

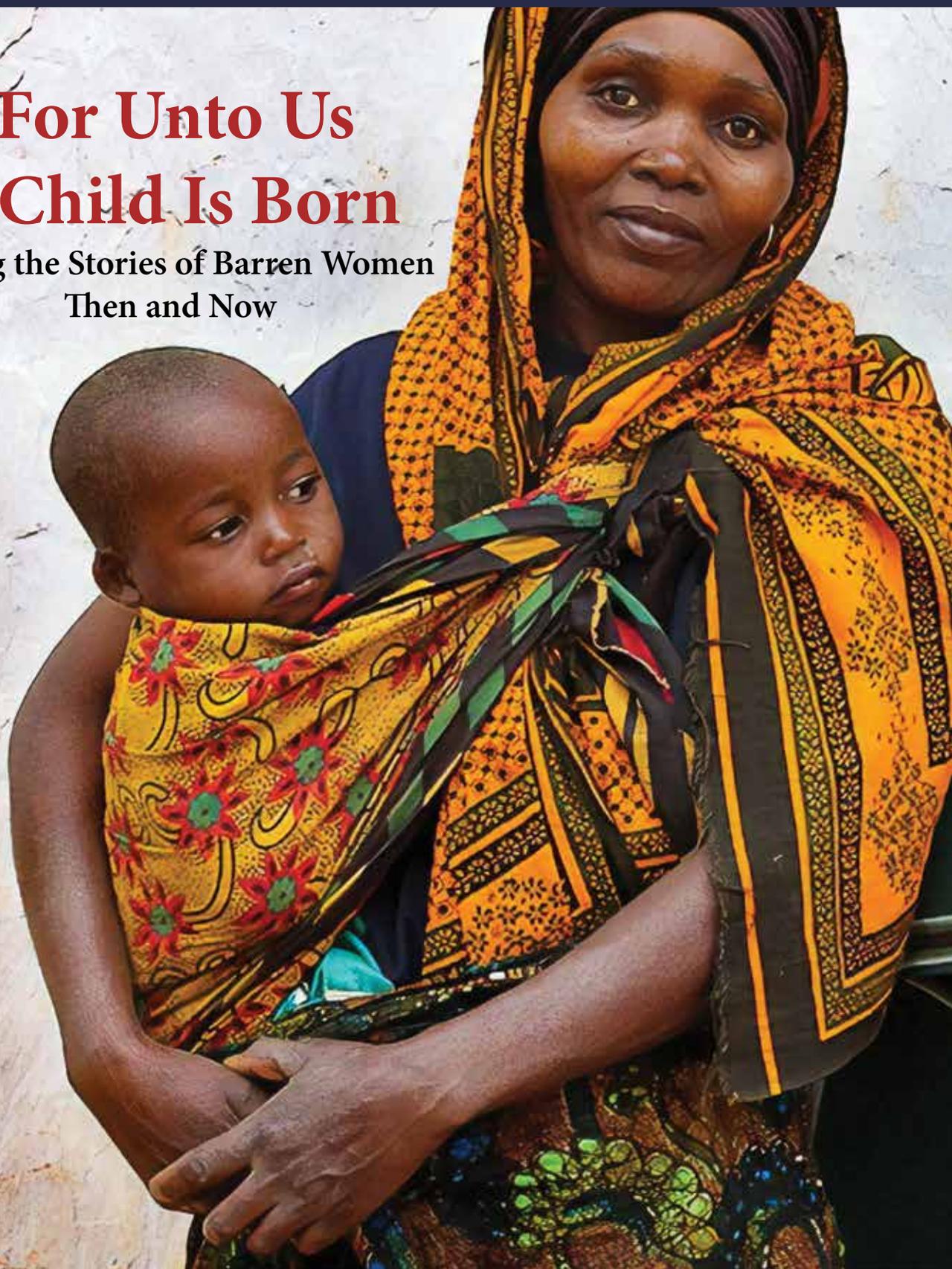
Winter 2021

# THE BIBLICAL STORYTELLER

A Network of Biblical Storytellers, Int'l. Publication

## For Unto Us a Child Is Born

Telling the Stories of Barren Women  
Then and Now



2021 VIRTUAL FESTIVAL GATHERING OF BIBLICAL STORYTELLING

# Biblical Storytelling in Difficult Times

**KEYNOTE SPEAKER:**

Dr. Richard Ward

Find Your  
Renewal  
and Courage

**FEATURED TELLERS**

Thelma Ruffin-Thomas

Joyce Parr

Hands-On  
Workshops in  
Storytelling



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INJUSTICE, YOU  
HAVE CHOSEN  
THE SIDE OF  
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The Biblical Storyteller is a publication of the Network of Biblical Storytellers, Int'l., an ecumenical, international, non-profit organization of scholars, clergy, and laity whose mission is to encourage everyone to learn and tell biblical stories. We provide and develop resources for telling biblical stories through audio, video, and computer technologies as well as telling them face-to-face.

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# Have You Ever Waited on a Miracle?

## Miracles are more common than you might think.

My deceased husband Perrin was the first-born son of the first-born son of the first-born son and he wanted a son to continue that tradition. When we were discussing marriage, I told him that I was unable to conceive, due to a botched medical procedure that had scarred my fallopian tubes beyond recognition. (I've since heard many stories like mine.) He grinned and said, "Baby, I just need one son." And I grimaced and said we could adopt. I thought the subject was over. It wasn't. How little I understood that man.

## He started praying.

The first night of our honeymoon was predictable enough. We ate cake and did married people stuff. It was great. But the second night he prayed, out loud, for a son. Not a child, mind you, a son. This continued for over a year until it began to wear on my soul.

## In year two,

## I let the doctor explain it.

(Silly me, I thought a white coat and big words might help.) But Perrin just grinned his lopsided grin and said, "Awww, I know all that stuff. But I only need one son."

## I insisted he stop it.

In the car, on the way home, I told him never to speak of it again or pray about it out loud because his prayers were embittering my spirit. And he just grinned and said, "Okay baby. I'll keep my prayers to myself then."

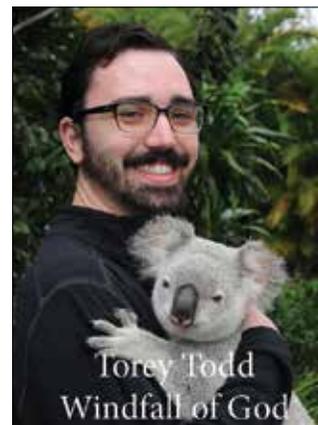
## Seven years later...

I felt sick to my stomach and my belly was swollen. I assumed it was cancer. The doctor took a urine sample. It wasn't cancer. I was pregnant. What the what?!!



## His prayers were answered.

My excitement turned to panic when the doctor reminded me that this was a medical emergency, an ectopic pregnancy, the egg was trapped in my fallopian tubes, and she ordered a pre-surgical ultrasound. As we drove to that appointment, Perrin was grinning his lopsided grin and holding my hand. I was crying and so was he. We were just crying for different reasons.

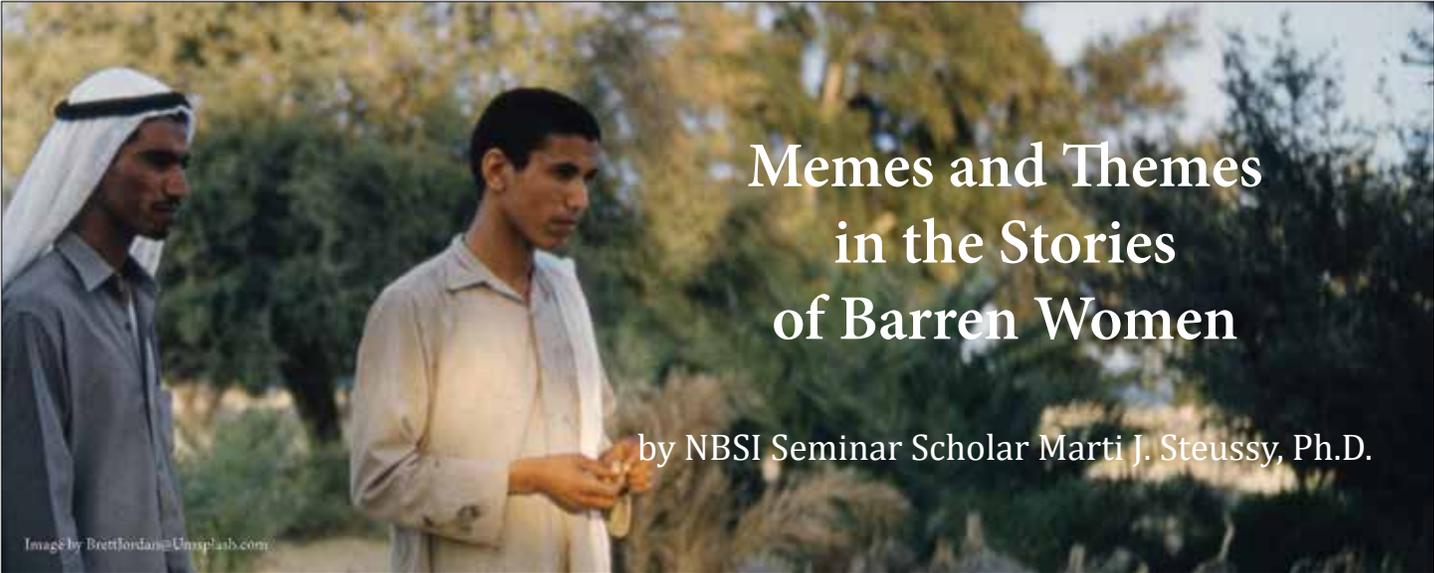


## Well long story short, it wasn't a medical emergency.

It was a miracle, pure and simple; the beginning of an 8 and ½ month journey that continues to this day. For

what floated into view on the ultrasound screen was a 10-week old fetus, safely in my womb, sucking his thumb. And so it was that I gave birth to the first-born son of the first-born son of the first-born son of the first-born son.

Don't tell me God doesn't answer prayers. (And yes, I also know how painful it is when God's answer is "no." Fifteen years later I became a widow and his only parent.)



# Memos and Themes in the Stories of Barren Women

by NBSI Seminar Scholar Marti J. Steussy, Ph.D.

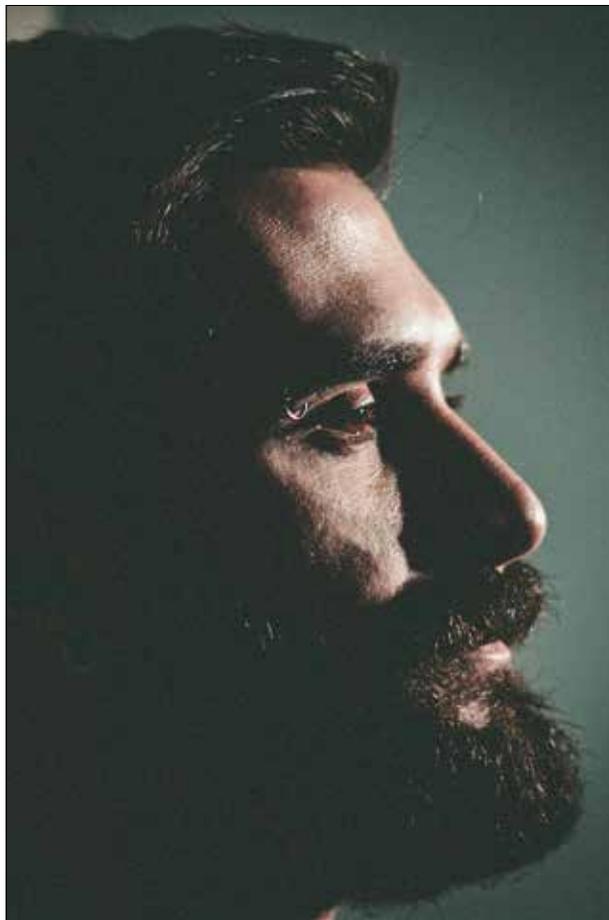
As we tell these stories, we must remember that the barren-woman theme is part of a larger meme: heroes marked out as special by their unusual birth circumstances.

Sometimes, as in the stories of Isaac or Samuel, this takes the form of a previously barren woman giving birth. Other times, as with Samson, the “specialness” involves an annunciation, or, with Jacob/Esau or Perez/Zerah, the birth of twins. Moses is set adrift in a basket and rescued (the Mesopotamian ruler Sargon of Akkad claimed a similar origin). With Jesus, we have both an annunciation and a virgin giving birth.

Elsewhere in the world, gods turn into swans to get women pregnant, and stories are told of babies who cut and tie their own umbilical cords as they are born.

For ancient audiences, the pregnancies in these stories worked to foreshadow

the unusual careers of the offspring, rather than teach the usual ways of God with women. As we tell them, we need to remember that storytelling



memes don't always accurately reflect ordinary life (for instance, in ordinary life twins often did not survive, and sometimes their mothers didn't either). It's also worth noticing the

thematic links between these “special birth” stories in the larger biblical narrative.

For instance, the stories of Mary/Elizabeth are linked to Hannah's story by the parallels between Hannah's song and the Magnificat (1 Sam 2:1-10; Luke 1:46-55).

My very favorite thematic link is the one between the stories of Sarah and Hagar in Genesis and the birth of Moses in the beginning of Exodus. In the Genesis set, we have a Hebrew mistress oppressing an Egyptian slave, to the point where the life of a boy-child is threatened. This oppression of Egyptians by Israelites is continued, by the way, in the story of Sarah's great-grandson Joseph, who reduces most of the Egyptian population to slavery (Gen 47:13-21). So when the Egyptians later oppress the Israelites, even to the point of endangering the lives of boy-children, it's arguably a case of “what goes around, comes around,” even if we often neglect to notice that in our tellings of

the Exodus story.

In the Sarah/Hagar stories, women of different ethnicity come into child-endangering conflict. But in Exodus,

Pharaoh's own daughter colludes with Moses' mother and sister to save a child.

**Pharaoh's daughter recognizes immediately that the child she finds is Hebrew (Ex 2:6), but she adopts him anyway.**

She probably even knows that the wetnurse offered to her is actually the child's mother, for it was a known custom, in the ancient world, for a woman to abandon her baby in a place where he would be easily found, then lurk nearby to offer herself as wet-nurse to the person who picked him up.

And it's not only Pharaoh's daughter who colludes: at the point when she finds the child, she is accompanied by a passel of attendants (2:5), all of whom know where this baby came from, and none of whom, apparently, spill the beans to Pharaoh.

The Hebrew phrasing in the previous chapter describes the midwives Shiphrah and Puah as "midwives of the Hebrew women" (1:15). While this could mean "Hebrew midwives" (as NRSV translates it), it could also mean "midwives who attend Hebrew women." Notice that Pharaoh knows who they are and how to summon them, and gives them instructions for "when you act as midwives to the Hebrew women," as if these are not the only women for whom they act as midwives. These



details suggest that Shiphrah and Puah may be Egyptian midwives serving Hebrew women. If so, the collusion of Egyptian women in saving Hebrew babies may begin even before Pharaoh's daughter spots the basket in the Nile!

This follow-up to the painful stories of Sarah and Hagar is one that I have enjoyed inviting people to ponder and reflect upon.

I am a big advocate of attending to painful stories, but painful stories are not always the end of the story. I like happy endings as much as anyone, and tracing the theme of special birth and the theme of relationships between Hebrew and foreign woman beyond the stories of Sarah and Hagar has been a joyful experience for me.



## Telling Their Stories

by Rachel Doll

There are so few stories of women in the Bible

at all, so it is important to lift them all up, but many of these only deal with a woman's ability to bear children, as



if that is the only measure of their worth. It is easy, and wrong, to hear these stories and deduce that a woman's ability to bear children is tied to having enough faith, or that children are given by God only to those that pray hard enough, or deserve it. In the stories of Peninah and later of Leah, the wife that is loved the least by her husband is the only one able to bear children; but all the women feel the pain of loneliness. It is important to portray the longing, the pain, and all the emotions of the characters, and for the audience to hear God's steadfast presence for each of the people in the stories, even when God did not intervene as the person wanted.

The assumption that all women want to bear children, and that their worth is tied to that ability is still present today. In telling these scriptures, I have shared a raised eyebrow and sad shake of the head as I described the woman as barren, to remind the audience that this would mean she was shunned. Today we are not shunned outright if we cannot or choose not to have children, but there are definitely many circles where infertile women are made to feel unwelcome. Battling infertility even today is a very alienating journey.

# Sarah and Hagar

A Scholarly Reflection by NBSI Seminar Scholar  
Rev. Cynthia Park, Ph.D.

Q. What were the ramifications for a woman in Sarah's time who was unable to bear children?

A. Disclaimer: Attempting to extrapolate meaning from a sample of one in order to apply it more generally may border on unreliable conjecture. But, using the anecdotal evidence from Sarah's story—and from Hagar's story in relation to Sarah's story—we can draw some reasonable inferences. Drawing these inferences depends upon story acting as a “tradent” of ideas. Owing to the biblical narrative, the burden on Sarah to bear a child is definitely greater than one would imagine it would be in another household. In Sarah's case, a child would be the affirmation of God's promise to her husband. From God's initial communication to Abraham, God frames future blessings, particularly of vast swaths of land, as the inheritance of Abraham's “descendants.” In fairness, Abraham's story indicates

that he feels the burden of childlessness as well, when he tells God that his servant will need to be his heir. He doesn't seem to blame Sarah. The pressure seems to be coming from Sar-

ah's own sense that this is her problem to solve. Hence, she “gives” Hagar to Abraham. Conversely, Hagar's story introduces the ramifications of a woman who bears a child against her will.

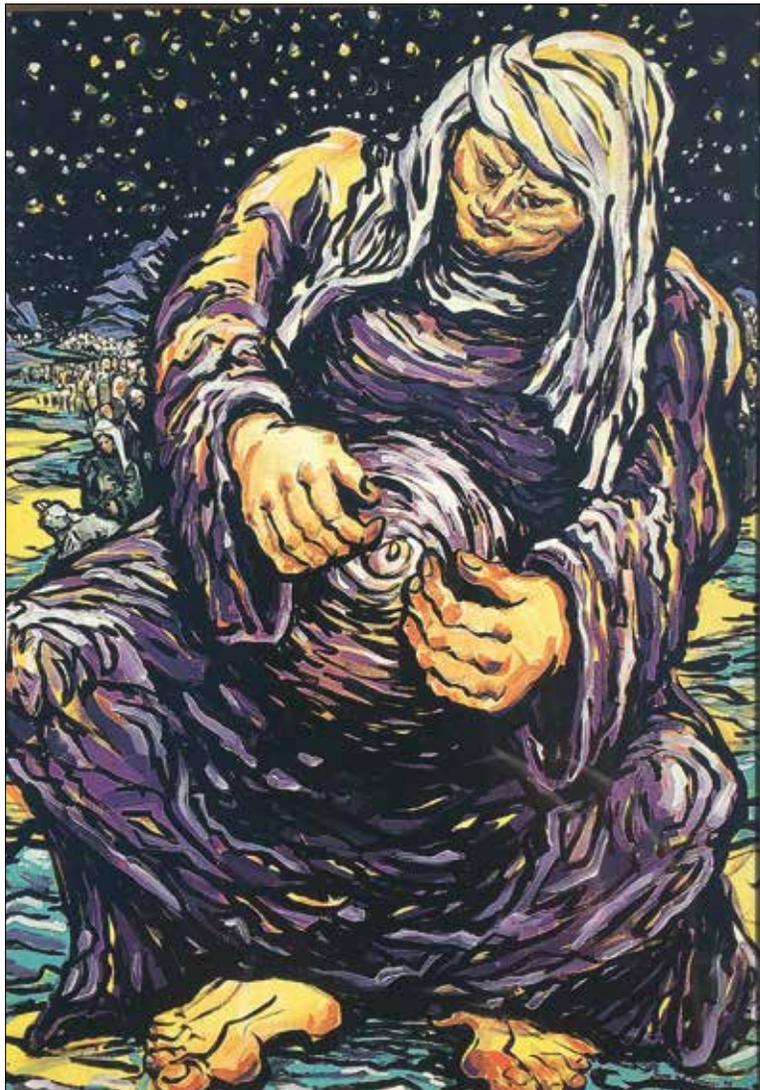
As Sarah's chattel, Hagar already has little autonomy over her life, whereas Sarah has complete autonomy over Hagar's. The futures of Hagar and Ishmael are entirely subject Sarah's whim.

Q. Were men ever blamed for the lack of children?

A. Abraham laments over being childless. According to the story, he seems to feel God has forgotten God's promise to make him the father of many. If anything, in this case, Abraham blames God.

Q. What was her probable relationship to Hagar? Can you illuminate how Hagar's history as an Egyptian slave brought her to this place and to the bed of Abraham? How did their society see this kind of “gift?”

A. I can only imagine the relationship dynamics be-



This image of Sarah birthing the nations was painted by Shari LeMonnier, widow of our beloved Dan LeMonnier. Cynthia Park purchased it in the Festival Gathering book store and kindly offered to let us use it here. We miss you Dan! Thanks for your beautiful work, Shari!

tween Sarah and Hagar by looking at pieces from both women's stories.

Before Hagar became Sarah's surrogate, Abraham and Sarah had traveled to Egypt, seeking food during a famine [Gen. 12:10-20]. Abraham feared that Sarah's beauty would put his life in jeopardy. And, so he ordered her to pose as his sister, not his wife, in the event she was taken. Indeed, Pharaoh did find her lovely and "took" her. We do not know how long she remained in Pharaoh's household before he realized she was Abraham's wife. However, the narrative indicates that, in a sort of exchange for Sarah, Abraham's wealth in livestock became quite great. In any event, Sarah's narrative now includes helplessness at the hands of Egypt. Perhaps she considered it fair turnaround to exploit the vulnerability of her Egyptian maid afterward. If we deduce from Sarah's laughter when she overhears that she will become pregnant that she is cynical, then we might stretch that possible cynicism into mood swings. That she "gives" Hagar to Abraham and then later despises Hagar and her son could indicate a relationship between the two women that moved from collaborative to adversarial, and always with Hagar as the victim. And Hagar laments to the angel that Sarah is cruel to her. Sarah's dismissal of Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness feels heartless, cruel. Especially since the concept of surrogacy is not unusual in the stories of the subsequent patriarchs. Abraham's grandson Jacob will father children by the two maids of his wives Rachel and Leah, as well as by his wives. The difficulty in Hagar's surrogacy seems to come from Sarah's own temperament and disposition.

Q. What aspects of God's narrative did Hagar's pregnancy bring into play? Why would God have asked her to return to Sarah? What are the politics around that narrative?

A. The promise God gave Hagar about her son Ishmael does not seem to be

an afterthought on God's part. Which is not to say that it was in God's plan for Sarah to abuse her as she did. But, it seems that God's plans have always taken into account our misguided attempts to assist God. The politics around Abraham's first child Ishmael as the origin story of Islam and Abraham's second child Isaac as the origin story of Judaism seem to center on the resentment of Hagar by Sarah. If you will, rivalry over pride of place in the patriarchal stories appears to be baked in to the cake from the beginning. Even the narrative about Ishmael put into God's voice sets up Hagar's descendants to be always on the defensive, a profile of otherness, wildness, not-quite-ness.

Q. What were the most unique aspects of Sarah's subsequent pregnancy?

A. I guess when she showed us that "99" is the new "29"! Perhaps, this is the first story in our religious tradition that links childbearing directly to God's favor, as a sign of promise fulfilled and notice taken. To this is tied the biological fact that women alone can give birth. It becomes too easy to then begin to see a woman giving birth as the fulfillment of her own creation and a sign of God's favor. Conversely, it sets up women who do not bear children to be eyed suspiciously as somehow broken, even as cursed.

Q. How did the child Sarah bore continue the legacy of her people?

A. Sarah's child IS the opening chapter of the legacy. He is the promised heir from which many will come, and all as fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. Isaac's birth also secures Sarah's memory will be preserved, because she will not die childless.



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# Barren but not Broken

## More Scholarly Reflections

### Hannah

by Gloria Ulterino, Founder  
Women of the Well

I am always drawn into Hannah's story, and I believe this to be the author's intent. She's the beloved, chosen wife of Elkanah, even though she's barren. Elkanah's other wife, Peninnah, (common practice in those days) is not loved nearly as deeply, but she's been able to give him children. We can only imagine Hannah's profound pain, the wound that only deepens in time, despite her husband's love for her. (When have any of us profoundly desired something that is continually—seemingly endlessly—out of reach for us?) But then, look, Hannah takes action. When they go to pray and sacrifice (remember that) at Shiloh, Hannah prays, deeply, mouth moving to the lament of her heart, and she catches the attention of Eli, the priest. He's ready to dismiss her, angrily. She's drunk! Or so he thinks. But, no. She convinces him otherwise, so thoroughly, in fact, that the rabbis in the Tradition have named Hannah the "Mother of Intercessory Prayer."

Look at Hannah's Song (1 Samuel 2:1-10) and compare it to Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). The thoughts are the same. The conclusion is the same.

God is always "there" for the ones most in need, and God will act on their behalf.

Remember the "sacrifice" at Shiloh, meaning "to make holy?"

Hannah promised God that she would return her son to God as a "nazirite" (1 Samuel 1:11). According to the laws in Numbers 6:1-21, a nazirite was someone designated to the service of the Lord. (Hannah would go on to mother more children, and her "song" would become a cherished part of the Jewish tradition.)

I believe that Mary—a faithful Jewish young woman—was familiar with Hannah's Song. One of my storytelling colleagues, Marilyn Catherine, created a powerfully beautiful story of Mary. In this story, she imagined Mary, working out in the fields with other women. As so often happened, she had the boy Jesus with her. On this one day, the women were singing "Hannah's Song," and Jesus ran to his mother with these words, "Mama, Mama, what do those words mean? Tell me

what they mean?" And that is how Jesus came to know Hannah's Song, and also Mary's Magnificat. Was that part of his education for continually lifting up the lowly, as God intends? I wonder. Don't you?

### Elizabeth

by NBSI Seminar Scholar  
Joanna Dewey, Ph.D.

Elizabeth appears only in the Gospel of Luke; elsewhere throughout the traditions, the first connection between John and Jesus is when Jesus comes to be baptized. Thus many scholars doubt the historicity of the story of John the Baptist's birth and familial

relation to Jesus. Luke is conforming to first century beliefs that exceptional men have exceptional births, so both John the Baptist and Jesus are portrayed as having exceptional births. These stories are based on Old Testament narratives. Historically we have



evidence that John the Baptist also continued to have followers after his execution and since Jesus was baptized by John, it might appear that John was the greater figure. Luke's narrative firmly makes the point, that much as John is to be esteemed, Jesus is his superior. In what follows, I am writing from the perspective of what Luke, a relatively well educated Greek man, was conveying to his audiences in the late first or early second centuries.

Luke reflects the views of the culture that a woman's greatest honor was to produce sons. The woman was customarily blamed if a couple was infertile. This was considered a shame, a blot on the woman. Luke emphasizes this view in 1:25: "The Lord... took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

Some real women of course may have felt differently. One of the reasons some women found Christianity attractive in the early centuries was its value on only one marriage and on celibacy which offered women living in community with other women a way out of endless and dangerous childbirth and out of their subservience within the patriarchal household.

While some in antiquity thought both the man and the woman contributed to the new offspring, the more common view was that the man was the active agent and the woman merely a container or incubator for the child. Nevertheless, it was the woman's fault if the couple had no children. This is patriarchal society at work.

Luke portrays Elizabeth remaining in seclusion for some months. He imagines a relatively wealthy household. Ninety to ninety-five percent of the population lived subsistence lives, and they needed the labor of women to subsist.

Most importantly, Luke's narrative clarifies the relation of John to Jesus.

Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, recognizes Mary as the mother of her Lord. Even the unborn John recognizes the unborn Jesus and jumps for joy in the womb. Jesus' superiority to John is established before either is born.

## Made to Create

by NBSI Seminar Scholar  
and Biblical Translator  
Janet Stahl

In my work as a missionary and Bible translator, I recently heard a woman talk about being made to create rather than to consume. Her insight about being made to create triggered an echo in my mind of Eve's words when she gave birth to Cain;

*"With the Lord's help, I have produced a man!" Genesis 4:1b*

I was struck by the connection between creating and giving life/birth and a woman's unique role in this amazing miracle. In parts of the South Pacific, a woman is no longer called by her name but as the mother of her oldest child. When I first heard this, I was put out thinking that women have personal identities in their own right, but some women impressed on me the honor of the title and how privileged they felt by taking part in this act of creation.

Was this honor what Tamar strived for when she tricked her father-in-law, Judah, into sleeping with her? I struggle to understand her motivation to be attached to Judah's family, after first having an arranged marriage to Judah's firstborn son, who was so wicked that the Lord took his life early. And then being subjected to having interrupted sex with the brother who refused to father a son for his dead brother and

then being sent off to wait at her father's house indefinitely for the third son.



It is ironic how the very unique privilege of women is also the most vulnerable part of life.

We trained storytellers in a region of Africa among a group who have the custom of kidnapping young girls, keeping them captive and abusing them for a month to see if they are fertile and potentially good wives. If they don't become pregnant, they discard them. If they do become pregnant then everyone sees it as expedient for the girl to marry into the family. In this same group, a woman anticipates her son's initiation into manhood as a time when he is expected to whip her publicly to display his dominance. During a workshop in which the groups from that region were crafting the stories of Genesis 2 and 3, one of the local men stopped sharing mid-story and said, "We need a better way to talk about women."

We worked among people in South Asia who recognized the effectiveness of training women as Bible storytellers because they know women will share the stories widely. In fact, these amazing women do share the stories widely and are creating caring communities even though they risk being sexually or physically abused when they leave their homes. They love to tell the story of Ruth which brings them hope of an alternative to fearing harsh treatment by their mother-in-law and the nightmare of being disowned as a widow, who must have brought bad luck to her husband.

# Sing, O Barren One

## A New Storytelling Program for Churches by Donna Paulson

*Donna Paulsen is the founder of Soul Hope Ministries. Her award-winning thesis for her master's degree in storytelling from East Tennessee State University became a program for churches that deals with the issues of infertility: "Sing, O Barren One."*

Five years ago, due to a medical error, I became an infertile woman. At that time I was in my early thirties and had looked forward to having children of my own. As I was grieving my loss, I began to look around my local church for someone who I could relate to. That was when I first realized that infertility and miscarriage were not things that were openly talked about and that there was a stigma attached to women without children.

I interviewed nine women for my thesis. They confirmed that religious ideologies had contributed to their feeling shame when they could not become mothers. For example, the belief that a woman's highest calling is to be a wife and mother contributed to these women feeling they had failed when they could not get pregnant. Even positive Bible verses that said children are a blessing from the Lord had been flipped around to suggest that the absence of children was a curse. Social interactions were difficult as well. The normative societal categories that their faith communities had adopted contributed to these women feeling like outsiders.

In the midst of their struggle with infertility and miscarriage they had begun to process and communicate their stories in a way that reflected a deep commitment to and faith in God. Rather than allowing societal norms to categorize them, they focused on their spiritual identity as a beloved child of God. They found a new purpose by finding and supporting other women and couples who were also struggling with infertility. Significantly, they found creative ways to grieve and remember their lost children. When these women were left with



no way to express their grief, or have their burden shared by members of their community, they became much bolder in speaking about their losses. Some even named their deceased and included them in their conversations with others.

In my thesis I elaborate on four specific calls to action that I believe can help churches begin to minister to those within their membership who

are struggling with infertility. First, we need to create a space for infertility education. Storytelling programs like "Sing, O Barren One" raise awareness and will get the conversation started. Following my performance, I host a Q&A with the audience.

Second, we need to keep expanding our categories. Just because a woman doesn't follow the anticipated path (i.e. marriage, childbirth, motherhood) doesn't mean she isn't a vital contributing member in their community. Third, our spiritual leaders need to be aware that due to the stigma attached to this issue, many of their members are suffering in silence. Publicly pledging their support and offering private counseling for those who are struggling could initiate a surprising number of responses. The current statistics are one in ten couples are struggling with infertility and one in four women will experience at least one miscarriage. Finally, I would love to see more faith communities create and implement a bereavement ritual for women and couples who have experienced a loss. This could be something as simple as a flower or candle in the sanctuary to something more profound like a funeral. We are called by God to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. It is important that we continue to create safe places for expressions of grief.

# Things to Consider When Telling These Narratives

## A Storytellers' Round Table

### Janice Kim

In current Korean society, many young couples are reluctant to have a baby, and this is a major conflict between the couple and their parents, but still there is more pointing toward women. These days, the problem of how to afford a child is as serious as those about how to get a child. Both mother and father must make money to raise their children, but there is not enough of a social support system for parents to take care of their children while they are working. Korea's birth rate has already fallen below 1.0. It is the world's lowest birth rate.



When my son was a baby, he was very sick, and I prayed to God like Hannah. I believed that God would answer my prayer, but after my son had gotten well, I failed to give Him gratitude and honor. Hannah's story reminds me of this shame. A friend of mine tried to have a child for 30 years. Even now, she refused to answer all my questions and seemed uneasy to talk about this subject. So I think you must be very sensitive when you tell these stories to women who have prayed for a long time and not had a child.

### Juliana Rowe

I have observed women in diverse cultures grapple with barrenness differently, depending on their individual situation. Therefore in all these stories are good models from which a parallel story can be drawn to match the individual plight of the modern woman.



The challenges are not knowing who comprises the audience, who may be grappling with the problem, how they may be touched (or not), and the attitudes of some disinterested males in the audience. How do I approach the telling to reach the most people? Whose heart will the stories touch? Are there listeners for whom the problem of barrenness is real? How do I reach the indifferent, who dismisses the stories as "a women's problem?"

One never knows who is within earshot of our telling and how they are affected by it. I am always reminded when I tell these stories that even though we talk about the women as suffering the brunt of the pain of barrenness, their husbands also, even if to a lesser extent, share the same pain.

### Pam Faro

Being a mother is core to my life experiences and identity, my lens through which I see nearly everything, my perspective, my deepest and most powerful emotions. I do not truly know the emotions—whether pain, yearning, envy...or acceptance, or even peace, perhaps—of not being able to bear children.



So telling any of these stories absolutely requires learning/research/listening, and imagination—which is what I DO, as a storyteller.

In these stories, the barren women eventually conceive so I imagine that these stories may be deeply painful for women who wish to bear children but cannot. How do I connect and respond to that as the storyteller without the experience of being barren? I draw on the anguish brought to me by other biblical stories. Biblical stories of physical healing from illness, injury and even death are often deeply painful for me, as I have dearly-beloved family members who were not healed of their disease, or saved from their injuries, no matter how many fervent, anguished prayers were prayed.

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SPEAKER**

Richard Ward

**FEATURED TELLERS**

Thelma Ruffin-Thomas  
and Joyce Parr

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