

THE IMPLICATION OF GENESIS 11:30
IN THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM

by
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The objective of this thesis is to indicate the implication of Genesis 11:30 in the life of Abraham in relation to the promises that he received from God. This verse in the context of the twelve following chapters gives evidence that the promise of the seed must be fulfilled by God Himself, through Sarah, in His own appropriate time. It could not be obtained by Abraham's human efforts. God has supernaturally sustained Sarah in her condition through the years in order to demonstrate His power in both Abraham and Sarah's lives.

Abraham received the promised seed in a society where barrenness was regarded with contempt and disgrace. Children were wanted in order to characterize the divine blessings upon the family and to share a part in the community. The biblical materials indicate the expedencies used by Abraham, on account of Sarah's barrenness, to secure an heir, and they also show that barrenness was very dominant among the women during the patriarchal era. Those women used the same mundane method that Sarah used to provide children to their husbands. The extra-biblical material reflects a similar practice among the people of the ancient Near East and their ways of overcoming the problems of barrenness. But the apocryphal period reveals that barrenness was praised and encouraged as a heavenly gift, and the people by that time perceived that having many children could be bad as well as good.

Sarah's barrenness and her conception were attributed to God who possesses the ability to change whatever seems to be impossible to the most perfect intellect. He waited till Abraham and Sarah were beyond human calculation before He gave them the promised seed. But both Abraham and Sarah had full confidence that their dead bodies were going to be revived to the capacity of productivity.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the importance of Genesis 11:30 in the context of the promise that God gave to Abraham. The verse is important, because it is the prelude to all the subsequent events of the twelve successive chapters in Genesis. The promise of Genesis 12 ("I will make of thee a great nation") required faith in a most eminent degree. Genesis 11:30 says that "Sarah was barren and she had no child." Sarah's barrenness constituted a natural, physical barrier which tested Abraham's faith or, at the least, caused deep thought (cf. Rom 4:18-21). The thesis is that the promise concerning the seed was to be fulfilled at an appropriate time set by God Himself and that the barrenness of Sarah providentially occurred as a demonstration of God's power in the lives of Abraham and Sarah. It also emphasized that God's plans are made on the basis of His complete knowledge and control. God is the One who determines whether or not any given conceivable thing shall happen; and what He does in time, He planned from eternity to be carried out in time. Therefore, what He had committed Himself to do by His Word cannot be fulfilled by human ingenuity.

To fulfill the purpose of this thesis, the meaning of the word barrenness is considered in relationship to the society and the time environments of Sarah and Abraham, drawing from both the biblical and extra-biblical materials. The author utilized modern archaeological discoveries of the cuneiform literature which provide an essential backdrop for the patriarchal period. The tablets found at Ur, Nuzi, and other ancient sites have illustrated customs previously known from the Genesis records. They help to place the biblical records in historical context, with the result that the biblical patriarchs can be seen in the light of the culture and customs of the era in which they lived.

Also explained are the results of Abraham's anxiety as he was seeking, in human wisdom, ways to subdue the obstacle that prevented the fulfillment of the promised seed. Sarah decided to found a family by giving her Egyptian girl, Hagar, to Abraham as a concubine. Hagar bore him a son, Ishmael, who caused the disharmony of his home and whose seed has been the cause of some of the problems of the Middle East today. Abraham was taught that he must leave all to God and commit himself entirely to His guidance. However, though he seemed to be weak when he followed his own method for bringing about the promise by means God had not appointed, he was strong in the Lord and his loyalty was steadfast toward God. From Abraham's life

story emerge dynamic principles that can assist anyone who wants to walk by faith in God's Word. His faith is dramatically alive in both Old and New Testament contexts. His greatest desire was to obey and trust God even at times of doubt.

Genesis 11:30 in the context indicates that God dispenses His gifts in various ways. His mercy of giving children can be denied and granted as it pleases Him. Sarah, the wife of Abraham, recognized God's sovereignty and placed a great emphasis upon God's control and upon His providence in her childless affliction (Gen 16:1). She said, "The Lord has restrained me from bearing." So, where children are born, it is God who has given them; where they are absent, it is He who has withheld them (Gen 30:2).

The vision concerning the promised seed extends through the next twelve chapters of Genesis and was fulfilled at an appointed time. The fulfillment of Sarah's conception and the birth of Isaac were accomplished by God's omnipotence. Isaac was born by virtue of the promise: "By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who has promised" (Heb 11:11). The word of God is true for He is faithful to what He has promised.

CHAPTER I

SARAH'S BARRENNESS: A DEMONSTRATION OF CULTURAL IMPACT

The Concept of Barrenness in the Old Testament World

Biblical Material of the Word Barrenness

The race of Israel looked upon children as an heritage from the Lord. The more children, especially male children, a person had among the Hebrews, the more he was honored. Children were considered as a mark of divine favor. Barren women were held in contempt and disgrace. So the wife who was barren and not able to present her husband with such blessings felt that her purpose in life had not been fulfilled. The reproach attached to barrenness was probably due to two reasons: (1) the constant expectation of the Messiah and the hope cherished by every woman that she might be the mother of the promised seed; and (2) every Israelite feared that he might die childless and his name might be cut off in Israel and he would cease to have any part in the living community.¹

¹George A. Buttrick, gen. ed., The Interpreter's Bible (New York: Abington Press, 1976), vol. 6: The Book of Hosea, by Harald Cooke Phillips, p. 663.

Several passages from the Scripture refer to women who were barren and who were to have recourse to some doubtful expedencies in order to secure children to their marriages. These passages indicate that barrenness was not well accepted, and even when a wife was fortunate enough to have a husband who loved her, sterility was a heavy cross for her to bear. Her husband might not repudiate her, but his other wives knew how to make her miserable, as she was a failure in life. Barrenness was considered a matter of shame and remorse. It could lead to divorce, because an important consequence of marriage was the birth of children to bear the husband's name.¹

Sarah Barren

Sarah, the wife of Abraham, was barren (עקרה), and she had no child (Gen 11:30). The definition of the Hebrew word denotes a biological deficiency, uprooted in the sense of being torn away from the family stock or being left to wither without progeny or successor.² Sarah's condition according to this definition has frustrated scholars who are trying to understand her barrenness in the context of the blessings and how could she become the mother of the

¹Paul K. Jewett, Man as Male and Female (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), pp. 88-89.

²Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, 1975 ed., s.v. "Barrenness," by Larry L. Walker.

seed that God promised to Abraham. Joseph Exell also points out that she was naturally barren from her youth and could not bear children when she went on the journey with Abraham and her father Terah.¹

Zion Barren

The word barrenness is metaphorically used to describe the city of Jerusalem in her sadness. Zion, the mother of Israel, was similar to Sarah, the ancestress of the nation, who was barren. She was bitterly mourning because she had been destitute of her children, but she was comforted by Jehovah, as Sarah who was glad when she gave birth to Isaac after a long period of barrenness. Zion will be surrounded by a joyous multitude of children after a long period of desolation (Isa 54:1 compared with Isa 50:1-3; 66:9-10).²

Rebekah Barren

Isaac must have heard of the promise that the family of which he was presently the chief would multiply and become a great nation. Yet, his wife Rebekah was still childless, even though they had been married for twenty

¹Joseph S. Exell, The Preacher's Complete Homiletic Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), p. 217.

²Frantz Delitzsch, Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah, Vol. 2, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), p. 283.

years. He was probably taught that the promised blessing would not come as a gift of special favor, but as a result of his exercising the patience of faith. In prayers he told God of his perplexity, the great trials of his endurance, and the quiet confidence of his faith. He did not search for any carnal cultural expedients like his father Abraham. Rebekah's barrenness probably was a supreme calamity for Isaac and no act of God could have produced a more direct blessing than the reversal of her situation.

Leah and Rachel Barren

When the Lord saw that Leah was unloved, He blessed her with children while Rachel was permitted to remain barren for a time (Gen 29:31 - 30:4). Leah's motherhood aroused Rachel's jealousy beyond endurance. Even though she enjoyed the greater affection of her husband, she could not be content as long as her sister surpassed her in what was, to an oriental woman, the most important of all duties of a wife--motherhood. Rachel's impatient behavior counterparts Sarah's in Genesis 16:2. When Rachel thought of her own barrenness, she became more and more envious of her sister who was blessed with children. She did not want to leave the founding of the nation of God to Leah alone. She sought the earthly and mundane means of procuring children through her maid, Bilhah. Rachel regarded the desired

result as the answer of God and as a victory in the contest with her sister.

Leah, unsatisfied with the blessing of Jehovah upon her, was driven by jealousy to employ the same means used by Rachel to retain her husband's favor because she became עקרה , barren. She besought Jacob to go into Zilpah, her maid, who bore him two sons. Leah did not think of God in connection with the birth of the last two sons. They were nothing more than the successful and welcomed result of the means that she employed.¹

Peninnah and Hannah Barren

Peninnah, the wife of Elkanah, had children who accompanied her to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of Host in Siloh, but Hannah was עקרה (1 Sam 2:5). She became irritable and depressed in spirit when her rival Peninnah increased her affliction by reproaching her for being barren. Even though her husband loved and gave her a double portion of the sacrifice, her goal in life was not fulfilled until she conceived and became the mother of Samuel who was one of the greatest prophets in Israel. She exalted the mercy of God who dispensed fruitfulness or barrenness as He pleased.

¹C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1880), p. 289.

Barrenness was regarded by the Hebrew woman as a great evil and divine punishment. However, it is noted that some of the greatest men of the Hebrew nation, such as Isaac, Jacob, Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist, were born of previously barren women. Children like these were in a special sense the gift of God, specifically Isaac who was born to Sarah well beyond the normal expectation in a woman's capacity of productivity. Those children were given because the parents were fully devoted to the Lord and they would rear them in such a way as to enable these children to be special instruments of the Lord in behalf of His people.¹

Abraham's Responses to Sarah's Barrenness

In both Haran and Moreh, God informed Abraham that he would be the father of many descendants (Gen 12:1-2, 7) and his seed would be as innumerable as the dust of the land beneath his feet (Gen 13:16).

A period of ten years had elapsed since he had said his farewell to his homeland as God had commanded him. Yet the hope with which he entered the land of Canaan seemed just as far from being realized, because he was still faced with the continuous biological problem of Sarah's barrenness (Gen 11:30). Furthermore, there was no sign that

¹Francis D. Nichol, ed., Seventh Day Adventist Bible Commentary (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1954), vol. 2: Judges, p. 383.

would indicate the fulfillment of the promise. He was a childless man. James Hastings mentions that Abraham was the head of a large and wide camp in which there were many households and the merry shouts of the little children of the slaves rang all day long. Abraham's own tent stood in the center, solitary and silent.¹ This problem of barrenness might have made him consider whether or not there might be some other solution to his childless status. Every year that passed by meant that his possessions were shortly to be handed to a no-blood descendant; there would be no clan to call him in future generations its father.

Abraham inquired about the possibility of the realization of this particular part of the promise from God since he and Sarah were much older than when they left the land of Ur for Canaan. His cry, "Oh Lord, what will thou give me since I am childless and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" (Gen 15:1-2), seems to show that he had almost lost expectation of a natural son and that he has settled down to the conviction that his steward would be his heir.

Being childless was a painful thought to Abraham, but he delighted in the purpose of God and desired only some light as to the meaning of the promise of the seed. Was it to be understood only as a heir by adoption? In

¹James Hastings, The Greater Men and Women of the Bible (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), p. 196.

that case, Eliezer appeared to him the most worthy. He wanted most of all a decisive response, one which would confirm his proposed anticipation: his servant was in line to become his heir. This question also proves that he had thought out a well-determined plan.¹

However, most popular interpretations of Genesis 15:2 fail to present from different contexts the meaning of the Hebrew word, עֲרִירִי , used by Abraham to express his childless status to God. Frantz Delitzsch says that when the word עֲרִירִי stands by itself, it means alone or lonely, but here in this text it means childless.² Delitzsch does not establish the reason for Abraham's use of עֲרִירִי which carries a connotation of judgment instead of עֲקָרָה which denotes a biological deficiency in both male and female (Deut 7:14; Gen 25:21; Gen 29:31). It is true that Abraham realized that the completeness of the divine blessings fell into the background in the presence of his childlessness, because he saw himself as a man who did not in his own flesh and blood have the prospect of producing an heir. This created an element of fear in his innermost thoughts (Gen 15:1).

¹John Peter Lange, Genesis (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), p. 410.

²Frantz Delitzsch, A Commentary on Genesis, vol. 2, trans. Sophia Taylor (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1888; reprint ed., Minneapolis: Klock and Christian Publishers, 1978), p. 3.

In studying the concept of childlessness (עִירִי) in relationship to other passages in the Scriptures, it is beneficial to note that the word always refers to judgment and punishment directly from the Lord. But it appears in different contexts, namely: (1) In a curse declaration of geneological childlessness, "thus says the Lord, write this man down childless," עִירִי, Jeremiah 22:30. Notwithstanding any children which may follow the declaration (especially with 1 Chron 3:16-24), Zedechiah the son of Jeconiah died childless because his children were slaughtered before him by the King of Babylon (2 Kgs 25:6-7),¹ and (2) In a list of sexual offenses the punishment was declared to be childlessness (Lev 20:20-21).² It could be noted that in this context, the word עִירִי has been taken "different ways;" either in a figurative sense implying that the children born in such prohibited marriages, the biological father will be destitute and childless, or in the literal sense, their children would die before them.³

¹Ibid., p. 347.

²M. Rosenbraun and A. M. Silberman, Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos Haphtaroth and Rashi's Commentary, vol. 2: Leviticus (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, n.d.), p. 93.

³James G. Murphy, Commentary on the Book of Leviticus (Andover: Warren F. Drapper, Publisher, 1874), p. 250.

This writer agrees with Murphy who says that Abraham's response to God was made in a context of fear.¹ Abraham could have been fearful for three reasons: one, because he was a stranger in a land which was occupied by tribes of another race who could have easily combined against him if they suspected him of being an intruder; two, of being killed by the enemies before the coming of the promised seed; and three, that God's punishment was laid upon him. But the Lord who had stood by to give him the victorious success over his enemies (Gen 14:1-17) now came to speak with him with words of encouragement and to reassure him that He was Jehovah, the Self-Existent One, the Author of Existence. The patriarch recognized the authority and the supremacy of God in His judgment, but his childless status still troubled him and it moved him to express his feelings to Jehovah.

To God, Abraham proposed to make an heir of his faithful servant, Eliezer of Damascus. Scholars believe that he might have adopted Eliezer as his heir. This servant was the one to whom he had bequeathed the care of his house and to whom he had left all his possessions and administrative responsibilities.

The Lord spoke to tell him that Eliezer, the servant, was not the one whom He intended. Abraham's hope

¹James G. Murphy, Commentary of the Book of Genesis (Minneapolis: James Publications, 1865), p. 295.

of having an heir through Sarah was not to be extirpated by the fact that Eliezer had been made the patriarch's heir. The one who would come forth from Abraham's own body would be his heir. That meant the one that would inherit all he had would be begotten by him and would be his own natural son, not a servant in his house. The Vulgate renders it "out of your womb," that out of his wife's womb, which was his, would come a genuine and legitimate son who would be the legal heir.¹ Abraham had yet to learn that the seed could not be produced by human means or help. He pointed to himself as the source of the problem; he did not blame God for Sarah's barrenness.

The experience of the ritual covenant of Genesis 15:9-21 seemed to evoke no vocal response from Abraham. He was attacked on the very grounds of his spiritual privilege and hope. He was well-accepted in the sight of God, accounted righteous; he was pardoned and justified. He was personally invested with a glorious inheritance and ordained to be the father of a great nation and the source of blessing to all families of the earth. He was peculiarly and eminently distinguished. All of this did not stop him from forming a rational response to the proposal of Sarah, his wife. It is strange and sad that after a full decade of walking with God, enjoying every height of privilege and

¹Vulgate Version, p. 20.

strong assurance of faith, that Sarah, a faithful companion of Abraham, sharer of his trials, and witness of God's blessings, succumbed to a state of desperation. She decided to bring about the fulfillment of the divine promise by employing an anthropocentric, mechanical device: Sarah suggested her maid servant, Hagar, to her husband (Gen 16:1-2). She gradually began to see herself as a hindrance to the fulfillment of the promised seed. According to Genesis 15, Abraham had many children in the promise, but not one in reality. His eyes were fixed upon his head servant, Eliezer of Damascus, but Sarah had fixed her eyes upon her head maiden, Hagar, the Egyptian.¹

The childless state of Abraham's house had its great sorrow and was a perpetual opposition to the purpose of his calling and his destination. Joseph Parker indicates that there is nothing unnatural in the history of Abraham's domestic life. It has been carefully and vividly brought under notice. There was little else to talk about in those early days; the talk was centered around the children. To have a quiver full of such arrows was to be blessed of God in the most acceptable way; not to have children was to have great disappointment and distress.² Abraham yielded

¹John Peter Lange, A Commentary on the Holy Scripture, Genesis, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1864) p. 415.

²Joseph Parker, Preaching Through the Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971), p. 213.

to the voice of his wife (Gen 16:2), hoping that God would accomplish His promise of a seed which was to come out of his loins through his taking of Hagar as a substitute mother. Many scholars, like D. Kidner, believe that "Abraham had lost faith or that he had slipped from faith."¹ Gene A. Getz said that, "Abraham had stepped out of the will of God."² But there is no scriptural support for the beliefs of these scholars. Sarah had not yet been mentioned in the promise as the person by whom he should have the child. They sought to produce the seed of the promise according to the thoughts and resources of man. Paul, the Apostle, in the epistle to the Galatians allegorically alludes to Abraham's son with Hagar as born after the flesh, the product of self-effort in religion (Gal 4:22).

The actions of taking a second wife is regarded as polygamy, and the practice that was forbidden by God's institution (compare Gen 2:24 with Matt 19:5) was brought into the world by the wicked Lameck (Gen 4:19) and was sometimes unfortunately used by the patriarchs. As for the case of Abraham, it is evident that his action was not the effect of an inordinate lust, but of an earnest desire to have children, specifically a blessed and promised child.

¹D. J. Wiseman, gen. ed, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1967), vol. 1: Genesis, by Dereck Kidner, p. 126.

³Gene A. Getz, Abraham: Trials and Triumphs (Glendale, CA: A Division of G/L Publications, 1976), p. 79.

The substitution of the Egyptian servant for his wife did not only cause him to make a rationalistic response to Sarah's barrenness, but it also allowed him to give what seemed to be for him a logical response. By this response he indicated that his total hope was placed in his son Ishmael and that he, at that time, regarded this child as the promised seed (Gen 17:18-20). After thirteen years of silence from God, Abraham came to love the son in spite of his wild nature (Gen 16:12). When God broke the silence, it was to tell him that the spoken heir was yet to come, and it was not Ishmael.

Apocryphal Materials on the Word Barrenness

In the biblical material barrenness was the most atrocious calamity to a childless family in their society and a shame specifically to the woman who could not fulfill her role of motherhood. A Jew of the Old Testament was a part of the whole family; and his conception of life probably did allow him to ask what would become of him without children in the community. This attitude was changed during the period of the Apocrypha, because the people perceived a fine difference between prolificacy and barrenness. The position of the people showed that having many children might not always be a blessing; they can be bad as

well as good.¹ Several editors assert that a subjective immortality was taught during the Apocryphal period.

The Wisdom of Solomon 4:1 says, "Bitter than this is childlessness with virtue, for in the memory of virtue is immortality because it is recognized both by God and man." The Vulgate turns these words, "O quam pulcra est castra generatio cum Claritate," into a praise of celibacy,² whereas the Cyprian Version gives its true meaning to indicate that childlessness from natural or accidental causes was intended in the interpretation.

H. R. Charles notes that Philo believed a childless man will be rewarded and he will be happy and occupy a higher position in the heavenly sanctuary.³ Childlessness was encouraged in Ecclesiasticus 16:1-3, the wisdom of Jesus the son of Sirach:

"Desire not a multitude of unprofitable children, neither delight in ungodly sons. If they multiply, delight not in them. Except the fear of the Lord be with them. Trust not thou in their life, neither rely on their condition. For one is better than a thousand and die childless than to have ungodly children."⁴

¹The Jewish Encyclopedia, 1903 ed. s.v. "Barrenness," by Frederick De Sola Mendes, p. 543.

²J. A. F. Gregg, The Wisdom of Solomon, The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, ed. A. F. Kirkpatrick (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1922), p. 33.

³H. R. Charles, The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1913), p. 541.

⁴W. O. E. Oesterly, Ecclesiasticus (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1912), p. 108.

The Talmud marks another stage in the attitude of the people's mind toward barrenness and childlessness. A written law was developed, and the duty of teaching it diligently to one's children brought additional pain to the heart of the pious, but childless Jew who gloried in the performance of all the commandments. He could not fully impart them to those who should come after him.¹ Large families and old age were commonly considered signs of prosperity and thus of God's favor.

The Backdrop of the Law Codes

That the divine truths of the Word of God have their permanent and immutable value is self-evident. They are not to be dependent upon place and time, although man does understand these truths as they were given to a specific society in a setting of place and time. Archaeology, by beneficially contributing to the setting of place and time, has broadened and deepened man's understanding of these truths and has pointed out information that is related back to the millennium of the ancient Near East. Gordon, in his article, "Biblical Customs and the Nuzi Tablets," said:

One of the main reasons that the Scripture is often misunderstood is the fact that its readers are generally unfamiliar with the ways of mankind in the Bible

¹Jewish Encyclopedia, s.v. "Barrenness," by Frederick De Sola Mendes, p. 543.

lands and the Bible times. A knowledge of many groups of documents found by archaeologists would assist several scholars to fill the gap and to overcome their ignorance.¹

Roger T. O'Callahan observes particularly that archaeology bears witness to the truths of Genesis and to the traditions of its background with regard to the close geographical and social bonds between Israel and Mesopotamia. He illustrates the impressive similarity from Nuzi, touching upon the desire for offspring, the rights of inheritance, and the community responsibilities.² The discoveries of findings in the ancient Near East within the last century has expanded scholars' knowledge of the historical, cultural, and religious background of the Old Testament.

Harry M. Orlinsky states that the book of Genesis deals with ideas and customs of the patriarchal period of the Hebrews. The book reflects clearly the early milieu of the Babylonians, Amorites, and Hurrians.³ The prophets of sixth century B.C. knew well this fact as evidenced by the way Ezekiel addressed Jerusalem: "Your origins and

¹Cyrus H. Gordon, "Biblical Customs and the Nuzu Tablets," Bible Archaeologist, 3 (February 1940):1-12.

²Roger T. O'Callahan, "Historical Parallels to Patriarchal Social Customs," The Catholic Biblical Quarterly 6 (1944):404-405.

³Harry W. Orlinsky, Understanding the Bible through History and Archaeology (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1972), pp. 25-26.

your birth are to the land of Canaanite, your father was Amorite and your mother was Hittite" (Ez 16:3, 45).

Extra-Biblical Material of the Laws

The extra-biblical material of the Nuzi tablets and Hammurabi's Laws are important social codes from Mesopotamia, and they can not be identified as the customs which were practiced by the people at the time of Abraham and Sarah and which, in general, can reflect how ancient Near Eastern peoples reacted to a condition of childlessness.

Hurrian Adoption Code

Prescriptions of the Hurrian Code

The cuneiform tablets in the archives of the Horite city of Nuzi expose in detail the feudal customs which did not permit property, which was held in fief from the ruler, to pass beyond a male member of the holder's family.¹ The practice of adoption had its origin in the desire for male offspring among the Nuzi families who had been denied a son or who had been deprived of one by circumstances. For instance, a reading from a tablet of adoption says:

The tablet of adoption belongs to Nashwi, the son of Arshenni: he adopted Wullu, the son of Puhi-Shenni. As long as Nashwi is alive, Wullu shall provide food and clothing, when Nashwi dies, Wullu shall become the heir. If Nashwi has a son of his own, he shall divide

¹O'Callahan, "Historical Parallels," p. 404.

equally with Wullu, but the son of Nashwi shall take the gods of Nashwi.¹

The absence of a male child was a severe problem for a family. It urged the necessity of adopting a close relative in order to provide for care in old age, to perpetuate the family name and to settle succession of property in accordance with the owner's wish. The need for adoption was rather strong and was enforced by religion.

The establishment of such new irrevocable kinship and relationship through adoption demanded the adopted person to cease to be the child of the natural parents and to belong absolutely to the adoptive parents, and only the subsequent birth of a natural son could alter the heirship priority of the adoptee.

Similarity to the Hurrian Code

The remarkable resemblance between biblical statements on Eliezer of Damascus as Abraham's heir (Gen 15:2,3) and the Nuzian practices is seen in the desire to assure a proper inheritance. It is evident that Abraham had adopted Eliezer either as a guarantee that he would have someone to tend him in his old age or, no doubt, to have an heir.²

¹Theophile J. Meek, "Documents from the Practice of Law; Mesopotamia Legal Documents," Ancient Near Eastern Texts, 3rd ed., ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 219.

²Keith N. Schoville, Biblical Archaeology in Focus (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), p. 194.

Eliezer might have been a tried and trusty follower, one who had managed his house with skill and honor. R. R. Richards believes that Eliezer's adoption had closely followed this ancient Middle Eastern custom. Both the biblical material and the Nuzian customs admitted that "when there was no direct heir, the indirect one could be either a relation or even an outsider would become the legal inheritor."¹ Schoville affirms that the tablets were written five centuries after the Patriarchal period but they reflected that the adoption customs which were widespread throughout the society of that day. However, he admits:

There was no need to find a direct influence of Hurrian law and customs upon the people of the Old Testament whether in Palestine or in Mesopotamia. The texts illuminate and substantiate the patriarchal customs in particular and establish them authentically to be within the general framework of the Patriarchal era.²

Hammurabi's Code

Prescriptions of the Code

Hammurabi, the first ruler in Mesopotamia to issue a collection of laws which were far more advanced than any

¹Raymond R. Richards, "Genesis 15, An Exercise in Translation Principles," Bible Translator, vol. 28, p. 215.

²Schoville, Biblical Archaeology, p. 194.

previous attempted codes of the time, is regarded as one who climaxed legal codification prior to the Roman code.¹

This code of law was the best representation and reflection of the Mesopotamian society. There are several statements which allude to a maidservant bearing children in the place of her mistress. For example:

Code 144: If a man takes a wife and that wife gives a maidservant to her husband and she bears children, if that man sets his face to take a concubine they shall not countenance him, he may not take a concubine.

Code 145: If a man takes a wife and she does not present him with children and he sets his face to take a concubine, that man would take a concubine and bring her into his house that concubine shall not rank with his wife.

Code 146: If a man takes a wife and she gives a maidservant to her husband and that maidservant bears children and afterwards would take rank with her mistress because she was born children, her mistress may not sell her for money but she may reduce her to bondage and count her among the maidservants.²

The family code of the Hurrian society says:

If Gilumninu bears children, Shennina shall not take another wife. But if Gilumninu fails to bear children, Gilumninu shall get for Shennina a woman from the Lullu country as concubine. In that case Gilumninu herself shall have authority over the offspring.³

¹Robert Francis Harper, The Code of Hammurabi King of Babylon (Chicago: Callahan and Company, 1904), p. 3.

²Ibid., p. 51.

³W. F. Albright and D. N. Freedman, ed., The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1964), vol. 1: Genesis, by E. A. Speiser, p. 120.

Similarity of the Code

According to the Mesopotamian society and how the purpose of marriage was procreation rather than companionship, a woman protected her marital status when she bore children to her husband. In the case of barrenness, she was expected to provide a handmaid to her husband for the production of children. This would have prevented a man from taking another wife.¹

C. H. Gordon asserts that the narration of Genesis 16:1-4 conforms with the cultural environment of the time. Abraham had received the promise of a son at an appointed given time in God's plan, but finally with no heir forthcoming Sarah suggested that Abraham adopt the traditional custom of taking another woman in order to produce children. Ishmael was born of Hagar, Sarah's servant (Gen 16:2).²

When Hagar found that she had conceived, she became proud and felt herself raised above her former position. She violated Hammurabi's Code 146 by assuming equality with Sarah and by forgetting about her mistress's generosity. Her act of ingratitude gave Sarah full right to complain of her conduct to Abraham, to appeal to the law code in order to retaliate against Hagar's arrogance, and to bring her

¹Cyrus H. Gordon, Hammurabi's Code (New York: Holt, Rineheart, and Winston, 1957) p. 13.

²Ibid., p. 15

under some kind of treatment of submission. R. S. Candlish argues that Abraham might have commanded Hagar to be placed as a servant under Sarah's rule and to render to her obedience, or he might have reinforced the disciplines which caused Hagar to flee her mistress's presence -- her unbearable living situation.¹

E. A. Speiser objects to those finding a similarity between Genesis 16:1-4 and Hammurabi's Code. He sees Code 146 of Hammurabi as relevant only in part to the text of Genesis. He says the law was applied only to a priestess of radidum rank, who was free to marry but who was physically unable to bear children. She was allowed to give her husband a slave girl in order to provide him children. If the concubine elevated herself to an equal position with her mistress, the wife had the right to demote the concubine to her former status, but she could not sell her to others.²

Speiser does not see a great deal of application of the Code, because these legal provisions were restricted to only certain priestesses for whom motherhood was biologically ruled out. In Sarah's case, there was a limitation,

¹R. S. Candlish, An Exposition of Genesis (Wilmington, Delaware: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1972), p. 164.

²Speiser, Genesis, p. 120.

because she was supposed to be the mother of a promised child to Abraham.¹

Sarah was childless, but it was she who had pressed a concubine on Abraham. She conformed with the Family Code of the Hurrians, but that was not an act of obedience to God. Abraham chose to follow the society's customs with which he was intimately acquainted. Roger T. O'Callahan supports the impressive parallels of Genesis 16:1-4 with the Codes of Nuzi.² He cites other instances (Rachel and Leah, Gen 29:31; 30:1-5; 30:9-13) where a barren wife provided her husband with handmaids in order to assure offspring to their marriage.³ Speiser explains the Nuzi Code in relationship to Sarah's position over Hagar. He believes these extra-biblical materials shed new meaning against the severe treatment of Hagar.⁴

The Impact of the Cultural Background

Barrenness in Sarah's society was regarded as a dishonor and reproach, whereas fecundity was considered as a special mark of divine favor. She decided to follow the practice of her native country in order to provide an heir

¹Ibid., p. 121.

²O'Callahan, "Historical Parallels to Patriarchal Social Custom," pp. 399-408.

³Ibid., pp. 398-405.

⁴Speiser, Genesis, p. 120.

for the family, because the popular belief was that adoption of the maidservant children or a faithful servant would prove to be a remedy for infertility.¹ It is important to note that it was not only the cultural background, but was more an attempt to use their own power, and they did not wait for God's power to be demonstrated.

The use of their own power evolved two problems, which can be called "immediate" and "mediate" problems. The immediate problem is that the harmony of Abraham's house became a discord on two occasions. First, at the conception of Hagar who despised her mistress, Sarah. Hagar's attitude caused a grievous and bitter disturbance in Sarah (Gen 16:4-6), which allowed her to reduce Hagar to slavery under severe and ill treatment. Second, at the weaning of Isaac, the harmony of the family was again disturbed by Ishmael's behavior. Sarah insisted upon the dismissal of both Hagar and Ishmael. This irrevocable expulsion was a rude and painful measure to the affectionate heart of Abraham.

The mediate problem is that Ishmael, because of the Lord's blessing upon Hagar (Gen 16:10) would father a great nation, the Arabs, who, in turn, would become hostile

¹Nahum M. Sarna, Understanding Genesis (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), p. 128.

opponents of the Jewish nation.¹ This assigned position to Ishmael as father or founder of the Arabian people has been refuted. Scholars like Samuel Fallows believe he only joined the people and adopted their habits of life and character. The tribes which sprang from him have eventually made a powerful contribution to the pre-existing Arab nation (Gen 16:11-12).² From these tribes came Islam which is the strongest threat to the advance of Christianity the world has ever seen.³

The consequences that Abraham had to pay for listening to Sarah's suggestions were domestic troubles, heartache, and deep-seated hatred between the descendants of the two wives. These were the results of their human efforts and a genuine attempt to obtain a child to eradicate their barrenness and accomplish God's promise. John Calvin believes that God was chastising them as they deserved. They both had to pay the penalty for their levity. The contrivance devised by Sarah and too eagerly

¹Donald Grey Barnhouse, Genesis: A Devotional Exposition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), p. 128.

²Samuel Fallows, The Bible Encyclopedia, vol. 5 (Chicago: The Howard Severance Company, 1906), p. 750.

³Ibid., 5:884.

embraced by Abraham failed to succeed.¹ They learned that God's way was in the son that Sarah would have to bear and in him she would have the happiness and joy of being a mother.

¹John Calvin, Commentaries of the First Book of Moses Called Genesis, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 428-430.

CHAPTER II

SARAH'S BARRENNESS: A DEMONSTRATION OF GOD'S POWER

God's Power in Sarah's Barrenness

The power of God is revealed in the fact that He holds all things in His hands. He gives power and strength to His people, and He controls every individual need, crises, and destinies of human life (Ps 86:16, compared with Is 4:10).¹

God Himself is the source and cause of both the possible and the impossible. He alone has the power to determine and to control whether any given conceivable thing shall happen. He also possesses the power that produced the effect of change in the lives of Sarah and Abraham, reversing their childless condition in order to fulfill His sovereign plan.²

This idea of God's power is clearly taught in the Scriptures. The prophet Jeremiah cried, "Ah, Lord God! behold thou hast made the heavens and the earth by thy

¹TDNT, s.v. "δυναμις" by Grundman, 2:284.

²Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), p. 407.

great power, and outstretched arm and there is nothing too hard for thee" (Jer 32:17). God is said to have created all things by the breath of his mouth and to uphold the universe by a word (Job 26:12-14). In Genesis 17:1, God said, "I am the Almighty God." The Lord says in Matthew 19:26, "With God all things are possible."

In relation to the fact that God does whatever He pleases in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deep places (Ps 135:6), it would not be a contradiction to admit that Sarah's barrenness was purposely used by God to demonstrate His divine power. He not only knew that she was barren before the departure from their homeland (Gen 11:30), but He favorably chose to carry his predestinated plan through her. Moreover, God has the ability to do whatever seems impossible to the most perfect intellect. He promised to make her the mother of the promised seed, even to the extent of sustaining in her a biological deficiency all her life for that particular purpose. Therefore, in His providence and power, He sustained her in the pilgrim journeys from Ur to Canaan to Egypt and then back to Canaan. He also controlled and directed her paths and protected her against all evil attacks (Gen 12:12-20; 20:1-8). He led her to the destination at the culmination of that appointed time for the birth of Isaac, the promised seed (Gen 21:1-4).

The old age of Abraham and Sarah was not a surprise to God. Since God knew that she was beyond the normal expectation of a woman's productivity, this fulfillment of the Promise (Gen 21:1-4) could be nothing else but again a demonstration of God's power.

The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews points out the faith of Sarah and her confidence in the word of God (Heb 11:11) that enabled her to receive supernatural strength for the parenthood experience. She herself recognized the working power of God in her life (Gen 16:1). Murphy says, "It was natural to the ancient mind to recognize the power and the will of God in all things."¹ Samuel Cox and others believe that Sarah's action of giving Hagar, her handmaid, to Abraham was an act of faith.² Her hope was based on the power of God's Word, which had repeated the promises on many occasions to Abraham. She believed Abraham should have a child, but nothing had been said yet concerning her being the mother of the promised child. This unlimited power was demonstrated when Sarah's barrenness was reversed and her conception became a reality. Even though it seemed to be humanly impossible for a child to be born from an aged woman who was barren, Abraham trusted in

¹James G. Murphy, Commentary on the Book of Genesis (Minneapolis: James Publications, n.d.), p. 257.

²Samuel Cox, "Conversion of Sarah," The Expositor 12 (1876): 349.

the God who revealed His power to him in the creation (Gen 15:5a) and who upholds the world and creation (Jer 10:12-16, compared with Job 26:12, Col 1:17).

God's Power in Conception

The Scriptures contain several instances of barren and childless women who can serve as evidence to the fact that God carries His programs through on His own time for His own purpose. In each instance where barrenness occurred, a particular favor had always been shown upon them by a special, divine intervention.

Fertility, as well as barrenness, is often attributed to God (Gen 29:31; 30:2). Sometimes, conception is spoken of in a more concrete way; for instance, "the Lord caused her to have a seed in her womb" or "the Lord enabled her to receive seed in her womb." In the reviewed article "A Surgeon Looks at the Human and Spiritual Body," the writers point out the praises of David for the marvelous work of the omniscient and omnipotent God (Ps 139:13-14). He gives thanks to the Lord who has wonderfully designed his bones, skeleton, and the state of his being as a sum total of element of a human being. He acknowledges the reason for God's exact knowledge of man and His power over him; it was because God had wonderfully formed him in the

belly.¹ The Psalmist admits that God's knowledge of man and government are a settled possessing of His own workmanship by a constant holding, by a settled ruling of His work, by a constant maintaining and judging of the most secret motion of the spirit of man (Jer 1:5). Like a shield, the Lord covered His tender work with His mighty power from all harm when He framed it in the mother's womb.²

He knew what He was making; neither darkness nor distance of heaven from earth, nor any other impediment hindered Him in His work. David Dickson said in relationship to this Psalm, "The making of a man's body of so many bones, arteries, veins, sinews is a most curious piece of work, and God sees things before they were made and His purpose to make has no less clearness of knowledge of the things to be made, than the substance of it."³

Calvin says:

There is no need to be surprised of God's knowledge of the most secret thoughts of men since he formed their hearts and their reins. When man was enclosed in his mother's womb, God saved him as clearly as in mid-day light. Man was fearfully and wonderfully made. Never was so terse and expressive a description of the physical conformation of man given by any human being.

¹John C. Whitcomb and David C. Whitcomb, "Fearfully and Wonderfully Made: A Review," Grace Theological Journal, 2 (Fall, 1981):333-339.

²Ibid., p. 335.

³David Dickson, A Commentary on the Psalms (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1959), p. 479.

So fearfully are we made that there is not an action or gesture of our bodies which does not, apparently, endanger the muscle, vein or sinew, the rupture of which would destroy either life or health. We are wonderfully made, that our organization infinitely surpasses in skill, contrivance, design, and adaptation of means to ends, the most curious and complicated piece of mechanism not only ever executed by art and by man's device but ever conceived by the human imagination.¹

The formation of man is not of himself nor of his parents but of God's power. Man is wonderfully made in all parts, his bones which are the substantial parts of the body and the strength of it, though they are covered with skin and flesh. They are made by the Lord Himself and cannot be hidden from Him. The manner of their production and growth, which is done in secret, remains a secret to man because he does not know how the bones grow in the womb of a pregnant woman. But God does know.

The Old Testament people were taught to give an extensive, important significance to conception. They believed that no child was born without the participation of the Lord. The birth of a child was a demonstration of God's active power or presence to them. For instance, nothing could have confirmed and revealed the blessing of God upon the union between Ruth and Boaz more fully than the birth of a male child. All children were said to be gifts from the Lord of life and Creator of all that exists

¹John Calvin, Commentary on the Book of Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 214.

(Gen 4:25), but a male child as heir solved the problem of preservation of the line, the problem which essentially faced Naomi and Ruth.¹

Millar Burrows says that "every parent should feel that they receive no gift so valuable as the children the goodness of God bestowed upon them."² At the birth of Obed, the redeemer of Naomi, not because he would one day redeem the whole possession of Naomi, but because as the son of Ruth the child was also the son of Naomi. As such, he would take away the reproach of childlessness from her; he would comfort her and tend her in her old age.³

The development of the child in the womb was looked upon as one of the greatest mysteries of God's creative work (Eccl 11:5). For these people, having many children was a coveted honor. Relatives often expressed their wishes that a couple would be blessed with a large family and fortune to preserve the ancestral inheritance (Gen 24:60). Children were the "crown of man" (Prov 17:6); sons were "olive plants around the table" (Ps 128:3); and "a reward like arrows in the hands of a hero, happy is the man who has his quiver full of them" (Ps 127:3-5). Sterility was

¹Millar Burrows, "Levirate Marriage in Israel," Journal of Biblical Literature 59 (1940):22-23.

²Ibid., pp. 22-23.

³Arthur H. Lewis, Judges/Ruth (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), p. 123.

condemned and was considered a trial or a chastisement from God, although at the same time, barrenness could also be traced back to the highest causality in the purpose of Jehovah God.

Rebekah's barrenness was removed due to Isaac's prayers. The heir of the promise was to be a child of prayer. Accordingly, when the prayer ascended, the fruit of the womb was given. The Lord heard, and she conceived and gave birth to Esau and Jacob (Gen 25:21-22).

The thirteenth chapter of the book of Judges teaches that the angel of the Lord appeared in the form of a man to Manoah's wife who was barren at that time (that is, since the time of her marriage to Manoah). He announced to her that she would conceive and bear a son. Scholars, like John Gill, ascribe divine power to this conception, making her barrenness an evidence of God's divine omniscience.¹ The child of a long unfruitful marriage is in a peculiar sense to be a gift of God, and a charge that was given to Manoah and his wife predicted some great purpose of God for the child.

Alexander Whyte asserts that "in the case of every child born into the world, there is a divine predestination which, whether it has been recognized by the parents or

¹John Gill, The Exposition of the Old Testament (London: William Hill Collingridge City Press, 1851).

not, gives dignity to his existence."¹ God who closed Hannah's womb (1 Sam 1:5) answered her prayer and Samuel was born. Her poem of gratitude (1 Sam 2) praised the sovereignty of the Lord for the wonderful reversal of human standards. Her faithfulness was rewarded with seven more children (1 Sam 2:8-21). She saw in her elevation from disgrace (being barren) to honor (being fruitful) the wonderful power of God which humbles the high and exalts the lowly.²

The involvement of God's power in barrenness and childlessness can be seen in the life of two other women, Leah and Rachel, who were both wives of Jacob. God looked upon Leah's affliction, and He had pity on her. He blessed her by opening her womb and giving conception, so that she might obtain her husband's affection. She recognized God's power and praised Him fervently after the birth of her sons. Jacob vehemently rebuked Rachel because he knew that it was God who gave children and who had withheld the blessing of children from her. (This indicates also that the everlasting and almighty God overrides the physical body, that He works all things with His power, and that He determines the ends which they are destined to serve.)

¹Alexander Whyte, Bible Characters (London: Oliphants LTD), p. 35.

²David L. Cooper, Messiah: His Nature and Person (Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society, 1933), pp. 74-75.

They are all dependent on Him and subservient to Him.¹ It was God who was dealing with Rachel according to His sovereign plan by making her barren for a period of time. She was proved to be self-complacent and forgetful of her dependency on His power.²

For fourteen years she was kept in her state of barrenness, and when God caused her to be fruitful, she recognized the divine power and said, "God has taken away my reproach" (Gen 30:23). She traced not the gift to some irresponsible power of nature but to the distinct favor of a personal God.³

God's Power in Abraham's Pilgrimage

God in His power used the childless status of Abraham and Sarah to bring him to the point of belief that He might count him as righteous (Gen 15:14). God had to test him before giving the promised seed at his own appointed time.

Abraham's faith in God is the dominant theme from the first to the last times he is mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments. His faith is presented by scholars as a growing process, a result of a difficult human struggle

¹Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), p. 74.

²Murphy, Commentary on Genesis, p. 397.

³Exell, Homiletic Commentary, Genesis, p. 587.

over reoccurring doubts, an unmerited victory obtained by God's power. It was through strict demands that God called him to abandon all and to take a journey by faith (Gen 12:1-3, compared with Heb 11:8).

In response to the promise of the land and seed, Abraham left with a wife who was barren (Gen 11:30). After he was settled in the land, he was rewarded for his obedience with more explicit details of the promise: "To your descendants I will give this land" (Gen 12:7). Abraham accepted the life of a pilgrim, a nomad and a stranger in this promised land under the control of the idolatrous Canaanites. In such circumstance he could acknowledge God's ownership of the land only by an act of faith.

But the prediction of descendants has a further perspective added when Abraham is told (Gen 12:1-3) that all families of the earth would be blessed in his seed, זרע . The word זרע is derived from the verbal root which literally means to sow or to scatter seed.¹ Therefore, in the primary sense it refers to the seed of plants (Gen 1:11; 47:19). In the secondary sense it refers to offspring or prosperity of men. The usage of the word unmistakably refers to the literal descendants of Abraham (Gen 13:16, 15:13, and 22:17). There are other contexts where it is used to refer to a single individual. Walter

¹BDB.

Kaiser agrees that the Hebrew always used the singular form of the word to refer to the secondary sense.¹ For example, after the death of Abel, Adam said, "God has appointed me another seed in the place of Abel." The context shows that he was speaking of Seth (Gen 4:26). The same usage is found in Hannah's prayer: "But wilt give thy maid servant a seed of men" (1 Sam 1:11). This fact demonstrates that Hannah was praying for a son.

However, the current occurrences in the Middle East bring different views about the seed of Abraham. David Cooper questions the Lord's affirmation that He will bless all nations through Abraham's seed. He cannot honestly affirm that the world has been blessed as pledged in the passages of Genesis (Gen 18:18; 26:4; 28:14).

Rather he sees the Hebrew people as never having enjoyed the realization of this promise, but, on the contrary, to the promises for more than three thousand years their history has been written in blood.² He concludes that the seed mentioned in the passages could refer to Abraham's literal descendants but that the primary meaning of the blessing unquestionably is that of an individual of the race of Abraham who shall bring the universal blessing

¹Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, s.v. "זרע," by Walter C. Kaiser, 1:253.

²David R. Cooper, Messiah: His Nature and Person (Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society, 1933), pp. 37-39.

and relief from the curse.¹ Paul, the Apostle, indicates that the incarnation of the Son of God was the summation and the crown of the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham and his descendants. The seed, the posterity of Abraham, was embodied in Jesus Christ (Matt 1:1, compared with Gal 3:16).²

But the questions must surely have remained in Abraham's mind: What about my wife's condition? How can these promises of a seed and blessing be fulfilled?

And so it was that when Abraham stood alone in the land, God came to assure him that he would be greatly rewarded with numberless children for his faithful obedience. Abraham believed, but he requested further assurance for prolonging the delay because his wife was barren: "O Lord Jehovah what will thou give me for I continue to be childless and a slave born in my house will be my heir" (Gen 15:1-3). Then God spoke in response to his prayerful petition: "Fear not Abram I am thy shield and thy exceeding great reward. He that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir" (Gen 15:1-4).³ Henry

¹Ibid., pp. 37-39.

²John Eadie, Commentary of the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1884; reprint ed., Minneapolis: James Klock Christian Publishing Company, 1977), p. 255.

³Henry W. Frost, Men Who Prayed (New York: Gospel Publishing House, 1914), p. 6.

W. Frost says that it seemed to Abraham as if Jehovah had taken little account of what he had given up for God, for He had failed to give him that which alone could satisfy his life, namely a child and an heir.¹ God did not rebuke Abraham but reassured him that the coming of the promised heir will be through His creative power and as He pointed to the stars. At this crucial point in his struggle between faith and doubt, he chose to trust God's word, and God reckoned it to him as righteousness.

During the adventures of the Patriarch, God did not alter His ordained plan because of Abraham's anxiety and impatience. He could not obtain God's promises by using his own human devices. God insisted firmly upon His way. The rich blessings of God for Abraham and Sarah, and their seed, could not be a reality apart from the power of God.

In the process of waiting almost a quarter of a century for God to manifest His power, the bodies of Sarah and Abraham were reduced physically, their strength diminished but their faith built up.² The purpose of this long delay could have been to strengthen his faith, to encourage him in making larger ventures in prayer and to have a great hope in the abundant mercies of God. In the process he

¹Ibid., p. 6.

²Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, vol. 2, rev. Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), p. 354

about one hundred years old and Sarah at ninety years old was past the age of bearing (Gen 17:17; 18:11). It demonstrates that the birth of Isaac did not only represent the fulfillment of the oft-repeated assurances of posterity, but it also indicates God's almighty power (Isa 40:29-31).¹

Both the Apostle and the writer of the Hebrews emphasizes the deadness of the bodies of Abraham and Sarah (Rom 4:17-21 compared with Heb 11:11-12). In Romans 4:17-21, Paul had in mind the quickening of the bodies of Abraham and the womb of Sarah, which from the point of view of raising a family were as good as dead.² However, Cranfield points out the different opinions concerning the procreative difficulties of Abraham and Sarah. He says:

Augustine argued that it was Sarah who was incapable of becoming a parent, which Calvin concluded that when Abraham, who before had been like a dry withered tree, was revived by the heavenly blessings, he not only had the power to beget Isaac but having been restored to the age of virility was afterward able to produce other offsprings.³

Paul establishes the familiar contrast between man's lack of power and the infinite resources of God (cf. Mark 10:27). The establishment of this contrast brings two

¹Albert Barnes, Notes on the New Testament "Romans", ed. Robert Frew (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1949), p. 110.

²J. A. Emerton, gen. ed., The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T and T Clark Limited, 1975), vol. 1: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, by C. E. B. Cranfield, p. 244.

³Ibid., p. 244.

interpretations among the critics about Paul's understanding of Abraham's faith in God's power. In the first interpretation Paul points out that Abraham believed the blessing could come from God at a time when it was no longer a human possibility for him to keep on hoping. In the second interpretation Paul simply thinks of the sheer impossibility according to human calculation of the promise recorded in Genesis 15:5 without any reference to the fact that Abraham had already been hoping for a long time without receiving the object of his hope.¹ But the indication is that Abraham did not only believe in God and that He could bless, but he had a confident persuasion that what God had promised He was able to perform. Charles Hodge notes that one of God's characteristics is the "life giving power" by which He can raise the dead to life, which is the prerogative that requires almighty power. Life is specified in the Scriptures as one of God's peculiar works (Deut 32:29; 2 Kgs 5:17; Ps 68:20).²

Robert Haldane alludes to this Romans passage and agrees that faith in God's power, as in raising the dead, is a proper ground for believing any other work of power which God engages to do or which is necessary to be per-

¹Ibid., p. 247.

²Charles Hodge, Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1886), p. 124.

formed in order to fulfill His word.¹ James Stiffler notes that critics are divided upon the genuine interpretations of "without becoming weak in the faith he contemplated his own body. . ." One view states that the perfectedness of Abraham's faith made him overlook the circumstances and the tremendous difficulties in the way of becoming a father, that is, his faith was so strong in the God who raises the dead that he had no reasons to distrust his own body or to consider Sarah's natural incapacity or to doubt that God would fulfill His promise of a numerous seed through Isaac. Another view says that Abraham did consider the hindrances at their full weights but still believed in the divine Word which declared that many peoples would come from him. He looked solely to the power of Him who promised.²

There can be no question that Paul's emphasis is upon the humble acknowledgement and trust in God's power. God is described as controlling things which are not and those which are (He is able to work His program by means of either promising or unpromising instruments) and uses the things that frustrate his plan to serve His ends.

¹Robert Haldane, Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans (New York: Robert Carter, 1847), p. 180.

²James M. Stiffler, The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary Logical and Historical (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1897), p. 82.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis consideration was given to the importance of Genesis 11:30 in relationship to the promises that God gave to Abraham. The significance of this text was emphasized, since it gave Sarah and Abraham's condition before their pilgrim journey under God's command. The importance of the verse was explained in context of twelve successive chapters of Genesis, since they played a vital part in the entirety of the patriarch's life account. Genesis 11:30 shed light on the inner struggles in Abraham between God's promises and the ethical expediencies of the time.

Abraham with good intention tried to use a natural means to bring forth the fulfillment of the promised heir. His actions eventually caused him grief and sorrow (Gen 16 and 21). Informative arguments from the biblical and extra-biblical materials were given in opposition to scholars' dogmatic affirmation of Abraham for using the ethical expediencies to fulfill God's word. It was pointed out that these ethical expediencies were not to be interpreted as Abraham's lack of faith but as evidences describing his human failures and weaknesses.

The context of the story of the patriarch's life indicated that God overruled the barrenness of his wife. The Scripture recorded the faith of Abraham in God's promise in words which summarized his whole character, "and he believed in the Lord and He reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6). God was a friend to Abraham (Jas 2:23), and Abraham was the father of all who believe (Rom 4:12). From the whole account of Abraham, no indication was given that he lost faith in the word of God. Rather, the Scripture revealed that Abraham did what seemed to be expedient when he seemed to be fearful for his life, and God always sovereignly intervened and manifested His power to protect His faithful servant in time of danger. Abraham always responded accordingly to the divine command as he was chosen by God to be the agent through whom God would establish a nation and give the promised land. However, Genesis 11:30 recorded that Sarah was barren, and she had no child. Since the sovereign God in His providence foreknows and upholds all things (Col 1:17), Sarah's barrenness was not a surprise in His plan. In fact, it has been observed by many that there was a constant threat to the Lord's promise made to the patriarchs. The promise said their seed would be innumerable and one which would be a blessing to all the families of the earth. The threat was due to the barrenness of their wives. Scriptural evidences examined in this thesis have demonstrated that God, even

though guaranteeing the fulfillment of His word and promise, put the patriarchs through a time of testing by keeping their wives barren. Especially is this true of Abraham and Sarah. Then, at His appointed time, He showed His power by permitting them children. Unquestionably, it was God's power; definitely not human power and capability -- it had been reduced to incapability. The Westminster Confession of faith states that:

God the Great Creator of all things doth uphold direct, dispose, and govern all creature's actions, and things from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and Holy Providence according to His infallible fore-knowledge and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.¹

According to Ephesians 1:3-11, Genesis 11:30, the barrenness of Sarah was ordained by God and the fulfillment of the promised child to Abraham was to occur in the latter part of Abraham and Sarah's lives (Rom 4:16-25). God had decreed the time to manifest His power to Abraham and Sarah. He also used Abraham's mistakes to strengthen his faith in His Word. God's Word can be fulfilled by God according to His eternal purpose.

¹George S. Hendry, The Westminster Confession for Today (London: SCM Press LTD, 1960), p. 68.

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