

Considerations on the Meaning of Sterility in the Patriarchal Cycle

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the concept of sterility as idealized in the Biblical text and exemplified in the stories of Sarah and Abraham, Rebecca, Leah, Rachel and Jacob. My analysis of these stories leads to the hypothesis that sterility is one of the fundamental themes of Israel's ancient past, by condensing some of the main obstacles inherent to the emergence of a people who believe to be guided by God. This new perspective on sterility was achieved by focusing on the spectrum of meanings of the Hebrew root *'qr*, which includes infertility and uprooting; these, added to famine in the land, are experiences that will shape the religious conscience of Israel. This approach amplifies the perception of sterility in the Hebrew Bible as it emerges from the text as a luminal state of deprivation, in opposition to the contents of the divine oath to the patriarchs (progeny and land). But even while enclosing lack of productivity, weakness and death, which have negative value, Biblical sterility is not a closed circle but a space open to potentiality, where divine revelation occurs. God reveals himself *through* sterility and *in* sterility. The originality and the notion of specificity in the Biblical idea of sterility lie in this cyclical trait, which breaks the circumscription and negative orientation of sterility. The Bible presents sterility as a transitory state, an area for individual and corporate transformation of status. In an ideological system, such as ancient Israel's, where contractual relations replace natural relations, sterility functions as a powerful symbol of the relationship between men and between men and God. And this may be the reason why sterile matriarchs' traditions were continually reinterpreted from the 10th century BCE until the 1st century CE and could be adapted to new contexts and make sense to different communities, particularly in times of crisis and transition.

Keywords:

Sterility; Hebrew Bible; Matriarchs; Patriarchs; Biblical women

RESUMO

O presente artigo foca o conceito de esterilidade, tal como idealizado no texto bíblico e exemplificado nas histórias de Sara e Abraham, Rebeca, Lea, Raquel e Jacob. Minha análise dessas histórias leva à hipótese de que a esterilidade é um dos temas na fundação do passado antigo de Israel, ao condensar alguns dos obstáculos principais inerentes à emergência de um povo que acredita ser guiado por Deus. Esta nova perspectiva sobre a esterilidade foi alcançada ao focar no espectro de significados da raiz hebraica *qr*, que inclui infertilidade e desenraizamento; estes, junto da fome na terra, são experiências que modelarão a consciência religiosa de Israel. Esta abordagem amplifica a percepção da esterilidade na Bíblia hebraica, porquanto emerge do texto como um estado liminar de provação, por oposição aos conteúdos da promessa divina aos patriarcas (descendência e terra). Mas, mesmo quando incluindo falta de produtividade, fraqueza e morte, que têm um valor negativo, a esterilidade bíblica não é um círculo fechado, mas um espaço aberto à potencialidade, aonde a revelação divina acontece. Deus se revela *através* da esterilidade e *na* esterilidade. A originalidade e a especificidade na idéia bíblica sobre a esterilidade radicam nesta natureza cíclica, que quebra a circunscrição e a orientação negativa da esterilidade. A Bíblia apresenta a esterilidade como um estado transitório, uma área para a transformação individual e coletiva do status. Num sistema ideológico tal como o do antigo Israel, aonde relações contratuais substituem as relações naturais, a esterilidade funciona como um símbolo poderoso do relacionamento entre as pessoas e entre as pessoas e Deus. Esse pode ser o motivo por que as tradições das matriarcas estéreis foram continuamente reinterpretadas do século X aEC até o século I EC e puderam ser adaptadas a novos contextos, fazendo sentido para comunidades diferentes, particularmente nos tempos de crise e transição.

Palavras chave:

Esterilidade; Bíblia hebraica; Matriarcas; Patriarcas; Mulheres bíblicas

Considerations on the Meaning of Sterility in the Patriarchal Cycle

The concept of sterility

To every culture, fertility is a blessing. In the Hebrew Bible, besides fertility being a blessing, procreation is a commandment: “Increase and multiply and fill the earth” (Genesis 1:28;9-7). This is one of the pillar’s of God’s “ideal order of cosmos”¹ and of the instauration of a basis of well-being on which the stable progression of life is founded. Nevertheless, in real life phenomena related to chaos² continually threaten this ideal arrangement in the form of death, sickness and sterility.

Sterility is an element that belongs to “observable reality”. It is an experience at the same time emotional and biological, experimented within the private and social spheres, and that runs against the universal parameters of well-being and progress. In sterility lies the fundamental contradiction of human experience: the tension between life and death. It situates all social actors in the nexus of this tension (wife, husband, fetus; mother, father, child; matriarch, patriarch, heir) and also includes every motor power of the story of Israel – the fulfillment of the divine oath, God’s action in the sake of Israel, generational continuity, the very existence of the audience itself.

Sterility is a recurrent theme in the Hebrew Bible. However, it cannot be said that there is one single Biblical concept of sterility. In fact, there are several elaborations on the idea of sterility, which express the view about the world that ancient Israelites from several ideologies and periods had.

All these types of sterility appearing in the Hebrew Bible share a common aspect: their divine origin. The Bible leaves no doubt on the theological postulate through which all cases of sterility are created by God and can only be redeemed by God.

However, even while including the lack of productivity of the land, weakness and death – which have a negative value -, Biblical sterility is not a closed circle³, but a space open to potentiality, where divine revelation occurs. God reveals himself *through* sterility and *in* sterility; He creates life, having death as an auxiliary.

¹ Expression used by Suzan Niditch in *Ancient Israelite Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 56.

² The concept of chaos is universally defined as an initial state preceding/opposing divine order (*cosmos*), cf. Suzan Niditch, *From Chaos to Cosmos: Studies on Biblical Patterns of Creation* (Chico, Ca: Scholars Press, 1985), 6. In the book of Genesis, we learn of two kinds of primordial chaos: aqueous chaos (Gen 1:2), characterized by the elements of lack of definition, abyss, emptiness and darkness, and arid chaos (Gen 2:5), characterized by the lack of bushes, herbs and rain.

³ Except queen Micol, Who “did not have children until the day of her death”, extinguishing thus her father’s royal lineage (II Samuel 6:23). Sterility also has the connotation of exclusion from the social group (Leviticus 20:20-21).

The originality and specificity of the Biblical idea of sterility, in my point of view, lie in this cyclical nature, that breaks the circumscription and negative orientation of sterility. The Bible presents sterility as a transitory state, an area for individual and corporate transformation of status. In this intermediate state, scarcity, unveiling, the “little me”⁴ are experienced. In this state, in which God manifests himself, space and time are structurally sacred and changes take place through God’s power of change.

Important social and theological concepts are founded on the idea of sterility. Among these concepts, which are some of the main ideas in Biblical thought, the inclusion and exclusion of the individual in and from the group, the uprooting and ownership of the land, as well as ideas that cross the centuries, among which the closure of the womb by God and the notion of children as God’s “gift” are prominent.

In spite of its importance, this theme has been neglected by scholars of all times. The general trend among the authors that did address this subject is to reduce a whole system of meanings into one only phenomenon, disintegrating them into the notion of a “saga motive” (*Sagenmotif*)⁵ or into the idea of a fixed interpretative pattern.

Another theory widely adopted to explain the initial sterility of Biblical women is offered by Otto Rank in his analysis of the myths regarding the birth of heroes. The sterility of mothers is a part of the set of obstacles the hero has to overcome, in this case, to praise the child’s origin.⁶

Considering the aims of this research, I have followed the opposite path. I tried to demonstrate that sterility is a complex concept, whose ramification of meanings has specific outlines that will be important for the constructive balance of religion and to the story and self-perception of Israel. My analysis of texts indicates that recurrent sterility in the Biblical tradition is not only a resource used by the author⁷, but represents a seminal reason of the various views of ancient Israelites in particular moments of history and over the course of time. This hypothesis was built on a broader approach to sterility, that goes beyond an exclusive link “sterility – matriarchs – feminine”, to address other spheres of Israel’s ancestral experience, which includes the meanings of rupture, uprooting and wandering.

⁴ “It is the primary sensation of ‘little me’ which is the founding of every human being when facing the mystery and the vastness of life in the world”, Adin Steinsaltz, *Biblical Images: Men and Women of the Book* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 15.

⁵ Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Macon, Ga: Mercer University Press, 1997), 294.

⁶ Otto Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), 65.

⁷ Literary resource used to intensify suspense regarding the fulfillment of the divine oath, to praise Jacob’s origin, or still to glorify the birth of the hero. *Ibid*, 18.

Elements from three different spheres interlace, resulting in a symbolic unit that will define the patriarchal cycle as a whole⁸: the initial infertility of the matriarchs; the uprooting of the patriarchs and Canaan's "famine of the land".

This route raises different questions: what are the symbolic traits of sterility? Why is it used as symbol in the patriarchal era? Which are the spheres of the divine and the profane revealed by the concept of sterility? What are the different marks of ancestral sterility? What does distinguish ancestral sterility from other types? Why does infertility fall on the woman?

When looking for answers to these questions, I hope to come closer to the view that the ancient Israelites had about the world. I am interested in researching the way hoe they saw themselves and the others, and how they understood God's acts on fate and on the history of Israel.

In the context of sterility, they keyword is 'aqarah, used to designate Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel. The etymological study of the radical 'qr shows a whole group of meanings, enclosing distinct spheres⁹:

- **Sphere of agriculture:** *la'aqor* (Ecclesiastes 3:2); *te'aqer* (Zephaniah 2:4) – to pull by the root, extirpate, root out, totally exterminate, remove, displace.
- **Animal sphere:** *'iqqer*, *'iqqru*, *vaye'aqer*, *te'aqer* – to mutilate the animal (bull or horse), causing a wound in the tendon above the hoof; to mutilate bull or horse, damaging the part of the animal's leg between the hoof and the fur above and behind the hoof; to hurt by cutting the tendon in the front part of the knee; - to mutilate the animal (bull or horse), causing a wound in the tendon in the front part of the knee; (fig.) to diminish or nullify strength, vitality and power; - to hamstring (horse, ox, car) [Genesis 49:6] – *šor*; Joshua 11:6-9 *šus*; II Samuel 8:4, I Chronicles 18:4 *rehev*; - to castrate, caponize, sterilize, mutilate, cripple.
- **Human/animal sphere** (derivative meaning): *'aqarah* (Genesis 11:30; 25:21; 29:31); Exodus 23:26; Judges 13:2; I Samuel 2:5; Isaiah 54:1; Job 24:21); *'aqar*

⁸ John Skinner approves of generalizations that, in spite of their literary imprecision, contain a core of truth enough to be suggestive. As an example, he quotes the generalization made by Duhm, in his book *Isaiah*, according to which Abraham was traditionally associated to sacred tress, Isaac and Ishmael to sacred wells and Jacob to sacred stones. Skinner adds that such ideas very likely correspond to a vague impression of the popular mind in Israel, cf. *Genesis: The International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1910), 246.

⁹ E. ben Yehuda, *A Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew* (Jerusalem: Hemda & Ehud Benyehuda, 1951); F. Brown, S.R. Driver & C. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972); W.R.F. Browning, *A Dictionary of the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); M. Clark, *Etymological Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew* (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1999); D.J.A. Clines, Ed. *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); L. Koehler & W. Baumgarten, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamentii Libros* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985).

wa'aqarah (Deuteronomy 7:14); *'aqeret habayit* (Psalms 113:9); - infertile, infecund, without descendants;¹⁰ - *'aqar* – impotent (Deuteronomy 7:14).

- **Genealogical sphere** (derivative meaning): *'equer mispahat ger* (Leviticus 25:47); - descendant, foreigner's seed, gentile; - descendant from the city guardian's family¹¹- original meaning: root; metaphorical meaning: descendant.¹²
- **Sphere of ideas** (derivative meaning): *'iqar* (Job 30:3) – root, base, foundation; *'eqron*, *'aqaron* – etim. *'qr* + *on* (location) – Philistine foundation from the beginning of the Iron Age (Joshua 13:3; 15:11; 45; 19:43; Judges 1:18; I Samuel 5:10; 6:16; 7:14; 17:52; II Kings 1:2; Jeremiah 25:20; Amos 1:8; Zechariah 9:5,7); Deriv.: *'eqroni*, *'eqronim* (heathen of *'eqron*) (Joshua 13:3; I Samuel 5:10).
- **Arabic languages:**¹³ 1. *'qr* – hurt, especially hurt the front legs' tendon of a camel in its owner's tomb; 2. *'aqara*, *mu 'aqarat* – cut a camel's tendon joint in a competition; 3. *'aqir*, infertile; *'aqrat*, infertility.

As I read the texts, I was able to identify an “osmotic relationship” among these meaning units, where the semantic fields work as porous cells exchanging meanings around the radical *'qr*. This interlacement produces the peculiar character of the Biblical idea of sterility: the one designated as *'qr* is simultaneously fruitless – impotent – uprooted, regarding God and the cosmos.¹⁴

¹⁰ John van Seters, “The Problem of Childlessness in Near Eastern Law and the Patriarchs of Israel”, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, (4, 1968): 401-408, on 401, quoted in Clines, 874.

¹¹ *'Equer*: the descendant (who grants the family position), cf. the Acadian name *Surus-ken*; Acar, member of Jeramiel's family, proceeding from Judah (I Chronicles 2:27), Noth, *Personennamen*, 232, quoted in Clines, 874.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Moshe Caspi argues, based on the original meaning of *'equer* as a root in Hebrew and Aramaic, that “in ancient Semitic languages, *'aqarah* does not have the meaning of a woman who is unable to conceive. Since from the meaning ‘root’, the term *'aqirah* = to pull by the roots was developed, this is the origin of the expression *'aqirat ašoreš*”, the author concludes. “It is possible to infer that the ancient meaning of the word *'aqarah* is a woman whose fetus was pulled (*ne'eqar*), that is, her root was pulled (*ne'eqar šarašā*). They had abortions in the times of wandering and famine, and they had children in better times.” Caspi also writes about ethnographic evidences proving that abortions were usual, then, he explains why the matriarchs were called *'aqarat*: they suffered among the wandering tribes of shepherds, the case of the patriarchs. I tried to demonstrate how the idea of root and uprooting is present in the Biblical concept of *'aqarat*, that I translate as sterility, following the indications of specialized dictionaries. I believe, however, that the Biblical idea of opening of the womb clearly demonstrates that the impasse of the woman designated as *'aqarah* is located in the process of conception. God opens the womb so that the woman can conceive. Even if Caspi is right about the original ancient meaning of *'aqarah*, the Hebrew Bible uses this idea as a theological resource to

Sterility in the patriarchal cycle

In the patriarchal narrative, the terminology around sterility is used regarding Sarah, Abraham, Rebecca and Jacob. The narrative refers to the three matriarchs with the word *'aqarab* (sterile, without children). Abraham calls himself *'ariri* (deprived of progeny, without children) before God. And Jacob accuses his children of having weakened his power/strength (*'iqqru šor*).¹⁵

Sterility, meaning uprooting and displacement (*la'aqor*) is, in my view of the text, implicated in Abraham and his family's departure from their native land, Sarah's and Rebecca's weddings, the patriarchs' displacements in Canaan and the Canaan – Egypt circuit.¹⁶

Another meaning of sterility – the infertility of the land – is present in the narrative of the creation of man in Genesis 2:5, as well as when there is “famine in the land”, an experience shared by all the patriarchs.¹⁷

André Chouraqui states that:

“In Israel's formative period, the Hebrews are represented in the way they recognize themselves – as beings of passage, transition, exodus and uprooting, in the only land they consider their own and that, in its turn, is as diverse and paradoxical as they themselves are.”¹⁸

This self-perception of ancient Israelites, which is a core element in their memory of the origins, is expressed through the language of sterility in the written context of traditions, that is, in the wider context of patriarchal narratives.¹⁹ Even a

insert conception into the sacred sphere. In my opinion, this is the reason why the matriarchs are designated as *'aqarab*. See M. Caspi, “Mosivi 'Aqeret Habayit 'Em Habanim Smehah”, in *Beit Miqrah*, vol. 82 (Jerusalem: Israel Society for Biblical Research, 1980).

¹⁵ Matriarchs in Genesis 11:30; 25:21; 29:3; Abraham in Genesis 15:2; Jacob in Genesis 34:30; 49:6.

¹⁶ Ronald Hendel emphasizes a piece of information central to the dynamics of the story, although it is implicit in the text. It indicates the strength of this element and its inclusion in the tradition inherited by the author and the audience. R.S. Hendel, *The Epic of the Patriarch: The Jacob Cycle and the Narrative Traditions of Canaan and Israel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 39. Even in the term *la'aqor* is not present in the book of Genesis, uprooting – displacement – eradication is one of the main themes in the patriarchal narrative. It characterizes and unifies the patriarchs, in the same way that infecundity characterizes and unifies the matriarchs. Departing from this perception, I can affirm that infertility and uprooting are the distinctive characteristics of the individuals and the whole patriarchal cycle.

¹⁷ Genesis 26:1; 43:1; 47:4; Ruth 1:1; II Samuel 1:1; Kings 4:38; 8:1. Drought is one of the basic, critical human experiences, which leaves a deep impression in human memory: The “famine in the land” that characterizes the patriarchal period shares with other types of sterility in this period the quality of gratuity; there is no association with sin or the notion of “pollution of the land”, product of human transgression.

¹⁸ André Chouraqui, *The People and the Faith of the Bible* (Amherst, Ma: University of Massachusetts Press, 1975), 41.

¹⁹ It is possible to distinguish between the elements that belong to the sphere of folk and the literary elaboration of these motives made by the author. According to Mary Callaway, the jahvist employed

superficial look to this wider context succeeds in apprehending elements from sterility as patriarchal – cycle marks. The matriarchs are initially infertile, having no children. The patriarchs, uprooted, displaced, temporary residents. And the land, which is arid, is deeply marked by famine.

It is still important to highlight the distinctive marks of this ancestral sterility. Generally speaking, it is characterized as follows:

1. Primordial character;²⁰
2. Cyclical and positive character – a state established and removed by God;
3. Connection among the meanings of the radical *‘qr* – infertility of the womb and the land, uprooting and displacement.

We can notice that the patriarchal cycle and ancestral sterility are not only interconnected, but they are also superposed. Both of them are based on a new arrangement of the *cosmos*. Creation themes are reviewed in the patriarchal narrative, and God remakes genesis in history. God’s first direct action towards Abraham is made through the word (*dbr*), that on the one hand orders rupture and uprooting (Genesis 12:1), and on the other brings the promise of posterity and greatness (Genesis 12:2). As background, a previous action had already triggered the process of creation: Sara’s sterility (Genesis 11:30).

This initial sterility effects a deep rupture in the previous pattern of the order of the cosmos, represented by the genealogical lists of continuous succession of procreations and generations.²¹ The post-Eden divine order, established for the first man and the first woman of creation, is “uprooted” in the divine arrangement of Israel’s history. God “did not allow” for Sarah’s delivery (Genesis 16:2) and “did not give” descendants to Abraham (Genesis 15:3). In their multivocal sterility, Sarah and Abraham are “displaced” from the primordial divine blessing “Increase and multiply and fill the earth” and from divine punishment, which entails heavy strains in both biological and land reproduction.

principles that gave the ancient material (assembled by him) a line of theological convergence. One of these principles would be the sterility of the matriarchs. She affirms that “all the references to Sarah’s sterility are shown to originate from the jahvist, and to work as part of the theme of the obstacles against the promise fulfillment”. M. Callaway, *Sing O Barren One: A Study in Comparative Midrash* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 23.

²⁰ Referring to the aqueous *tohu-wa-vohu* of Genesis 1:2 and to the static and arid infertility of the land in Genesis 2:5.

²¹ According to Niditch, these genealogies also serve to highlight the continuous ordination of the cosmos. Niditch, *Chaos*, 55.

In this new cosmic dynamics, where contractual relations (regarding the promise) replace natural relations, sterility is an expressive symbolic instrument. Fertility and land ownership – the contents of the promise – are blessings to be given by God. The reality that comes before its fulfillment is one of infertility and displacement.

According to this new order, the patriarchal saga is a domain where two foundational themes are simultaneously articulated: sterility and divine truth.

Foundational themes of the patriarchal cycle: sterility and promise

The patriarchal – cycle bipolar structure is highlighted when the Pentateuch is read with the idea of sterility in mind. On one extreme, infertility and uprooting, in the other, the divine oath of posterity and land – ownership.

These two poles are opposite, but never disjunctive. In fact, they move side by side. The matriarchs' and patriarch' route is a continuous process of infertility and uprooting.²² The divine oath too, is a continuous process, a gradual progression.²³

The promises are directed to Israel. The whole perspective of the process, the horizon, is Israel. The term *zar'ekha* = his seed (Genesis 12:7), receiver of the promise, brings the connotation of a succession of generations²⁴, instead of only the immediate child in the womb.

²² In the matriarchs' case, the process is characterized by initial sterility and subsequent fertility, resulting from divine action. In the patriarchs' case, uprooting persists all along the full patriarchal cycle, even after Isaac and Jacob are born in Canaan. The fact that Joseph's brothers left Canaan for Egypt is indicative of this uprooting, as well as the designation of Canaan as the patriarchs' dwelling place.

²³ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12:36: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 149; J. Pedersen, *Israel, Its Life and Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 182-212.

²⁴ This terminology is widely used by the peoples of the whole ancient Middle East to denote succession and also extinction of an entire people. The patriarchal narrative addresses the basic relations of the human community. According to Westermann, this narrative perspective is based on the "memory of the origin". Along the narrative, the basic meaning of "family" for all later form of communities is expressed. The narrative acknowledges the process occurring in the most developed communities – in the spheres of politics, economy, education, art, religion – and that go back to Israel's ancestral family. Processes that happened between Abraham and Sarah, Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, keep occurring with countless variations in all generations. Ibid, 149. Although the basic idea in the patriarchal narrative is generational continuity – as Westermann states, "while there are people, they cannot disappear" -, it is important to highlight that Israel's ancestral family is established in history through the combination of the elements rupture – sterility – impotence (all of them contained in the radical '*qr*'), an imposition by the divinity, that inaugurates the ancestral story through these elements. The basic, indissoluble cell in Israel's story – the ancestral family – starts with the dissolution of another family, and this nucleus will keep breaking up and "exiling" its "non chosen" members (Lot to the Jordan valley, Ishmael to a foreign land, as well as Ketura's children, Esau to Seir). When Israel's ancestral past is evoked (Deuteronomy 26:5-9; Isaiah 51:2-3), Abraham's adventures will not be remembered, but the paradigmatic elements of the origin will: the exact moment of the rupture, together with the promise and Abraham's subjugation to the divine order.

The vertical succession of generations is motivated by the primordial injunction “Increase and multiply and fill the earth”. When sterility is first introduced in the narrative, it constitutes the field where the motion of shift in perspective and direction occurs. The perspective turns to be historical (memory of the origin) and the succession turns to be horizontal (genealogy is replaced by narrative), having divinity as the motor power of the process.

I believe that by apprehending sterility as an element in the memory of the origin, we approach the view the ancient Israelites had about the world. The reason why the idea of sterility is so strongly settled in Israel’s traditions on the origin may be exactly because it belongs to the folk sphere (and that is why it was “discarded” from modern contemporary discussion).

The anthropologist and authority in symbols, Mary Douglas states that,

“No experience is too banal not to possess a meaning that surpasses it. The more personal and intimate, bodily and emotional the ritual symbolism is, the more eloquent its message will be. The more the symbol is collected in the common fund of human experience, the better it will be received and the better it will be known.”²⁵

From the point of view of tradition authority, its stability is confirmed by the fact that it has been interpreted and reinterpreted along the centuries, gaining new meanings in

different stages of Israel’s history and working in several contexts to the point of becoming significant to Rabbinic Judaism and primitive Christianity.²⁶

Once we recognize ancestral sterility as a set of meanings, it becomes imperative to replace the discussion about its function within the corpus of patriarchal narratives. This new reading, which makes the strong prevalence of the meanings of sterility in the whole patriarchal cycle emerge, reveals that sterility works as a foundational theme of ancestral history, together with the revelation of the divine oath. Sterility constitutes a divine plan that becomes concrete in the immediate mundane sphere, establishing a reality completely opposed to the reality of the divine oath, the fulfillment of which does not happen in the patriarchal period.

²⁵ Mary Douglas, *Pureza e Perigo: Ensaio sobre as Noções de Poluição e Tabu* (Lisboa: Edições 70, [s.d.]), 137.

²⁶ According to Callaway, in the 1st century CE, the theme of the sterile woman was central to primitive Christianity as a subject for reflection about the origins of Jesus, and also to Rabbinic Judaism, as a reflection on the nature of divine action. Callaway, 4.

Promise		Reality
Great people; father of nations	vs	Foreigner and resident (<i>ger me tošav</i>)
Posterity	vs	Sterility and deprivation (<i>‘aqarah, ‘ariri</i>)
Ownership of the land	vs	Wandering
Power	vs	Solitude, weakness, fear, humility

My studies led me to state that sterility occupies a central role in the traditions on the origin of a people who believe to be guided by God. Douglas Knight brings the idea of sterility as an element of the patriarchal tradition before the settlement in Canaan, whose nucleus can be identified in the diverse elaborations on the theme created during the process of growth of the traditions.²⁷ My research points out to Deuteronomy 7:14 as a mark of the finalization of this ancestral cycle of sterility: “You shall be blessed above all peoples; there will be no male or female barren among you or among your cattle”.

The blessing formula condenses the elements of transition from an ancestral era to a new stage of corporate definition:

1. The blessing is directed personally and straight to the people;
2. The context is the fulfillment of the oath sworn to the ancestors = “your forefathers” (Deuteronomy 7:8);
3. The people’s singularity is shown by the use of the superlative (“above all peoples”) and by the theme of the blessing, expressed by the eradication of sterility.

If we adopt a diachronic reading of the texts, we may notice that several forms of sterility keep appearing in various biblical passages after Deuteronomy. And, on the other hand, sterility of the wombs, both as an object of curse and as a collective punishment, is truly eradicated from the Hebrew Bible.

The punishments prescribed to Israel are the most horrible, including anthropophagic situations, as in Deuteronomy 28:53,57, when despair will take the Israelites to “eat the fruit of the womb; the flesh of the sons and daughters that h’ your God has given you” and “the afterbirth that comes out from between her feet, and the children she bears (...) she shall eat them secretly”. But even then they will

²⁷ D.A. Knight, “Traditions and Theology”, in *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament*, D.A. Knight, Ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 26.

have children: “You will have sons and daughters but you will not keep them, because they will go into captivity” (Deuteronomy 28:41; “Your sons and daughters will be given to another nation (...) and you will be powerless to lift a hand” (Deuteronomy 28:32). Even then, they will continue to have children.

Summing up, “Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb” (Deuteronomy 28:18), but nowhere the interdiction of these wombs is seen. In the Hebrew Bible, God does not go back on His promise to the ancestors.

Conclusion

The book of Genesis comprises the traditions of Israel’s ancestral past. I intended to enlighten the shape and function of sterility in the body of these traditions. On one extreme, sterility confers unity and coherence to the different traditions, which are interwoven. On the other, it gives particular contours and expression to each narrative.

Sterility acts as an expressive symbol of the relationship between God and Israel in the fulfillment of the promise and, at the same time, it allows us to know this same story through the intimate suffering of the deprived. Ancestral sterility is used to symbolize mainly the liminality of patriarchs and matriarchs and to introduce the theological pillar of the divine oath, the essence of which is land and progeny.

These are gifts that belong to divinity and will be ritualistically bestowed. They cannot be reached in any other way. The ritual in question is the removal of the state of sterility by God. Therefore, neither can descent be obtained through the adoption of a servant as heir (Abraham) nor it can be obtained through the servant and her son’s child (Sarah, Rachel). In the same way, neither can fertility be obtained through contagious magic nor through a talisman or mandragora (Rachel). Land-ownership and proliferation would not be obtained through exogamic alliances (Jacob’s sons).

In all these instances, the radical *‘qr* and correlate terms will be used to classify the matriarchs and patriarchs and will give the narrative a semantic course. In the case of Abraham and Sarah, this course is expressed by the cycle *‘aqirah* – *‘aqarut* – *‘iqqar*²⁸ (uprooting – sterility – foundation). In Rebecca’s, through the association between *‘aqarah* and *škulab*. In Leah, by the relation between *‘aqarah* and *snuab*. In Rachel, through the association between sterility and death. Finally, in Jacob, through the relation between the radicals *‘kr* and *‘qr*.

²⁸ Terms that are not in the text, but derive from the radical *‘qr* and mean uprooting – infecundity – foundation.

What we have called “Biblical sterility” is the set of interlaced meanings (infecund – uprooted – impotent) of the radical ‘qr. The idea of ‘qr embraces a whole set of human relationships that occur horizontally (with other human beings) and vertically (with God and the land), forming the indissoluble triad of the ancient Israelite thought: God – human being – land.

This structure of thought persists all along the whole ancient history of Israel, with strong modifications in the nature of the relationship among the parts; these modifications reflect in each period of history different views about the world and embrace different socio-political conditions.

Following this line of thought, we can identify three kinds of sterility in the course of Israel’s ancient history:

1. *Liminal sterility*

It reflects two dimensions of the formative of a people: reality (‘*aqarh*, ‘*ariri*, *ger we tošav* in the land designated as ‘*erets megurim*, devastated by famine) and the perspective of Israel as a sovereign nation, where there is a vast descent and whose people is rooted in a good and generous land. At the same time, it contains reality and potentiality, which characterize Israel’s ancient past and the patriarchs as transition beings. It is not linked to considerations of merit, guilt or sin.

2. *Institutionalized sterility*

It is used as a structured society’s punitive and regulative agent. Sterility works as Punishment for transgressions of moral – sexual order, like “incest”²⁹ (Leviticus 20:20-21) and adultery when practiced by a woman (Numbers 5:11-31). Exclusion from the group/divine order occurs in this context. The land, polluted by sexual transgressions and apostasy vomits its inhabitants, uprooting them. The foreign element (for instance, the land of Moab in the Book of Ruth) and exile are symbolically associated to sterility, collective death and vanishing.

3. *Structural (socio-economic) sterility*

It classifies “sterile beings”, marginal and hierarchically inferior people within the structured society: the sterile woman, the poor widow without children, the orphan, the eunuch, the foreigner. These social categories, which keep representing the traits of the *communitas* inside the structure (physically and socially debilitated, deprived of status, subject to good will) have God “at their side”. The individual

²⁹ Leviticus 20:20-21: the uncle’s wife and the brother’s wife may not be considered so close as to qualify the relationship as incestuous.

attitude regarding “sterile beings” is a moral regulator for the society and the principle of divine retribution. This relation to society’s underprivileged people breaks the equivalence established before according to which, to have no descendants (sterile, widow without children, eunuch) implies the exclusion from the group.

Victor Turner makes only one direct reference to Israel in the Middle East when he refers to “Little nations, structurally small and politically insignificant, that are the bastions of moral and religious values inside a larger system of nations”. To him, this is a social phenomenon that possesses the attributes of a neophyte in the liminal phase of the ritual: they are people or principles that fall in the social structure’s gaps, that are in the margins or that bear the lower hierarchical levels.³⁰

The ancestors and the Children of Israel regard themselves as a people guided by God. Divine grace is Israel’s motor power and Israel is dependent in every aspect on it. In my opinion, this ideology imposes on Israel a self-perception through the values of the *communitas*, which are not structured around the society. This perception is furthered by the historical fact that Israel developed under constant external pressure. These values, which relate to humility and obedience, are qualities inherent to the radical ‘*qr*. Through them, the Israelite recognizes his or her place in the cosmos and in the history of his or her existence.

The Biblical concept of sterility, as it is approached here, allows for the symbolic expression of the cultural attributes of *communitas*. Some of the core concepts for this analysis are contained in this idea. Liminality, defined along the text as a symbolic field between order and chaos, is one example. Marginality, addressed since the beginning as a state which is in some measure apart from the divine and social order though contained in them is another example. And still, inferiority, a category used to designate people who are underprivileged within society.

The idea of a process of ritual passage also comprises the full semantic wealth of the radical ‘*qr*: from the triad infecund – impotent – uprooted... to the senses of nucleus, root, foundation. If we ask ourselves about the foundations of the ancient Israelites’ existence, we would find the answer, according to the Hebrew Bible, in God’s action as revelation, a bestowal of divine grace, in the classic relation formula *ḥesed + rahamim*.

With the idea of sterility in mind, we can affirm that the ancient Israelites “ritualized” the various stages of their history, through two kinds of basic and opposite rituals, which have directed the focus of my analysis since its beginning:

³⁰ V.W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (Chicago: Aldine Transaction, 1995), 109.

1. *Status improvement*: from barrenness to fertility; from uprooting to taking root; from impotence against the land's inhabitants to the victory over the seven nations that then will be uprooted by divinity;
2. *Status reversion*: from bestowed fertility to punitive barrenness; from a profitable land to a polluted and consequently sterile and desolated land; from rooted in the land to vomited by the land; from a sovereign nation to a small contingent dispersed in exile;
3. *Status re-improvement*: reunion and re-rooting in the land, multiplication and fertility.

What is the strength of sterility as a symbol? It is possible to find a clearer idea in Douglas' statement that the strength of a symbol lies in the fact that it is collected on the common fund of human experience.³¹ Womb and land sterility have two aspects in common: the cyclic and the observable aspects. Together, they form a powerful symbolic field. The sum of these factors contributes to confer the properties of a rite of passage. To confirm this statement, we need to remember some points:

- The life experience of the people is marked by alternate expositions to periods of impotence, weakness and lack of productivity;
- Feminine and masculine infertility are, at the same time, physical and emotional experiences;
- Feminine menstruation leads to infertility, impurity and pollution;
- Infertility in the land of Israel, marked by summer droughts and irregular winter rains, leads to a collective and traumatic experience.

Infertility associated to impurity and to ritual pollution is the distinctive characteristic of Israel's structured society as well as infertility associated to uprooting is the mark of the emergence of the people.

What are the types of sacredness revealed by the concept of sterility? I hope I was also able to show that important principles of monotheistic ideology are apprehended in the narrative on sterility. They state, as we have seen, the uniqueness

³¹ Douglas, 137.

of God and His absolute power over fertility and infertility. The story of women who have their wombs opened and closed according to the divine will was a part of monotheist theology. They demonstrate that the gift of life comes only from the one God.

The theological essence of the stories indicates that sterility is a part of the Divine plan. Women are sterile because the divine plan in its mysteries states so and not because they have done something wrong. They do not receive their children due to their actions or merits. Children are a gift, not a reward of God.

God's power, which is not confused with cosmic forces, can reverse the established order of nature and society, making an old woman pregnant in menopause or transforming weakness into strength, evil into good, death into life. The demonstration of this principle is expressed in our analysis of the underprivileged human categories, as the case of the hated wives and the wives without children from Genesis, or the example of Leah, who generated many children, more than the other three wives of Jacob together could. God saw and heard Leah and compensated her for the humiliation of being a non loved wife.³²

Divine sensitiveness towards the shameful and humiliating position of a woman is highlighted in this action. In Sarah's case, the whole house of Abimelec is punished because of the offence against her honor.³³ God speaks to Agar when she runs away from Sarah and intervenes on her behalf and Ishmael's in the desert.

With these observations, we can see that since the early stages of Israelite religion, the God of Israel acts for the sake of the underprivileged – *gerim* – (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob), the desperate (Agar), the women whose honor is threatened (Sarah, Leah) and the sterile women (Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel). Their vulnerability indicates a state of availability and receptivity to the action of the divinity – which occurs in the terms of speaking, seeing, listening and remembering – and the bestowal of divine grace.

Prayers are also important in patriarchal narratives because they show how human beings must behave and also because God hears them. Isaac prays to God because his wife was sterile. God answers and his wife conceives. Abraham prays to God and God cured Abimelec's house. Leah and Rachel were heard by God.

Why are the matriarchs sterile? Why does sterility fall on the woman? Although the narrative recognizes male sterility (Deuteronomy 7:14), it places

³² The aspect of Leah's transformation from weakness into powerfulness and Rachel's transformation from death into life will grow in Ana's story and in Zion's traditions, where the sterile woman is transmuted into a happy mother.

³³ Calum Carmichael states that the theme of woman's dishonor (Sarah, Rachel, Leah and Dinah) in the patriarchal narratives will inspire the deuteronomist in the composition of the Law concerning foreign captive women (Deuteronomy 21:10-14). C.M. Carmichael, *Women, Law and the Genesis Traditions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1979), 22-30. Notice that the episode regarding Sarah and Abimelec, corresponding to an offence against a woman's honor, includes a procedure of financial compensation aiming at "keeping up appearances in front of all that know her".

infertility on the woman. This idea makes sense when seen under the light of the texts, where we verify the paradoxical position of the woman within the patrilineal virilocal structure. They come from outside the group, they are necessary to reproduce lineage. By doing so, they introduce divisions. By not doing so, they threaten the survival of the group.

Along this research I hope I was able to demonstrate that the woman is the very symbol of liminality in this worldview and coherently, several symbolic liminal values are applied to her. They are sterile whereas the promise refers to multiple fertility. They defy the rules with stratagems when authority is monopolized in the patriarch's hands. On the other hand, I also intended to state that the woman is part of the observable and cyclic reality: she is visibly fertile (if pregnant) and visibly infertile (if menstruating).

In my view, this does not depreciate the image of women at all. The matriarch 'aqarab is, to me, the supreme symbol of a people in emergence, which in its turn is characterized as *walad*.

While there are euphemisms and metaphors for the masculine reproductive organ, whose position whether on the knee or on the thigh is not very well known, the feminine womb is called by its Hebrew name, *rehem*, it is praised as the locus of divine action and it generates the term for human and divine mercy, *raahmim*. *Rehem* – *rahmim*: in my opinion, no other culture, ancient or modern, praised so much the feminine.

Sterility is located in the woman because the woman has a womb and it is through this organ that the Hebrew Bible reveals the essence of the mystery of conception. Conception is the fruit of divine action, which takes place inside the woman's womb, any woman's womb, every woman's womb. Once again we come across the idea of passage – from 'aqarab to 'iqqar, divine action is the nucleus of the Torah.

The matriarchs are not sterile in order to generate heroes, the sterile matriarchs are heroines themselves. We do not need to read between the lines to know about them, because they have their own voice, they make themselves be heard in a clear and loud voice, even if they do not always get the sympathy of the author and also perhaps from the audience.

Turner calls the woman "the submerged side of family relations". When the values of *communitas* can be expressed in a society, this face emerges. As we have seen, these values have a constant dialogue with structure in the ancient Israelite society. The vast number of terracotta statues showing prominent bellies and breasts, found in sites all through the country of Israel is the testimony of the

profound need of ancient Israelites to incorporate the feminine principles in their religious expression.³⁴

This may be the reason why sterile matriarchs' traditions were continually reinterpreted from the 10th century BCE to the 1st century CE and could be adapted to new contexts and make sense to different communities, particularly in times of crisis and transition.³⁵

By identifying the key component of the theory of conception in the feminine womb and by asserting the divine power over this organ, the Hebrew Bible establishes a direct relation between divinity and the woman. The concept of the womb's opening and closure demonstrates that the same capacity for procreation – that in some cultures is elaborated so to include the feminine in the plan of nature (as opposed to culture) – leads the woman to direct contact with the divine.

The fundamental principle of the Hebrew Bible, according to which divine grace is Israel's primary and motor force, has one of its most poignant expressions in the image of the sterile matriarch, immersed in her fragile humanity.

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³⁴ Callaway, 74.

³⁵ Ibid., 141.