

# Re-evaluating I Samuel 1:1-17 and the Plight of the Barren Woman in Ancient Israel and Yoruba Culture

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**Abstract:** *As in other similar biblical stories, I Sam. 1:1-17 depict what a typical barren woman generally goes through in both ancient Israelite and Yoruba societies. Since so much importance has been attached to procreation in both societies, the concern shifts back and forth from personal shame to psychosocial trauma within the society where she lives especially when she may not be listened to, no matter what she intends to say in the community. In this paper, I intend to use Elkanah/Peninah/Hannah story as a template to elucidate the agony of the barren and to reexamine the basis for these cultural views while seeking various ways of reducing the stigma. In addition, special attention is paid to various contributions by scholars and experts looking at their suggestions through the lens of postmodern and some socially acceptable methods including the contributions of technology, which seems to be getting more popular in modern societies.*

**Keywords:** Ancient Israel, Yoruba people, Culture, Barren, society

## 1. Introduction

Infertility is a health problem that affects men and women of reproductive age in all parts of the world. Infertility, defined as the inability to conceive after a year or more of regular unprotected sexual intercourse (Cooper-Hilbert, 1998; World Health Organization [WHO], 1992), is a complex global public concern that is difficult to prevent, diagnose, and treat (Wright, 2003). The prevalence of infertility varies from continent to continent as well as from country to country (Mogobe, 2005). Research has shown that infertility affects millions of people worldwide. For instance, in the last three decades, more than 80 million people (about 8-12% of married couples) worldwide experienced infertility (WHO, 1992; Wright, 2003). In the United States, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) estimated that 6.1 million women between the ages of 15 and 44 experienced infertility (CDC, 1998). In 2002, it was estimated that 7.1 million women and their partners (about 12% of reproductive age) experience infertility (CDC, 2002), which presents an increase of 1 million people with infertility difficulties in the United States as was noted between 1998 and 2002. In Europe, about 16% of married couples experience infertility (Krishnan, 1994). Estimates on the prevalence of infertility in Africa are believed to be over 50% of the cases seen in gynecology clinics (Mogobe, 2005).

Experience has shown that if you have not worn the same shoe with those who are beclouded with setbacks at a point in their life, you may not be able to empathize with them; "for he who wears the shoe knows where it pinches." One of the problems with which those in any kind of predicament are plagued is that they are, more often than not, left in their own world. In other words, they are not always given commensurate consolation which their situation at that point in time requires. The enormity of the pain or whatever they experience within their inner being is not always known to others save those who perhaps, have undergone similar experience.

We are living in a society where childless women or those who are yet to give birth are not only jeered at, but also made to realize that they do not essentially belong to the womenfolk. The case is such that even women who have just one child in their marriages in Yoruba culture of the southwest Nigeria are not usually regarded as women. The issue of infertility has its root from the biblical view (a case of Sarah and Hannah, which affected their psychological, mental and physical state). The throbbing of the fruitlessness of their marriage is not so much because they are yet to be blessed with children, but more so because of their placement in the society, especially in their immediate community. The implication is that many people are either oblivious of the fact those children are blessings from God or that they have been blindfolded by haughtiness. It is a further demonstration that some persons delight in the misfortune of others, and would want to show that they are more favoured than the rest of mankind.

Specifically, however, every woman wants to be called a mother, not in the sense of being an elderly woman, but in the sense of being actual mother. Once this aspiration is not immediately met as at when due, especially few months after marriage, unmitigated anxiety sets in. This sort of fruitfulness is consequent upon the misunderstanding of the real purpose for which marriage was instituted. This is addition to the fact that it is not in the hands of man to give children. Children are gifts from God. It is with this understanding that we attempt to re-evaluate 1 Samuel 1:1-17 and the plight of the barren woman in ancient Israelite and Yoruba culture in Nigeria.

The history of Israel is that of a people who were always under the protective hand of God; a people who were saturated with God's blessing. Fertility of the womb was thus considered essential part of God promises and as such, it was of paramount importance to the life of Israel. On the other hand, childlessness was regarded as a contradiction to these promises of God; for it is believed to be walking

against the plan of God for his chosen people. This was evident in the life of Elkanah when his dear wife Hannah, could not give birth for a considerable length of time. Hannah's infertility at that point in time was a stumbling block to the actualization of this wonderful plan of God in their lineage but prayed to God and God answered her prayer by giving her a son (Samuel) which she later dedicated to the Lord. This makes childlessness an evil that must be combated.

Fundamentally, the Old Testament considers childlessness as an evil that must be struggled against. Xavier Leon-Dufour observed that sterility goes against the command of the creator who desires fruitfulness and life. This is obviously the mentality of the people of Israel. Like the typical African society, the people of Israel believed that not to have one's name survived is a sign of shame, and perhaps, failure in life. This explains why Hannah made a vow to God saying: "Lord Almighty if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life and no razor will ever be used on his head." Many persons in this state of life actually feel much less important before those whose marriages are fruitful. Others like Rachel who said to her husband: "Give me a child or I die" believe that it is better to die than to remain childless. But if one understands that it is God that bestows or denies motherhood, just as Jacob responded to his wife Rachel, one would come to the realization that there is more to marriage life than procreation."

From the responses of Jacob, it is patently obvious that it is God that gives or denies fruitfulness in marriage. The sacred writer(s) of the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy tend to show that it is reserved to God alone to conquer childlessness in marriage, and he never failed to manifest his omnipotence in this regard. It goes without saying that the only task onus on man is complete trust and dependence on God who gives generously to whomever he chooses. But the type of battle one is required to wage on sterility in marriage is that of patient waiting in prayer and absolute trust and confidence in God as evident in Hannah: for prophet Habakkuk says: "Even if it delays, wait for it, for surely it will come" It is instructive to note that the ancestors of Israel were born of women who were childless in their marriage until their ripe old age. It goes to portray the omnipotence of God: that nothing is impossible for him and that he has the power to do whatever he wills.

There is one other situation of childlessness in antiquity which adds another dynamic to the problem. The case of the childless women raises a number of issues about how such women could benefit from their marriage in their extended families. Although they might have been the favored wives, without children they have no rights of succession and thus are classified as barrens. This is common in Yoruba culture. The barren women's status was ambiguous. Women's status within the household depended upon their reproductive roles, and until they fulfilled those roles, they are basically considered to be outsiders to their husbands' families. Therefore, once the primary wives are barren, they were not always guaranteed social and financial protection if or when they become widows.

Throughout the world and particularly in African societies especially in Yoruba culture, the word "childlessness" sends interest to the ears of the listener and a sense of pity is immediately aroused in the mind. Children are regarded as great treasure to their parents, relations and their immediate community. Many people suffer from childlessness for so many reasons such as drug abuse, hard drugs effect, contraception, numerous abortions, and some are genetically inherited. Unfortunately in Nigeria, it is the woman who suffers most even when she is not the problem. She is constantly under stress, frustration and disappointment. She loses respect and may be ridiculed. She is always tensed and sorrowful. Nigerian men simply refuse to accept that they could be the problem and the women in their desperation from social pressures have been forced to help their men to bring in children from outside.

Childlessness causes constant fights, misunderstanding and suspicion in the marriage. Sex becomes mechanical and unfulfilling. The risk of being sterile can be a heavy burden. The woman risks divorce and in some cases gets rivals. The number of childless couples is tremendously on the increase, this is evident to the fact that attempts to initiate a move which would have been directed towards adoption is taken with serious resistance in some places mostly by couples without even a child.

Meanwhile, most couples become childless as a result of the degree of their waywardness while they were youths or younger and unmarried, such as illicit use of drugs in order to avoid pregnancy (Ugwuanyi, 1999). According to Nwapa (1996), some couples attribute their problem of childlessness to the supernatural, the hope in God that gives children to remember them at the appropriate time while some couples usually fall back to adoption, they are comfortable for being biologically infertile, they no longer want to know the cause of their infertility and solve it or get rid of it (Diemere et al, 2000). However, there is difficulty in the way childless couples have been communicating with friends who do have children. They describe as negative (although sometimes well-meant) remarks within the couples' social worlds, for instance at birthday parties and other social gatherings. It is possible for childless couples to participate in the 'world of children', especially if couples have good friends or relatives who have children and on the cultural aspects of childlessness such family becomes isolated and the wife faces inheritance restrictions on property and burial rights, also there is usually marital instability including fear of the husband taking a second wife, divorce and physical abuse by partner. This study will fill the gap in the area of childlessness and infertility in the Yoruba culture with references to 1 Samuel 1:1-17.

### **Yoruba and African Perspectives of Infertility and Childlessness**

Marriage, a universal phenomenon in Africa and for the Yorubas in particular is a union between a man and a woman, which brings together families, communities and ethnic groups (Ekong 1988). Though, a universal phenomenon, cultural differences abound in the formation of the family and the universal features are important. The system of marriage differs from people to people and what is considered as the importance varies from one place to the

other. One of the general cultural beliefs in Yoruba marriage is that procreation is the basic aim of marriage. Marriage and procreation are inseparable. Atere (1986) opined that the reward of marriage is expected much earlier than in the past because children are wanted for a number of reasons which are socio-cultural and economic. According to Ebibgola (2000), modernization has not weakened the deep-rooted tradition of having a child as soon as possible after marriage.

Odinga (2011) asserts that women who are childless are relegated to the periphery of society. They were not allowed to participate in communal events; these women were regarded as nobodies and perceived of as liabilities. In these cases, a household without children was considered incomplete and the women were automatically regarded as the guilty parties. Infertile women had no status, no voice and were often beaten by their husbands. In these communities, the infertility of a man was not discussed but treated with secrecy and women were expected to guard this secret. In these cases, the women use evidence from their husband's previous marriages where they were not able to have children. These defiant women were given a voice in the courts and could demonstrate that they were not infertile and that this medical condition was, in fact, their husbands' problem (ibid).

Oduyoye (1999), Alhassan, Ziblim and Muntaka (2014) regard infertility, miscarriage and childlessness, especially in Africa, not only as medical conditions but experiences which impact women both psychologically and socially. They argue that the desire of many young women to become mothers may be due to the fact that society places the importance of procreation in high regard (Alhassan et al. 2014). This is evident on the African continent especially because children are highly valued for social, cultural and economic reasons. Women who are infertile and childless are therefore confronted with a series of societal discriminations and stigmatization which often lead to psychological disorders such as anxiety and depression (Alhassan et al. 2014).

Oduyoye (1999) provides insight into her own personal experience of infertility and childlessness. Her focus is not specifically on the psychological aspects and her experience will be highlighted in detail throughout this paper. Oduyoye's article addressed the topic of infertility in 1999, which suggests that attempts had already been made to address this silence. Being a biological mother appears to be an expectation of both society and the church in Oduyoye's experience. Infertility does not affect only the couple involved but causes disharmony within the extended family circles and community. The individual affected often tries to please family members by partaking in rituals and practices that are uncomfortable and degrading. Oduyoye (1999) mentions drinking bitter herbs for fertility to please the elders and enduring many painful and embarrassing medical and traditional procedures sometimes from insensitive doctors and traditional healers. Oduyoye (1999) shares an experience in this article. She writes that she was asked to be at the clinic at seven one morning, without having breakfast. The doctor could only see her at three in the afternoon and only then was she told that the machine that they were going to use has broken down. One of the doctors told her and her

husband that he would not perform another operation to remove the cysts and that she had only a fifty-fifty chance of retaining a pregnancy. Furthermore, the doctor said, "At any rate, unless you two are expecting a virgin birth, I would say you are not giving yourselves the best of chances with your travelling schedule" (Oduyoye 1999).

Donkor (2008) concurs with Oduyoye about the rituals, practices and beliefs associated with infertility. When infertility is linked to witches and evil, spiritual means are used to treat women. In the Akan tradition, many people seek herbal treatment. These herbs are used to prepare soup to drink. Some women go to a fetish priest who performs rites to their gods. When a child is born to this woman, they are given special names as a sign that they have been delivered through the power of the spirit. Infertility and childlessness in some instances lead to divorce and emotional abuse from husbands (Donkor, 2008). Furthermore, the Christian community has made the experiences of the childless excruciating because it has not developed a theology that could help couples. What is helpful, especially from a liberating point of view, is that Oduyoye (1999) affirms that all women are diverse in their gifts and abilities even if they are childless and that they can be fruitful in other areas of their lives and still be complete women.

#### **Plights of Hannah as a Barren Woman in Ancient Israelite**

In the story of Hannah we find several different things that can cause depression, anxiety, eating disorders and other things along those lines. As is common, she had several things working against her at once. *1 Samuel 1:1-2 Now there was a certain man of Ramathaim-zophim, of mount Ephraim, and his name was Elkanah, the son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephrathite: 2 And he had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah: and Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.*

First of all, it was revealed that Hannah had the perennial problem of the "crowded marriage." Her husband had two wives; it did not work out too well for her. Many women suffer from a "crowded marriage." "The other woman" may be an adulterous partner, a second wife (in the case of Mormons and Muslims), a meddling mother-in-law, a domineering parent who tries to supervise their offspring's home, another woman who is held up as "perfect," or a homosexual partner. It could also be the man's career, hobbies, sports, etc. In fairness it should be noted that some men suffer from "crowded marriages" too. Their wife's "other" may be similar to the ones mentioned above, or it may be her job, her "crafts," or her "buddies" - other women she hangs around with who take pre-eminence over her husband (her BFFs). A woman's children can also come between her and her husband.

Hannah also had no children. Under the Mosaic covenant this was a great shame because God had promised to reward obedience to His law with fruitfulness. *Deuteronomy 7:12 Wherefore it shall come to pass, if ye hearken to these judgments, and keep, and do them, that the LORD thy God shall keep unto thee the covenant and the mercy which he*

*sware unto thy fathers:...14 Thou shalt be blessed above all people: there shall not be male or female barren among you, or among your cattle.* Without children, Hannah looked like a failure. Many people would assume she was "not right with God." This is common today, as well. When people don't get the blessings others assume they should have, the "blessed" will judge the "unblessed" of sin, though they really do not know God's reason. People may think a single person has somehow failed to do the right thing or God would give them a spouse. It may be suggested, either in private or publically, that a barren woman is not "doing something right" or she would have children. Perhaps they are not praying hard enough, perhaps they are not "surrendered," or perhaps they have "sin in their lives." There are other areas as well where these attitudes are exhibited. These attitudes from fellow believers are very discouraging and can aggravate the affliction of depression or anxiety, if not actually bringing it on.

This is not in keeping with God's will for His children. He tells us in *Romans 12:9, Let love be without dissimulation. 10 Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; We ought to be encouraging one another to be ...patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer; Romans 12:12 1 Samuel 1:3 And this man went up out of his city yearly to worship and to sacrifice unto the LORD of hosts in Shiloh. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, the priests of the LORD, were there. 4 And when the time was that Elkanah offered, he gave to Peninnah his wife, and to all her sons and her daughters, portions: 5 But unto Hannah he gave a worthy portion; for he loved Hannah: but the LORD had shut up her womb.*

Hannah had a good husband. He loved her, and tried to keep her from feeling deficient because of her affliction. The Lord had shut Hannah's womb for His own reason. Elkanah did not know what the reason was, but he still wanted Hannah to be happy and feel worthy. He loved her for who she was. Notice that the Lord does not tell us in this passage why He shut Hannah's womb. Because Peninnah had children by Elkanah, it was obvious that Hannah was the one with infertility, but the Lord does not tell us why. There is an important lesson in this. It is a perilous thing to start speculating as to why certain things happen to people the way they do. Why do some people stay single? Why are some barren? Why does a woman have a miscarriage? Why do people lose children in death? Why do some lose their spouse? And so many, many more questions. Ultimately, it is God's decision. Elkanah did not despise his wife because of God's choice for her, and it behoves us as the children of God to practice this toward our fellow saints. We ought to desire for them to be content in their lot in life.

### Causes of Childlessness

Medically, there are different causes and risk factors for couple's childlessness. According to Eisenberg (2011), infertility for men is most often caused by low or no sperm count and blockage of the tubes that transport sperm. Infertility in women on the other hand, is caused by a range of other factors such as problem with ovulation, blockage of fallopian tubes and physical damage to the uterus. Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD), advanced age, smoking, and

excess alcohol use are also mentioned as risk factors of infertility. However, a considerable number of people in the majority world have limited level of knowledge about the medical causes of infertility.

The problem is thus usually perceived as caused by other factors than medical ones. Some associate infertility with supernatural powers and others associate it with diseases or with the absence of reproductive organs. A study by Okonofua et al. (1997) on the social meaning of infertility in Southwest Nigeria showed that there are several traditional beliefs regarding the causes of infertility. Social scientists, however, are still debating the relative importance of voluntary and involuntary factors in the upturn in levels of childlessness, although individual self-fulfillment and freedom of choice have been seen as important (Poston and Kramer 1983). In the United States, Poston and Gotard (1977) attributed the early part of the rise in childlessness mainly to voluntary factors "linked to broader changes in the fabric of society regarding fertility control, contraceptive technology, female work preferences and patterns, and sexual and family norms"

### Consequences of Infertility

Historically, producing many children has been a woman's way of managing her social, economic, and psychological position in Africa because it ensures continued access to land and labour (Price, 1996). According to Kimani & Olenja, (2001) a child is important to his or her parents, family, clan, community, nation and the world at large. Kimani and Olenja point out that the children are viewed as important from socioeconomic, psychological, cultural, religious, and aesthetic perspectives. For the parents and family, children are a psycho-social resource during their childhood years, and they are a socio-economic resource when they become adults. The community, nation, and the world look upon children as the future leaders and workers of tomorrow (Kimani and Olenja). Children are taught the knowledge and wisdom they need to be successful leaders and workers of tomorrow. Thus, when marriage fails to bring forth children, those who are infertile experience psychological, political and financial consequences.

### Social and Cultural Impacts of Childlessness on Married Couples

According to Ugwanyi (1999), the number of children a man has determines the socio-economic importance of the man. Childlessness demoralizes some of the affected couple's zeal to accumulate wealth, this is because they view that wealth accumulated would go to the community when they die, because of this, most of the couples squander their money while they are still alive. Also culture measures the political strength by the number of children a man has, childless couples are not recognized in the society they find themselves in a political desert

Ugwanyi (1999), explained that children help to render valuable services and this create source of income on their father's farm land, cattle, rearing and in agricultural pursuit, besides this, the females are source of income to their parents when they get married. Cultural beliefs come in various forms and the cumulative effect of these beliefs is a

set of taboos and norms whose counteracting effect results in childlessness (Larsen, 1996).

Analysis and findings have shown the perception of childlessness in sub-Saharan Africa and the adverse effect of this on women who takes the blame for a couple's childlessness. The findings agree with that of (Larsen, 1996; Dyer et al. 2002). The consequences of childlessness are more profound in women as compared to men (Inhorn 1994). It is generally believed that men cannot be infertile so far as he can sustain an erection. Fertility and potency are often thought to be synonymous.

According to Orubuloye et al (1996), if a man cannot father a child, a male member of the family can always assist him in doing so. This is done in the western countries and it is called surrogate motherhood or fatherhood as the case may be. Having child is clearly more important than loyalty to one's spouse, which is evidenced by the common practice of divorce because of childlessness. The findings are in keeping with other qualitative and quantitative studies which indicate an overwhelmingly negative implication of the inability to procreate (Sabatelli, 1988; Kemmann et al. 1998).

#### Scholars' analyses of Hannah's Case

Many scholars, all working within a broad feminist perspective, such as Oduyoye (1999), Scott (2011), Kim (2008), Berlin (2004), O'Day (1985) and an unknown scholar<sup>11</sup>, have done extensive research on this narrative. As indicated previously Oduyoye (1999), shares her own experience of infertility from an African feminist theology approach, examining the importance of progeny in Ghana. As much as 1 Samuel 1-2 may be regarded as a story of despair which speaks about the pain and suffering of infertility, especially for a woman who is unable to have children, Oduyoye (1999:105) reads it as a story of hope. O'Day (1985) also regards the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1-2 as a story of hope, liberation and freedom. The African feminist theology theory works within liberation pedagogy and social transformation. It is relevant for this project because it is life giving in its approach and it touches on the responses of the participants regarding liberation. Kanyoro (2006), who presents the work done by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, asserts that feminist theology is engaged in theological dialogue with the cultures, religions, sacred writings and oral stories which shape the African context and define the women of this continent. The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians attempts to collaboratively reflect on issues of justice across the boundaries of gender, faith and belief (Kanyoro 2006).

Scott (2011) examines the five narratives in the Hebrew Bible related to infertile women who became mothers. In her analysis, she mentions Sarah, the wife of Abraham in Genesis 16: 1 and in Genesis 17:19. Other narratives are Genesis 25:21, the story of Rebecca; Genesis 30:1, the experience of Rachel and Judges 13:2, the account of Manoah's unnamed wife. Scott juxtaposes these women to Hannah in 1 Samuel 1-2. According to Scott, Hannah is the only barren woman who renders her petition directly to God and not to her husband. Hence, Hannah takes full control of

her situation and does not depend on any intervention from her husband Elkanah or the priest Eli (Scott 2011). This analysis of Hannah's character suggests a level of agency on her part. Hence, the theme of agency is pertinent to this study.

Berlin (2004) and Mshubeki (2011) discuss the dynamics involved in a polygamous marriage especially with a focus on the relationships between Hannah, Penninah and Elkanah. Berlin (2004) focuses on Hannah's prayers and how one should pray to God. Her contribution is to alert readers to how Hannah's infertility and the taunting she experiences from Penninah and her society, transformed Hannah's way of praying to God (Berlin 2004). She describes the prose prayer by a barren woman for a child and her poetic prayer of praise and thanksgiving in 1 Samuel 2. As much as the scholar focuses on the prayers rendered by Hannah, she also emphasizes the agony that a polygamous marriage can bring, and how this negative situation can lead to a stronger relationship with God through prayer. This contribution focuses on a theme of relationships within a polygamous marriage as well as a relationship of faith with God (Berlin 2004).

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