

NOTES ABOUT CHILDREN IN THE PENTATEUCH*

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Resumen

La autora presenta esta interesante nota acerca de los niños en el Pentateuco. Un tema poco explorado hasta el momento. Primeramente, identifica a los niños como un don de Dios. Segundo, describe el entorno de los mismos con relación a los rituales y a la adoración. Tercero, presenta los niños como verdaderos instrumentos de Dios. Por último, la autora expone las conclusiones del caso.

Abstract

First, the author presents children as a gift of God. Second, children in ritual and worship. Third, children as instruments of God. Finally, conclusions are placed in order.

1. CHILDREN AS A GIFT

At the beginning, “the man called his wife Eve (“life”) because she was the mother of all who live” (Gen 3: 20), and a source of hope for the fallen first parents.

God’s greatest gift and guarantee of the covenant with Israel was that of children.¹ A child was regarded as a gift from the Lord (1 Sam 1: 19-20). A large family with several sons was a sign of God’s blessing: “Sons are a gift from the Lord and children a reward from him. Like arrows in the hand of a fighting man are the sons of a man’s youth. Happy is the man who has many such arrows” (Ps 127: 3-6).

A favorite image was that of father, mother, and numerous children around the table: “Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the heart of your house; your sons shall be like olive-shoots round about your table” (Ps 128: 3-4).

Every birth was considered a divine miracle, and the most difficult ones were attributed to divine intervention. God said to Abraham: “I will bless her (Sarah) and give you a son by her. I will bless her and she shall be the mother of nations; the kings of many people shall spring from her”. Then, Abraham threw himself down on his face; he laughed and said to himself: “Can a son be born to a man who is a hundred years old?”. Finally, “the Lord showed favor to Sarah, as he had promised (...). Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac (“he laughed”) was born. Sara said,

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¹ Elizabeth Ann R. Willett, “Infant Mortality and Family Religion in the Biblical Periods,” in *Davar Logos* 1.1 (2002): 34; note 32.

God has given me good reason to laugh, and everybody who hears will laugh with me” (Gen 17: 16-17; 21: 1, 6).

In the biblical covenant² God promised great prosperity to Abraham and Sarah. The Lord said to Abraham “Leave your own country, your kinsmen, and your father’s house, and go to a country that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you and make your name so great that it shall be used in blessings: Those that bless you I will bless, those that curse you, I will execrate. All families on earth will pray to be blessed as you are blessed” (Gen 12: 1-3).

Nevertheless, Abraham felt at a complete loss without children: “You have given me no children, and so my heir must be a slave born in my house” (Gen 15: 1-3).

Barrenness was the worst of all conditions, regarded with contempt by more fortunate women. Abraham’s wife, Sarah, had borne him no children, whilst their Egyptian slave-girl, Hagar, “conceived one; and when she knew that she was with child, she despised her mistress” (Gen 16: 4-5).

If no children came, people thought God must be displeased –and this could be very hard on a couple, who had no children. For example, Elkanah had two wives, Hannah, who was childless, and Peninnah, “Hannah’s rival, who used to torment her and humiliate her because she had no children” (1 Sam 1: 6-10).

God can take away the “humiliation of being barren”. When Rachel found that she bore Jacob no children, “she became jealous of her sister and said to Jacob: Give me sons, or I shall die. Jacob said angrily to Rachel, Can I take the place of God, who has denied you children?”. Nevertheless, after a while, “God heard her prayer and gave her a child; so she conceived and bore a son and said: God has taken my humiliation” (Gen 30: 1-3, 23-24).³

During early Biblical times, immortality was conceived as living on through children who carried on the *name* of their parents.

In the Old Testament children were cherished as the only means by which a father could enjoy an extension of himself beyond the grave, for children perpetuated a man’s name and kept the memory of him alive through at least another generation or two. For example, when Jacob blessed Joseph, he said: “The God in whose presence my forefathers lived, my forefathers Abraham and Isaac, the God who has been my shepherd all my life until this day, the angel who ransomed me from all misfortune, may he bless these boys. They shall be called by my name, and by that of my forefathers, Abraham and Isaac; may they grow into a great people on earth” (Gen 48: 15-16).

² For the nature of the covenant, see John A. Dearman, *Religion & Culture in Ancient Israel* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1992), 134-37.

³ Carol L. Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford, 1988), 105-06.

When brothers live together and one of them dies without leaving a son, his widow shall not marry outside the family. Then, the husband's brother "shall take her in marriage (...). The first son she bears shall perpetuate the dead brother's name so that it may not be blotted out from Israel" (Deut 25: 5-7).

2. CHILDREN IN RITUAL AND WORSHIP

Children were important in ritual and worship. In the Book of Genesis, the blessing of children before the death of parents has special significance.⁴ Before his death, Jacob blesses his eleven sons, but gives a double blessing to Joseph.⁵ The ancient Jewish tradition of blessing children follows the ritual of these texts.⁶

Religion and family life were woven together in the way parents brought up their children. Children were encouraged to ask questions about their religion and history. Concerning the Exodus from Egypt, Moses said to the parents: "When in time to come your son asks you what this means, you shall say to him, "By the strength of his hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the Land of slavery" (Exod 13: 13-15). Moreover, when Moses gave the Commandments, he added: "Teach them to your sons and to your sons' sons (...). You shall repeat them to your sons, and speak of them indoors and out of doors" (Deut 4: 9; 6: 7).

During Israel's entry into the promised land, when children asked what the stones were for, the parents would explain that God marked the places where he did something special for his people with large stones: "These stones are to stand as a memorial among you" (Josh 4: 5-6).

In early Old Testament times, during Sabbath, parents and children would visit the local shrine, where God could be remembered and worshipped. There they would offer a sacrifice and the priest would teach the children the laws of God.⁷

Children participated in festivals as well. At Passover, the father asked the oldest child about the meaning of the service. Then, the child explained how it had come about, as he had been taught.⁸ Later in Israel's history the children acted the story of Esther at the Festival of Purim.⁹

Concerning special rituals or sacrifices, the demand that the first-born of human children, like the first-born of the flocks and herds, belong to God is set out as a basic principle: "You shall give me your first-born sons. You shall do the same with your

⁴ Chapters 27, 48, 49.

⁵ Genesis 48: 1-22; 49: 22-26.

⁶ Ronald E. Clemens, "The Relation of Children to the People of God in the Old Testament", in *Baptist Quarterly* 21 (1966): 195-205.

⁷ Exodus 31: 15-17.

⁸ Exodus 12; Joshua 5: 10-12.

⁹ Esther 3; 7; 9: 24-26.

oxen and your sheep. They shall stay with the mother for seven days; on the eighth day you shall give them to me”.¹⁰ No indication is given here whether such children were actually to be given to God, as child sacrifices, or whether they were to be redeemed by the payment of compensation.¹¹ During the known period of Israel’s worship the principle of compensation was accepted, either by substituting a lamb for the child,¹² or by regarding the priestly duties of the tribe of Levi as an overall compensation for all Israel.¹³

In the Old Testament, it is said that children have been passed through fire to Moloch.¹⁴ Nevertheless, according to the Law of holiness, the practice of passing children through fire was forbidden: “Lord spoke to Moses and said: Any Israelite or alien settled in Israel who gives any of his children to Moloch shall be put to death” (Lev 20: 1-2). Only in rare instances are there indications of the practice of child sacrifice in Israel, as in the case of Ahaz, king of Judah: “He even passed his son through the fire, adopting the abominable practice of the nations whom the Lord had dispossessed in favor of the Israelites” (2 Kings 16: 3).¹⁵

In the episode of the sacrifice of Isaac, God tests Abraham’s fidelity. He is commanded to sacrifice his only son Isaac upon Mt. Moriah. He travels during three days, and at the moment when he is about to slay the lad, an angel of the Lord calls from heaven and bids him desist.¹⁶ As a reward for his piety, Abraham is promised that his

¹⁰ Exodus 22: 29-30.

¹¹ Ronald E. Clemens, “Exodus,” in Ackroyd, P.R. *et alii* (eds.), *The Cambridge Bible Commentary*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University, 1972), 147.

¹² “You may buy back the first birth of an ass by giving a sheep instead, but if you do not buy it, you must break its neck. You shall buy back all the first-born of your sons, and no one shall come into my presence empty-handed” (Exod 34: 20).

¹³ Lord spoke to Moses and said: “I take the Levites for myself out of all the Israelites as a substitute for the eldest male child of every woman. The Levites shall be mine (...). The eldest sons in Israel will outnumber the Levites by two hundred and seventy-three. This remainder must be ransomed, and you shall accept five shekels for each of them, taking the sacred shekel and reckoning twenty gerahs to the shekel. You shall give the money with which they are ransomed to Aaron and his sons. Moses took the money paid as ransom for those remained over when the substitution of Levites was complete” (Num 3: 11-13, 44-50).

¹⁴ The usual views are that Moloch/Molech is: 1) a tendentious misvocalization of the word *Melech*, “king”, the original vowels being replaced by those of the word *bosheth*, “shame,” just as Baal himself was called Bosheth by Israelite writers, and just as Ashtareth was vocalized Ashtoreth in the same way; 2) a name of an Ammonite god (*M-l-ch* or *Milcom*) registered in the Old Testament; 3) a deity of the same name mentioned in texts from a) the Third Dynasty of Ur, b) Mari, and c) Ras Shamra-Ugarit, and 4) a Phoenician word *molk*, meaning “votive offering”. For an analysis of this term, Theodor H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York, Harper & Row 1969), 587-88.

¹⁵ Clemens, “Exodus,” 147.

¹⁶ “God said to Abraham: “Take your son Isaac, your only son, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him as a sacrifice on one of the hills (...). Then, the angel of the Lord

offspring will be innumerable “as the stars in the sky and the grains of the sand on the seashore” (Gen 22: 17). In the Old Testament, stars and sand are symbols of multitude and prosperity.¹⁷

In order, apparently, to enhance the wonder of a hero’s career, popular story loves to relate how a baby was exposed at birth and rescued from imminent death only by what might seem to common eyes an accident, but what was really divine fate interposed to preserve him for his high destiny. Moses is not only exposed at birth, but also drawn out of the waters. His mother “got a rush basket for him, made it watertight with clay and tar, laid him in it, and put it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. (...) The Pharaoh’s daughter noticed the basket among the reeds (...). She adopted him and called him Moses, because, she said, I drew him out of the water” (Exod 2: 1-10).

Moreover, this episode could reflect an old ritual or custom of testing the legitimacy of children by throwing them into the water and leaving them to swim or sink. The infants who swam are accepted as legitimate and those who sank are rejected as bastards. The Biblical narrative of the birth of Moses drops no hint that his legitimacy was doubtful; but when we remember that his father Amram married his paternal aunt, that Moses was the offspring of the marriage, and that later Jewish law condemned all such marriages as incestuous, we may perhaps, suspect that in the original form of the story the mother of Moses had a more particular reason for exposing her baby on the water than a general command of Pharaoh to cast all male children of the Hebrews into the Nile.¹⁸

In the Near East, stories of this type are told particularly about the founders of dynasties and kingdoms, whose parentage and upbringing have long been forgotten. The legend of Sargon of Agade is a good example: “My mother was a changeling (?), my father I knew not. (...) My mother conceived me, she bore me in secret. She set me in a basket of rushes; with bitumen she sealed my lid (...). The river bore me up and carried me to a drawer of water (...) (ls. 1-10)”.¹⁹

said: Abraham, Do not raise your hand against the boy; do not touch him! Now, I know that you are a God-fearing man (...)” (Gen 22: 1-12).

¹⁷ Genesis 26: 4; Exodus 32: 13.

¹⁸ Gaster, *Myth*, 230.

¹⁹ Samuel Kramer, “The Legend of Sargon”, in *The Ancient Near East. An Anthology of Texts and Pictures. Volume I* (ed. James Pritchard; New Jersey: Princeton University, 1973), 85-86.

3. CHILDREN AS INSTRUMENTS OF GOD

God acts through children and young people.²⁰ God gives wisdom as a special gift to children and young people. The young Joseph received from God the gift of interpreting dreams and ruling the land of Egypt. The Pharaoh said to Joseph: "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one as shrewd and intelligent as you. You shall be in charge of my household and all my people will depend on your every word" (Gen 41: 39-40).

The young Salomon asks God for a gift: wisdom and a listening heart. God said: "Because you have asked for this, and not for long life for yourself, or for wealth, or for the lives of your enemies, but have asked for discernment in administering justice, I grant your request; I give you a heart so wise and so understanding that there has been none like you before your time nor will be after you" (1 Kings 3: 11-12).

God acts through young heroes and gives them strength and power as a special gift. When Samuel searches for a new king to replace Saul, God tells him that David, a young shepherd, will be the next king (1 Sam 16:1-3). Then, God enables the young David to face the Philistine champion, Goliath. Saul, as chief, was "to go and fight this Philistine" instead of David, who was too young for a battle like Saul himself said: "You cannot go and fight with this Philistine; you are only a lad, and he has been a fighting man all his life" (1 Sam 17: 32-34).

For many people, the twin culture-heroes are a common folklore pattern, from who derive their cultural and ethnic origins. The twins are often presented as rivals: the good son and the evil one. For example, Jacob and Esau "pressed hard on each other on their mother's womb" (Gen 25: 22). Mainly, this reflects the traditional hostility between two neighboring peoples or between two elements of the same people. Or, again, they may express simply the duality of nature. However, it is also influenced by a widespread belief that two children cannot be begotten at the same time by a human father, so that in the case of twins one of them must be of divine origin and superior, or else of demonic origin and inferior, to the other. The Lord said to Rebecca, mother of Jacob and Esau: "You have two nations in your womb; two peoples going their own ways from birth! One shall be stronger than the other; the older shall be servant to the younger" (Gen 25: 23). The contrasting characters of the twins or pair of heroes are sometimes expressed in physical terms. "At birth, Esau is hairy all over and red" (red-haired man); whilst Jacob is not (Gen 25: 25). The belief is widespread that redheads are sinister and dangerous.

Jacob and Esau were presented as the ancestors respectively of the Israelites and the Edomites. Jacob, the younger son, succeeded in diverting to himself the paternal blessing, which was intended for his elder brother: "Peoples shall serve you; nations bow down to you" (Gen 27: 29). In this story is preserved the reminiscence of a legal

²⁰ Joseph A. Grassi, "Child," in *ABD* (ed. David Noel Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 904-07.

ceremony whereby a younger son was substituted for his elder brother as rightful heir to the paternal inheritance. Evidently, God acts in favour of Jacob, the ancestor of the Israelites. In his dream, God said to Jacob: “I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. This land on which you are lying I will give to you and your descendants (...). You and your descendants are blessed” (Gen 28: 13-15).

4. CONCLUSIONS

In the Pentateuch, children were regarded as a gift from God, and a large family was a sign of God’s blessing and a guarantee of the covenant with Israel. Also, young people participated in several rituals and festivals, preserving the religion and traditions. Finally, God acts through children, giving them a listening heart, strength and power, and the ability to rule as well.