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## THE MEANING OF STERILITY IN THE PATRIARCHAL CYCLE

Prof.a. Dra. SUZANA CHWARTS, PhD (USP)

### 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 foundational themes of Israel's ancient past, by condensing some of the main obstacles inherent to the emergency 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 liminal 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 a 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 among men and between men and God. And this may be the reason why sterile matriarch's traditions were continually re-interpreted, from the 10th century BCE. until the 1st century CE, and could be adapted to new contexts and make sense to distinct communities, particularly in times of crisis and transition.

**Keywords:** Sterility - Hebrew Bible - Matriarchs - Patriarchs - Biblical Women

### 1. 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.*" (Gen1:28; 9:7). This is one of the pillars of God's "ideal order of cosmos"<sup>1</sup>, and of the instauration of a well-being basis on which the stable progression of life is founded. Nevertheless, in real life, phenomena related to

chaos<sup>2</sup> continually threaten this ideal arrangement in the form of death, sickness, war and sterility.

Sterility is an element which belongs to “observable reality”. It is an experience at the same time emotional and biological, lived in the private and the social spheres, and which opposes 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 Israel’s story – the divine oath fulfillment, God’s action in favor of Israel, generational continuity, the very existence of the audience.

Sterility is a recurrent theme in the Hebrew Bible. However, it cannot be said that there is one 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 kinds 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 circle,<sup>3</sup> 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.

The originality and specificity of the Biblical idea of sterility, in my point of view, lie in this cyclical nature, 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 this intermediate state, the scarcity, the unveiling, the “*little me*”<sup>4</sup> 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 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 a “God’s gift” are prominent.

Despite its importance, this theme has been neglected by scholars of all times. The general trend among the authors that did address the theme is to reduce a whole system of meanings into one only phenomenon, disintegrating them into the notion of a “saga motive” (*Sagenmotif*)<sup>5</sup> 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. Mothers’ sterility is a part of the set of obstacles the hero has to overcome, in this case, to praise the child’s origin.<sup>6</sup>

Considering the aims of this research, I have followed the opposite track. I tried to demonstrate that sterility is a complex concept, whose ramification of meanings has specific outlines that will be important to the constructive balance of religion and to the story and self-perception of Israel. My analysis of the texts indicates that the recurrent sterility in the Biblical tradition is not only a resource used by the author,<sup>7</sup> but represents a seminal reason of the ancient Israelites’ various visions in certain moments of history and over the time. This hypothesis was built on a broader approach to sterility, which goes beyond the exclusive link “sterility-matriarchs-feminine” to address other spheres of Israel’s ancestral experience, which include the senses of rupture, uprooting and wandering.

Elements from three different spheres interlace, resulting in a symbolic unit that will define the patriarchal cycle as a whole:<sup>8</sup> the matriarchs’ initial infertility; the patriarchs’ uprooting and Canaan’s “famine in the land”.

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

When looking for the 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 how they saw themselves and the others, and how they understood God’s acts on fate and on Israel’s history.

In the context of sterility, the keyword is ‘*aqarah*, used to designate Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel. In the etymological study of the radical ‘*qr*, though, we can see a whole group of meanings that encloses distinct spheres:

- **Sphere of Agriculture:** *la’aqor* (Eccl. 3:2); *te’aqer* (Zeph. 2:4) – to pull by the root, uproot, 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; hurt cutting the tendon at the front part of the knee; – to mutilate the animal (bull or horse), causing a wound in the tendon at the front part of the knee; (fig.) diminish/nullify the strength, vitality and power; – to hamstring (horse, ox, car)<sup>9</sup> (Gen. 49:6 - *šor*; Josh. 11:6-9 *sus*; 2Sam. 8:4, 1Cr 18:4 *reh?ev*);<sup>10</sup> – to castrate, caponize, sterilize, mutilate, cripple.
- **Human/animal sphere** (derivative meaning): ‘*aqarah* (Gen. 11:30; 25:21;

29:31; Exod. 23:26; Judg. 13:2; 1 Sam.2:5; Is 54:1; Job 24:21); ‘*aqar wa‘aqarah* (Deut. 7:14); ‘*aqeret habayt* (Ps. 113:9); – infertile, infecund, without descendants;<sup>11</sup> – ‘*aqar* – impotent (Deut.7:14).

- **Genealogical sphere** (derivative meaning): ‘*eqr mispah?at ger* (Lev. 25:47) – descendant, foreigner’s seed, gentile; – descendant from the city guardian’s family;<sup>12</sup> – original meaning: root; metaphorical meaning: descendant.<sup>13</sup>
- **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 (Josh.13:3, 15:11; 45:19:43; Judg. 1:18; 1Sam. 5:10, 6:16, 7:14; 17:52; 2Kings 1: 2; Jer. 25:20; Amos 1:8, Zeph. 2:4; Zech. 9:5,7); Deriv: ‘*eqroni*, ‘*eqronim* (heathen of ‘*eqron*) (Josh.13:3, 1Sam. 5:10).
- **Arabic languages:**<sup>14</sup> 1. ‘*qr* – hurt, especially hurt the front legs’ tendons of a camel in his owner’s tomb; 2. ‘*aqara*, *mu* ‘*aqarat* – cut a camel’s the tendon joint in a competition 3. ‘*aqir*, infertile; ‘*uqrat*, infertility.

As I read the texts, I was able to identify an “osmosis relationship” among these meaning units, where the semantic fields work as porous cells that exchange 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, in relation to God and the cosmos.<sup>15</sup>

## 2. Sterility in the patriarchal cycle

In the patriarchal narrative, the terminology around sterility is used regarding Sarah, Abraham, Rebecca and Jacob. The narrator addresses the three matriarchs by the word ‘*aqarah* (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 (‘*iqqu šor*).<sup>16</sup>

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 and Rebecca’s weddings, the patriarchs’ displacements in Canaan and the Canaan-Egypt circuit.<sup>17</sup>

Another meaning for sterility – the infertility of the land – is present in the narration of the creation of man in Gen. 2:5., as also when there is “*famine in the land*”, an experience shared by all the patriarchs.<sup>18</sup>

Andre 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 diverse and paradoxical as they are themselves.”<sup>19</sup>

This self-perception of the ancient Israelites, which is a core element in their memory of the origin, is expressed through the language of sterility in the writing context of traditions, that is, in the wider context of the patriarchal narrations.<sup>20</sup> Even a superficial overlook of 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;<sup>21</sup> 2. cyclical and positive character – a state that is 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 the genesis in history. God’s first direct action, towards Abraham, is made through the word (*dbr*), that on one the hand orders rupture and uprooting (Gen.12:1), and on the other, drives the promise of posterity and greatness (Gen.12:2). As background, a previous action had already triggered the process of creation: Sara’s sterility (Gen.11:30).

This initial sterility effects a deep rupture in the previous pattern of the order of *cosmos*, represented by the genealogical lists of continuous succession of procreations and generations.<sup>22</sup> 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 (Gen.16:2) and “*did not give*” descendants to Abraham. (Gen.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 the divine punishment, which orders multiple effort in biological and land reproduction.

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

### 3. 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. On the other, the divine oath of posterity and land-ownership.

These two poles are opposite, but never disjunctive. Actually, they move side by side. The matriarchs and patriarchs' route is a continuous process of infertility and uprooting.<sup>23</sup> The divine oath, too, is a continuous process, a gradual progression.<sup>24</sup>

The promises are directed to Israel. The whole perspective of the process, the horizon, is Israel. The term *zar'ekha* = "his seed" (Gen.12:7), receiver of the promise, brings the connotation of a succession of generations,<sup>25</sup> and not only the immediate child of the womb.

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 of the memory of the origin, we approach the view that the ancient Israelites had about the world. The reason why the idea of sterility is so strongly settled in Israel traditions on the origin may be exactly because it belongs to the folk sphere (and that is why the theme was "discarded" from the modern academic discussion).

The anthropologist and authority on symbols Mary Douglas states that

"No experience is too banal to possess a meaning that surpasses it. The more personal and intimate, bodily and emotional the ritual symbolism source 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."<sup>26</sup>

In 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 story and working in several contexts to the point of becoming significant to Rabbinic Judaism and primitive Christianity.<sup>27</sup>

Once we recognize ancestral sterility as a set of meanings, it becomes imperative to replace the discussion about its function in the body 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 story, together with the revelation of the divine oath. Sterility constitutes a divine plan that becomes concrete in the immediate mundane sphere, establishing a reality that is completely opposed to the reality of the divine oath, whose fulfillment does not occur in the patriarchal period.

Promise		Reality
great people; father of nations	x	foreigner and resident ( <i>ger we tošav</i> )
posterity	x	sterility and deprivation ( <i>'aqarah, 'ariri</i> )
ownership of the land	x	wandering
power	x	solitude, weakness, fear, humility

My studies led me to state that sterility occupies a core role in the origin traditions 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 in the process of growth of the traditions.<sup>28</sup> My research points out to Deut.7:14 as a mark of 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 formulation condenses the elements of transition from an ancestral era to a new stage of corporate definition: 1. the blessing is directed, personally and directly, to one people; 2. the context is the fulfillment of the oath sworn to the ancestors = "*your forefathers*" (Deut. 7:8); 3. this 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, like in Deut. 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 have children: "*You will have sons and daughters but you will not keep them, because they will go into captivity*" (Deut. 28:41); "*Your sons and daughters will be given to another nation... and you will be powerless to lift a hand.*" (Deut. 28:32). Even

then, they will keep having children.

Summing up, “*Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb*” (Deut.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.

#### 4. Conclusion

The book of Genesis comprises the traditions of Israel’s ancestral past. I intended to enlighten the shape and the 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 expressions to each narration.

Sterility acts as an expressive symbol of God and Israel relationship 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 patriarchs and matriarchs’ liminality and to introduce the theological pillar of the divine oath, whose essence 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. Thus, neither can descent be obtained through the servant’s adoption as an heir (Abraham), nor can it be obtained through the servant and the 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 narration a semantic course. In the case of Abraham and Sarah, this course is expressed by the cycle ‘*aqirah* - ‘*aqarut* - ‘*iqqar*’<sup>29</sup> (uprooting - sterility - foundation). In Rebecca, by the association between ‘*aqarah* and ‘*škulah*. In Leah, by the relation between ‘*aqarah* and ‘*šnu’ah*. In Rachel, by the association between sterility and death. And finally, in Jacob, by the relation between the radicals ‘*kre*’ and ‘*qr*’.

What we have called “Biblical sterility” is the set of the interlaced meanings (infecund-uprooted-impotent) of the radical ‘*qr*’. The idea of ‘*qr*’ embraces a whole set of human relations 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 – land.

This structure of thought persists in the whole ancient history of Israel, with strong alterations in the nature of relations between the parts; these alterations reflect, in each period of history, different views about the world and embrace distinct sociopolitical conditions.

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

1. **Liminal sterility**: reflects two dimensions of a people’s formative stages: the reality (‘*aqarah*, ‘*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. It contains, at the same time, reality and potentiality, which characterize Israel’s ancestral 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 regulation agent. Sterility works as a punishment for transgressions of moral-sexual order, like “incest”<sup>30</sup> (Lev.20:20-21) and adultery when practiced by a woman (Num. 5:11-31). Exclusion from the group/divine order occurs in this context. The land, polluted by sexual transgressions and by apostasy, vomits its inhabitants, uprooting them. The foreign element (for instance, Moab’s land, in the Book of Ruth) and exile are symbolically associated to sterility, collective death and vanishing.

3. **Structural sterility** (socioeconomic): classifies “sterile beings”, marginal and hierarchically inferior people inside the structured society: the sterile woman, the poor widow with no children, the orphan, the eunuch, the foreigner. These social categories, which keep representing the *communitas* traits inside the structure (physically and socially debilitated, deprived of status, subject to good will) have God “beside them”. The individual attitude regarding “sterile beings” is a moral regulator for the society and the principle of divine retribution. This relation with society’s underprivileged people breaks the equivalence established before, according to which, having no descendants (sterile, widow without children, eunuch) implies the exclusion from the group.

Victor Turner makes only a direct reference to Israel in the ancient 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”. For him, this is a social phenomenon that possesses the attributes of a neophyte in the liminal phase of the ritual: it is people or principles that fall in the social structure gaps, that are in its margins or that bear the lower hierarchical levels.<sup>31</sup>

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 to Israel a self-perception through the values of the *communitas*, which are not structured around society. This perception is increased by the historical fact that Israel developed under constant external pressure. These values, which relate to humility and obedience, are inherent qualities in the radical ‘*qr*’. Through them, the Israelite recognizes his/her place in the cosmos and in the story of his/her existence.

The Biblical concept of sterility, as it is addressed 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 from 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 that is used to designate people who are underprivileged inside the society.

The idea of a process of ritual passage also comprises the whole semantic wealth of the term '*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 will find the answer, according to the Hebrew Bible, in God's action as a revelation, a bestowal of the divine grace, in the classic relation formula *h?esed + rah?amin*.

Having 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 that since the beginning have directed the focus of my analysis:

1. status improvement: from barrenness to fertility; from uprooting to taking roots; from impotence against the land's inhabitants to the victory over the seven nations that will, then, be uprooted by the divinity.
2. status reversion: from bestowed fertility to punitive barrenness; from a proficuous land to a polluted, and, as a consequence, 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 in the common fund of human experience.<sup>32</sup> 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 properties of a rite of passage. To confirm the statement, we must 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 people's emergence.

What are the types of sacredness revealed by the concept of sterility? I hope I was also able to show that important principles of monotheist ideology are apprehended in the narrations about sterility. They state, as we have seen, the uniqueness of God and His absolute power over fertility and infertility. The story of women who have their wombs opened and closed according to the divinity will, was part of the monotheist theology. They demonstrate that the gift of life comes only from one God.

The theological essence of the stories indicates that sterility is 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 because of their actions or merit. Children are a God's gift, not a reward.

God's power, which is not confused with cosmic forces, can reverse the established order of nature and society, making an old woman at her menopause pregnant 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 in the case of the hated wives and the wives with no children from Genesis, or in the example of Leah, who generated many children, more than the other three Jacob's wives together could. God saw and heard Leah and compensated her for the humiliation of being a wife who was not loved.<sup>33</sup>

The divine sensitiveness towards the shameful and humiliating position of a woman is highlighted in this action. In Sarah's case, the whole Abimelec's house is punished because of the offence against her honor.<sup>34</sup> God speaks to Agar, when she runs away from Sarah and intervenes for her and Ishmael, in the desert.

With these observations, we can see that, since the initial stages of Israelite religion, Israel's God acts in favor 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 e Rachel). The vulnerability in which they are indicates a state of availability and receptivity for the action of the divinity – which occurs in terms of speaking, seeing, listening and remembering – and the concession of Its grace.

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

Why are the matriarchs sterile? Why does sterility fall on the woman?

Although the narration recognizes masculine sterility (Deut. 7:14), it places sterility on the woman. This idea makes sense if it is seen under the light of the texts, in which we verify the paradoxical position of the woman in 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 it, they threaten the group's survival.

Along this research, I hope I was able to demonstrate that the woman is the very symbol of liminality in this vision of world, and coherently, several symbolic liminal values are applied to her. They are sterile when the promise is 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 menstruated).

In my view, this does not depreciate the image of women at all. The matriarch 'aqarah is, to me, the supreme symbol of a people in emergence, which in its turn is characterized as a *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 *reh'em*, it is praised as the *locus* of divine action and it generates the term for the human and divine mercy: *rah'amim*. *reh'em-rah'amim*: 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. And again we come across the idea of passage – from 'aqarah to 'iqqar, and divine action is the Torah's nucleus.

The matriarchs are not sterile in order to be able to generate heroes later. The sterile matriarchs are heroines themselves. We do not have 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 not always get sympathy from the narrator and maybe from the audience.

Turner calls the woman "the submerged side of family relations". When the values of *communitas* can be expressed in society, this side emerges. As we have seen, these values have a constant dialogue with the structure in ancient Israelite society. The vast number of terracotta statues showing prominent bellies and breasts, found in sites along the whole country of Israel, is the testimony of the ancient Israelites' profound need to incorporate the feminine principle in their religious expression.<sup>35</sup>

This may be the reason why sterile matriarch's traditions were continually

re-interpreted, from the 10th century BCE until the 1st century CE and could be adapted to new contexts and make sense to distinct communities, particularly in times of crisis and transition.<sup>36</sup>

By identifying the key component of the conception theory in the feminine womb and by stating 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 of procreation, that in some cultures is elaborated in a way that includes the feminine in the plan of nature (as opposed to culture), leads the woman to a 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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Suzana Chwartz, PhD

Chair, Program of Graduate Studies in Hebrew Language and Jewish Literature and Culture;  
Chair, Center of Jewish Studies, Faculty of Philosophy and Literature, University of São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil.  
Biblical Archaeology; Classical Literature; Hebrew Linguistics and Literature; Hebrew Bible.  
schwartz@usp.br

<sup>1</sup> Expression used by Suzan Niditch in *Ancient Israelite religion*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.56.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of chaos is universally defined as an initial state preceding/opposing divine order (*cosmos*), cf. S. Niditch, *From chaos to cosmos: studies in biblical patterns of creation*. (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), p.6. In the book of Genesis, we learn of two kinds of primordial chaos: aqueous chaos (Gen 1:2,) characterized by the elements of indefiniteness, abyss, emptiness and darkness; and arid chaos (Gen 2:5), characterized by the lack of bushes, herbs and rain.

<sup>3</sup> Except for the queen Micol, who “didn’t have children until the day of her death” – extinguishing, thus, her father’s royal lineage, (2Sam 6:23). Also, sterility with the connotation of exclusion from the group (Lev 20:20-21).

<sup>4</sup> “It is the primary sensation of “little me” which is the true feeling 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), p.15.

<sup>5</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1997), p.294.

<sup>6</sup> Otto Rank, *The myth of the birth of the hero*, p. 65.

<sup>7</sup> Literary resource used to intensify the suspense regarding the divine oath fulfillment or to praise Israel’s origin or still, to glorify the hero’s birth. *Ibid.*, p.18.

<sup>8</sup> John Skinner approves of generalizations which, in spite of their literary imprecision, contain a nucleus of truth sufficient 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 trees, 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. J. Skinner, *Genesis: the international critical commentary*. (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1910), p. 246.



<sup>9</sup> Schokel.

<sup>10</sup> Brill.

<sup>11</sup> John van Setters, *JBL* 87 (1968), p.401, Quoted in Clines, p.874.

<sup>12</sup> Brill. 'Eger: "the descendant (who grants the family position)", cf. the Acadian name *Surus-ken*; Acar, member of Jerameel's family, proceeding from Judah 1Chr2:27. Noth, *Personennamen*, p. 232, quoted in Clines, p.874

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Clines.

<sup>15</sup> Moshe Caspi argues, based on the original meaning of 'eqer as root in Hebrew and in Aramaic, that "in ancient Semitic languages 'aqarah does not have the meaning of a woman who is unable to of conceive. Since from the meaning "root", the term 'aqirah = pull by the roots, was developed, this is the origin of the expression 'aqirat has'ores?", concludes the author. "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 sarasa*). They had abortions in the times of wandering and famine, and they had children in better times. Caspi also writes about ethnographic evidences that prove that the existence of abortions was usual. Then, Caspi explains why the matriarchs were called 'aqarot: because they suffered among wandering tribes of shepherds, the case of the patriarchs. In my research, I tried to demonstrate how the idea of **root and uprooting** is present in the Biblical concept of 'aqarut, that I translate as sterility, following the indications of specialized dictionaries. I believe, however, that the biblical idea of womb opening, demonstrates clearly 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 insert conception into the sacred sphere. In my opinion, this is the reason why the matriarchs are designated as 'aqarot. Caspi, "Mosivi 'aqeret habayt 'em habanim smeh'ah", in, *Beit Miqrav*, vol. 82 (Jerusalem: Israel Society for Biblical Research, 1980).

<sup>16</sup> Matriarchs: Gen 11:30; 25:21; 29:3; Abraham: Gen 15:2; Jacob: Gen 34:30; 49:6.

<sup>17</sup> Ronald Hendel emphasizes a piece of information which is central for 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), p.39. Even if 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.

<sup>18</sup> Gn 26:1, 43:1, 47:4; Rt 1:1; 2 Sm21:1; 2 Rs 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 kinds of sterility in this period the quality of gratuity; there is no association with sin or the notion of "land pollution", product of human transgressions.

<sup>19</sup> A. Chouraqui, *The people and the faith of the Bible* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1975), p.41.

<sup>20</sup> It is possible to distinguish among the elements which belong to the sphere of folk and the literary elaboration of these reasons. According to Mary Callaway, the jahvist employed principles that gave the ancient material (assembled by him) a line of theological convergence. One of these principles would be the matriarchs' sterility. 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), p.23.

<sup>21</sup> Refers to the aqueous "tohu-wa-vohu" of Gn 1:2 and to the static and arid infertility of the land of Gen 2:5.

<sup>22</sup> According to Niditch, the genealogies also serve to highlight the continuous ordination of the cosmos. Niditch, *From chaos to cosmos*, p.55.

<sup>23</sup> In the matriarchs' case, the process is characterized by an initial sterility and subsequent fertility, resulting from divine action. In the patriarchs' case, uprooting persists all along the whole patriarchal cycle, even after Isaac and Jacob are born in Canaan. The fact that Joseph's brothers abandoned Canaan and went to Egypt is indicative of this disrooting, as well as Canaan designation as the patriarchs' dwelling place.

<sup>24</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: a commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), p. 149. J. Pedersen, *Israel, its life and culture I-II* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), pp. 182-212.

<sup>25</sup> This terminology is widely used by the peoples from 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 the forms of later communities is expressed. The narrative acknowledges the processes which occur in the most developed communities – in the sphere of politics, economy, education, art, religion – and that go back to Israel ancestral family. Processes that happened between Sarah and Abraham, Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, keep occurring, with countless variations, in all generations. Westermann, p.149. Although the basic idea of the patriarchal narrative is generational continuity (as Westermann states, "while there are people, they can not disappear") it is important to highlight that Israel 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 of the divinity, that inaugurates the ancestral story through these elements. The basic indissoluble cell in Israel history – the ancestral family – starts with the dissolution of another family, and this nucleus, then, keeps breaking up and "exiling" its "non-elected" members (Lot, to the Jordan Valley; Ishmael, to a foreign land, as well as Ketura's children; Esau to Seir). When Israel ancestral past is evoked (Dt 26:5-9; Js 24:3; Is 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.

<sup>26</sup> M. Douglas, *Pureza e perigo: ensaio sobre as noções de poluição e tabu*. ( Lisboa: Edições 70, s.d), p.137.

<sup>27</sup> According to Callaway, in the I 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 about the nature of the divine action. Callaway, p.4.

<sup>28</sup> Knight, "Tradition and theology" in *Tradition and theology in the Old Testament*, Knight (ed.), p.26.

<sup>29</sup> Terms that are not in the text but derive from the radical 'qr, and mean uprooting – infecundity - foundation.

<sup>30</sup> Lev20:20-21: the uncle's wife and the brother's wife may not be considered so close to qualify the relationship as incestuous. These transgressions lie in the context of prohibition against incest.

<sup>31</sup> Turner, *The ritual process*, p.109.

<sup>32</sup> Douglas, p.137.

<sup>33</sup> The aspect of Leah's transformation from weakness into power and Rachel's transformation from death into life will grow in Ana's story and in Zion's traditions, in which the sterile woman is transmuted into a happy mother.

<sup>34</sup> Calum Carmichael states that the theme of woman's dishonor (Sarah, Rachel, Leah e Dinah) in the patriarchal narratives will inspire the deuteronomist in the composition of the law concerning foreign captive woman (Deut 21:10-14). C.M. Carmichael, *Women, law and the Genesis traditions*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1979), pp. 22-30. Note that Sarah and Abimelec's episode, which covers the offense against a woman's honor, includes a financial compensation procedure, aiming to "keep up appearances before everyone who knows her."

<sup>35</sup> Callaway, p.74.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.141.

## RESUMO

Da República romana ao Império. A herança de Júlio César. A ascensão de Otávio. *A Eneida* de Virgílio.

**Palavras-chave:** formação do Império; poema épico.

Último século antes de Cristo. Os romanos, povo extremamente valorizador dos princípios da liberdade, se estabelecem como uma República, tão duramente conquistada após a expulsão dos etruscos e dos seus reis - que por longo tempo conduziram os destinos dos romanos, pela força, - ceder ao peso das armas dos próprios romanos. O Império, com todos os riscos do governo de um só, começara a ser instituído. Os plebeus, classe sem qualquer direito, começavam a cobrar sua participação no poder. Júlio César, que se tornara ditador após a morte de Crasso e Pompeu e buscara o apoio da plebe em oposição ao senado, também fora assassinado. As insatisfações faziam-se sentir por toda parte. A tentativa de segundo triunvirato também não dera certo: Lépido havia morrido e Otávio vencera Marco Antônio e sua amante Cleópatra, na batalha naval de Ácio, assumindo o poder imperial com o nome de Otávio Augusto. As insatisfações grassavam por toda parte. Era preciso fazer alguma coisa. Era preciso mostrar ao povo romano que Augusto era um escolhido pelos deuses, alguém das mais nobres origens, cuja missão era conduzir os destinos de Roma.

Assim sendo, Augusto solicitou do poeta Virgílio que escrevesse uma obra literária na qual fosse demonstrado o valor e a importância do povo romano, em que ficasse evidente que este tinha fortes motivos para sentir orgulho da sua cidadania e das suas origens; e, principalmente, que fossem demonstradas as origens divinas de Augusto, ser ele o descendente do herói troiano Enéias (filho de Príamo e da deusa Vênus) que, segundo lenda, fora um dos que dera origem à cidade de Roma.

A Eneida seria, portanto, como uma bíblia para o povo romano, um livro em que os destinos gloriosos dos romanos ficassem eternamente evidenciados.

"Tu, romano, lembra-te que teu papel é conduzir os povos sob o teu poder, essa é a tua habilidade, e também disciplinar a paz, perdoar os que submeteste e abater os soberbos". (A Eneida, Livro VI, versos 851-853).

Públio Virgílio Marão nasceu na aldeia de Andes, hoje Pietola, próximo de Mântua, a 15 de outubro, 70 anos antes de Cristo, no mesmo dia em que faleceu o poeta Lucrécio, autor do "De Rerum Natura".

Apesar de filho de pais humildes, aos 17 anos foi para Milão, onde estudou grego, latim, medicina e matemática. De Milão foi para Roma. Fixou residência no monte Esquilino, junto dos jardins de Mecenas (ministro do imperador Augusto),