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Old Testament Faith and History

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God's Bride: Israel

Love cannot be bought. It cannot be earned. It cannot be bargained for. No matter what society may deem important in a relationship, no one can manipulate someone else into loving them. This message is made clear in the form of animosity and competition between pairs of women. Sarah and Hagar. Rachel and Leah. Hannah and Peninnah. All of these women compete with each other for the affection of their husbands. Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah are the beloved although barren wives. Hagar, Leah, and Peninnah are the fertile, less loved wives. The culture in which these women lived in put the most importance on children. Bearing children, specifically sons, is the most sacred and honored task a woman can complete in her lifetime. If she is barren then the family has no future. Not only does that mean that the family line will end but in that culture the descendants took care of those who had died by making offerings. So if there were no children then there was no one to take care of the ancestors in the afterlife, and they would suffer for eternity. Not to mention that the barren woman herself would have to deal with the shame and ridicule of not being able to bear children. For in that culture, a woman's entire identity was centered on her ability to produce offspring. Yet despite all of these societal, cultural, and religious pressures, Abraham, Jacob, and Elkanah love the women who "fail" at their main duty as women. These relationships are symbols for the way God loves the people of Israel. His love is not conditioned upon societal standards and He doesn't reject His chosen ones when they make mistakes, just like the husbands.

Sarah is a matriarch. She is supposed to be responsible for producing the children whose descendants will fulfill the covenant that God made with Abraham. Yet, well into her 90's, she is barren. Not only is she failing at her duties as a wife, but she is preventing the future nation of Israel from fulfilling its destiny. To remedy this problem, Sarah offers Hagar to Abraham so she could have children through her. The word used in the original Hebrew means "to build up." This has a double meaning. Not only does Sarah want to "build" a family through Hagar, she needs to build up her standing in society through the children that Hagar produces on her behalf,

otherwise she has no purpose. As Westermann states “in [this] patriarchal society there was no other way for a woman to be a member of society.” (Westermann, 236) In addition, once Hagar knows that she is pregnant she begins to disrespect Sarah. This is because Hagar’s standing in society has been raised from a maidservant to a legitimate wife of Abraham. Sarah knows that her position has been further lowered by Hagar’s pregnancy because now she must compete with a younger, fertile wife. Furthermore, according to the Code of the Hammurabi if a woman cannot bear children for her husband, it is her duty to provide him with a concubine (Johns). Even if the fate of the nation of Israel did not depend on Sarah’s ability to bear children, as the barren wife of Abraham she was required by law to provide him with someone who could continue the family line. Abraham is aware of everything that transpired between his two wives; he is familiar with the law of the land, and he is the one who made the covenant with God. However, when Sarah approaches him asking for help in resolving her issues, he tells her to do with Hagar as she pleases. At this point, God has not blessed Sarah with a child. There is no one to fulfill the covenant. Abraham knows this but he still trusts Sarah’s judgment when she oppresses Hagar to the point where the woman pregnant with his child, his only hope to continue the family line, runs off into the desert. Abraham loves Sarah despite her infertility, age, and her unfair treatment of Hagar. She is a failure as a woman (as far as society is concerned) and she acts in a way unbecoming of a woman of her stature, but Abraham doesn’t cast her away. She is his most beloved wife.

The same applies to God and the nation of Israel. The people are commanded by God to not follow the practices of the society that they live in but to follow His word. Worshipping local deities, marrying foreign women, and eating pork are examples of how they were supposed to differentiate themselves from their neighbors yet, time and time again; they failed to keep the covenantal promise. But despite their many failures God loved them, His chosen people, and He never forsook them.

Another example would be the conflict between Rachel and Leah. Their relationship was far more complicated than Sarah and Hagar’s because the two were sisters. In addition, Jacob originally wanted Rachel but was tricked into marrying Leah first by her father, Laban. Yet despite all of these extra factors most of the commentaries I found on them were titled “Jacob’s Sons” or “Jacob’s Children.” This shows that even when scholars are reviewing Old Testament

stories such as these, the focus is still on what children the women produced rather than the women themselves. Their identity as women, as opposed to mothers and wives, is virtually nonexistent. In this story the initially barren wife, Rachel, cries out to her husband in frustration “Give me children or I will die!” (Genesis 30:1) It also can be translated as “Give me children or I am dead!” (Genesis 30:1) This shows that Rachel sees her life through the lens of the culture she lives in and truly believes that she is worthless without any children to her name, despite how much Jacob loves her. Jacob’s love for Rachel is extraordinary. When Jacob first meets Rachel, by the well, he is overcome with emotion and kisses her. This is monumental because it is the “only explicit biblical scene of a man kissing a woman” (Beck, 606). Furthermore, Jacob labors away in servitude to Laban for *14 years* in order to have her as his bride.

When one takes into account the entire situation it is clear to see why Leah, the fertile wife, was so unhappy in her marriage to Jacob. The scripture never talks about how Leah felt when Laban used her to deceive Jacob but it does mention how she struggles with the fact that Jacob doesn’t love her. She bears him six sons, therefore fulfilling her duties as a wife and mother according to the Middle Bronze culture, but it doesn’t change Jacob’s devotion to Rachel. Leah doesn’t understand this and still holds out hope that she can earn her husband’s affections with her children. In scripture she says “...surely my husband will love me now” (Genesis 30:16). and “Now at last my husband will become attached to me...” (Genesis 30:19). after she has children. When this fails to work, Leah tries to bargain for her husband with some mandrakes her son brought her. In those times the roots were believed to aid fertility so Rachel wants them because she believes they will help relieve her from her barrenness. Leah hands them over but only after Rachel agrees to let her have Jacob for a night. One can infer from this that Jacob, unsurprisingly, spent most of his nights with Rachel. Not to mention that when Rachel dies in childbirth later on, she is buried in an unknown grave and Jacob erects a “matsevah” or a stone pillar on top of it as a sign of his undying love for her. Leah tries her best to earn Jacob’s love through children, and bargain’s for his love through mandrakes, but both attempts fail. The people of Israel often tried to force God’s hand in certain situations. Whether it was making a hasty sacrifice or bringing the Ark of Covenant into battle, they thought that they could bargain with God in order to get what they wanted. God cannot be bargained with and His love is a gift to mankind, not a prize. That is the main message in the story of Rachel and Leah.

Finally, the last pair of women that symbolize God's relationship with the nation of Israel are Hannah and Peninnah. The husband of the two women, Elkanah, would make an annual trip to Shiloh to make sacrifices to the Lord. It was customary in those times that a certain portion of the sacrifice should go to the priests who performed the ritual but the rest belonged to the family. Scripture says that Elkanah would give some of the meat to Peninnah and her children but he would give a double portion to Hannah. Just like Abraham and Jacob before him, Elkanah loved his barren wife more. Even when she suffers from "great anguish and grief" because of her lack of children he reminds her of his love by asking whether he is worth ten sons to her. Once again the husband's love for his wife is not affected by her inability to bear children but the barren woman herself feels distressed by her infertility. In addition, Hannah suffered in a similar way to Sarah because just as Sarah was tormented by her more fertile counterpart, Hannah was tormented by Peninnah. Unlike Rachel, Hannah does not plead with her husband for children but instead pleads to God in a silent prayer and in time receives a son, Samuel. This final story is consistent with the messages of the other two but it takes it one step further. Instead of trying to fix her problem herself or relying on her husband, Hannah relies on God.

There are multiple instances in which the people of Israel try to use their own means to succeed when true success is only possible through God. Sometimes God has to make the odds seem impossible just so the people will know for sure that it was His work. For example, when Gideon and his army are sent to fight Midianites, God realizes that there are too many men. He doesn't want Israel to think that they had defeated their enemies on their own so He instructed Gideon to only take the men who drank the water like dogs to battle which amounted to about 300. In the end the Midianites were defeated and Hannah was blessed with a son. This shows that in times of distress, the most important thing you can do is rely on God.

In the patriarchal society in which the stories of Sarah, Hagar, Rachel, Leah, Hannah, and Peninnah take place, being a woman meant abiding by a very narrow set of standards. It was mandatory to provide children. Yet despite failing to conform to society's standards for womanhood, Abraham, Jacob, and Elkanah all love their chosen wives. In addition, the less favored wives did their best to earn or bargain their way into their husbands' love with no success because love cannot be manipulated like that – not for man and certainly not for God.

God loved the people of Israel just as these men loved their wives. Whole-heartedly, without reservation, despite what society pressured them into doing. Conforming to society and conforming to God's will are often two very different things, today and in biblical times. Furthermore each of the conflicts between the pairs of women teaches one a lesson about love and relying on God. The more beloved wives were certainly not perfect and neither were the people of Israel, but God's unconditional love never wavered just as the husbands' love was not dampened by their chosen's wives inability to bear children.

All of the women in these stories, barren and fertile alike, defined themselves solely by society's standards and it affected them for the worse. Society, in essence, is not inherently evil. However every society has rules and standards against which women are held up and judged. In biblical times, a woman lost serious social standing unless she could bear children. Even without the criticisms of other people, the barren women themselves were distressed by their infertility. Nowadays, such criticism is not as common. Women are having children later in life and sometimes not at all. The essence of what it is to be a woman is no longer so specific. But that doesn't mean that women are free from preconceived notions modeled by our culture that they must conform to or risk being ridiculed.

In modern times, women face many more pressures that make them feel inadequate and unworthy. For example, if a woman is aggressive and ambitious in the workplace she runs the risk of being ostracized and damaging her relationships with her male co-workers. However, if she is sweet, nurturing, and submissive she rarely moves forward in her career but maintains good relationships because she "doesn't step on anyone's toes." Also, a woman can be a mother and maintain her career but she has to deal with criticism from both sides accusing her of not being fully committed to either one. In regards to beauty, the standard for American beauty has become a tall, model-thin woman with a flawless complexion who seems as if her beauty is effortless. This is a standard that very few, if any, women could meet. In my opinion, the answer isn't to try to fix society. It's to try to help women view themselves in healthy ways and define themselves based on their own personal standards of the type of women that they aspire to be. I am sure that if Rachel and Leah had focused more on improving themselves than battling each other by producing the most children, their relationship as sisters could have been saved. The same applies to conflicts between Sarah, Hagar, Hannah, and Peninnah. In the words of Eleanor

Roosevelt, “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.” Whether it’s because of your career, your beauty, or a decision/ability to start a family, society shouldn’t make any woman feel like less of woman for any reason.

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