

License:

Creative Commons: Attribution (CC BY)

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Vivian, E 2022, 'Human Reproduction and Infertility in the Hebrew Bible', *Currents in Biblical Research*, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 267-292. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476993X221104182>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

Human Reproduction and Infertility in the Hebrew Bible

Eleanor Vivian 

University of Birmingham, UK

Currents in Biblical Research

2022, Vol. 21(1) 267–292

© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/1476993X221104182

journals.sagepub.com/home/cbi



Abstract

Given the biblical imperative to humanity to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1.28; see also 9.1, 7; 35.11) and the fact that several biblical narratives hinge on a woman’s reproductive incapability (Gen. 16–18; 21; 25.21–34; 30.1–24; Judg. 13; 1 Sam. 1), it is not surprising that there are extensive studies of human reproduction and infertility. The emergence of feminist criticism in the 1970s–1990s led to a particular focus on the way in which the biblical texts present the contribution of women to the procreative process, and many studies analyze the barren woman motif. Yet the various methodological and hermeneutical approaches applied to the study of human fertility and reproduction leads—somewhat inevitably—to a range of conflicting opinions on the role of the respective parties (the male, the deity, and the female) in reproduction and inducing fertility.

Keywords

reproduction, fertility, infertility, feminist criticism, disability studies, comparative anthropology, barrenness, circumcision, covenant, kinship

Introduction

The opening chapters of the canonical Hebrew Bible hint at what will emerge as a prime concern of the texts as a whole: human fertility, infertility, and reproduction. “Be fruitful and multiply” is the first command given by God to humanity in Genesis (Gen. 1.28; see also 9.1, 7; 35.11), and the ability to produce many offspring is listed as a man’s reward for fulfilling covenantal stipulations (e.g., Gen. 17). Many references to women pertain to their motherhood, often focusing on their reproductive (in)capabilities: a woman’s “fruitfulness” is deemed worthy of praise (e.g., Ps. 128.3; Ezek. 19.10), and several

Corresponding author:

Eleanor Vivian, European Research Institute, University of Birmingham, Pritchatt’s Road, Birmingham B15 2SB, UK.

Email: EKV084@student.bham.ac.uk

narratives hinge on the matriarchs' reproductive incapacity (e.g., Gen. 16.2; 21.1–2; 25.21; 30.2, 22). As Baden notes, many female figures in the Hebrew Bible are “introduced as barren almost before we know anything else about them” (2011: 18).

The prevalence of the topic in the Hebrew Bible is not surprising when we consider its historical context: in an agrarian society, children were seen as “assets, not expenses” (Koepp 2012: 71); they would be able to contribute to labor (Meyers 1988: 57) and, thus, to survival (Koepp 2012: 87; Ackerman 2014: 21). Furthermore, in a geographical location and time where poverty and disease exacerbated an already short life expectancy, it is little wonder that the biblical texts “give ideological sanction to the adaptive strategy of increasing birthrate” (Meyers 1999: 38).

Similarly, in the larger ancient Near East we find considerable literature that outlines—either explicitly or by implication—ancient authors' understandings of infertility and reproduction. Several edited volumes address such texts through a variety of themes and/or time frames (e.g., Budin and McIntosh Turfa 2016; Chavalas 2013; Parpola and Whiting 2002; Stol 2016), whereas other works focus more specifically on literature from certain locations and empires such as Egyptian (e.g., Budin 2018; Feucht 2004; 2016; Inhorn 1994; Robins 1993; Roth 2000), Mesopotamian (e.g., Biggs 1967; 2002; Budin 2016; Couto-Ferreira 2013; 2016; Leick 1994; Volk 2004), and Hittite (e.g., Bachvarova 2013; Beckman 1983; Engelhard 1970; Pringle 1993) literature.

Many scholars have compared these ancient Near Eastern texts to the biblical texts, as will be outlined below. One often consistent element in these ancient texts is that their authors recognized both the god(s) *and* sexual intercourse as playing a role in the creation of a child (see e.g., Quick 2021: 46). However, scholarship diverges with respect to the value ascribed to the respective roles of the male, the deity, and the female in the process of reproduction.

Methodological Approaches

The methodological approach utilized by scholars deeply affects their understanding of how the Hebrew Bible presents the roles of the male, the deity, and the female in human reproduction and infertility. In this section, I shall outline the key methodological approaches employed to analyze human reproduction and infertility in the Hebrew Bible and then examine the implications of these approaches.

Emerging Context: Feminist Criticism

Prior to the emergence of feminist biblical scholarship in the 1970s–1990s, analyses of human reproduction and infertility were primarily limited to studies on specific verses within commentaries (e.g., von Rad 1961: 131, 191; Boling 1975: 219; McKane 1963: 33) and on narrative motifs in which these topics were a prevailing concern (e.g., Alter 1981, see below). The explosion of feminist biblical criticism led to a rise in studies concerning reproduction and infertility, given three of the primary tenets of feminist scholarship:

- to read women in the biblical texts;
- to critically engage with the Hebrew Bible through a feminist hermeneutical lens; and
- to compare current patriarchal societies to that which is presented in the texts. (Sakenfeld 1985: 56; see also Wacker 2006: 634)

The goal of these tenets is to uncover the patriarchal bias of the texts, which scholars often presume have been produced by men *for* men. Indeed, Sakenfeld asserts that the feminist hermeneutical lens is a “stance of radical suspicion,” by which:

Feminists recognize in common that *patriarchy* was one of the most stable features of ancient Biblical society over the thousand-plus years of the Bible’s composition and redaction. Thus, in studying any biblical texts, feminists need to be alert not only for explicit *patriarchal* bias but also for evidence of more subtle androcentrism in the world view of the biblical authors. (1985: 55–56)

Many feminist scholars perceive this “explicit patriarchal bias” in the Bible’s presentation of female infertility and the focus on male role in the reproduction as evidence that some biblical authors relegate the role of the woman in the reproductive process. In what follows, I highlight that, although scholarly opinion diverges with regards to the degrees of participation the respective parties play in the procreative process, many scholars agree that the Hebrew Bible centers the divine and the male roles in reproduction to the detriment of the mother.

Comparative Anthropological Studies

As noted, one of the primary objectives of feminist criticism was to compare the presentation of patriarchal society in the Hebrew Bible with contemporary societies. Several (more recent) studies compare the understanding of infertility in the Hebrew Bible with that of contemporary cultures. For example, de-Whyte analyzes the social and biological role of woman as mother in Hebrew and Akan cultures in her 2018 monograph *Wom(b)an: A Cultural-Narrative Reading of the Hebrew Bible Barrenness Narratives*. Journal articles by Abasili (2015), Ademiluka (2019; 2021), and Yafeh-Deigh (2020) undertake similar studies on other cultures. Each of these studies analyze the ways that infertile women are perceived in various cultures, focusing in particular on the implications of one’s reproductive capacity—or lack thereof—on one’s social standing.

Disability Studies

Comparative anthropology shares its focus on societal and cultural implications with disability studies readings of biblical texts. Disability studies is a burgeoning field of study within biblical studies, as reflected in Melcher’s 2019 article in this journal. Several edited volumes pertaining to this field have been compiled over the past couple of decades: Avalos, Melcher, and Schipper’s ground-breaking volume *This Abled Body*, and Moss and

Schipper's *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature* which includes several chapters concerning infertility, impotency, and other sexual disabilities (e.g., Ackerman; Baden; Lemos; Stewart).

Within biblical studies, most disability researchers employ what is known as the cultural model of disability, which analyzes the representation of disabilities in discourse. It provides key insights into how textual representations of disability may reflect cultural values (Mitchell and Snyder 2000). Lemos (2011), for example, analyzes the social disablement experienced by those with crushed testicles, recognizing the multiple identities that eunuchs could inhabit as people with status as well as people prohibited from certain spaces. Additionally, as will be illustrated below, disability studies is particularly applied to representations of female infertility (e.g., Baden 2011; Moss and Baden 2015).

Both disability studies and comparative anthropological studies are relatively new developments in the study of human reproduction and infertility in the Hebrew Bible. Scholars in both fields tend to employ earlier research from feminist criticism as a foundation for their studies, given feminist criticism's proclivity towards reading the experience of women within the texts, especially after centuries of androcentric readings of the Bible that largely ignored women's experiences. Feminist criticism, therefore, is one of the emerging contexts out of which a consideration of human reproduction and infertility in the Hebrew Bible arises.

History of Research

Biblical research on human reproduction and infertility recognizes the respective relationships between the male, God, and the female as sites of connection and of conflict. Yet there is no consensus among scholars regarding the role of these parties in the procreative process. In what follows, I outline the varying conflicting understandings of each party—the male, God, and the female—in the process of reproduction and in their potential to be the “cause” of infertility, highlighting the ways in which the three parties are seen to interact and/or conflict.

The Male Role in Reproduction

Many scholars identify a patriarchal intention behind the explications of the respective roles in reproduction. Norstedt-Hedman (2016) and Delaney (2001), for example, argue that the Hebrew Bible overemphasizes the role of the male, to the detriment of the female. Indeed, Norstedt-Hedman argues that: “there is a structural negation of the mother and of the maternal body which denies and suppresses the mother's role and feminine functions of reproduction.” She claims that this structural negation relegates the mother's role to simply that of a “vessel” for children created “for man and by the Father-God” (2016: 6). In her 2016 thesis, she argues that this “narratological negation of the maternal” consists of two aims:

- 1) Asserting the dominance of the Father-God in terms of creation by devaluing maternal contributions to the process of creation.
- 2) Asserting the patriarchal ideology of paternal priority by devaluing the maternal figure and excluding her from a place of personal value. (37)

Similarly, [Kelso \(2003\)](#) argues that the maternal body is not valued in and of itself, but only in that it produces men and produces *for* men. Indeed, God tells men—not women—to “be fruitful and multiply” (e.g., Gen. 9.1, 7; 35.11) and blesses them with innumerable descendants if they fulfil covenantal stipulations (e.g., Gen. 17; Lev. 26.3–9; Deut. 7.12–15; 28.1–11). The male progenitor is thus perceived by some scholars to be the primary agent in the reproductive process.

Male “seed”. A number of scholars have noted that the term “seed”—*zera*^c in Biblical Hebrew—is polysemous (e.g., [Stiebert 2012](#): 218; [Erbele-Küster 2017](#): 106; [Quick 2021](#): 46): when used to refer to procreation, it bears a semantic range that encompasses both “semen” (e.g., Lev. 15.16–18; 22.4) and, more frequently, “progeny” (e.g., Gen. 3.15; 17.7–10; 26.3–4; Exod. 28.43; Deut. 1.8; 4.37; Ezra 2.59; Neh. 9.2). Indeed, the story of Onan and Tamar employs both meanings within a matter of sentences: because Onan understands that the “seed” would not be his, he does not impregnate Tamar, but instead spills “it” (the seed) on the ground (Gen. 38.8–9).

Whitekettle recognizes that the polysemous nature of the term has clear implications for the way in which women were thought to contribute to the process of conception:

The use of this word to denote not only semen, but also the children that result from ejaculation, lends strong support to the notion that the process of conception was understood as monogenetic, that is, the male alone contributed what initial material was necessary to form the conceptus in the womb of the female. ([1995a](#): 386–87)

Monogenesis is the understanding that only one party contributes to the process of procreation: namely, the male. This same idea is found in Graeco-Roman understandings of conception under the name “preformationism,” which understands the male contribution of semen to contain all that is required to produce a child ([Stiebert 2012](#): 213; [Quick 2021](#)). Several scholars maintain that the use of the term “seed” to refer to both semen and progeny results in an understanding in which the female role is denigrated to that of nurturer only. Delaney, for example, argues that the Hebrew Bible’s monogenetic understanding of reproduction implies that the mother contributes nothing to the substance of the child: she is “the one in whom the seed is planted; she nurtures and brings it forth, but is not herself the source of the seed” ([2001](#): 454; see also [Levine 2002](#): 341; [Chapman 2016](#): 122).

In fact, several scholars acknowledge parallels between human reproduction and agriculture implicit in the use of the term “seed.” [Van Wolde \(2014: 371\)](#) and [Stiebert \(2012: 219\)](#) both claim that the agricultural image of semen as “seed,” by implication, perceives the woman to be the land in which the seed is implanted; the woman provides only the environment—the womb—in which the child may grow.

A number of scholars find parallels in ancient Near Eastern understandings of conception. As Stol asserts: “The metaphor of the woman as a fertile field to be worked by the man is ubiquitous.” He highlights that many erotic lyrical poems in Sumerian and Babylonian speak of ploughing fields as a euphemism for sexual intercourse, and that women without children are named “abandoned (field)” (2000: 1–2). Whitekettle also notes that there exist parallels between “accepting” seed in agricultural contexts and in human reproduction: he cites a Maqlû incantation: “(as) the plow impregnated the earth and the earth accepted (maḥāru) the seed (zēru)...” (CAD, M/1, 58b in [Whitekettle 1995a](#): 95 n.52), and another text that refers to the woman’s womb “accepting” the male sperm in a similar way: “if a woman’s womb has accepted (maḥāru) the sperm (riḥūtu)...” (BAM 240:6 in [Whitekettle 1995a](#): 94–95).

Thus, the use of the agricultural term “seed” to polysemously refer to both semen and offspring may be seen to reflect a specifically monogenetic—or preformationist—understanding of procreation. Much scholarship has understood this primarily as a means of restricting the role of the woman in the process of human reproduction to merely that of the environment—the land—in which the male “seed” may grow.

Circumcision. The rite of circumcision is also seen by many scholars to pertain to human fertility and agriculture: just as trees are pruned to produce “fruit,” so circumcision increases fertility (Cohen 2005; Koepf 2012: 80; Exum 2016: 97). Eilberg-Schwartz acknowledges an analogy between the “uncircumcised male organ and immature fruit tree” to be particularly prevalent in the priestly writings in which, he argues, circumcision is regarded as a ritual act, “symbolically readying the stem for producing fruit” (1999: 158). Cohen (2005) likewise highlights the connection made between the first fruits and foreskin within the priestly material (e.g., Lev. 19.23). He notes that: “Just as foreskin-fruit is prohibited in order to prepare the way for fruit, so too human foreskin is removed in order to prepare the way for ‘fruit’” (94; see also [Eilberg-Schwartz 1999](#): 150).

Several scholars note the connection between circumcision and reproductive ability: Eilberg-Schwartz refers to circumcision as a “fruitful cut,” and recognizes the connection made between circumcision—which makes the male organ appear constantly erect—and virility, and, thus, the continuation of one’s lineage (1990: 141–76). Indeed, as the sign of the covenant presented to Abraham in Genesis 17, the rite of circumcision is linked to the production of progeny. Fox (1974) argues that just as a rainbow functions as a sign to remind God to never again flood the earth, so circumcision acts as a sign to remind God of the covenantal promise of fruitfulness, and, thus, influences God’s decision to enact this promise. The fact that the symbol of the covenantal promise is imprinted on the male organ leads Rashkow to assert that: “Certainly, no other part of the body would emphasize as effectively the connection between male reproductive capacity and the Deity’s ultimate potency” (2000: 90).

The ritual of circumcision can, in some instances, be seen to implicitly downplay the reproductive capacity of the female. Indeed, in her chapter “The M(O)ther’s Place” in *Fragmented Women* (2016), Exum outlines the way in which scholarship has understood the relationship between circumcision and female purity rights (p. 97). She notes that both [Kristeva \(1982: 99–100\)](#) and [Eilberg-Schwartz \(1990: 174–175\)](#) interpret the mention of

circumcision among the female ritual purity discussion in Lev. 12.2–4 as a means of separating the male child from the impurity of the mother, associating him instead with the paternal. She argues that:

[i]n their different ways, these interpretations all point to patriarchy’s fear of women’s reproductive power, its need to suppress it, and its equally strong desire to appropriate it. (97)

As such, the practice of circumcision has been regarded in scholarship to differentiate the male child from the female birth-giver, connecting him instead to the male community and to the male God through the covenantal rite. The implicit connection between circumcision and fertility—inferred through the metaphorical connection made between the male organ and a fruit tree—similarly associates the male with virility. Thus, the ritual of circumcision can be understood as a means of denying the female contribution to procreation, and even distancing her from the covenantal promises made between God and males reflected in the rite of circumcision. Combined with the polysemic nature of the term “seed,” this further denigrates the role of the female in the reproductive process. Scholars such as [Norstedt Hedman \(2016: 6\)](#) therefore perceive a “structural negation of the mother” at both a narratological and ritual level; the focus on the male organ and its emissions instead elevates the role of the father.

Male Infertility?

Although [Koepf \(2012: 61\)](#) notes that male infertility is never explicitly indicated in the Hebrew Bible, there are a number of instances in which it may be implied. For example, the institution of levirate marriage may suggest that the husband was culpable for the pair’s childlessness since his widow is then given in marriage to a close relative to provide a child on behalf of his kin (e.g., Deut. 25.5–10).

Furthermore, [Schipper \(2016\)](#) highlights that there are a number of instances in which male infertility may be implied in the Book of Ruth. He analyses the potential etymological heritage of the names of Naomi’s sons, with whom Ruth and Orpah, respectively, have no children. He points out that both of their husbands’ names imply transience: *Mahlôn* is perhaps etymologically connected to the Hebrew verbal root *hālâ* “to be sick.” *Kilyôn* may be related to the similar form found in Isa. 10.22 and Deut. 28.65, which seems to bear the meaning something akin to “destruction” ([Schipper 2016: 82](#)) and could be etymologically connected to the Hebrew verb *kālâ*, meaning “to stop, perish, fade away.” Indeed, as Koepf eloquently asserts, their names: “may have been meant to suggest that they were less than ideal reproductive specimens” (2012: 61).

Furthermore, reference to the old age of the male partner in relation to their childlessness may allude to infertility. For example, Sarah laughs incredulously at the prospect of having children due to the advanced age of her and her husband, Abraham (Gen. 17.17; 21.2, 6). [Fuchs \(1999: 135\)](#) and [Norstedt Hedman \(2016: 33\)](#) both posit that this is alluding to Abraham’s impotency. Similarly, [Nel \(2008\)](#) notes that the “command” to enjoy the “spring of your youth” in Proverbs (5.18) highlights that the Hebrew Bible understood impotency to be a logical corollary of old age.

In the ancient Near East, likewise, old age is seen as a reason for impotency. For example, an Assyrian medical text hypothesizes:

‘[if a man] because of old age(?), (being hit with) a stick, (having an attack of) fever, or (being struck by) a chariot goad(?), is impotent toward a woman...’ (AMT 88,3:1f.)

As Biggs asserts of Babylonian literature, “Whatever may have been considered the cause of impotence, it is probable that quite often the cause was simply the natural diminution of potency which affects all men sooner or later” (1967: 3).

In these ways, various texts suggest that men may well be culpable for childlessness, though not due to infertility but due to impotency resulting from sickness or old age. Yet this theme is not as prevalent in the biblical texts as is female infertility. Indeed, Koepf (2012: 61) acknowledges that, even when male infertility can be inferred, it is not explicitly labelled as such, nor do the texts draw attention to it. Female infertility, on the other hand, is the crux of several biblical narratives, as we shall go on to see.

God’s Role in Reproduction

Several scholars highlight the connection between the male and the male God in the process of procreation: the male progenitor is allied to the deity through their capacity to create. For example, Norstedt Hedman (2016: 37) argues that the aforementioned “narratological negation of the maternal” is part of a patriarchal bias that asserts the dominance of both the Father-God and the biological father of the child at the expense of the role of the mother.

The role played by female goddesses in the ancient Near Eastern understanding of reproduction and gestation is also absorbed by the one male God of the Hebrew Bible. As Frymer-Kensky highlights, in the ancient Near East:

[o]nce the semen left a man’s body, the stages of childbirth were in the bodies of woman and the hands of goddesses. ... Both gestation and birth were under the tutelage of the mother goddess and her assistants. (1992: 49)

Yet in the Hebrew Bible, the male God is understood to control gestation: the father provides the “seed” (Gen. 38.8–9; Lev. 15.16–18; 22.4), and the deity forms the child in the woman’s womb (e.g., Job 10:8–12; Ps. 139:13–16; Jer. 1:5).

Indeed, Delaney (2001: 455) suggests that this reflects a “symbolic interrelation between monogenesis and monotheism” and asserts that the agricultural metaphorical imagery employed to depict the reproductive process results in this interconnection:

Men became symbolically allied with God the Creator, while women became symbolically associated with what was created—namely, the earth. The very notion of paternity, therefore, already embodied authority and power. (454)

The association between the phallus and divine fertility is, in fact, even more prominent in the ancient Near East: in the Sumerian hymn “Enki and the World Order,” it is the phallic fertility of the god Enki which fills the rivers and, as a result, provides fruitfulness in the land. Ancient Egyptian cosmogonic myths from the Old Kingdom period depict creation as emerging from the ejaculation of the gods (see e.g., Budin 2018: 26–28). Thus, just as male humans produce offspring through their genitalia, so, in the ancient Near East, were gods thought to create through their divine genitalia.

Man vs God: The Oedipus Complex. Not all scholars see a patriarchal intention in the depictions of reproduction that emphasizes the roles of man and God; some see the representations to reflect an understanding of man vs God, thus downplaying the role of the male parent through competition with the deity. Eilberg-Schwartz, for example, perceives a contest between man and God with regards to role in procreation which he determines to reflect the Oedipus Complex:

if it is the divine father who is responsible for opening a woman’s womb, it is not clear at all what role the human father plays. The deity is sometimes regarded as competition for human males, since the human male’s ability to reproduce is dependent upon the will or participation of the deity. (1994: 17)

Though he recognizes that the male contributes the seed, he also emphasizes that God must bless his wife for conception to occur. Thus, “[i]n this sense, the virility of the human male is put at risk by representations of divine masculinity” (1994: 17).

God “remembering” women and “opening” their wombs. To be sure, in several narratives, God is said to open women’s wombs. In their 2015 book *Reconceiving Infertility*, Moss and Baden claim that, although God opens wombs, he does not concomitantly close wombs. Instead, the womb is closed by default, until the deity deigns to open it in blessing. They argue that the deity’s control over women’s wombs can be read redemptively, concluding that the Hebrew Bible “does not lay blame at the feet of the sufferer” (2015: 69). God opens wombs in blessing but does not close them in curse (see also Baden 2011).

Moss and Baden focus on the imagery of the womb as a “closed chamber” in the Hebrew Bible, arguing for the significance of God “opening” these closed wombs in divine blessing. They cite Gen. 29.31, which declares that “when the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren” and Gen. 30.22, where God opened Rachel’s womb, to highlight that their wombs would naturally have been closed (56). Furthermore, they make reference to the discovery of a “sizable collection” of amulets in Egypt that depict a god/gods, a uterus, and a key, implying that the gods have the key to opening wombs of women (57).

The opening of wombs is not just understood as a blessing, but also as a reward: in Ps. 127.3, the fruit of the womb is said to be God’s reward, and in Ps. 128.3, a “fruitful” wife appears to be the reward for a man who “fears the LORD, who walks in His ways” (v.1). A similar idea may also be implied in Gen. 18: Callaway (1986: 29) suggests that Sarah’s

conception of Isaac may be regarded as a reward for Abraham's hospitality towards his guests in Gen. 18.1–8; a common theme in ancient literature. More explicitly, Elisha appears to reward the Shunammite woman for her hospitality by providing her with a child (2 Kgs 4). Hannah, too, appears to be rewarded by God with a son; not due to her hospitality, but due to her piety (1 Sam. 1) (Callaway 1986: 86).

Others understand God's role in opening women's wombs to be less favorable towards women: given the divine mandate to "be fruitful and multiply," the fact that God must *open* women's wombs in order for God's own command to be fulfilled may be seen to imply that women are *barriers* to the covenantal promises. As Callaway (1986: 49) acknowledges (and as I shall go on to elaborate below), barren women function as obstacles that the deity must overcome in order to fulfil the divine promise of fertility.

Thus, scholars are not unanimous in how they interpret the role of God opening wombs: some, like Moss and Baden, recognize this to be positive for women, whereas others, like Callaway, perceive it to be another means of structurally negating the role of the mother in reproduction by highlighting how her own reproductive processes are dependent on the whims of the deity.

God's Role in Infertility

Yet, if opening wombs is understood to be an act of divine blessing, then the continued closure of wombs may be seen as the result of "divine forgetfulness." Indeed, references to God "remembering" women before they conceive (e.g., Gen. 30.22–23) are understood by Moss and Baden to reflect this understanding (2015: 66–67).

However, God is not only said to "open" women's wombs but also to "close" them. God is understood to withhold "fruit of the womb" from Rachel (Gen. 30.2), and it is explicitly asserted that God had closed Hannah's womb (1 Sam. 1.5–6). These two examples seem to show God "closes wombs" somewhat arbitrarily, but nevertheless highlight that, as Tribble asserts: "the wombs of women belong to God"; "God closes and opens wombs in judgement, in blessing and in mystery" (Tribble 1992: 34–35).

There exists considerable debate within scholarship as to whether the closure of wombs is ever, in fact, the result of divine *punishment*. Some scholars interpret Gen. 20 as an example of this: Abimelech's household appears to be punished with infertility because Abimelech took Sarah to be his wife (Callaway 1986: 204; van der Toorn 1994: 79; Baden 2011: 17–18). However, other scholars understand the closure of the women's wombs in Abimelech's household not to be an act of divine punishment *per se*, but a divine act intended to ensure the paternity of Abraham's future children (Exum 2016: 86). By closing the wombs of the women, the reader is assured that Sarah's future offspring are Abraham's not Abimelech's.

Nevertheless, it seems possible to infer that Michal's childlessness in 2 Sam. 6.23 is the result of her denunciation of David: David had many children with all his other wives (2 Sam. 3.2–5; 5.13–15; 11.5; 12.24) which imputes the "culpability" of Michal's childlessness on to herself (Schipper 2007: 106). Yet whether this childlessness can be deemed "infertility" is another matter; she is not referred to as "barren," implying, perhaps, that her

childlessness was the result of limited sexual intercourse as opposed to God “closing her womb.”

In short, God is certainly understood to play a key role in the process of human reproduction. God opens wombs, closes wombs, and fertility is regarded as a blessing for obedience (e.g., Deut. 7; 28; Ps. 127.3). As van Rooy asserts, “[o]bedience and fertility go hand in hand” (van Rooy 1986: 232).

The Female Role in Reproduction

In contradistinction to scholars such as Norstedt Hedman and Kelso, several feminist scholars recognize procreation to elevate the role of the woman, recognizing women and God as co-creators in the production of children (e.g., Pardes 1992: 44–45; van Dijk-Hemmes 1993: 102–103).

Indeed, Stiebert points out that Eve’s naming of Cain—“I have acquired a man with YHWH”—implies that the *woman* and God are the prime contributors in procreation; that “the human father’s role is insignificant in comparison with God’s” (Stiebert 2012: 216). The first child conceived in Genesis is named “Cain” by his mother Eve because she has “acquired” (*qānā*) him “with the help of the Lord” (Gen. 4.1). Elsewhere, in the Hebrew Bible, the same verbal root designates God’s creative activity (e.g., Gen. 14.22; Ps. 139.13; Prov. 8.22). Mbuwayesango likewise argues that it is not intercourse with a male that results in conception; “[r]ather, an action of Yahweh, not sex with the concerned husband, brings about conception” (2016: 458).

The following section outlines views within scholarship that present the woman as playing a key contributing role in the process of procreation.

Aphrodisiacs. In the narrative contentions between Rachel and Leah, mandrakes are traded in for a night with their husband, Jacob (Gen. 30.14–16). Mandrakes are known aphrodisiacs, owing to the shape of their roots which resemble the lower half of the human body (Koepf 2012: 79). Indeed, Ackerman highlights that the root *dūd* from whence the term “mandrake” stems means “love, beloved” (2014: 15). Avalos (1995: 254–55) interprets their narrative function to be medicinal, claiming that they function as a “natural remedy” for infertility. However, Meyers recognizes their use here to be magical (2005: 38). Ackerman’s 2014 book chapter on “Women’s Reproductive Magic in Ancient Israel” notes that the use of aphrodisiacs to aid fertility is presented “in a manner that is wholly matter of fact, without any reservations being expressed about this use of ‘plant magic’” (2014: 17). Yet, the differentiation between plant magic and herbal remedies is not apparent.

Havrelock argues that their use does not *cure* Rachel’s barrenness; instead, it “alert(s) God to her desperation” (2008: 173). Exum, similarly, highlights that Leah and Rachel attribute their conceptions (or lack thereof) to God, not the mandrakes: Leah acknowledges God’s responsibility for conception (29.32, 33, 35; 30.18, 20), and Rachel likewise attributes her servant’s fecundity to God (30.6). Thus, Exum asserts that:

the narrator attributes nothing to the mandrakes, but regards female fecundity as due solely to divine intervention: ‘God remembered Rachel and God heard her and opened her womb’ (30.22) (2016: 124; see also [Stol 2000: 56](#)).

According to this view, women and God are the active co-participants in conception.

Therefore, although scholars dispute whether the use of mandrakes should be deemed a “magical” practice, an herbal remedy, or an appeal to God, it is clear that their use implies that the women are taking agency for their own fertility.

Female “seed”? There is one primary verse in the Hebrew Bible that appears to imply the female participant in sexual intercourse actually contributes to the process of procreation. In Leviticus 12.2, the particular causative verb *tazrīʾa* appears to imply that the woman produces seed herself.

As one might assume, scholars have offered several interpretations of this verse. [Grohmann \(2010\)](#) analyzes the nebulous term *tazrīʾa* in Leviticus 12.2 in the light of its interpretation in Heb. 11.11 (see also [van der Horst 1990](#)) and rabbinic literature (see also [Erbele-Küster 2017: 108–109](#)), arguing that “[t]his tradition marks a countertradition in the general concept of the man as the active part in procreation, giving seed, impregnating, and the woman as the passive one” (49). [Quick \(2021\)](#), similarly, argues that the idea of a female seed is present in the Hebrew Bible itself. She understands the presentation of embryology in the Genesis Apocryphon—in which Bitenosh’s orgasm is appealed to as proof of Noah’s paternity—to hearken back to the Hebrew Bible, appealing to Lev. 12.2 to affirm this view.

Stiebert, on the other hand, recognizes the ambiguity in the Hebrew Bible with regards to “whether the woman was believed to contribute procreatory fluid,” acknowledging that menstrual blood may have been perceived to be such (2012: 220). Indeed, Hittite rituals reflect an understanding of menstrual blood as life-giving fluid: [Bachvarova \(2013: 272–306\)](#) posits that the Hittite fertility ritual of twining of red and white wool may indicate that the Hittites understood both semen (indicated by the white wool) and menstrual blood (indicated by the red wool) to be necessary components for conception.

Nevertheless, many studies acknowledge that early biblical translation and interpretation did not understand this verse to be advancing the idea of female contribution; instead, the Septuagint—for example—translated the causative stem *tazrīʾa* in Lev 12.2—“produced seed”—as passive, thus understanding the female as the passive recipient of the seed ([Grohmann 2010: 43–44](#); [Quick 2021: 48](#)).

Kinship through the mother. Yet Chapman argues that several scholars “overemphasize the importance of the male seed in the biblical understanding of procreation, and fail to see those places where mothers are presented as contributing to the physical, ethnic, or character composition of their children” (2016: 122). Instead, she hypothesizes that it is one’s mother’s milk that forms kinship bonds: she argues that the “preposterousness” of certain breastfeeding scenarios in the Hebrew Bible highlights the significance of breastfeeding in conveying ethnicity (2012: 36–49). For example, the elderly Naomi breastfeeding her daughter-in-law’s child, Obed, Sarah breastfeeding Isaac herself rather

than requiring it of her Egyptian slave-girl, Hagar, and Moses' mother ironically breastfeeding her own child for the Egyptian princess who adopted him, are each instances where the ethnicity of the child is implied to be dependent on the mother importing it to them through their breastmilk.

Yet, as [Quick \(2021: n.38\)](#) highlights, "this focus on breastfeeding sees the female role in ethnogenesis relegated to a purely *post*-birth event." It is not an understanding of the female role in the reproductive process *per se*, but of her contribution to the continual development of the child.

However, Chapman argues that the formation of a child in the Hebrew Bible is understood to be "two-stage[d]"; a "maternally focused" process encapsulated in the Hebrew word pair "breast and womb" (2012: 25). She asserts that, "biblical authors imagined a child's physical, character, and emotional development to begin at conception, continue during the time in the womb, and find completion through breastfeeding" (2016: 124).

Similarly, [Steinberg \(1993: 46\)](#) highlights that it is the status of the mother which determines the inheritance status of her male child. The ethnicity of the woman is imported onto her child. Though Hagar's child Ishmael would have been deemed a sufficient heir, the status of the mother determines the status of her child thus Sarah's son Isaac is instead regarded as the "true" heir (p. 7). Indeed, Chapman argues that the matriarchs were required to be of the line of Terah because she will contribute this ethnicity to her children, the offspring of the patriarchs, children of the covenantal promise (2012: 123; see also [Steinberg 1993: 5](#)).

Thus, an (albeit small) number of scholars argue that feminist scholarship up until this point has been too pessimistic in its readings of conception in the Hebrew Bible. Chapman and Quick are prime examples of scholars who maintain the possibility of a more redemptive reading that acknowledges and credits the role of women in the reproductive process.

In conclusion, some of the more recent scholarship to date recognizes the ways in which the biblical texts credit women for their role in procreation. However, this is a minority viewpoint in comparison to the negation of the women's role, as demonstrated above. This is perhaps reflected in the diverse range of discussions outlined here concerning the ways in which the woman may actively contribute to her fertility and the reproductive process: in each case, scholarly views are both varied and scarce, and often these themes can only be inferred. The role of women in infertility, however, is considerably more explicit in the texts.

Female Infertility

The biblical texts often blame women for infertility: the institution of polygyny—a man marrying multiple wives—often seems to implicate the female. The texts presume that the male spouse may be able to reproduce with another female.

Polygyny is also commonly found in the texts we possess from other ancient Near Eastern societies: Stol asserts that: "[h]aving no children was unacceptable to Babylonians," highlighting that although an ordinary man would typically have one wife, he

was permitted to take another if his first had borne him no children (1995: 491). In fact, there exist many ancient Near Eastern legal documents that permit a man to marry a second wife if his first does not bear him any children. For example, a Middle Babylonian marriage document stipulates that:

If Naidu has not given birth to an heir, then the daughter of her brother, Iwaššura, shall be given (to Iriḫalpa). (*COS* 2:251–252)

Another Middle Babylonian document declares that if the wife had not borne any children after seven years, Idat[ti] is permitted to acquire a second wife (*COS* 2:252).

This concern is displayed in other ancient Near Eastern legal documents: indeed, the Code of Hammurabi even allows a man to divorce his first wife “who did not bear him children,” though it does require that he return her dowry and provide her with the equivalent of her bride-price (*COS* 2:344 §163). The fact that there are laws for this but not for the wife to do likewise heavily implies that the “burden” of infertility lies squarely on the woman’s shoulders. Though levirate marriage may appear to be a comparable male corollary to polygyny, this institution is implemented only at the husband’s death; unless her husband dies, a woman cannot attempt to conceive with another man if her marriage does not produce children.

The idea that the woman is assumed to be “at fault” if a couple do not conceive appears to be an idea common to both Israel and the ancient Near East. By allowing the man to sleep with another woman if he does not successfully conceive with his first wife, polygynous marriages presume that the woman is “culpable” for their lack of children.

Such a belief would have disastrous social consequences for a woman in this position. As Fontaine argues:

Any disability or illness which threatens a woman’s ability to fulfil her patriarchal purpose strikes at the very heart of her self-esteem, structured as it is by patriarchal expectations, and denies her her ‘rightful’ place within the fabric of society. (1996: 291)

Indeed, employing insights from disability studies, many scholars recognize female infertility to be a disability in the Hebrew Bible. Raphael asserts that “an understanding of disability as bodily impairment in the context of social environment reveals that female infertility... is the defining female disability in the Hebrew Bible (and in other ancient Near Eastern literature)” (2008: 57–58).

Powell provides a useful summary of scholarship concerning infertility as a disability in her 2015 article “The Infertile Womb of God: Ableism in Feminist Doctrine of God” (see especially 120–24). Here, she points out that although infertility may not necessarily be regarded as a disability today, it would have been in ancient Israelite culture: large families were pivotal to the continued functioning of an agrarian society, and it was seen as a woman’s primary function to reproduce. Thus, infertility was a socially disabling affliction in the context of the Hebrew Bible (see also Schipper 2007: 104–13). However, Baden questions this claim, asserting that “[i]t is crucial, before making any claims about

the sociocultural reality of infertility as disability in ancient Israel, to recognize how infertility is appropriated for the rhetorical aims of the text” (Baden 2011: 20).

Nevertheless, female infertility is certainly also regarded as a disability in ancient Near Eastern literature: the Sumerian “The Birth of Man” myth depicts the goddess Ninmah creating humans with different types of disabilities—including infertility—while the god Enki provides them all with a function in society (Jacobsen 1987: 151–66). In the Atrahasis epic, the gods create infertile women as a means of inhibiting population growth (Dalley 1991: 1–38).

Barren Woman Motif. The “rhetorical aims” (Baden 2011: 20) of female infertility have been extensively studied with reference to the particularly prevalent narratological trope of the “barren woman.” Various names for the barren wife (Williams 1980), sterile matriarch (Exum 2016: 92–100), annunciation type scene (Alter 1981, 1983; Fuchs 2003: 45–90), and birth of a hero motif (Brenner 1986), scholarly analysis of this literary trope epitomizes the varying approaches and conclusions drawn regarding reproduction, fertility, and infertility in the Hebrew Bible. Robert Alter’s chapter “Biblical Type-Scenes and the Uses of Convention” in his pivotal work *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981) generated considerable further scholarship on biblical type scenes; in particular, on what I shall henceforth refer to as the “barren woman” motif.

According to Alter’s later 1983 article on the same theme, this motif typically consists of a “initial barrenness, divine promise, and the birth of a son” (p. 120). Several other scholars expand on Alter’s “tripartite schema” (e.g., Brenner 1986; Havrelock 2008: 159). Callaway (1986: 26), for example, highlights that the barren women are all individuals as opposed to general or symbolic figures as is more typical in poetry (e.g., Prov. 7–9; 31), and Williams (1980: 109) recognizes that barren women often have fertile rivals (e.g., Gen. 16; 29.31–30.24; 1 Sam. 1).

In the Hebrew Bible, female figures are most often characterized as mothers (Fuchs 1999). As we have already ascertained, some scholars take this as a positive narratological strategy, highlighting the importance of the female, whereas others perceive it to emphasize the role of the human and divine males in the reproductive process, thus denigrating the role of the female. In this section, I shall employ the barren woman motif as an example of the ways in which scholarship variably understands the roles of the three parties in the procreative process.

As a feminist scholar, Fuchs recognizes the dialogical tension between the positive stance on motherhood and the prevalence of the barren woman motif. Indeed, she asserts that:

By questioning the natural ability of mother-figures to give birth, and by questioning the moral stature of naturally fertile mothers, the text is questioning the rights and privileges that accrue to maternity Mothers are clearly essential for the survival of patriarchy, but their essential role must not be given too much credit. (2003: 64–65; see also Scholz 2014: 78)

According to Donaldson, it presents the barren woman as an “obstacle” to the fulfilment of God’s covenantal promise of fertility (1981: 78). The barren women are seen obstructing the patrilineal duty to reproduce.

Indeed, as noted by Williams (1980), this motif often also characterizes the infertile favored wife in juxtaposition to a fertile rival. The focus is on their reproductive (in) capabilities and the conflict this creates within the (typically polygynous) familial structure. This trope highlights that it is the woman who is “to blame” for her childlessness as opposed to her husband, who has children with other women. Some scholars see this as a misogynistic trope, blaming her entirely for infertility (e.g., Norstedt Hedman 2016: 18), and denying that the male could be “to blame” in any way.

Scholz argues that this is another means by which the motif reinforces patriarchal ideals. The stories of the matriarchs:

serve patriarchy because they portray barren women as lacking control over their own fertility. Barrenness signifies that women are not agents of their own lives but depend on external forces such as God (2014: 78).

Similarly, Exum argues that the “sterile matriarch” theme transposes “procreative power from the women to the deity” (2016), thus denigrating her role as a means of affirming monotheism. Only God can enable conception (Alter 1981: 47–52). The stories of the women whose wombs were opened and closed according to God’s will were part of the monotheizing theology of the Yahwist according to Callaway. She claims that “the stories of the barren women functioned to show that the gift of life came from Yahweh alone” (1986: 49). Furthermore, Frymer-Kensky highlights that, in the Hebrew Bible, “Everything is interrelated and under the control of one deity” (1992: 98–99). She argues that the monotheistic God of the Hebrew Bible adopts the roles of both masculine and feminine deities of the ancient Near East, thus “[t]he father-god is also the mother-god” (1992: 165). Budin (2015: 35), in contrast, argues that it is the understanding that God creates, sustains, and controls all, even what occurs in the womb amounts to “masculine monotheism.” In both instances, God is seen to play the primary role in reproduction.

Some scholars understand the emphasis of the deity’s role in the reproduction within the barren woman motif to *elevate* the role of the mother therein. For example, Havrelock (2008) argues against the prevailing view that the barren woman is an obstacle to the fulfilment of the covenantal promise of fertility made between man and God. Instead, she argues that these narratives “disrupt a purely patriarchal construction of lineage and exhibit the reproductive necessity of a covenant between women and God.” According to Havrelock, the barren woman not only has autonomy over her reproductive capability, but this “female initiative” is pivotal to the covenantal relationship between humankind and the deity (155).

The various ways in which scholarship has understood the barren woman motif is indicative of the various ways in which scholarship has understood the roles of the male, female, and divine agents in reproduction, fertility, and infertility. Scholars understand the male, the deity, and the female to play varying degrees of roles within the reproductive process, and there is no consensus with regards to how their roles may intersect or conflict.

Conclusion and Further Directions

The increased interest in the role of the woman in the Bible that began with feminist scholarship in the 1970s led to an influx of studies regarding reproduction and infertility. By employing cultural anthropological and disability studies methodologies to the representations of reproduction and infertility within the Hebrew Bible, scholars are continuing to generate new and dynamic understandings of these themes. However, the emergence of these studies from a primarily feminist critical perspective which brings the woman into focus may lead to an undue emphasis of the women's role or lack of a role in fertility. Employing insights from masculinity studies—following the footsteps of the likes of [Creangă \(2010, 2014, 2019\)](#), [Graybill \(2016\)](#) and [Murphy \(2019\)](#)—may enable us to critically examine the role of men beyond the surface level of the text.

Adoption and surrogacy in the Hebrew Bible are both emergent themes in the field of biblical studies ([Quine 2021](#); [Zucker 2021](#), respectively). An analysis of these themes in texts such as the Book of Esther and the Book of Ruth, would certainly be fruitful. The relationship between slavery and child production could also be explored further: many of the barren women of Genesis employ these slaves as involuntary surrogates, and a nation's conquest is typically characterized by the enslavement and rape of the female members of the defeated group (e.g., Gen. 34; Deut. 21.10–14; Num. 31).

The conceptual connection between human reproduction and the fertility of the land is apparent throughout the Hebrew Bible and applying insights from metaphor theory to a study of the metaphorical expressions that conceptually connect the land and the female body—particularly with reference to their reproductive capabilities—would be most valuable. Similar interdisciplinary studies would bring fresh insights and provide new ways of engaging with themes of reproduction and infertility, which, as has been demonstrated, have already extensively been researched.

The continued relevance of infertility in modern society, and the ways in which biblical materials are adopted in religious discourse surrounding this difficult topic mean that I am sure will be studied extensively for many more years to come.

Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
AMT	<i>Assyrian Medical Texts</i> . R. Campbell Thompson. (London: J. Bale, Sons & Danielsson), 1924.
BAM	<i>Die babylonisch-assyrische Medizin in Texten und Untersuchungen</i> . F. Köcher and R. D. Biggs. (Berlin: de Gruyter), 1963.
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series

<i>CAD</i>	<i>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1956–2006</i>
<i>COS</i>	<i>The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions, Monumental Inscriptions and Archival Documents from the Biblical World.</i> Edited by William W. Hallo. 3 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1997–2002.
<i>CurBR</i>	<i>Currents in Biblical Research</i>
<i>DSD</i>	<i>Dead Sea Discoveries</i>
<i>FAT</i>	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
<i>HTS</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Studies</i>
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JHebS</i>	<i>Journal of Hebrew Scriptures</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSOTSup</i>	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
<i>LHBOTS</i>	The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
<i>OTE</i>	<i>Old Testament Essays</i>
<i>OTL</i>	<i>Old Testament Library</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue Biblique</i>
<i>SBLDS</i>	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
<i>SJOT</i>	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Prof. Sue Gillingham—who supervised my Master’s thesis on this theme—and to my Ph.D. supervisors, Profs. Charlotte Hempel and Candida Moss, fellow Ph.D. candidates Katherine Gwyther and Charlie Comerford, Dr. Kelly Murphy, and the anonymous reviewer, each of whom provided comments and suggestions which greatly improved this article.

Funding

Eleanor Vivian is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Birmingham, UK, funded by the Midlands4Cities (AHRC) Doctoral Training Partnership.

ORCID iD

Eleanor Vivian  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9284-538X>

References

- Abasili, A.
2015 ‘Hannah’s Ordeal of Childlessness: Interpreting 1 Samuel 1 through the Prism of a Childless African Woman in a Polygynous Family’, *OTE* 28.3: 581-605.

- Ackerman, S.
 2011 'The Blind, the Lame, and the Barren Shall Not Come into the House', in Moss and Schipper (eds.) 2011: 29-45.
 2014 "'I Have Hired You with My Son's Mandrakes": Women's Reproductive Magic in Ancient Israel', in M. Masterson, N. Sorkin Rabinowitz, and J. Robson (eds.), 2014: 15-29.
- Ademiluka, S. O.
 2019 'Interpreting the Hannah Narrative (1 Sm 1:1-20) in Light of the Attitude of the Church in Nigeria towards Childlessness', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 40.1: 1-10.
 2021 'Taking a Holistic View of the Biblical Perspectives on Childlessness: Implications for Nigerian Christians and the Church in Nigeria', *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 77.4: 1-10.
- Alter, R.
 1981 *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basicbooks).
 1983 'How Conventions Help Us Read: The Case of the Bible's Annunciation Type-Scene', *Prooftexts* 3.2: 115-30.
- Avalos, H.
 1995 *Illness and Health Care in the Ancient Near East: The Role of the Temple in Greece, Mesopotamia, and Israel* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press).
- Avalos, H., S. Melcher, and J. Schipper (eds.)
 2007 *This Aabled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature).
- Bach, A. (ed.)
 1999 *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (New York: Routledge).
- Bachvarova, M.
 2013 'Hurro-Hittite Stories and Hittite Pregnancy and Birth Rituals', in Chavalas (ed.) 2013: 272-306.
- Baden, J. S.
 2011 'The Nature of Barrenness in the Hebrew Bible', in Moss and Schipper (eds.) 2011: 13-27.
- Beckman, G. M.
 1983 *Hittite Birth Rituals* (Studien Zu Den Boğazköy-Texten, Heft 29; Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 2nd rev. ed.).
- Biggs, R. D.
 1967 *SA.ZI.GA: Ancient Mesopotamian Potency Incantations* (Texts from Cuneiform Sources 2; Locust Valley, NY: J. J. Augustin).
 2002 'The Babylonian Sexual Potency Texts', in Parpola and Whiting (eds.), 2002: 2: 71-78.
- Boling, R. G.
 1975 *Judges* (AB 6A; New York: Doubleday).
- Brenner, A.
 1986 'Female Social Behaviour: Two Descriptive Patterns within the "Birth of the Hero"', *VT* 36.3: 257-73.

- Budin, S. L.
 2015 'Fertility and Gender in the Ancient Near East', in M. Masterson, N. Sorkin Rabinowitz, and J. Robson (eds.) 2014: 30-49.
 2016 'Female Sexuality in Mesopotamia', in Budin and MacIntosh Turfa (eds.) 2016: 9-24.
 2018 'Phallic Fertility in the Ancient Near East and Egypt', in N. Hopwood, R. Flemming, and L. Kassell (eds.), *Reproduction: Antiquity to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 25-38.
- Budin, S. L., and J. MacIntosh Turfa (eds.)
 2016 *Women in Antiquity: Real Women across the Ancient World* (Rewriting Antiquity; London: Routledge).
- Callaway, M. C.
 1986 *Sing O Barren One: A Study in Comparative Midrash* (SBLDS 92; Atlanta: Scholars Press).
- Chapman, C. R.
 2012 "'Oh That You Were like a Brother to Me, One Who Had Nursed at My Mother's Breasts" Breast Milk as a Kinship-Forging Substance', *JHebS* 12.7: 1-41.
 2016 *The House of the Mother: The Social Role of Maternal Kin in Biblical Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press).
- Chavalas, M. W. (ed.)
 2013 *Women in the Ancient Near East: A Sourcebook* (Routledge Sourcebooks for the Ancient World; London: Routledge).
- Cohen, S. J. D.
 2005 *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?: Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- Couto-Ferreira, M. E.
 2013 'The River, The Oven, The Garden: The Female Body and Fertility in a Late Babylonian Ritual Text', in C. Ambos and L. Verderame (eds.), *Approaching Rituals in Ancient Cultures* (Rivista Di Studi Orientali Nuova Serie, LXXXVI Sup. 2; Pisa; Roma: Fabrizio Serra) 97-116.
 2016 'Being Mothers or Acting (like) Mothers? Constructing Motherhood in Ancient Mesopotamia', in Budin and MacIntosh Turfa (eds.) 2016: 25-34.
- Creangă, O. (ed.)
 2010 *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond* (The Bible in the Modern World 33; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press).
- Creangă, O. (ed.)
 2019 *Hebrew Masculinities Anew* (Hebrew Bible Monographs 79; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press).
- Creangă, O., and P.-B. Smit (eds.)
 2014 *Biblical Masculinities Foregrounded*. (Hebrew Bible Monographs 62; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press).
- Dalley, S.
 1991 *Myths of Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

- Dasen, V.
2004 *Naissance et Petite Enfance Dans l'Anquité: Actes Du Colloque de Fribourg, 28 Novembre - 1er Décembre 2001* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis, 203; Freiburg; Göttingen: Academic Press; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht).
- Delaney, C.
2001 'Cutting the Ties That Bind: The Sacrifice of Abraham and Patriarchal Kinship' in S. Franklin and S. MicKinnon (eds.), *Relative Values: Reconfiguring Kinship Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press) 445-67.
- De-Whyte, Janice P. E.
2018 *Wom(b)an: A Cultural-Narrative Reading of the Hebrew Bible Barrenness Narratives* (BibInt 162; Leiden: Brill).
- Donaldson, M. E.
1981 'Kinship Theory in the Patriarchal Narratives: The Case of the Barren Wife', *JAAR* 49.1: 77-87.
- Doyle, B.
2002 'Fertility and Infertility in Isaiah 24-27', in F. Postma, K. Spring, and E. Talstra (eds.), *The New Things: Eschatology in Old Testament Prophecy. Festschrift for Henk Leene* (ACEBTSup 3; Maastricht: Uitgeverij Shaker Publishing) 77-88.
- Eilberg-Schwartz, H.
1990 *The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press).
1994 *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon).
1999 'The Problem of the Body for the People of the Book', in A. Bach (ed.) 1999: 53-73.
- Engelhard, D. H.
1970 'Hittite Magical Practices: An Analysis' (Ph.D. Dissertation, Brandeis University).
- Erbele-Küster, D.
2017 *Body, Gender, and Purity in Leviticus 12 and 15* (LHBOTS 539; London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark).
- Exum, J. C.
2016 *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives*. (Cornerstones Series; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2nd ed.).
- Feucht, E.
2004 'Der Weg Ins Leben', in Dasen (ed.) 2004: 33-53.
2016 'Motherhood in Pharaonic Egypt', in Budin and MacIntosh Turfa (eds.) 2016: 204-17.
- Flynn, S. W.
2018 *Children in Ancient Israel: The Hebrew Bible and Mesopotamia in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Fontaine, C. R.
1996 'Disabilities and Illness in the Bible: A Feminist Perspective', in A. Brenner (ed.), *The Feminist Companion to the Hebrew Bible in the New Testament* (Feminist Companion to the Bible, 10; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press) 286-300.

- Fox, M. V.
1974 'The Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Light of the Priestly 'ôt Etiologies', *RB* 81.4: 557-96.
- Frymer-Kensky, T.
1987 'The Planting of Man: A Study in Biblical Imagery,' in J.H. Marks and R.M. Good (eds.), *Love and Dead in the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of Marvin H. Pope* (Guildford, CN: Four Quarters) 129-136.
1992 *In the Wake of Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press).
- Fuchs, E.
1999 'The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible', in A. Bach (ed.) 1999: 127-39.
2003 *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman* (JSOTSup 310; London; New York: Sheffield Academic Press).
- Graybill, R.
2016 *Are We Not Men? Unstable Masculinity in the Hebrew Prophets* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Grohmann, M.
2005 'Ambivalent Images of Birth in Psalm VII 15', *VT* 55.4: 439-49.
2007 Fruchtbarkeit Und Geburt in Den Psalmen (FAT 53; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck).
2010 'Biblical and Rabbinic Ideas of Female Semen? An Intertextual Reading of Lev 12, 2', *SJOT* 24.1: 39-52.
- Havrelock, R.
2008 'The Myth of Birthing a Hero: Heroic Barrenness in the Hebrew Bible', *BibInt* 16.2: 154-78.
- Inhorn, M. C.
1994 *Quest for Conception: Gender, Infertility, and Egyptian Medical Traditions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).
- Jacobsen, T.
1987 *The Harps That Once—: Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New York: Yale University Press).
- Kelso, J.
2003 'Reading the Silence of Women in Genesis 34', in R. Boer and E. W. Conrad (eds.), *Redirected Travel: Alternative Journeys and Places in Biblical Studies* (JSOTSup 382; New York: T&T Clark International) 85-109.
- Koepf, L. W.
2012 "'Give Me Children or I Shall Die": Children and Communal Survival in Biblical Literature' (Ph.D. Dissertation, Union Theological Seminary).
- Kristeva, J.
1982 *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (European Perspectives; New York: Columbia University Press).
- Leick, G.
1994 *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature* (New York: Routledge).

- Lemos, T. M.
2011 "“Like the Eunuch Who Does Not Beget”": Gender, Mutilation, and Negotiated Status in the Ancient Near East", in Moss and Schipper (eds.) 2011: 47-66.
- Levine, B. A.
2002 "“Seed” versus “Womb”": Expressions of Male Dominance in Biblical Israel', in Parpola and Whiting (eds.) 2002: 2:337-43.
- Masterson, M., N. Sorkin Rabinowitz, and J. Robson (eds.)
2014 *Sex in Antiquity: Exploring Gender and Sexuality in the Ancient World* (Rewriting Antiquity; London: Routledge).
- Mbuwayesango, D.
2016 'Sex and Sexuality in Biblical Narrative', in D. N. Fewell (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press) 456-464.
- McKane, W.
1963 *I & II Samuel: Introduction and Commentary* (London: SCM Press).
- Melcher, S.
2019 'Disability and the Hebrew Bible: A Survey and Appraisal', *CBR* 18.1: 7-31.
- Meyers, C. L.
1983 'Procreation, Production, and Protection: Male-Female Balance in Early Israel', *JAAR* 51.4: 569-93.
1988 *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press).
1999 'Women and the Domestic Economy of Early Israel', in A. Bach (ed.) 1999: 33-43.
2005 *Households and Holiness: The Religious Culture of Israelite Women* (Facets; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press).
- Mitchell, D. T., and S. L. Snyder
2000 *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press).
- Moss, C. R., and J. S. Baden
2015 *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Moss, C. R., and J. Schipper (eds.)
2011 *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US).
- Murphy, K. J.
2019 *Rewriting Masculinity: Gideon, Men, and Might* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Nel, P.
2008 'Remember the “Spring” of Your Youth: The Vanity of Male Power in Qohelet 12', *OTE* 21.1: 149-60.
- Norstedt Hedman, T.
2016 'Negating the Mother & the Maternal Body in the Hebrew Bible: From Eve to Sarah, Rachel and Hannah' (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Gävle).
- Otwell, J. H.
1977 *And Sarah Laughed: The Status of Woman in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press).

- Pardes, I.
1992 *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Parpola, S, and R. M. Whiting (eds).
2002 *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2-6, 2001*. (2 vols. *Compte Rendu [Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale]* 47; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project).
- Powell, L. D.
2015 'The Infertile Womb of God: Ableism in Feminist Doctrine of God', *Cross-Currents* 65.1: 116-38.
- Pringle, J.
1993 'Hittite Birth Rituals', in A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt (eds.), *Images of Women in Antiquity* (London: Routledge) 128-41.
- Quick, L.
2021 'Bitenosh's Orgasm, Galen's Two Seeds and Conception Theory in the Hebrew Bible', *DSD* 28.1: 38-63.
- Quine, C.
2021 'Pharaoh's Daughter: The Adoptive Mother's Sacrifice', *Feminist Theology* 29.2: 102-12.
- Raphael, R.
2008 *Biblical Corpora: Representations of Disability in Hebrew Biblical Literature* (London: T&T Clark International).
- Rashkow, I. N.
2000 *Taboo or Not Taboo: Sexuality and Family in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press).
- Robins, G.
1993 *Women in Ancient Egypt* (London: British Museum Press).
- Roth, A. M.
2000 'Father Earth, Mother Sky: Ancient Egyptian Beliefs about Conception and Fertility', in A. E. Rautman (ed.), *Reading the Body: Representations and Remains in the Archaeological Record* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press) 187-201.
- Sakenfeld, K. Doob.
1985 'Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials', in L. M. Russell (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) 55-64.
- Schipper, J.
2007 'Disabling Israelite Leadership: 2 Samuel 6:23 and Other Images of Disability in the Deuteronomistic History', in Avalos, Melcher, and Schipper (eds.) 2007: 103-14.
2016 *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Yale Bible 7D; New Haven, CN: Yale University Press).

- Schneider, T. J.
2008 *Mothers of Promise: Women in the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic).
- Scholz, S.
2014 *Introducing the Women's Hebrew Bible* (Introductions in Feminist Theology 13; London: Bloomsbury Publishing).
- Shectman, S.
2009 *Women in the Pentateuch: A Feminist and Source-Critical Analysis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press).
2018 'Israel's Matriarchs: Political Pawns or Powerbrokers?', in M. G. Brett, J. Wöhrle, and F. Neumann (eds.), *The Politics of the Ancestors: Exegetical and Historical Perspectives on Genesis 12-36* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck) 151-166.
- Steinberg, N.
1993 *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis: A Household Economics Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press).
- Stewart, D. T.
2011 'Sexual Disabilities in the Hebrew Bible', in Moss and Schipper (eds.) 2011: 67-87.
- Stiebert, J.
2012 'Human Conception in Antiquity: The Hebrew Bible in Context', *Theology & Sexuality* 16.3: 209-27.
- Stol, M.
1995 'Private Life in Ancient Mesopotamia', in J. R. Sasson (ed.), *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* (New York: Scribner) 1:484-501.
2000 *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting* (Cuneiform Monographs 14; Groningen: Styx).
2016 *Women in the Ancient Near East* (Berlin: De Gruyter).
- Trible, P.
1992 *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (London: SCM Press).
- van der Horst, P. W.
1990 'Sarah's Seminal Emission: Hebrews 11:11 in the Light of Ancient Embryology', in D. L. Balch, E. Ferguson, and W. A. Meeks (eds.), *Greeks, Romans, and Christians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press) 287-302.
- van der Toorn, K.
1994 *From Her Cradle to Her Grave: The Role of Religion in the Life of the Israelite and the Babylonian Woman* (Biblical Seminar Series 23; Sheffield: JSOT Press).
- van Dijk-Hemmes, F.
1993 'Traces of Women's Texts in the Hebrew Bible', in A. Brenner and F. van Dijk-Hemmes (eds.), *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden: Brill) 17-112.
- van Rooy, H. F.
1986 'Fertility as Blessing and Infertility as Curse in the Ancient Near East and the Old Testament', in A. Bonanno (ed.), *Archaeology and Fertility Cult in the Ancient*

- Mediterranean: First International Conference on Archaeology of the Ancient Mediterranean* (Amsterdam: B.R. Grüner) 225-35.
- Van Wolde, E. J.
2014 *Reframing Biblical Studies: When Language and Text Meet Culture, Cognition, and Context*. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns).
- Volk, K.
2004 'Von Dunkel in Die Helligkeit: Schwangerschaft, Geburt, Und Frühe Kindheit in Babylonien Und Assyrien', in Dasen (ed.) 2004: 71-92.
- von Rad, G.
1961 *Genesis: A Commentary* (trans. J. H. Marks. OTL; London: SCM Press, 2nd edn).
- Wacker, M.-T.
2006 'Feminist Criticism and Related Aspects', in J. W. Rogerson and J. M. Lieu (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 634-54.
- Weisberg, Dvora.
2009 *Levirate Marriage and the Family in Ancient Judaism* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press).
- Whitekettle, R.
1995a 'Human Reproduction in the Textual Record of Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine during the First and Second Millennia B.C', (Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University).
1995b 'Leviticus 12 and the Israelite Woman: Ritual Process, Liminality and the Womb*', *ZAW* 107.3: 393-408.
1996 'Levitical Thought and the Female Reproductive Cycle: Wombs, Wellsprings, and the Primeval World', *VT* 46.3: 376-91.
- Williams, J. G.
1980 'The Beautiful and the Barren: Conventions in Biblical Type-Scenes', *JSOT* 5.17: 107-19.
- Yafeh-Deigh, A.
2020 'Children, Motherhood, and the Social Death of Childless Women: The Social and Theological Construction of Infertility in the Hebrew Bible and in Cameroon', *BibInt* 28.5: 608-34.
- Zucker, D. J.
2021 "In/Voluntary Surrogacy in Genesis", *The Asbury Journal* 76.1: 9-24.