sciendo

Perichoresis
Volume 20. Doctoral Supplement (2022): 97–104
DOI: 10.2478/perc-2022-0034

CHILDLESSNESS IN THE BIBLE

LIGIA M. MĂCELARU*

Aurel Vlaicu University

ABSTRACT. This study casts light on how the issue of childlessness is portrayed in the Bible. The discussion begins with a commentary on Michal's story, which provides the foundation for further reflection on how childlessness was dealt with in the biblical world, especially in the situations where no miraculous divine solutions were provided. Several humanly devised solutions, acceptable and practiced in the ancient world are presented. The last part of the paper focuses on the more eschatological view of human existence provided in the New Testament, showing that childlessness is a form of suffering included in the promise of redemption brought about by the inauguration of God's kingdom. As such the response of the redeemed community is to be characterized by love and compassion.

KEYWORDS: childlessness in the Bible, Michal, David, childlessness in the ancient world, Biblical ethics

Introduction

At first sight, the issue of childlessness in the Bible raises no problems of interpretation. Famous accounts of childlessness such as Sarah's or Hannah's develop according to a relatively similar pattern: the childless couple or woman seek God's help, God offers a solution in the form of a miraculous birth, and the child thus given typically becomes a great man of God. Given these, one might be tempted to conclude that any situation of childlessness ought to be resolved in a similar fashion. However, a closer examination of the issue will reveal that the biblical perspective is more nuanced than the above. I propose that different biblical accounts must be examined if a fuller understanding of the biblical view on the issue is to be gained.

Preliminarily, though, two interpretive issues ought to be outlined. First, the discussion below is undertaken in view of the creation mandate. It is in the command to multiply that one can find an answer to the questions why procreation is fulfilling and why childlessness is emotionally devastating. The creation mandate hints to the fact that the human need to (pro)create, that is to shape one's children into one's own image, is embedded in the divine

* LIGIA M. MĂCELARU (MTh 2007, Evanđeoski Teološki Fakultet, Osijek, Croatia) is a PhD student at Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad, Romania. Email: ligia_macelaru-2002@yahoo.com.

© EMANUEL UNIVERSITY *of* ORADEA

design for humanity. It is a part of what being created in God's image is all about (cf. Măcelaru 2021: 596-608). Second, although the several narratives of childlessness presented in the Bible reveal psychological dramas and family dynamics as they explore the conflicted plots and emotional struggles of the narrative characters, ultimately the purpose of biblical accounts is to speak of God. Thus, beyond the information regarding childlessness provided, insights about God, his character, his faithfulness towards his people and his redeeming thoughts and actions are also gradually unveiled, from narrative to narrative.

Methodologically, the paper starts off with a commentary on the story of Michal, king Saul's daughter, David's wife. Since this is the only narrative of childlessness presented in the Bible that does not conclude with a miraculous divine intervention on behalf of the childless woman, and consequently without a child being born, I regard it as a suitable starting point for this discussion of childlessness, for it provides space for the more likely possibility that unresolved cases of childlessness are as much the norm in the Biblical world as they are in ours. In this way I advance an anthropological understanding of the issue of childlessness before moving on to discussing its eschatological nuances.

Michal, the Empty-Handed Woman

Michal was the youngest daughter of Saul, the first king of Israel. Her story is tangled with Israel's political life and her marriage life starts out as a political arrangement for the future of Israel. Her story begins in 1 Samuel 14: 49 where we are informed of her royal status (as if to suggest that she has everything) and ends in 2 Samuel 6: 23 where we are told that she has nothing for she 'had no children to the day of her death'. In 1 Samuel 18: 20 we are also told that Michal loved David, the champion and of Israel. Hers is in fact the only mention of romantic love initiated by a woman in the Hebrew Bible (Sakenfeld 2003: 79). We are not given any information in regard with David's feelings towards her.

According to local ANE custom and in order to avoid a possible threat to his throne and kingship, Saul wants to have David under his control, either by throwing him in risky war situations in the hope that David will lose his life (Brueggemann 1990: 138), or by making him a a part of his family. So, Saul tries to marry David with his oldest daughter (Merab), but David refuses out of humbleness. According to Jobling (1998: 79), Saul's offer to David, which should have been the reward Saul promised to the one who would kill Goliath, is in fact a clear political scheme. David's humbleness, however, puts an unexpected spin in the story, for the very price he is to pay in order to 'earn' the right to marry the king's daughter is also the trap Saul lays in order to have David killed in the battle (1 Samuel 18: 18, 23). Nevertheless, the one

who has earned the right to become the king's son-in-law by defeating Goliath is once again victorious in battle and wins Michal's hand in marriage (18: 27-28). In this way, David becomes entitled to power, to royalty kinship and ultimately to the throne through matrilocal succession (Brown 2003: 124-125).

The plot is full of conflict as Saul's jealousy for David's victories and successes is growing to the point that the king tries to kill the champion. This is where Michal re-enters the story as she helps David escape through the window during the night (1 Samuel 19: 11-12) and then cunningly covers for him so that the flight is not immediately known, thus giving David a chance to put some distance between him and Saul (Friedmann 2002: 228). Consequently, Michal becomes separated from David for several years and is 'given in marriage' by her father to another man. This is an abusive decision made by Saul, because according to the law of the land Michal's marital bind to David could not be nullified unless David would have written a 'divorce' (Friedman 2002: 275). This leads to an irreparable deterioration of the relationship between Michal and David, for as Michal is given as wife to Paltiel (probably another political move on Saul's side), David follows his own political ambitions and marries additional wives (Ahinoam of Jezreel, Abigail the widow of Nabal from Carmel, Maacah the daughter of Talmai king of Ghesur, Haggith, Abital, and Eglah). In the end, the political ambitions rule the day, for after David takes the power, he uses his position to 'bring' Michal back into his house, probably to legitimize his claim to the Saulide throne, without however attempting to restore the relationship. Some interpreted David's gesture as a public accusation David brought to Saul for the injustices done to him. Others have suspected David intended to control Michal, thus making sure she would never bear children and therefore threaten the Davidic dynasty (Friedman 2002: 281).

The next scene in which Michal appears is in 2 Samuel 6. The story is about David's plan to bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. The Ark was important to the new kingship because it was a symbol of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. It was an Israelite identity marker as well as a guarantee of a healthy community (Brueggemann 1990: 249). Within this context, David dances. Admittedly, this is an extravagant bodily expression become an act of religious vitality (Brueggemann 1990: 250-251). Michal, who previously loved David, is now the one who 'despises' him for his dance (2 Samuel 6:16) and addresses him with sarcasm. Is this a sign of a 'gender role' competition inside their marriage, or evidence of the fact that Michal, the daughter of the king that gives David legitimacy to the throne feels superior by lineage and entitled to 'educate' the new king on what is the appropriate behavior for a ruler. Is it wrong that she feels entitled to try to regain decency in regard with David's political life and carrier? Perhaps not.

However, David's reaction does not give her the place she reaches for. He chooses to point out that he is the one Yahweh chose in order to replace her father's kingship, and thus he does not need her approval, or the legitimacy she brings. In this way David dismisses her involvement and claims Yahweh's anointing as his legacy. The vocabulary is conflicted and offensive on both sides. The story ends with a note about Michal, which informs us that she 'had no children to the day of her death'.

It is interesting to observe the main thrust of the three episodes that describe Michal's family life: (1) she 'is given' by her father in marriage for political reasons but loves and is ready to sacrifice herself for her husband; (2) she 'is given' (forced) by her father into an unlawful marriage about which we have no other information than the emotional display of her second husband, who weeps when he loses her; (3) she 'is returned' to David, thrown in a tensed, conflictual relationship that betrays the lack of romantic feelings toward David at this point in the story (Sakenfeld 2003: 80), and ends up being a 'persona non-grata' as even her legitimizing role is denied her by David.

Some might interpret Michal's childlessness as punishment from God, but the story itself does not give such information. Also, we are not told if she continued to be David's wife or if subsequently to their argument she was dismissed as his wife, too. The three explanations offered for her childlessness (cf. Sakenfeld 2003: 82; Friedmann 2002: 281) are: (1) she is punished by God because she spoke against the 'Lord's anointed'; (2) David has no sexual relationship with her, for a various number of reasons; (3) Michal herself refuses to have anything to do with David. No hint is provided to favor any of the three against the other. One thing is sure, though –Michal's childlessness was beneficial to David as it contributed to the end of the Saulide claim to the throne.

At least three conclusions can be drawn based on Michal's story. First, not all cases of childlessness recorded in the Bible are resolved by miraculous intervention; in fact, some may remain unsolved. Second, the status of women in the biblical world was one of dependency; women were treated like property by the male figure in her life (father or husband) and therefore were abusively used for political or other gains, with little regard for their own desires and preferences. Third, a childless woman in the biblical world had even less value; she was a 'persona non-grata' in the male world of political schemes and influence.

Anthropological Understanding of Childlessness in the Biblical World

The glimpse into the status of women provided by Michal's story can be augmented here with observations of historical-anthropological nature. As noted, a woman's status was determined by the relationship with the male

figures in her life: father, brother or husband. Unmarried girls were under the protection and authority of their father or brother (if the father was no longer available) while the married ones under their husband's. A woman's worth was primarily associated with her ability to bear children, especially sons that will be the heirs of their father's name and property (land). Thus, a woman's role was twofold: to be productive and to reproduce (cf. Meyers 1999: 30-41). In terms of productivity, this was related to her responsibilities for stewardship over the household (working the land, imparting responsibilities in the house, care for the children and rule over the other females in the house—maidservants or female slaves). In terms of reproductivity, this was related to her responsibility to bear children. Children were the reflection of how much power a family would have, and a good resource for labor around the house (agriculture, farming, etc.).

Of course, as is the case today, the biblical world knew of different customs that applied to different ethnic and religious groups. Israel was a pioneer society, both in religious: religious (monotheistic) and social (family models) relationships. For instance, the picture given in the Bible is that women were both, dependent and independent. Dependent in the sense that she would always belong to a male figure. In the Israelite paradigm this was primarily so for protective purposes. Independent in as much as she would make all the decisions within the household, including the decision to bring another woman into her husband's life. She would also make deals, such as business agreements, real estate investments and other economical transactions for the benefit of her family. The ideal prototype provided in Proverbs 31 describes a certain level of initiative, even though that is also used to benefit her husband (Sakenfeld 2003: 117-133). However, if a woman would find herself without male protection and perhaps childless, she would be in a very difficult situation: she would have no rights to own land and therefore no means of providing for her most basic economic needs; she would be forbidden to enter into the temple and therefore no means for fulfilling her spiritual needs; she would have no right to decide in regard with initiating other relationships and therefore no means to provide for her social and emotional needs. Within this context, childlessness would come as an added sorrow for there would be no way she could prove her worthiness. And since a childless woman would be unworthy and useless to her husband, alternatives were developed in both Jewish law and other ANE societies to help couples overcome childlessness. As summarized by Sakenfeld (2003: 7-15), these were:

1. The adoption of a male servant. As exemplified by the story of Abraham in regard with Eliezer (Genesis 15:2), this was the most accessible and probably the most frequent solution. A servant would be adopted by the husband and given full right of inheritance with the condition that he would preserve the integrity of the property and would perpetuate the name of his master.

2. Serial monogamy—a rare custom, in which a man could divorce his wife for reasons of childlessness and marry another woman in the hope of ensuring in this way the birth of an descendant.
3. Polygamy—the taking in marriage any number of wives until an inheritor was born. In such cases all wives would have an equal status, although the story of Hannah and Peninnah tells of the inherent tensions such situations could generate.
4. Surrogate motherhood / Polycoity—a case similar to polygamy in as much as a second woman is brought into the household. However, the role of the second woman would be purely for procreation, she would not share an equal status with the other woman in the household and upon birth the child would be given to the childless wife. Specific examples of such situations are Abraham with Sarah and Hagar, Jacob with Rachel and Bilhah, and Jacob with Leah and Zilpah. This form of arrangement is what in today's world would amount to partial surrogacy (Dennis 1994: 42).
5. Levirate marriage—the case in which a childless widow would marry the closest male relative of her deceased husband and if a child would thus be born, he would be the heir of the deceased man. This custom had a dual scope: (1) to protect the childless widow through the birth of a male child; and (2) to ensure that the property of the deceased would remain in the family (tribe) through the kinship between the child's father and the deceased man. This custom, exemplified in the book of Ruth, was prohibited in the later period.

The above description provides us with an anthropological view on women and their childlessness status in the biblical world. Over the years, many of the traditional customs were weakened while Israel as a nation morphed through different forms of societal structure: surviving migrants in the desert, agrarian society in the pre-monarchic period, urban-city dwellers in the monarchy, etc. In the new context of urbanization customs as the levirate marriage became less important and even childbearing became secondary in terms of family inherence.

The Eschatological Perspective on Childlessness

There are many promises in the Bible related to the issue of childlessness and bearing of children. Based on these, in some Christian circles, childlessness has been regarded as a sign of sinfulness or at least lack of faith. Several Bible passages have been used in this regard:

> … and none will miscarry or be barren in your land (Exodus 23:26).
>
> He settles the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of children (Psalms 113: 9).
>
> If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the LORD your God will keep his covenant of love with you, as he swore to your forefathers. He will love you and bless you and increase your numbers. He will bless the fruit of your womb, the crops of your land, your grain, new wine and oil, the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks in

> the land that he swore to your forefathers to give you. You will be blessed more than any other people; none of your men or women will be childless, nor any of your livestock without young. The LORD will keep you free from every disease. He will not inflict on you the horrible diseases you knew in Egypt, but he will inflict them on all who hate you (Deuteronomy 7: 12-15).

Indeed, a look at these texts without paying due attention to the larger biblical context would suggest a 'cause-effect' relation between childlessness and divine punishment for sin. However, if we consider the larger biblical ethos, we ought to realize that the very same God that makes such promises has also decreed numerous stipulations on how we, as a community of compassionate righteous worshippers of the true God (Grens 1998: 67-85) are to treat the ill, the impaired and disadvantaged among us (including childlessness). The triad of worship, righteousness and compassion was the norm for the belief communities called to represent God in the Old Testament (Hanson 2001: 69-75). In fact, the rules of conduct stipulated are mandatory for entering God's kingdom (Stassen and Gushee 2003: 47). In God's kingdom, worshiping God in righteousness and showing compassion could be translated into such actions as: welcoming strangers, embracing the saddened with love and providing for the needy. Numerous examples of this teaching are available in both the Old and the New Testament. However, its climax is given in summary form in Matthew 25 in terms of how we treat the less fortunate, the 'out of the box' type of people. Admittedly, legitimate questions as to the origin and purpose of suffering, childlessness included, can be raised. However, these go beyond the scope of this article. The most we can say here is that, first, God did not intend that humans would suffer and therefore he neither intend childlessness. Second, no direct cause-effect line between suffering and sin should be drawn. Third, as a community of love we are not called to condemnation and judgment but to loving embrace and compassion. Thus, our call is to pray and act, confronting the sin but loving the sinner (Hays 1996). Fourth, the fullness of the Kingdom of God holds a promise of 'no tears and no suffering' (Revelation 21:1-4). As such, we ought to be aware that the here and now is not the ultimate reality. Our ultimate hope is 'for the day to come' when all sorrow and suffering, including childlessness will be overcome by the joy of living in the fullness of God's presence.

Conclusion

The issue of childlessness is as old as humanity itself. People of all times and in all places have struggled with it. The resources available and the alternatives offered by the Bible may not apply culturally today. The story of Michal helps prove that childlessness must be viewed and treated beyond its connection to the status of the women in the ancient world. Israel's own development as a society shows evident preoccupation with addressing constructively

the problem. The New Testament teaches compassion and the ultimate divine purpose of dealing away with all forms of lack and suffering. Seen in this light, a correct approach to childlessness requires making use of all available resources to overcome it, while trusting God to work his purposes in the life of the childless couple. Furthermore, Christian communities should be accurate bearers of God's image and thus accept and compassionately embrace with love those undergoing suffering (childlessness included), without presuming and implying that the cause for suffering is to be found always in the presence of sin or lack of faith.

Bibliography

Brown JP (2003) *Ancient Israel and Ancient Greece*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Brueggemann W (1990) *First and Second Samuel*. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.

Friedmann D (2002) *To Kill and Take Possession: Law, Morality, and Society in Biblical Stories*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.

Grenz S (1998) *Created for Community*: *Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

Hanson PD (2001) *The People Called: the Growth of Community in the Bible*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Hays R (1996) *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: a Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*. San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Publishers.

Jobling D (1998) *1 Samuel*, Berit Olam. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.

Măcelaru MV (2021) Created in God's Image: Human Dignity in Biblical Perspective. *Journal for Freedom of Conscience* 3(*): 596-608.

Meyers C (1999) Woman and the Domestic Economy of Early Israel. In Bach A (ed) *Woman in the Hebrew Bible*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Sakenfeld KD (2003) *Just Wives? Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament & Today*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Stassen GH, Gushee DP (2003) *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press.

Turner D (1994) *Sarah Laughed: Women's Voices in the Old Testament*. London: SPCK.