Candida R. Moss – Joel S. Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2015). Pp. 328. $43.95. ISBN:9780691164830

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The two authors of this book belong to the younger generation of biblical scholars from the UK and the US. Both are very well educated (Oxford, Yale and Harvard) and are currently teaching in leading British and American academic centres, the University of Birmingham (UK) and Yale University (US), respectively. Both scholars tend to approach their research by confronting traditional opinions and viewpoints. C.R. Moss is an active columnist for the American news and opinion website "The Daily Beast", besides contributing to many American, British and European magazines and newspapers.

The book under review is mainly a systematic study of selected texts from the Old and New Testaments, however, in order to broaden their treatment of the subject of infertility in ancient times, the authors also analyse certain other ancient Near Eastern, Greco-Roman, and early Christian sources. The two writers begin their book with the thesis that there is no such thing as a general, overarching biblical perspective on infertility – and that the biblical viewpoint is definitely *not* universally negative. Thus, their effort is to unfold the nuances of this theme as encountered in the Bible.

The book consists of a brief preface and acknowledgements, an extensive introduction, six chapters of analysis and interpretation, and a thoroughgoing conclusion. Chapter 1 deals with the biblical models of the matriarchs (pp. 21-69). In Chapter 2 the authors analyse the substance of God's blessing as found in Genesis 1–2, and its further realization within the Torah tradition (pp. 70-102). Chapter 3 deals with the picture of Mother Zion in Deutero-Isaiah (pp. 103-139). In Chapter 4, the two scholars turn toward the New Testament authors and offer a number of insights into the Son of God and the conception of the New Age (pp. 140-170). Chastity, marriage, and gender in the Christian family are the focus of Chapter 5 (pp. 171-199). The last of the six main chapters deals with the question of barrenness in the context of eschatological times (pp. 200-228).

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The authors prefer endnotes over footnotes, which makes their text easier to read but also creates some difficulty in following their sources. The study closes with a bibliography (pp. 291-312) and two indexes, one of primary sources (pp. 313-324) and a second one of subjects (pp. 325-328).

The introduction starts with some very current, social-political background on the subject of infertility. Moss and Baden see it first of all as a medical issue. However, it is always socially, culturally, and religiously defined and therefore calls for a sociological-theological approach. The authors also add the aspect of gender studies to their reflections, focusing on the stereotype of womanhood as necessarily connected to motherhood, apart from which women are turned into "cold, emotionally deficient" persons. Men and women, they assert, are not equally judged as childless people, and in most cases infertile women are regarded in a much worse light than the men. Since families with children are an important element within contemporary societies, fertility does have political aspects as well, although governmental strategies vary in this regard. In any case, fertility has usually been highly valued within societies, with fertile women looked upon positively and childlessness, by contrast, seen not only as a flaw but giving rise to individuals who are odd and self-centred.

Passing on to the biblical tradition, Moss and Baden note that the idea of infertility in the Holy Scriptures seems somewhat one-sided and focused on the will of the primordial God: "be fruitful and multiply". Thus, being childless meant being cursed and punished. Many different texts could be used to illustrate their thesis – Genesis, Deuteronomy, 1 Samuel, Psalms, Hosea, Luke, James, 1 Timothy, Hebrews – and many modern works follow the pattern. However, the authors have decided to give the readers a selection of texts that might add some new facets to the general perspective on infertility in the Bible. It is not clear, though, what the criteria are for their selection. The authors' "self-conscious" way of choosing the texts they do makes the results of such a study very subjective indeed. All the same, they at least set clear-cut limits for the scope of their study, focusing on the canonical Bible along with the ancient context in which it was written (Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Rome). They also set out to treat the chosen texts as a cluster of case studies with a variety of theological viewpoints, rather than yielding a global theological synthesis on the issue. The goal of the book is to expand the traditional understandings of the biblical thinking on infertility.

In the initial chapter, Hannah is the first woman presented as a model of the barren matriarch, to whom other characters are quickly added (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel). In all these cases, the desire to bear children is simply assumed, but the authors of the book see in that a kind of oversimplification. Thus, they contextualize the issue within its ancient environment, showing the necessity of progeny as the means to economic and social-political independence. The issue

of infertility was also cast in a framework of gender whereby, in the context of a marriage which produced no children, the fault – and the shame – always lay with the woman. However, the Bible does know some exceptions.

Commenting on the problem of the shame of infertile women, Moss and Baden differentiate between shame and guilt. To them, the relationship between God and an abased woman is essential to understanding the distinction. The prayers for fertility directed to God by both husbands and wives are a sign that children are always a gift from above. The text seems to assume that, in a sense, *all* wombs are closed and need divine intervention for procreation. Therefore, the state of infertility is not the result of sin of any kind and as such demands no confession in response. Indeed, the authors list five examples from the Bible itself which argue against linking a person's infertility to some supposed sinful action. The mysterious state of some humans being sterile is something common to both ancient and modern times. The stories in the Bible show that there are no easy answers to such challenging situations.

Chapter Two focuses on the Book of Genesis and God's words spoken to Adam and Eve: "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28). Some exegetes would stress the meaning of it as an authoritative saying, but Moss and Baden prefer its blessing-like aspect. They also point to the fact that, in many cases among the figures of the pre-historical narrative (Adam and Eve, Noah and his sons, and Abraham), they have to receive a special divine blessing to enjoy progeny. To complicate this even more, it would be difficult to prove that this blessing is directed toward everybody, since many of the patriarch's descendants were not included in the fertility blessing (e.g., Dinah). The authors are convinced that Eve was instructed to procreate only when she was *cursed* with fertility in Genesis 3:16. Adopting some allegorical interpretations of the church fathers, Moss and Baden claim that if Adam and Eve had not sinned, "they would have lived in an eternal state of childlessness" (p. 86). In a way then, those who avoid procreation "are the very ones who do not participate in the cursed female state" (p. 89). On the other hand, none of Adam and Eve's descendants is explicitly ordered to have children. Thus, say the authors: "The blessing to be fruitful and multiply was neither timeless nor universal" (p. 80). It was rather general in meaning and applied to groups rather than to individuals.

The prophetic books are the main focus of the authors in Chapter Three, but some of the historic and wisdom literature is also quoted. Moss and Baden bring to the reader's attention biblical personifications of Zion, which is symbolized by the infertile woman or, by contrast, by the one enjoying a great number of children. Most of the barren matriarch figures in Genesis sooner or later produced offspring, thus their state of barrenness in most cases was a temporal one. However, some fragments of Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah contain a very specific imagery in which both the women who could not procreate and the ones who

have lost their progeny are placed in the same category. The Hebrew Bible terminology connected to the subject (derived mostly from the roots *škl*, *ʿṣr* and of *galmûd*) helps the authors offer up some fresh eschatological views on infertility, including the image of new Jerusalem. They also look at some post-biblical Jewish traditions in search of similar images, juxtaposing eschatological rabbinic interpretations which imagine, at the eschaton, both the physical reversal of infertility and the lack of desire for children on the part of the people of the new era. The chapter concludes with an overview of some of the smaller traditions that somehow got overshadowed by the main stream of texts usually employed in discussions of infertility. These "quieter voices" (p. 137), claim the authors, push the issue of infertility to a new perspective: barrenness is not guilt, and all who are infertile will be blessed in the future world.

With the content of Chapter Four, Moss and Baden turn toward the message of the Gospels and of the New Testament as a whole. In the Gospel of Mark, they claim, the Holy Family "is not predicated on biology" (p. 141) and thus their model of parenting potentially includes also those bereaved of their biological progeny. Then they pass smoothly to the adoptive interpretation of the scene of Jesus' baptism in the Gospel of Mark, showing it against the broader panorama of Roman beliefs. They trace the origin of the Gospels' Infancy narratives to "the murky world of transgressive human and divine" (p. 150) known to Greeks, Romans as well as Jews.

Moreover, tackling the issue of Mary's miraculous motherhood the authors draw a disputable bridge between ancient practices of incubation and modern insemination treatment. Commenting on Luke's Infancy Narrative, they see Mary in the line of barren women "whose pregnancies illustrate the power of God" (p. 160). And finally, elaborating on the term *doulos* in the Lucan narrative, they stress the fact of the sexual exploitation of ancient female slaves. This argumentation leads them to propose a parallel between Mary and the enslaved surrogates of the Old Testament, and subsequently to the suggestion that she takes the role of surrogate in Jesus' maternity as well as the role of barren wife. However, the second element of their thesis is rather poorly grounded. The final paragraph devoted to the Gospel of John shows a new model of family, one formed by the group of Jesus' followers, in the same way that motherhood can rely on non-biological bonds.

In Chapter Five, Moss and Baden discuss *in extenso* the issue of Pauline teachings on marriage (1 Corinthians 7). They define Paul's view on marriage as a "concession" (pp. 173-174). In their opinion, the apostle also devalues procreation and "prefers celibacy and childlessness" (p. 173). In order to understand better the position of Paul, the authors draw on some Greco-Roman beliefs about sexuality, where one can see a variety of viewpoints on marriage, chastity, and procreation. Procreation as the unique goal of sexual relations (similarly, the

view of sexual relations with a barren women as immoral) and the virtue of self-control are two especially relevant perspectives. Thus, according to the authors, the roots of Paul's interest in celibacy lay in "the stoic sexual ethics or Jewish asceticism" (p. 190). To the examination of Paul's teaching on marriage and chastity Moss and Baden add their analysis of an extra-biblical text of *Acts of Peter*, claiming that it establishes "a new economy of the body" (p. 196), with physical infertility and lack of sexual interest prized more than youth, physical attractiveness and fertility. In concluding this chapter, the authors are positive that the diverse array of ancient views they have presented can help in establishing alternative models of marriage and the family, both in the ancient Greco-Roman world and in our own modern world.

Chapter Six connects the issue of infertility to the eschatological perspective. The authors begin with a discussion of the Gospel account of the healing of the woman with hemorrhages, focusing on the term *xerainō*. Based on the ancient medical context, they propose interpreting the term as expressing the state of being dried up and having a hardened body. Thus, in their opinion, the healing act of Jesus is a kind of "cauterization" (their term – p. 203), and they consequently see in the healed woman an example of an infertile/sterile individual. Then, they argue that since the Gospel of Mark makes a clear association between health and salvation, the woman could be seen as "a prefiguration of the resurrection of the body" (p. 206). Their argumentation continues with the scene describing the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, set against the broader background of a eunuch's role in the ancient world. Here again, the eunuch is viewed as someone disabled as to reproduction and thus "perfected for the Kingdom of Heaven" (p. 212).

From biblical texts, the authors then turn to the realm of patristic tradition (Irenaeus, Pseudo-Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Augustine), asserting that the healing miracles of Jesus are prefigurations of resurrection. Moreover, drawing upon ideas found among some minor non-orthodox groups within early Christianity, they extend the heavenly ideal of celibacy to earthly existence (Manicheans). All these examples, according to Moss and Baden, demonstrate that "it is not necessary to read the words of Jesus through a dominant model of fertility and prosperity" (p. 226). The authors conclude that in the heavenly reality, the state of infertility cannot be taken as divine punishment. In fact it is quite the opposite: "as we draw nearer to God, we leave behind us not only the pains of childbirth, but also the very necessity of procreation" (p. 227). In their opinion, it is plausible to see the status of a eunuch in every person enjoying the Kingdom of Heaven.

The general conclusion of the book summarizes the interpretations rendered in the previous chapters. Even though Moss and Baden seem to be right in stating that childlessness does not mean a state of being cursed, their opinion of infertility as a "foreshadowing of the eschatological era" (p. 233) gives the impression of

being far-fetched. Despite all appearances, the distinction between the biological state of barrenness and the state of *chosen* celibacy was fundamentally important to the early Church Fathers quoted in the book. Indeed, in so many cases infertility has been (and is) experienced as a painful deficiency, both in the ancient world and in our own.

Reconceiving Infertility is no doubt a useful contribution to the world of biblical studies. The authors have gathered a considerable body of crucial and insightful material on the matter. In broadening their perspective (and the readers'), they certainly manage to add some important nuances to their chosen topic. However, one might wonder whether the sub-title of the book – announced as "Biblical perspectives on procreation and childlessness" – is appropriate, since at least some of the authors' arguments are based primarily on peri-biblical texts, or even on those coming from outside of the biblical world. On balance, the work represents a laudable offering, and time will tell to what extent its various proposals and interpretations might be embraced by the wider circle of biblical scholarship.