What Does the Bible Say About Infertility?

Placing the command to “be fruitful and multiply” in context

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In the very first chapter of the first book of the Bible, the command is given to humankind to “be fruitful and multiply.” Genesis 1:28 reads: “God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’”

Yet despite this blessing, there are numerous instances of barrenness in the Bible—from the matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel to Michal (Saul’s daughter and David’s wife). Joel S. Baden of Yale Divinity School and Candida R. Moss of the University of Notre Dame analyze the Biblical portrayal of infertility in the Biblical Views column “Reevaluating Biblical Infertility,” published in the September/October 2017 issue of Biblical Archaeology Review.

Many of the women in the Bible described as being barren, such as Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Hannah (Samuel’s mother), Samson’s mother and Elizabeth (John the Baptist’s mother), later conceive. However, there are other Biblical women, including Michal (David’s wife), who remain barren for their entire lives. For still others, like Dinah, Miriam and Deborah, the Bible records no offspring, which suggests they may have been barren.

According to the Bible, is infertility a punishment for sin?

Short answer: no.

Baden and Moss clarify that although “some ancient interpreters tried to identify some rationale for these women’s infertility, the Bible itself attributes no faults to them. They are, simply, barren—and blameless.” Some may argue that Michal’s infertility was a result of her contempt for King David (2 Samuel 6:16–23), but by that point in the narrative, she had already been married—first to David, then to Patiel, and then returned to David—for more than a decade. There is not an inherent causality between her reproach and her barrenness.

Baden and Moss further explain that in those times, every birth was seen as a miracle:

“I]n the ancient Near East, there was a broader understanding that every successful procreation was the result of divine intervention: The deity had to “open the womb” in order for conception to occur. … [T]he opening of the womb was miraculous, despite its frequency. The absence of this miracle could hardly be a reflection of some human sin—and, in the case of the barren matriarchs, it is never described as such.

What else does the Bible say about infertility?

Interestingly, Baden and Moss point out that the directive “be fruitful and multiply” doesn’t apply to everyone:
Although it is spoken to the first humans in Genesis 1, “be fruitful and multiply” is not a command that pertains to all people at all times. Even in the Bible itself, these words cannot be taken as straightforward instruction: Both Noah and Jacob are told to be fruitful and multiply, yet in both cases God says this to them after they have finished producing offspring. Moreover, this blessing is given only to those individuals who stand at the head of necessary lineages: the first humans, Noah, Abraham and Jacob. Once Jacob’s 12 sons are born, no one else in the Bible will ever be told to be fruitful and multiply. After all, we are told already at the end of Genesis that the Israelites had become fruitful and numerous. The command has long since been fulfilled.

The idea that procreation is not for everyone is advanced in the New Testament, where “the driving metaphor is one of adoption.” Biological lineage becomes less important than spiritual adoption in the Christian church. Paul even recommends that some Christians stay single, so that they can better focus on ministry (1 Corinthians 7).