

Martha Phillips: Barren Women

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Martha Phillips

Barren Women

Lament to an Unjust God

(In memory of my sister, Mary)

*I stand on the shore of time,
 looking up at the gray cliffs of despair,
Where hope tries to climb one last time.
The waves roar then crash,
 whipping up the surf like a drunken sailor,
Then, reverses, and falls back into the twisting sea.*

*The north wind blows, a colder wind I cannot know;
 and colder still I cannot be,*

I hear an echoing call from eternity.

It reaches out an empty hand, but,

I turn, for I am not ready yet,

My baby is still small,

just weaned from the breast,

Who will replace me, Lord,

when his father needs a rest?

The dark insect music of the cove calls me home.

My Baby smiles, gurgles, then he howls,

a noise louder than reverence demands but,

One more holy I cannot know.

The bed does not stop my plodding, gloomy, mind,

but as darkness falls all feelings slow.

Now, I can face my God but,

will I still love Him?

*In my barrenness, Lord, you gave me this child,
Was it to lure me into paradise?
Like Hannah, I have been a good and faithful servant.
I loved You, I loved my family, and now, Lord,
I love this little one, a reward for all those lonely years.
My body is no longer a temple, but a hollow, empty, shell.*

*My soul is too bitter to ponder heaven,
and my aching heart is too weak for this world.
Can you right this terrible wrong?
and if you do can I forgive you?*

*A black funeral shroud hangs behind the door,
an elegant silk gown, fit for the Harvest Ball.
I will dance with you if I must,
but I will save the last dance for Job!*

It is midnight in the garden of good and evil![1]

[1] There is a popular novel out by this name by John Beren.

We are familiar with the stories of barren women throughout the Old Testament.

All three of the patriarchs: Abraham, Jacob and Isaac had wives that were barren. This is ironic in that God had promised to make their seed as numerous as the "sands of the sea." When Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel did conceive after many years of barrenness they were vessels for the flowering of a new land that God had promised them.

The next two stories of barren women, that of Samson's mother and that of Hannah, Samuel's mother, bring us to a new phase in Israel's history: the forming of the Israelites into a nation. Under the Tribal Confederacy, the people were not keeping the Mosaic Covenant and we are told, "everyone did

what was right in his own eyes". Samson was born to a barren woman. She is not given a name because she is a symbol of what was to be a new beginning for Israel. Samson stood for strength, but it was to be a false strength, one that was brought down by apostasy.

Hannah's story is different: Hannah's son Samuel will be like Moses for he will lead his people into a new era, that of kingship, the Davidic Covenant, and the establishment of a nation. Hannah's story starts with a man, Elkanah her husband. He has two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. It is not surprising that these two women are very jealous of each other. In the story of Abraham and Sarah there is jealousy between Sarah and her handmaiden who had born a son to Abraham. In the story of Jacob and Rachel the favorite wife Rachel is barren and Leah the other wife gives him many sons. Leah brags about her fertility and taunts Rachel about her barrenness.

Hannah was the favorite wife of Elkanah and she was also barren. Peninnah has a quiver full of children but she suffers in the knowledge that her husband does not love her. Hannah had been barren for a long time and her rival used it as an excuse to continually taunt her. In those days it was often thought that barrenness was brought about by sin, leaving Hannah to also endure a sense of shame.

Elkanah was a good man; year after year he took his family and went up to Shiloh to offer sacrifices and to worship. Hannah was very unhappy on these occasions because it was the Feast of Tabernacles, the time for rejoicing over the bountiful crops. Hannah in her barrenness could not rejoice. Elkanah loved Hannah very much but because of her barrenness he gave her only one portion of meat. Elkanah like most men did not understand Hannah's pain. He was baffled by her behavior. He wants to know why she is so down cast, doesn't she have him. Why does she go about weeping and not eating?" After all "aren't I better then ten sons?" ([1 Sam 1:8](#)) Couldn't she just ignore Peninnah taunts; that's what he would do.

When they arrive at the House of the Lord, Hannah goes as she usually does to pray for a child. She has done this year after year to no avail, but this year she is more determined than ever. She has gone through the stages of grief and is at the point of bargaining with God. She begs and pleads and then proposes a bargain, "Give me a son and I will give him back. Let me be productive and I will give him to you always." Here was a woman experiencing great grief and anguish. Yet Eli, God's servant, is as insensitive as her husband. He fails to recognize in Hannah the presence of the Lord. Eli the Priest sees her weeping bitterly and pouring her heart out, but because her lips are moving and nothing is coming out, he thinks she is drunk. He doesn't understand that she is grieving over having no children. Eli goes to her and says, "How long will thou be drunken? Put away the wine from thee." Eli wants to shame her because of her behavior. To Hannah's credit she doesn't slink off into the shadows or run crying to Elkanah but instead she confronts Eli. "No, my Lord, I am a woman sorely troubled. I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring my soul out before the Lord." Now it is Eli's turn to feel shame. Eli turns to Hannah and says, "Go in peace and the God of Israel grant your petition which you have made to him."

We know Hannah's depression is gone because it says her countenance lifted and she was now able to eat. She has a new song for she is now soon to be a source of life. Unlike Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel, Hannah didn't wait for God to come to her; she went to the House of the Lord and let her request be known unto him. Hannah is an intense, devout woman that asserts herself in her encounter with God. Hannah raised her son in the Lord and as she promised gives him back to the service of God in the temple. Samuel becomes a priest, prophet and mediator who leads his people into a new era.

We can relate the theme of the barren women to the land. God promised the Israelites descendants, but he also promised them

the land. These women we have been talking about were the "Mothers of Nations." Like the infertility of the matriarchs Israel inherited a desert land. Some of the land was barren but much of it lay dormant like these women, waiting for the right conditions to become fruitful. The birth process and the fruitfulness of the land are analogous.

In plants you have the seed, which is male entering into the "Mother Earth."

The seed contains a kernel, food reserve and a protective outer cover which are analogous to the embryo, amniotic fluid and the womb in the woman. The right conditions must be met in the mother or the land environment in order for fertility to take place. In the mother it is genetics, good health and the social environment. For the land it is moisture, sunshine and soil conditions. If the conditions are met the child or plant will continue to grow and in turn bear fruit. Sometimes there is a pause, such as a dry spell in the plant or illness in the human that causes a temporary infertility. Other times permanent loss of fertility occurs, such as when an entire species is wiped out. In the female menopause comes signaling a permanent halt to fertility.

This picture of the birth cycle be it plant or animal has theological implications for us Barrenness can be the creative pause that restores us to fruitfulness or it can be the sterility of a hybrid, that is unable to reproduce. In theology the birth of new ideas has the power to break the cycle of sterility. To give birth to a new idea is like the parting of the soil or the parting of the amniotic fluids as the idea passes through the soil or birth canal. God parted the waters from the firmament to create the earth. Moses parted the waters of the Red Sea so the Israelites could become a new people. When the umbilical cord is cut we separate the mother from the child. The child now has freedom to actualize his potential. This process will produce suffering and pain but it also brings with it the potential

for fruitfulness. God cast Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden, thus cutting the umbilical cord and also bringing about pain in childbirth. We have to suffer in order to create new life. Was it disobedience that brought about sin, or was it woman's inherent need to create when she reached for that fruit from the tree? Creation takes place when we can take the horizontal structures of life, those made by man, and combine them with the vertical structures of life, our relationships with God. These structures can then give way to concentric circles. Like the cross section of a tree, God is the core and man is the rings around the core. Like the tree we continue to grow by adding outer layers. The need to create sustains us and honors God, the original creator. Our sin against God is in not using his creation to form an environment that will produce and nourish new thoughts about God, thoughts that give rise to actions that will in turn result in social justice for all.

Lament of Indifference

Hear our voice O, Lord; and restore to us our passion,

for we are a rebellious people.

A chill has permeated our spirit; and our worship has grown cold.

Our prayers are suspended in crystals of ice for use by future generations.

Our once joyful music is buried in an avalanche of discord.

O, that we could smolder, belch, or even hiccup!

"My beloved children, how I weep for you, for you are a stiff-necked people.

The coldness of your heart angers me, but I have withheld judgment from you.

When Your whole being is saturated with my anger, then will your passion erupt."

*Lord, we remember the days of our passion,
when your praises fell abundantly from our lips.
Our ears were alert to the cries of the suffering;
and our eyes focused on the plight of the poor;
We remember how we burned with desire to serve you.*

*May our bodies shake with indignation,
and our spirit erupt with rage.
For only then can we bring forth justice,
and give sustenance to the poor.*

*Start with our toes, Lord!
Loosen every joint;
Cause our feet to move in a slow, rhythmic dance,
until we are steady.
Then let our bodies tremble with a holy fervor;
as we lift our arms towards heaven,
May music burst forth from our lips.*

*In our new found nakedness,
may Your spirit blows warm across our breast,
and may our cold hearts turn to flesh.*

*“My, beloved Sons and Daughters,
I will forever hold you close,
for you have harkened to my voice,
and changed your ways”*

*Thank You Father
We shall sing your praises to the next generation.*