



NORWEGIAN
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The Motifs of Childlessness as Curse and Motherhood as Blessing

Judgment and Salvation in the Old Testament

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*This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the Cand. theol. degree at*

MF Norwegian School of Theology, 2014, autumn

AVH504: Spesialavhandling med metode (30 ECTS)

Study program: Cand. theol.

[21 048 words]

*To my friend, Guro, who became a mother
whilst this thesis was written.*

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0. ABBREVIATIONS

AB	The Anchor Bible
BDB	The Brown–Driver–Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament
BHS	Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia
DI	Deutero-Isaiah (DtIsa)
<i>G</i>	Greek version
HB	Hebrew Bible
HCOT	Historical Commentary on the Old Testament
Hermeneia	Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible
HMT/MT	Hebrew Masoretic Text/Masoretic Text
JSNTS	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
JSOTS	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
<i>KJV</i>	King James Version
LEH	A Greek—English Lexicon of the Septuagint
LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
LXX	The Septuagint
NICOT	The New International Commentary on the Old Testament
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis
<i>NO2011</i>	Norwegian translation of the Bible, 2011, Bibelselskapet
<i>NRSV</i>	New Revised Standard Version
OT	Old Testament
OTE	Old Testament Essays
OTL	The Old Testament Library
OTS	Oudtestamentische Studiën
<i>S</i>	Syriac version
<i>T</i>	Targum
<i>TDOT</i>	Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament
<i>TLOT</i>	Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

The stories of the women in the OT have intrigued me for as long as I can remember. Learning that the status and prestige of women was profoundly connected with their procreative abilities, increased my interest for the lives of women in OT times. During my work on this thesis, I came across a noteworthy comment made by Anneli Aejmelaesus which have, among other things, motivated me. In *The Traditional Prayer in the Psalms*, Aejmelaesus elaborates on certain themes of petition which are not fully represented in the Book of Psalms:

There are several situations in life for which one could expect to find a prayer in a collection of prayers representative of OT religion. For instance, in narrative texts we often read about women praying to have a child. Hardly any psalm is appropriate to this situation. [...] It is obvious that the material we possess in the Book of Psalms is a very limited sample which has survived from the rich traditions of psalms and prayers available to the Israelites during the various periods of their history.¹

The OT is given to us through the writing, redaction, and translation of texts. And by the same writing, redaction, and translation of these texts, the lives of the people that fundamentally created the OT, are removed from us, making the OT distant and foreign. Still, through our studies, we may hope and try to comprehend some of the aspects of human condition and understand how these aspects affected their lives and, subsequently, their religion.

1.2 TOPIC AND RESEARCH QUESTION

The topic of this thesis is the motifs of childlessness and motherhood, or – more specifically – the motifs of childlessness as curse and of motherhood as blessing. We will consider how these motifs are conveyed in the Law and the historical books.

¹ Anneli Aejmelaesus, "The Traditional Prayer in the Psalms," *Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, ed. Otto Kaiser (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986), 48.

Furthermore, and most importantly, we will investigate how these motifs are employed in oracles of judgment and salvation in the prophetic literature.

An important aspect concerning this topic is the depiction of Yahweh as sovereign and intervening in the lives of humans. This is truly a multifaceted image – crucial to the renderings of this thesis – but will not be discussed in depth as a topic of its own.

The goal for this thesis is not to determine the redaction behind the larger biblical narrative or between the legislative, historical, and prophetic literature in the OT. A hypothesis, however, is that the motifs of curse and blessing which we find in the Law and the historical books are applied – or alluded to – in prophetic oracles of judgment and salvation, such as we may find in Jeremiah and Isaiah when alluding to the Law's regulations on curse and blessing.

The research question of the thesis is: *How are the motifs of childlessness and motherhood employed to convey judgment and salvation in prophetic literature?*

Some of the supporting questions may also be mentioned: How are childlessness (or barrenness) conveyed as curse and motherhood (or offspring) as blessing? How are the elements of childlessness and motherhood intertwined with other conditions of the lives of women in OT times?

1.3 MATERIAL

The main material chosen for this thesis is Jer 15:5-9 and Isa 54:1-10. The oracle of judgment in Jer 15:5-9 is chosen because it depicts the punishment of Yahweh as bereavement. Whilst there is no mention of a barren woman in this passage, the terminology is kept within a similar semantic field: wives lose their husbands, mothers lose their sons and a mother of seven children languishes. What exactly this may mean, we will look at more closely. The oracle of salvation in Isa 54:1-10 is chosen because of its direct reference of a barren woman. Additionally, the woman is illustrated as forsaken, rejected, and widowed. The anger of Yahweh has turned and the woman is restored as wife and mother.

Within the prophetic literature in the OT, there are other texts that could have been employed for the purpose of this thesis. DI comprises other passages with relevant terminology, such as Isa 49:20-23 ('bereaved and barren,' v. 21) and 50:1-3 ('divorce,' v. 1). Lam 1 speak of childlessness, bereavement, and widowhood, e.g. in vv. 1, 5, and 20. And child birth of redeeming significance are depicted in Isa 7:14-16 and Mic 5:2-5. However, Jer 15:5-9 is prioritised as it is a compact oracle of judgment with reference to bereavement and a mother of seven. Additionally, Isa 54:1-10 is prioritised because of its explosive character expressing a substantial turning-point. My findings will, of course, be coloured by the choices I have made among the material available as well as my interpretation of the chosen texts.

In addition to the exegetical work of Jer 15:5-9 and Isa 54:1-10, a brief overview of women's conditions in the OT and the implications of childlessness and motherhood will be given. Thusly, we shall look at the portrayal of curse and blessing in the Pentateuch, partly in general and partly with regards to offspring. We will glance upon the narratives of the patriarchs and matriarchs, the promises of Yahweh (e.g. Deut 7), and a law for convicting adulterous sin (Num 5).

Moreover, the Book of Ruth and the story of Hannah (1 Sam 1; 2:19-21) are chosen to illustrate different aspects of female conditions and discern why having a male heir was of such great significance; Naomi and Ruth are both widows and childless while Hannah is childless and has a co-wife. The significance of these narratives is emphasised as they illustrate obedience to the Law and the blessing that comes from this. Even though less attention is provided for the story of Sarah than to the stories of Naomi, Ruth, and Hannah, Sarah is still considered to be the prototype of 'the barren woman narratives' in the OT. It would be fruitful, no doubt, to study further the stories of the matriarchs in Genesis. However, the Book of Ruth and 1 Sam 1:1-2:21 are prioritised as they stand in extension of the Law, as parts of the historical literature.

Additionally, some light will be shed on the song in 1 Sam 2:1-10, also called the Song of Hannah. This lyrical text depicts the image of the sovereign Yahweh and

underscores that he intervenes through both blessing and curse. In v. 5 we are presented to a role reversal (at which we will look closer) between a barren woman and a mother of many children.

1.4 METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Since chap. 2 will contain an overview of a mix of related topics, from different types of material, there is need of some methodological clarifications. With the texts from the Pentateuch we will mainly try to establish an understanding of blessing and curse, specifically concerning the blessing of motherhood and the curse of childlessness. When reading the narratives of Naomi, Ruth, and Hannah we will make sociolinguistic considerations with support from Hennie J. Marsman's survey, *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East*, and an article by Philip F. Esler, "The role of Hannah in 1 Sam 1:1-2:21: Understanding a biblical narrative in its ancient context," in addition to theological dictionaries.

With regard to 1 Sam 2:1-10, the Song of Hannah is understood as a later redaction to the narrative in 1 Sam 1:1-2:21 and that is must have had "a different setting and function before its ascription to Hannah."² We will not go into details concerning this discussion. Although the song is "not wholly unsuitable to its secondary context,"³ for the purpose of this thesis, we will primarily investigate it as a song belonging to a category of biblical psalms elaborating Yahweh's sovereignty and beneficence.⁴

Chaps. 3 and 4 are exegetical discourses of Jer 15:5-9 and Isa 54:1-10. The translations provided are my own, unless otherwise is noted, and based on Biblia

² Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 14. See also Marko Marttila, "The Song of Hannah and its Relationship to the Psalter," in *Ugarit Forschungen: Internationales Jahrbuch für die Altertumskunde Syrien-Palästinas*, eds. M. Dietrich and O. Loretz (Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 2006), 500-501.

³ P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *1 Samuel*, AB (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1980), 76.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 74.

Hebraica Stuttgartensia. The employed tools for translation are BDB and Accordance Bible Software.⁵

Since we will investigate childlessness and motherhood in different contexts, we mainly refer to them as *motifs*. In the exegesis, however, we come across the use of metaphors in Jeremiah and Isaiah. Consequently, we should venture to define *metaphor* and *imagery*. An image expresses similarity or analogy by using ‘figure of speech.’⁶ We use imagery both to speak of God and to speak of ourselves in relation to God.⁷ When trying to say something familiar about something we know little of, we employ words and language that are known to us, with which we are confidential, but we employ them as images. We do this not to define objectively, and not to infer boundaries, but to put forth suggestions of interpretation.⁸ While an image is most often metaphorical, metaphors are not necessarily images.⁹ A metaphor consists of a ‘source domain’ and a ‘target domain,’ where the ‘target domain’ is illuminated by the ‘source domain.’¹⁰ Personification, in example, is a form of metaphor that “brings to expression something which cannot be expressed in plain language.”¹¹ Later in the thesis, we will take a closer look on the personification of Jerusalem/Zion as female.

1.5 STRUCTURE

The first main part of this thesis, chap. 2, is the overview of the motifs of childlessness as curse and motherhood as blessing – based on the material from the Pentateuch, the Book of Ruth and 1 Sam 1:1-2:21. This provides information

⁵ Occasionally, I will provide translations from LXX based on *Greek Septuagint*, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006. For these translations, I have employed *A Greek—English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (LEH), (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003), as translational tool.

⁶ Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques*, JSNTS (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), 251.

⁷ Kirsten Nielsen, “Bibelens poetisk sprog,” in *Tidsskrift for teologi og kirke*, ed. P. Gravem (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2009), 104.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁹ Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 251.

¹⁰ Øystein Lund, “*Min vei er skjult for JHWH...”: Veimetamorikk og veitematikk i Jes 40-55*, (Oslo: MF Norwegian School of Theology, 2004), 44. Lund builds on George Lakoff’s definition of metaphor.

¹¹ Elisabeth Boase, *The Fulfilment of Doom? The Dialogic Interaction between the Book of Lamentations and the Pre-Exilic/Early Exilic Prophetic Literature*, LHBOTS (Continuum: New York/London, 2006), 52.

interesting for us in the thesis' next main part, i.e. the exegesis of Jer 15:5-9 and Isa 54:1-10 in chaps. 3 and 4. Finally, chap. 5 will conclude the thesis. We will attempt to draw together the findings of each main chapter and endeavour to answer the research question. The following afterword is devoted to a few thoughts concerning motherhood and childlessness – connected with the image of God – today.

2. BLESSING AND CURSE

2.1 THE BLESSING OF MOTHERHOOD AND THE CURSE OF CHILDLESSNESS IN THE LAW

Blessing

The main root for 'to bless' in the HB is בִּרַךְ, which may also refer to 'to kneel' and 'to praise, greet.' The noun בְּרָכָה means 'blessing, praise.'¹² The root is essential in the בִּרַךְ-formula (as with אָרַךְ in the אָרַךְ-formula: the formula for cursing), e.g. used when wishing a blessing upon another.¹³ In the OT, "the godly man knew that the only kind of benedictory wishes he could utter were those which God alone could bring to reality."¹⁴

Among the different settings where benedictory wishes were common, the setting of house and family is the oldest (cf. Gen 24:60; 28:6; Ru 2:4). A wish of blessing was custom when showing gratitude or respect. Subsequently, we find the slightly paradoxical formulas used with Yahweh as the object (cf. Ps 103); since blessings come from Yahweh, blessing him would mean to 'praise' or 'give thanks.'¹⁵

For a woman in the Ancient Near East, being a mother was the most prestigious position one could have.¹⁶ And in the Book of Genesis, through the narratives of Sarah and Abraham, Rebekah and Isaac, and Rachel and Jacob, motherhood (and fatherhood) is conveyed as a blessing. The blessings of a sustained family line is explicitly expressed in the promises to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3, cf. 15:5) and transferred to Sarah in Gen 18:9-15; 21:1-7. The promises of Yahweh is repeated in Deut 7:12-14. If the people keeps the laws of Yahweh, he will keep the covenant and loyalty which he swore to do: "he will love you [אָהַבְךָ], bless you [בִּרַךְךָ], and multiply you; he will bless the fruit of your womb [בְּטַנְיֶיךָ] [...]. You shall be the most

¹² Josef Scharbert, "בִּרַךְ," in *TDOT*, vol. 2, ed. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, trans. J. T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 279-280.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 284.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 303.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 304-05.

¹⁶ Hennie J. Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East*, Oudtestamentische Studiën (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 191.

blessed of peoples, with neither sterility [עֲקָרָה] nor barrenness [עֲקָרְהוּ] among you and your livestock” (NRSV, v. 13-14).

Through the blessing – and intervention – of Yahweh, the women would be fertile and bear children and, consequently, the family line would be blessed (cf. Deut 28:4, 11). Similarly, in other cultures of the Ancient Near East, when a woman bore children, “she knew she was blessed by the gods.”¹⁷ For the people of Yahweh, the condition for such blessings would be that they, in return, follow the commandments (cf. Deut 11:27). In Deut 28, the blessings and promises of Yahweh are those of power, wholeness, and prosperity for the people; the condition is for the people ‘not to turn aside’ (תִּסּוּר לֹא) from the law and the commandments (cf. v. 14).

In several places outside the Law, we find descendants of the number seven to be especially significant with regard to the blessing of children: Job is blessed with seven sons and three daughters (Job 42:13);¹⁸ Ruth is *more than seven sons* to Naomi (Ru 4:15); and in 1 Sam 2:5 and Jer 15:9, a mother of seven is referred to, however, not in a positive manner in Jer 15. This may also be said about the mother in 2 Macc 7 who is bereaved – in a most horrendous way – of her seven sons. Nonetheless, Marianne Grohmann writes that the number seven “can be understood as the proverbial symbol of fullness.”¹⁹ A mother (or father) of seven may then count herself blessed in more than one way.

Curse

אָרַר, קָבַב, and קָלַל are three of the most common roots for ‘to curse,’ all of which may be used parallel to אָלַהּ בְּרִיךְ.²⁰ אָלַהּ, also, refers to ‘curse’ or ‘oath’ (cf. Deut 29:18-20; Isa 24:6; Jer 23:10). The curse of childlessness is made explicit in Num 5:11-31,

¹⁷ Ibid., 199.

¹⁸ Marsman pointed out Job 42 for me, cf. *ibid.*, 224.

¹⁹ Marianne Grohmann, “Psalm 113 and the Song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10): A Paradigm for Intertextual Reading?” in *Reading the Bible Intertextually*, ed. R. B. Hays et.al. (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2009), 127. See also Klein, *1 Samuel*, 17.

²⁰ For אָרַר, see Gen 27:29; Num 22:6; 24:9. For קָלַל, see Deut 11:26-29. For both אָרַר and קָלַל, see Gen 12:3, where they are used as synonyms. For קָבַב, see Num 23:11, 25.

in the law of jealousy (הַקְנָאָה תִּוְרָה, v. 29). If a man suspects his wife of infidelity, and he finds himself being jealous, this law could then be applied. The punishment for unfaithfulness was a curse of infertility. The law explains that the husband could lead his wife to the priest. The priest, then, prepares cursed water and makes the woman take an oath.²¹ If she is guiltless, she will not be affected by the bitter water (מִי הַמַּרִּים): “then she shall be immune and be able to bear children” (*NRSV*, v. 27). If she is guilty, however, she will be cursed: “the Lord make you an execration [אָלָהּ] and an oath among your people, when the Lord makes your uterus [יִרְכֶּךָ] drop, your womb [בְּטִנְיָךְ] discharge; now may this water that brings the curse [מַאֲרָרִים] enter your bowels and make your womb discharge, your uterus drop!” (*NRSV*, vv. 21-22). The water should cause bitter pain (מַרִּים) as well (v. 24). In this way, the woman should bear her iniquity (cf. v. 31).²²

As with regard to ‘blessing,’ it is Yahweh who has the power, ultimately, to curse people (cf. Num 23:8). Yahweh may curse the people, if they do not keep his commandments and they turn aside (סָרְתָם) from his way (cf. Deut 11:26-28). Juxtaposed to the blessings of Deut 28:3-6 (בְּרָכָה-formula), are the curses (מַאֲרָרִים-formula) in Deut 27:15-26. The latter of these curses, encompasses them all: “Cursed be anyone who does not uphold the words of this law [תִּוְרָה] by observing them” (*NRSV*, v. 26). Concerning childlessness, Yahweh is depicted as the agent ‘closing the wombs’ of women (cf. Gen 20:18).

2.2 NAOMI AND RUTH: WIDOWS AND CHILDLESS

The Book of Ruth is a narrative about two childless widows (three, when counting Orpah). Naomi loses her husband, Elimelech – an Ephrathite – whilst living in Moab. Her two sons,²³ who have married Moabite women, also die, making Naomi childless and Ruth and Orpah widows. Neither Ruth nor Orpah have children. In the

²¹ This is similar to other customs of the Ancient Near East, cf. Marsman, *Women*, 172.

²² Both אָלָהּ and מַרִּים is used in this text, cf. respectively vv. 18, 19, 22, 24, 27 and vv. 21, 23.

²³ Appropriately named Mahlon and Chilion, meaning ‘sickness’ and ‘destruction, corrosion.’

times of the OT, a woman's dignity was "bound up with children."²⁴ And the opportunity to lead a good – or sustaining – life, was for a woman also bound up with men: her father, brothers, cousins, husband or sons. Even though some widows could be economically independent, and also own land, they would most likely not be as socially secure as men were.²⁵

Harry A. Hoffner, suggests that the term for widow, אֵלְמָנָה, carries a completely negative nuance in the HB; it refers to women that have lost some or all her male protectors and are living without means and influence. The אֵלְמָנָה is, therefore, often mentioned together with the orphan and the Levite (cf. Deut 14:29; 16:11, 14). These vulnerable groups were of special concern in the laws, both in the ancient Mesopotamia and in the HB (cf. Deut 26:12).²⁶ A related Near Eastern term for widow literally means "one who does not have any peace."²⁷

Hennie J. Marsman argues that the image of the widow in the HB is somewhat ambiguous. She quotes Karel van der Toorn:

The widow may once have been a respectful daughter and a loyal wife; yet now she is free. Her unchosen freedom makes her an ambiguous figure. [...] On the one hand, she is a monument of devotion, wisdom, and chastity; on the other hand, she is known as an easy prey for religious fanatics, a prattler, and a woman of loose sexual habits.²⁸

If a widow had young children, she could manage the property of the late husband until her children had grown and could inherit.²⁹ Children, at least sons, were necessary to ensure the future generations and to provide for the parents in sickness and old age. In fact, sons could appear for the mothers before a court law.³⁰

²⁴ Klaus Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 40-55*, Hermeneia, ed. P. Machinist, transl. M. Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 435.

²⁵ Cf. Marsman, *Women*, 462, 691, 717-718.

²⁶ Harry A. Hoffner, "אֵלְמָנָה," in *TDOT*, vol. 1, eds. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, transl. John T. Willis. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 288.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Marsman, *Women*, 318.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 320.

³⁰ Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 435.

A widow could remarry, if she had a rich dowry or was young. She could also return to her father's house.³¹ Childless widows had the right to levirate marriage (marrying the husband's brother, Duet 25:5-10). In Gen 38, Tamar was asked to stay in their father's house until levirate marriage could be arranged. Childless widows could also be asked to return home, as Ruth and Orpah are asked to return to their mother's house (cf. Ru 1:8). Being childless, however, meant in general humiliation and reproach (cf. the story of Rachel, Gen 30:1, 23). This may imply, and we may assume, that returning home as a childless widow could mean shame for both the woman and her family.

In the Book of Ruth, Naomi finds herself in need to return to her hometown, Bethlehem. She asks both Ruth and Orpah to return to their homes; only Orpah returns. Ruth will not leave her mother-in-law and gives her a pledge of loyalty – both earnest and beautiful: “Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die – there will I be buried,” (*NRSV*, 1:16-17). Ruth is not only showing loyalty to her mother-in-law, she is also obedient to Yahweh. When the two women arrive in Bethlehem, the reaction in the town portray the implications a return of a widow may have had: “the whole town was stirred because of them” (*NRSV*, 1:19). Naomi gives herself a new name, Mara (מָרָא) – from the same root that is used for ‘bitterness’ and ‘bitter pain’ in Num 5. Not only is she bitter, her condition is also defined by emptiness as she proclaims: “I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty” (*NRSV*, 1:21).

As a widow, Naomi could not inherit, but had the usufructuary rights to Elimelech's land and to manage this land; when she died, “the land would be redistributed within the [מִשְׁפַּחַתָּה]” – within the family.³² In Bethlehem, Ruth and Naomi seek favour (חַסֵּד, cf. 2:2, 10, 13) from their kinsman (גִּבּוֹר) Boaz. Firstly, Ruth is allowed to glean barley safely in his fields (2:15). Secondly, Boaz ensures Ruth the security of

³¹ Hoffner, “אֵלֶּיָּהוּ,” 290.

³² Marsman, *Women*, 312, 463, 718.

marriage (3:1, 9-13; 4:9-10).³³ Boaz' wish that Ruth may find refuge (רָחַץ) under the wings (כַּנְפֵי) of Yahweh (2:12) is indeed a self-fulfilling prophecy: Ruth finds refuge under Boaz' cloak (כַּנְפֵי, 3:9) and he truly becomes her redeemer (גֹּאֲלָהּ).

Naomi is again blessed: Through the love (אַהֲבָה) from Ruth and her son, Obed, Naomi, too, is redeemed: "He [Obed] shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age" (*NRSV*, 4:15). Indeed, Naomi is truly blessed: Ruth is, to her, more than seven sons (שִׁבְעָה בְּנִים, cf. 4:15).

The Book of Ruth exemplifies obedience to Yahweh and his blessing by giving a child. The family line of Naomi and Ruth was not to be broken – the same family line in which the king David is to be born (4:22). Yahweh is keeping his promise of blessing – בְּרָכָה – not only to Ruth and Naomi, but to the people of Israel as a whole.³⁴

2.3 HANNAH: CO-WIFE AND CHILDLESS

The story of Hannah, in 1 Sam 1:1-2:21, is interesting to us as a barren mother narrative comparable to the stories of Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel in Genesis as well as Samson's mother (Judg 13:2-25) and the Shunammite woman (2 King 4:8-37).³⁵ In a related culture, in Mesopotamia, childlessness was associated with the sins of the women.³⁶ We see the texture of this in the HB as well (cf. Num 5). However,

³³ There are disagreements on whether or not the marriage between Boaz and Ruth is a levirate marriage, since Boaz was not a brother of Elimelech. Some argue that it may be seen as levirate marriage because the duty of Ruth's late brother-in-law would then go to the next-of-kin. However, it seems as though there are no clear indication on Ruth having the right to a levirate marriage, compared to Tamar in Gen 38. We may conclude, as Frederic Bush, that the marriage of Ruth and Boaz at least can be referred to as "a levirate-type marriage," cf. *ibid.* 314, 317-18.

³⁴ Cf. Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1996), 267-68. Bush argues: "the book [Ruth] is brought into relationship with the Bible's main theme of redemptive history," 268. For the genealogy's part in the unity of the Book of Ruth, cf. *ibid.* 10, 14-16.

³⁵ Hannah is not called 'barren' explicitly, but it is implied in the text, i.e. "she had no children" (1:2) and "the Lord had closed her womb" (1:5, 6).

³⁶ Marsman, *Women*, 196.

interestingly, none of the barren mother narratives convey that the sin and blame of these women were the cause for their childlessness.³⁷

Nevertheless, we know that being barren was considered a reproach (cf. Gen 30:23). When women did not bear children, they bore shame and, possibly, also fear. This fear would come from the threat of exclusion; in some customs of the Ancient Near East, childlessness was considered a reason for divorce.³⁸ In the story of Hannah, Yahweh is portrayed as the agent for Hannah's barrenness: "the Lord had closed her womb" (NRSV, 1 Sam 1:5, 6).³⁹ And Yahweh is, ultimately, the one who can take away her reproach and secure her place in the household.

Typical for the sons of the 'barren mother type' in the OT, is that they grow up to become important leaders for the people in crisis, as with Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Samuel: "The Deity acts not only in the particular event of childbearing, but also on a larger scale in fulfillment of divine promises to Israel."⁴⁰

In the setting of the story of Hannah, of the books of Samuel, Israel is waiting. Israel, portrayed as a marginal community, is waiting for something to bring an end to the chaos. And this waiting "begins in barrenness wherein there is no hint of future," in hopelessness.⁴¹ Then, through the intervention of Yahweh, Israel is given "a new historical possibility where none existed."⁴² Samuel is born.

Polygyny

But before this vindication, Hannah is waiting in misery. She is married to Elkanah, an Ephramite. Elkanah has a second wife, Peninnah, and while Hannah has no children (יְלֵדִים), Peninnah has several (יְלֵדִים), cf. 1:2, 4. Peninnah is Hannah's

³⁷ Joan E. Cook, *Hannah's Desire, God's Design, Early Interpretations of the Story of Hannah*. JSOTS (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 11. Cf. Victor P. Hamilton, "זָקַר," in *NIDOTTE*, vol. 3, ed. W. A. VanGemeren (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), 509: "it is difficult to find one instance in the OT where a named woman is cursed with childlessness."

³⁸ Cf. Marsman, *Women*, 176.

³⁹ Similarly with the women of the house of Abimelech, cf. Gen 20:18.

⁴⁰ Cook, *Hannah's Desire*, 10.

⁴¹ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, INTERPRETATION: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 11.

⁴² Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 12.

rival (רִיבָה)⁴³ and she provokes and torments Hannah because of her barrenness (1:6). Still, Hannah is the one whom Elkanah loves (אֶהְבֵּתָהּ, 1:5). The provocation, however, increases during the annual trip to Shiloh for the offering in the temple.

In his sociolinguistic reading of 1 Sam 1-2, Philip F. Esler investigates the features of patrilinearity, patrilocality and polygyny in the light of Hilma Granqvist's research on Palestinian Arabs from 1925 to 1931. Patrilinearity (keeping the inheritance within the family through the line of the father, e.g. marriage with the father's brother's son) and patrilocality (when the married woman moves away from her father's house to live in the household of her husband or her husband's father) are not my main concern here.⁴⁴ The custom of polygyny may, however, help us shed some light on the importance of motherhood relevant for the story of Hannah.

In her research, Granqvist found there was several reasons for, or benefits of, polygyny: the husband wanted a younger wife; the household needed more female labour; the wife was barren; or there were no male heirs.⁴⁵ When a man died, and there were no male heir, the consequences for the surviving wife could be severe. The heredity would go to a male cousin and the women would most likely face marginalisation and perchance even exclusion from the household. For this reason, barren women saw polygyny as means to protect oneself; if a co-wife produced a male heir, the childless wife might still have a chance to remain in the home.⁴⁶ Whom of the wives that gained control in the house in the case of polygyny, was not always obvious. The first wife, despite being barren, might still be the 'beloved one' or 'preferred one.'⁴⁷ Nevertheless, in the setting of Granqvist's research, barrenness

⁴³ Through a search in Accordance and the HMT, the root רִיבָה is not found used on any other rival wife or concubine in the Old Testament. It is a root most often used for enemies, foes or adversaries (cf. Gen 14:20; Ex 23:22; Isa 59:18; Ps 136:24), distress, anguish, or trouble (cf. Gen 32:7; 42:21; Isa 46:7; 63:9), attack (cf. Ps 129:1-2), or suffering (cf. Neh 9:27).

⁴⁴ Philip F. Esler, "The Role of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1:1-2:21: Understanding a biblical narrative in its ancient context," in *Kontexte der Schrift, Band II: Kultur, Politik, Religion, Sprache – Text*, ed. C. Strecker, (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2005), 18.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 21. Marsman elaborates similar reasons for bigynous and polygynous marriages within customs of the Ancient Near East, cf. *Women*, 126.

⁴⁶ Esler, "The Role of Hannah," 21.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 22.

“was considered a curse and a reproach.”⁴⁸ And if the second wife bore children, there might also be a possibility that the husband would still divorce his first wife.⁴⁹

We may never be able to justify a comparison between Granqvist’s research among Palestinian Arabs in the 1920’s and the story of Hannah.⁵⁰ However, with this as a background we may imagine that Hannah’s distress over her situation is not only caused by the disgrace of her barrenness and the spiteful mockery from her rival wife, but also a realistic fear of future marginalisation or exclusion (either by widowhood or divorce).

Hannah’s petition and the gift of Samuel

At Shiloh, with a culmination of distress, Hannah walks to the temple and prays to Yahweh (1:9-10).⁵¹ Then, she makes a vow: “O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me (זָכַרְתָּנִי), and not forget (לֹא־תִשְׁכַּח) your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death” (NRSV, 1:11).

Hannah does indeed find favour (חָנַן, cf. 1:18).⁵² Yahweh remembers (זָכַר) her and she conceives a son, Samuel (1:19-20). The name, שְׁמוּאֵל, is a play on the word for ‘to ask, inquire’ and ‘to loan’ שָׁאַל (cf. 1:17, 20, 27, 28). Hannah asks for a son (שָׁאַלְתִּי), then she lends him (הִשְׁאֵלְתִּהוּ) and gives him (שָׁאֵל) back to Yahweh.⁵³

⁴⁸ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 22-23.

⁵⁰ Esler, himself, writes: “Clearly there were significant differences between this culture [Palestinian Arab] and that of Israel in the Persian period, but there were also similarities in their social systems that meant these Palestinians were much closer culturally to ancient Israelites than they are to those of us who have been socialised into the cultures of Northern Europe (and its colonial offshoots) and North America,” *ibid.*, 19. This seems likely, however, we will not go as far as Esler does in his application of Granqvist’s research.

⁵¹ Women of the Ancient Near East would pray to deities concerning fertility, cf. Marsman, *Women*, 193.

⁵² Note the play on the word for favour, חָנַן, and Hannah’s name, חַנָּה, cf. Klein, *1 Samuel*, 9.

⁵³ Cf. *ibid.*, 9, 11.

The boy Samuel is a gift in more than one way. He is a gift from Yahweh to Hannah, restoring her from barrenness, shame and fear to the status of motherhood.⁵⁴ He is a gift from Hannah to Yahweh, to serve him as a priest and prophet. And finally, Samuel is a gift to the people of Israel, bringing hope in an unsettling time through his leadership and conduct. He leads Israel from marginalisation to the position of monarchy.

2.4 THE ROLE REVERSAL

The roles between Hannah and Peninnah had thusly shifted. Peninnah was no longer a threat as Hannah's rival (פְּנִינָה) since Hannah increased her status when becoming a mother. The hymn in 1 Sam 2:1-10,⁵⁵ portrays many such role reversals: the mighty have their bows broken and the weak gain strength (2:4); the satisfied must hire themselves out and the hungry become fat with spoil (2:5a); the barren (עֲקָרָה) becomes a mother to seven children while the mother to many withers (אִמֹּתַי לָלוּ) (2:5b). Yahweh is "ascribed authority over universal justice"⁵⁶: he is the one who kills and brings to life, who brings down to Sheol and to raises up (2:6); who makes poor and rich and brings low and exalt (2:7); and who raises the poor from the dust and lets them sit with princes (2:8).⁵⁷

Our interest here lies mainly with 2:5b and the key words עֲקָרָה and אִמֹּתַי לָלוּ. The first term, עֲקָרָה, means to be 'barren, sterile, childless' and may refer to both male and female – of mankind and animals – (Deut 7:14, male: עֲקָרָה, female: עֲקָרָה) and specifically to women (Gen 11:30, to Sarah; Judg 13:2, 3; Job 24:21; Ps 113:9). The word derives from the root עָקַר which also means 'to root up, pluck.'⁵⁸ The second

⁵⁴ Yahweh gives Hannah additional children as well, in 1 Sam 2:21.

⁵⁵ For more on the form, context, and setting of 1 Sam 2:1-10, cf. Klein, *1 Samuel*, 14-15; Marttila, "The Song of Hannah," 500-505.

⁵⁶ McCarter, *1 Samuel*, 74.

⁵⁷ The verses are paraphrased from *NRSV*.

⁵⁸ Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, (BDB), (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 785. Cf. Hamilton, "עָקַר," 509-10.

term, אֲמַלְלָהָ, has a little more ambiguous meaning, which may be best portrayed by looking at the root and its various contexts.

The meaning of the root אֲמַל varies from context to context; it may mean to be feeble, to be or grow weak, to languish, to pine away.⁵⁹ It may also indicate the loss of fertility, as we see in 1 Sam 2:5.⁶⁰ This root is infrequent; in the HB there are only 18 hits of אֲמַל.⁶¹ It is used to describe the conditions of different objects and corresponds to words such as אָבַל ('to mourn, lament, languish, dry up'); אָנָה ('to lament, mourn'); נָבַל ('to wither, fade, droop,' also: 'to be senseless, foolish'); קָמַל ('to be decayed'); הָפַר ('to be abashed, ashamed, confounded'); יָבֵשׁ ('to be dry, withered'); and שָׂדֶד ('to devastate, to be devastated'). Furthermore, the subjects for the root vary profoundly: fields (Isa 16:8); fishermen (Isa 19:8); creation (Isa 24:4); vines (Isa 24:7); the land (Isa 33:9); the gates of Judah (Jer 14:2); a sick heart (Ezek 16:30); all who live in the land (Hos 4:3); failing oil (Joel 1:10); the walls of daughter Zion (Lam 2:8); and, of course, women (1 Sam 2:5; Jer 15:9).⁶²

The role reversals in 1 Sam 2:4-9 depict Yahweh lifting up and giving strength to the weak, the marginalised, the poor, and the faithful.⁶³ Furthermore, the song illustrates Yahweh's power and sovereignty to weaken, kill, bring low, and punish and destroy.⁶⁴ What does the poet convey, then, when he juxtaposes these two women? The mother of many withers away, while the barren woman brings forth seven children. The song does not talk about bereavement. However, we may

⁵⁹ Roy E. Hayden and Anthony Tomasino, "אֲמַל," *NIDOTTE*, vol. 1, ed. W. A. VanGemeren (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), 426-27.

⁶⁰ BDB, 51.

⁶¹ Through a root search in Accordance and the HMT.

⁶² Cf. Hayden, "אֲמַל," 427.

⁶³ Psalm 113 is thought to be in relation to 1 Sam 2:1-10. This is due to the literal reference between 1 Sam 2:8 and Ps 113:7-8 in addition to the motif of the barren woman in v. 9. Shortly, Ps 113 can be said to depict the transcendent Yahweh, worthy of praise, reaching down to earth to bless. For discussion on the intertextuality between the two texts, and further analysis, see Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, WBC, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2002), 136; Grohmann, "Psalm 113 and the Song of Hannah," 123-31; Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, *Psalms 3*, Hermeneia, ed. K. Baltzer, trans. L. M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 185; Gert T. M. Prinsloo, "Yahweh and the poor in Psalm 113: Literary motif and/or theological reality?" in *OTE*, vol. 9, issue 3 (1996), 468-69.

⁶⁴ Cf. Klein, *1 Samuel*, 15-16.

assume a graveness in the consequences of this role reversal, in light of the parallel images; the one who did not have, will now be given plenty, and the one who had much, will have that taken away. This interpretation suits the *NRSV* translation of הַלְלָהּ אֲנִי in 1 Sam 2:5b: “she who has many children is forlorn.” *NO2011*, on the other hand, uses a Norwegian word for ‘withering away’ and a childless life is thusly conveyed as “a wilted, dried-up, atrophied existence.”⁶⁵ Either way, the woman being subjected to הַלְלָהּ אֲנִי may be identified as a woman no longer within the providence of Yahweh’s grace; she becomes ‘as good as’ a barren woman, with the shame and fear which that condition brings. While the barren woman gains the fullness of Yahweh’s blessing, bearing seven children. Ultimately, it is a juxtaposition between life and death.

2.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The curse of childlessness and the blessing of motherhood are referred to in several occurrences in the Law, through the narratives about Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel as well as legal code (Num 5) and the promises of Yahweh (e.g. Deut 27-28). We find that the blessing of offspring is in the very nature of the covenant between Yahweh and his people (Gen 12:2; 15:5; Deut 7:12-14). On the other hand, Yahweh is depicted as the agent for barrenness as he may ‘close the wombs’ of the women (Gen 20:18).

For a woman, a barren life would mean shame and reproach (Gen 30:1, 23) since producing an heir to her husband would ensure her status in the household and, subsequently, secure her economically and socially from the threat of marginalisation. This is profoundly intertwined with other components of a woman’s life. If subjected to widowhood, a woman would depend on other male relatives, preferably her own son. Had she no son, as Naomi and Ruth, her future would be less secure, depending on her husband’s relatives or the chance to remarry. Barrenness could also be the reason for polygyny, as with Elkanah’s marriage to Hannah and Peninnah. And even if the co-wife would produce a male

⁶⁵ Grohmann, “Psalm 113 and the Song of Hannah,” 127.

heir, the barren woman may not be entirely safe in her marriage (i.e. divorce) or in her widowhood – if her husband was to die and there were no male relatives either willing or able to take care of her.

Regarding the Book of Ruth and the story of Hannah, we have seen what the blessing of a son may lead to. It changes entirely the prospects of life. Naomi and Ruth are redeemed by their kinsman Boaz and their future is ensured by Ruth's son, Obed. Naomi is abundantly blessed; Ruth is for her more than the equivalent to seven sons. Hannah is freed from the torments of her co-wife and is elevated to a status beyond Peninnah. Her marriage is safe with Elkanah and, should she outlive him, so is her future as widow with a male heir.

Through the stories of Naomi, Ruth, and Hannah and their redeeming male heirs, is the redemption of Israel by Yahweh exemplified. Both families experience the blessing of a sustained family line, through which Israel will experience elevation: David, grandson of Obed, will become the great king of Israel, chosen by Yahweh through the judge Samuel.

Divine power and intervention is further emphasised in the Song of Hannah. Again, we see Yahweh portrayed as sovereign over life and death. Yahweh has the power to reverse roles: blessing the barren woman with seven children and letting the mother of many languish.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that there seems to be a slight ambiguity with the element of curse. On one side, curse is explicitly stated as a consequence for disobedience (Deut 11:26-27). Barrenness is defined as a due punishment for sin and childlessness is depicted as shameful. Yahweh may 'bring you back' as childless (cf. Naomi's *bitter* lament in Ru 1:20-21). On the other side, the reason for Yahweh closing Hannah's womb is not given and Sarah's, Rebekah's, and Rachel's barrenness is not explained as caused by sin. However, childlessness may nevertheless be seen as a curse in these incidents, because of its negative affect in the lives of women. In this ambiguity of the element of curse, Yahweh is still

understood as sovereign, while the reasons behind his acts of sovereignty are perhaps not depicted just as easily comprehended.

3. JUDGMENT: JEREMIAH 15:5-9

3.1 TRANSLATION⁶⁶

5) For who will have compassion for you, Jerusalem?

And who will lament for you?

And who will turn aside and ask about your welfare?

6) You have forsaken me, declares Yahweh, you have walked backwards.

I stretched out my hand towards you and destroyed you.

I became weary of having compassion.

7) And I have winnowed them with a winnowing fork by the gates of the land.

I bereaved and made my people perish

for they would not turn back from their ways.

8) More numerous than the sand of the sea are their widows⁶⁷ to me.

I brought to them, upon the mothers and upon the young men,⁶⁸

a destroyer at midday,

I let rage and terror fall upon her with suddenness.

9) The one having borne seven languishes.

She has breathed out her life, her sun has gone down in the middle of the day.

She is ashamed and abashed.

And the rest I give to the swords of their enemies,

declares Yahweh.

⁶⁶ As mentioned, my translation is based upon BHS. LXX, however, has several deviations from the MT. For a discussion on the relation between the Hebrew text and the *Vorlage* of LXX, see Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelley, and Joel F. Drinkard, *Jeremiah 1-25*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), xli-xlv.

⁶⁷ מָתָם- cf. *G, S, T*.

⁶⁸ cf. *S* (= וְעַל בְּחֹרֵי יָם).

3.2 STRUCTURE

- vv. 5-6 *Personification of Jerusalem as female*
- v. 5 Divine lament – rhetorical questions concerning the desolation of Jerusalem
- v. 6 The judgment of Yahweh, addressing 2. fem. sg.
- v. 6ab The sin of Jerusalem
- v. 6cd The indictment and punishment of Yahweh
- v. 7 *The people*
- v. 7 The judgment of Yahweh, referring to 3. masc. pl.
- v. 7ab The indictment and punishment of Yahweh
- v. 7c The sin of the people
- vv. 8-9abcd *Further destructions*
- v. 8 Referring to women
- v. 9abcd Referring to the woman
- v. 9ef Referring to the rest
- v. 9g *Declaration of Yahweh*

3.3 CONTEXT, FORM, AND SETTING

Jer 15:5-9 is thought, by commentators such as Holladay and Craigie, Kelley & Drinkard, to belong to the wider context of 14:1-15:9 – a passage consisting of both prose and poetry.⁶⁹ This passage is seen as a ‘counter-liturgy.’⁷⁰ It resembles a liturgy composed for a time of emergency, as found in Joel 1-2. However, in Jer 14-15, following the liturgy – the intercessions – are not good news, but bad news; following is not salvation, but judgment: “One is then faced with the possibility here that the sequence is to be understood as an imitation liturgy, a counter-liturgy as a vehicle for the judgment of Yahweh.”⁷¹

⁶⁹ Cf. Craigie et.al., *Jeremiah 1-25*, 1991, 199-200; William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 1—25*. Hermeneia, ed. P. D. Hanson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 421-23. (See also the discussion in *ibid.*, 421-22: Skinner assumes the unity to be secondary. Others, such as Volz, Rudolph, and Eissfeldt, see 14:2-16 and 14:17-15:4 as parallel units.)

⁷⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 422; Craigie et.al., *Jeremiah 1-25*, 200.

⁷¹ Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 422.

Holladay argues that the internal structure of the sequence is supported by the related functions of sections 14:2-6; 14:17-18; and 15:5-9. The section of 14:2-6 describes the emergency of drought, 15:5-9 describes the emergency of a military catastrophe, while 14:17-18 binds these two together with a description of both destructions from famine (a consequence of drought) and from sword.⁷² An additional emphasis done by Holladay, is on the possible references to Sheol found in this passage (for further discussion, see 4.4).⁷³

Craigie, Kelley & Drinkard see 15:5-9 as divine lament following the divine response in 15:1-4 (which again parallels the divine response in 14:10-17a).⁷⁴ They, too, see the section as a counter-liturgy: “when Jeremiah intercedes on behalf of the people, the opposite of the expected occurs. Instead of blessing, the Lord pronounces judgment. Jeremiah’s intercession mocks the intercession and the promises of the false prophets [Jer 14:13-16].”⁷⁵ Jer 15:5-9 is included in the scope of 14:1-15:4 as divine lament expressing “God’s sorrow over the necessity of this judgment.”⁷⁶

J. A. Thompson divides Jer 14:1-15:9 into two sections: 14:1-15:4 (consisting of two subsections, 14:1-16; 14:17-15:4) and 15:5-9. The subsection of 14:17-15:4 resembles 14:1-16 whilst 15:5-9 is a poem describing the fate of Jerusalem, continuing the theme of 15:1-4 and placed there by redaction.⁷⁷

Jack R. Lundbom maintains that 15:5-9 begins “a new editorial unit that concludes at 15:21.”⁷⁸ The upper limit is defined by the change from prose in v. 4 to poetry in v. 5. The prose in 4b (“because of what King Manasseh son of Hezekiah of Judah did

⁷² Berridge, on the other hand, argues that 15:5-9 is not a continuation of the drought liturgy of Jer 14 because constellations of בוֹשׁ (shame) and הַפֶּר (disgrace) “never has any bond with drought.” אִמַּל (‘to be weak, languish’), often related with drought, should in Jer 15:9a is to be understood as in 1 Sam 2:5. Cf. John M. Berridge, *Prophet, People, and the Word of Yahweh: an Examination of Form and Content in the Proclamation of the Prophet Jeremiah* (Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1970), 177, n. 335.

⁷³ Holladay, *Jeremiah*, 422.

⁷⁴ Cf. the table of structure in Craigie et.al., *Jeremiah 1-25*, 199.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 200.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 377, 385, 389.

⁷⁸ Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 724.

in Jerusalem" *NRSV*) is a later supplement encompassing Deuteronomic theology.⁷⁹ The lower limit is defined by the formula 'oracle of Yahweh,' followed by a *setumah*.⁸⁰

Our proposal is similar to that of Craigie, Kelley & Drinkard and, to some degree, Thompson. We see 15:5-9 as belonging to 14:1-15:4, however, feasibly as a secondary redaction.

The form of the section 15:5-9 is composed of different genres. Vv. 7-9 consist of judgment, v. 6a expresses indictment.⁸¹ However, v. 5 is in lament meter (*qinah* meter); the second colon is shorter than the first so as to present a falling rhythm and consequently portrait the lament of the hopelessness experienced by the singer.⁸²

Craigie, Kelley & Drinkard proposes a probable date and setting of the text during the exile, more specifically "during or after the first deportation and before the second deportation, thus during the reign of Jehoiachin or perhaps Zedekiah, about 597 B.C."⁸³ Similarly, Thompson argues that the "imagery points to the ravages of invasion and war and probably reflects the Babylonian invasion of 597 B.C. (2 K. 24:10-17)."⁸⁴

Holladay posits the date of November/December 601. Among other reasons, this is based on the fast which was declared in the ninth month of the fifth or eighth year of the reign of Jehoiakim, meaning the month of Chislev in either 604 (according to *M*) or 601 (according to *G*), cf. Jer 36:9.⁸⁵ Holladay follows *G*'s reading. Behind lies the specific historical setting: "it was a combination of the real drought and Jrm's

⁷⁹ Ibid., 722.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 724.

⁸¹ Cf. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 426-27.

⁸² Walter L. McConnell, "Meter," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, eds. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 475.

⁸³ Craigie et.al, *Jeremiah 1-25*, 200. Cf. Berridge, *Prophet*, 176.

⁸⁴ Thompson, *Book of Jeremiah*, 389.

⁸⁵ Here are Holladay's abbreviations employed: *M* – Masoretic Text; *G* – the Septuagint.

perception that the Babylonian army was a real threat which called forth the present sequence.”⁸⁶

3.4 INTERPRETATION

v. 5 The rhetorical questions in v. 5 is to be answered loudly and clearly: ‘No one.’ Jerusalem is left alone. The three questions may even uncover each their own ‘group of subjects’ willing to leave Jerusalem in desolation: there is no god who will have compassion for them (v. 5a); there is no prophet who will bemoan them or lament for them (v. 5b, cf. Jer 14:11); there is not a single person – not a neighbour nor a ‘passer-by’ – who will turn aside and ask about their welfare (v. 5c). Jerusalem has no one.

Berridge reads Ps 122:6 with Jer 15:5: “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem” (*NRSV*). Here we find both the root of שאל (‘to ask, pray’) and שלום (‘peace, welfare’) as in v. 5c: “It is a possibility that this terminology was used frequently in association with a blessing of Jerusalem.”⁸⁷ If this is true, such terminology might lead the hearer to associate the blessings towards Jerusalem with the omen of v. 5: that “Jerusalem may lose forever her old exalted position”⁸⁸ and with it the loss of Yahweh’s protection of his people (cf. v. 9).

Holladay argues that שאל carries a double meaning: ‘to ask’ *and* ‘to Sheol’. ‘To ask for one’s peace/welfare’ is the equivalent to asking ‘How are you’ (cf. 2 Sam 8:10) but it may also be a pun played on a reference to Sheol.⁸⁹

The speaker of the verse is somewhat hard to identify. It could be either Yahweh or Jeremiah. Craigie, Kelley & Drinkard calls it a “brief word of lament by Jeremiah, in *qinah* form”⁹⁰ preceding the divine lament of vv. 6-9. Holladay, too, acknowledges

⁸⁶ Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 428. For more on Holladay’s view of the historical background for the fast and the dating of Jer 14:2-15:9, see pp. 427-29.

⁸⁷ Berridge, *Prophet*, 178.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁸⁹ Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 441.

⁹⁰ Craigie et.al., *Jeremiah 1-25*, 204. Cf. Berridge, *Prophet*, 177.

the *qinah* meter in v. 5. However, he also argues that “there is no reason to divide the poem by speaker”⁹¹ as there are no such shifts of speaker in 14:2-6 and 14:17-18, which Holladay see as parallels to 15:5-9. As part of a sarcastic counter-liturgy, having Yahweh as the speaker of both v. 5 and vv. 6-9 intensifies the mockery of the counter-liturgy.⁹² Lundbom claims that two oracles are indicated (by the oracle formula in v. 6). Jeremiah may, however, be the speaker in v. 5; Yahweh and Jeremiah are then seen to speak alternately, as in 15:10-12.⁹³

v. 6 In v. 6 the speaker is Yahweh (1. sg) and the addressee is Jerusalem (2. fem. sg). The reason for Jerusalem’s desolation is this: She has forsaken (נִטְּשָׁתָּ) Yahweh. In Deut 32:15 the root נִטַּשׁ is used similarly, about Jacob’s rejection of God of creation and salvation: “He abandoned God who made him, he scoffed at the Rock of his salvation” (*NRSV*). Parallel to נִטְּשָׁתָּ is אָחֹזֵר הַלְלֵכִי: Jerusalem has walked backwards. This may either refer to the degeneration of Judah’s moral or emphasise the deliberate character of the rejection of Yahweh.⁹⁴

Jerusalem is now forsaken (cf. v. 5) because Jerusalem has forsaken Yahweh. She is to be indicted and punished. Yahweh is depicted as the agent of the devastation of Jerusalem; his outstretched hand brings destruction; he has become weary of having compassion and giving comfort, he is exhausted of patience – נִלְאֵיתִי הַנְּחָם – נָחַם. נָחַם in niphāl means ‘to be sorry,’ ‘to have compassion,’ or ‘to comfort oneself, to be comforted.’⁹⁵ *NRSV* translates the clause to “I am weary of relenting.” An exhaustion of נָחַם would be perceived as most severe. In Jon 4:2 and Joel 2:13, נָחַם is parallel to תִּנּוּן, רַחֲמוֹם, and תִּכָּסֵּר. When Yahweh is weary of having compassion, he is weary of keeping the covenant. The end of נָחַם is also the end of Yahweh’s loyalty in grace, mercy, and love.

⁹¹ Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 427.

⁹² Cf. *ibid.*, 427.

⁹³ Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, 724.

⁹⁴ Cf. Thompson, *Book of Jeremiah*, 389; Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, 727.

⁹⁵ Cf. BDB, 637.

The verb tenses in LXX differs from the verb tenses in MT. In LXX, vv. 6-7a and 9e, we find future tense in verbs with Yahweh as subject (i.e. 1. sg. fut. act. ind.) and aorist indicative (i.e. 1. sg. fut. act. ind.) in 7b-8. Generally, commentators choose to translate these verbs from the MT (e.g. hiph. waw cons. 1. sg.; piel perf. 1. sg.) into past tense, with variations of present perfect and simple past.⁹⁶

With the 2. sg. fem. form in vv. 5-6, Jerusalem is personified as female.

Personification of cities were common in the customs of the Ancient Near East. In Mesopotamian languages, cities were depicted in masculine or neuter terms. In Western Semitic languages feminine portrayal was more common. A city would be put in relation to a god or goddess as patron or, when feminine, as a deified spouse to the god. What we find in the HB is a modified form of this since deification of a city would not be possible within a monotheistic theology.⁹⁷ Jerusalem was no goddess, but rather a mortal (and sinful) woman.⁹⁸

Female personification of Jerusalem in Jeremiah occurs chiefly in texts of judgment and is associated with military invasion.⁹⁹ Only one place in Jeremiah is the personified city found in association with a salvation oracle (cf. Jer 30:12-17).¹⁰⁰ In Jer 15:5-6 the personification of Jerusalem is sustained with the use of 2. sg. fem form.¹⁰¹ However, Boase maintains that the woman in v. 9 is not herself Jerusalem. Nonetheless, she reasons that:

the close relationship between the personified city and her residents is evident. The events described are in past tense and are a reflection on the disaster that has befallen the city. Through the lament, however, the city/people are indicted.¹⁰²

v. 7 The receiver of the judgment in v. 7 changes from 'you' to 'the people,' referred to in 3. masc. pl. We may detect a chiasmic parallel between v. 6 and v. 7;

⁹⁶ Cf. Boase, *Fulfilment of Doom*, 74; Craigie et.al., *Jeremiah 1-25*, 197; Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 421; Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, 723-25; Thompson, *Book of Jeremiah*, 388-389.

⁹⁷ Elizabeth Boase, *Fulfilment of Doom*, 54.

⁹⁸ Marsman, *Women*, 706.

⁹⁹ Boase, *Fulfilment of Doom*, 63.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁰¹ According to Boase, Jer 15:5-6 includes a "developed personification," meaning that the qualification of *action* is attributed to the city, cf. *ibid.*, 74.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

the sin of Jerusalem in 6ab and the people's sin in 7c; and Yahweh's condemnation and punishing actions in 6cd and 7ab.

Yahweh has winnowed his people with a winnowing fork.¹⁰³ The figure of speech is taken from harvest terminology and would be:

well understood by the people of Judah, who annually gathered their harvest onto the threshing floors of the land and, after cutting the stalks to pieces with the threshing sledge, would toss the mixture of chaff and grain into the air with large wooden forks to let the wind winnow the grain. The chaff would be blown aside and the grain would remain.¹⁰⁴

The image of chaff (קֶשֶׂא or מִיץ) scattered by the wind, we find in other Old Testament poetry, cf. Ps 1:4; 35:5; 83:13; Is 17:13; Jer 13:24. We may picture the scattering of the people as making them weak and, even more so, alone and forsaken: “a metaphor for judgment and defeat.”¹⁰⁵

Yahweh winnows the people בְּשַׁעַרֵי הָאָרֶץ – ‘by the gates of the land.’ What does this mean? Lundbom suggests that ‘gates’ are synecdoche for ‘cities,’ similarly to the image we find in Jer 14:2 with ‘Judah’ and ‘her gates’ meaning the ‘cities of Judah.’¹⁰⁶ Is the people, then, scattered outside the protection of the cities? What does אֶרֶץ־אֲרָם signify?

The gates of Sheol

Holladay argues that אֶרֶץ־אֲרָם is a reference to Sheol. He argues for several references to Sheol (as אֲרָם) in Jer 14:1-15:9; specifically 14:2, 18; 15:7.¹⁰⁷ In the case of 14:2, Holladay scrutinises לְאֲרָם־לְקִרְרָה. Directly, it translates to ‘be dark’ and ‘to the

¹⁰³ Note the play on words, אֲרָם־בְּמִצְרָה. Cf. LXX: διασπερῶ αὐτοὺς ἐν διασπορῶ: ‘I will disperse them in diaspora.’ The repetition of ‘disperse’ may be called *figura etymologica*, cf. Georg A Walser, *Jeremiah: A Commentary based on Ieremias in Codex Vaticanus*, Septuagint Commentary Series (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 289.

¹⁰⁴ Thompson, *Book of Jeremiah*, 390.

¹⁰⁵ Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 441. Cf. Isa 41:15-16; Jer 51:2; Ezek 22:15.

¹⁰⁶ Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, 695; 728.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 422.

ground, to the earth,' creating a contrast to עֲלֶהְיָהּ ('rise, go up') in the last colon – the same contrast we find in Isa 14:12-13.¹⁰⁸ The root קָרַר means also "to be dressed in mourning attire."¹⁰⁹ Here we find additional similarities with Lam 2:9 ('Her gates have sunk into the ground,' *NRSV*) and Isa 3:26 ('And her gates shall lament and mourn; ravaged, she shall sit upon the ground.' *NRSV*). Holladay advocates a reading with Isa 14:12-15, with regard to the meaning of אֲרָרָהּ in Jer 14:2. Subsequently, he suggests this translation of Jer 14:2c: "(her gates) are dark to/in Sheol."¹¹⁰ He argues thusly: "Sheol, too, has gates (Ps. 9:14), which are evidently implied in 15:7, and that the gates of Jerusalem might merge in this poem with the gates of Sheol, or remind the hearer of the gates of Sheol, is horrifying: one notes that Ps 9:14-15 contrasts the gates of Sheol with the gates of Zion."¹¹¹ Is the 'outcry of Jerusalem' rising up (in 14:2) "an outcry from the living city of Jerusalem? Or is it an outcry of Jerusalem from Sheol?"¹¹²

With regard to 14:18, Holladay argues for an allusion to Sheol, i.e. אֶל-אֲרָרָהּ (literally: 'to the/a land'), because of the theme of death in the verse in addition to the related diction in Jer 23:11-12.¹¹³ He writes: "The prophets and priests will peddle their wares all the way to the grave."¹¹⁴ Holladay omits הַיָּם¹¹⁵ and suggests to translate אֶל-אֲרָרָהּ with either 'the land which they do not know' or 'land where there is no knowledge.' This again relates to Ps 88:13 where Sheol is described as 'land of forgetfulness.'¹¹⁶

What, then, are 'the gates' in 15:7? Exegetes often interpret this as the gates of the cities throughout the land or even outside Judah's borders.¹¹⁷ Holladay argues that

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 429-30.

¹⁰⁹ Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, 695.

¹¹⁰ Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 430.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 437.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 438. Lundbom, on the other hand, would argue that this refers to the exile, where the priests and prophets must have wandered to places they did not know beforehand, *Jeremiah 1-20*, 713.

¹¹⁵ Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 420, n. 18a.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 438.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Craigie et.al., *Jeremiah 1-25*, 204; Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, 728; Thompson, *Book of Jeremiah*, 390.

the text clearly refers to the gates of Sheol, (cf. Is 38:10, שְׁעַרֵי שְׁאוֹל; Job 38:17, שְׁעַרֵי מְנוּת), that Yahweh has scattered his people in the gates of Sheol.¹¹⁸

Additionally, Holladay suggests this translation of v. 7c which would support this theory: “I have wiped them out from their ways of no return.”¹¹⁹

Similarly, Mitchell Dahood writes, in his comment to Ps 9:14, about ‘the gates of Death:’ “The domain of the dead was pictured as a vast city with gates ruled by King Death. The poet aims to contrast the gates of Death with the gates of Daughter Zion in the following verse.”¹²⁰ Moreover, when translating Ps 18:8, Dahood translates שְׁעַרֵי הַמָּוֹת with “the nether world” and explains this with a comparison with Isa 14:9.¹²¹ Concerning Jer 15:7, Dahood translates the clause to: “the gates of the nether world.”¹²²

How do we know, then, when to translate שְׁעַרֵי with ‘land, earth’ and when to translate it with Sheol? *NRSV* follows Dahood’s suggestion in Is 14:9, but not in Ps 18:7[8]. Dahood argues that many scholars have found insights from “Akkadian, Aramaic, Ugaritic, and biblical literature,” but still “the philological datum seems to have made little impact upon translators of the Bible.”¹²³

If Holladay and Dahood are correct in their assumption of Sheol in Jer 15:7, these could be some of the consequences: the severity of the poem intensified; the punishment of Israel emphasised; and the brutality of the motif of the mother languishing in v. 9 magnified. However, the general translation of שְׁעַרֵי is ‘land, earth.’ Lundbom is most likely correct in his clarification of שְׁעַר: ‘gates’ is indeed a

¹¹⁸ Holladay argues that Jerome has a similar understanding, “the thresholds of the nether-world,” cf. *Jeremiah 1*, 442.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 421, 442.

¹²⁰ Mitchell Dahood, S. J., *Psalms I: 1-50*, AB (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1965), 57.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 101, 106.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 57. In *TDOT*, Magnus Ottosson writes that שְׁעַרֵי may occasionally “mean the Underworld or in any case point to a connection with Sheol, e.g., in Isa 26:19.” Cf. Ottosson, “שְׁעַרֵי,” in *TDOT*, vol. 1, ed. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 399.

¹²³ Dahood, *Psalms I*, 106.

synecdoche for ‘cities,’¹²⁴ cf. Deut 28:52; Judg 9:44 (reference with ‘city’: **הָעִיר** (**שָׁעַר**)); Isa 14:31 (**שָׁעַר**, paralleling **עִיר**). In Nah 3:13 we find a similar clause to Jer 15:7: **שְׁעָרֵי אֶרֶץְךָ** (‘the gates of your land’). Neither here do we detect a reference to Sheol. Furthermore, Lam 2:10 includes **לְאֶרֶץ** twice; this is probably an implication of mourning, not Sheol. There are, however, literal reference to Sheol in e.g. Isa 38:10: **שְׁעָרֵי שְׁאוֹל** (‘the gates of Sheol’) and 1 Sam 2:6 **מִזְרִיד שְׁאוֹל** (‘he brings down to Sheol,’ *NRSV*). This points at the possibility that when Sheol was thought of, Sheol could be written explicitly. Explicit expressions are not, of course, a necessity in Hebrew poetry, but the biblical data show that it is high possibility for the translation of ‘the gates of the land’ in Jer 15:7. Additionally, we should not follow Holladay’s translation of Jer 15:7c (‘I have wiped them out from their ways of no return’). The indictment of Yahweh in 7c is referring the moral decline of the people.

Should we take a look on the Greek text, it reads: **διασπερῶ αὐτοὺς ἐν διασπορᾷ ἐν πύλαις λαοῦ μου** (‘I will disperse them in dispersion: in the gateways of my people’). Here ‘the gates’ are connected to the people of Yahweh.¹²⁵ Moreover, it is not unproblematic to see ‘dispersion’ as a reference to Sheol. There are references to both death and dispersion in LXX Jer 41:17 and Dan 12:2. Any reference to death, both in LXX and HB, should not, however, be taken as an indication of Sheol without further proof. Besides, it is my viewpoint that the poem does not need a reference to Sheol to prove the severity of the message: death, ruin, and nothingness is now the lot of the people.

To bereave and make perish

In Jer 15:7, Yahweh is depicted as the agent (cf. v. 6) for scattering the people, bereaving them and making them perish. Yahweh has punished not just any people, but *his* people, because ‘they would not turn back from their ways.’

¹²⁴ Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, 728.

¹²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*

Bereavement is an extreme form of punishment. The root שכל can mean to bereave someone, e.g. to make childless (cf. Gen 42:36; 1 Sam 15:33; Hos 9:12), as well as causing miscarriage, for both women and animals (cf. Ex 23:26; 2 King 2:21).¹²⁶ The root may also express the barrenness or unproductivity of land, cf. 2 King 2:19.¹²⁷ שכל “describes the form of God’s punishment upon his people for disobedience. It is not that God will curse them with sterility, but rather he will take away the children whom they already have by violent means, for example by the sword.”¹²⁸ There are, however, exceptions. Some people are not bereaved due to disobedience, e.g. Job and the loss of his children (cf. Job 1).¹²⁹ In 2 Macc 7, seven brothers are tortured and killed and their mother thusly bereaved. This devastation is depicted as ultimately governed by Yahweh (cf. 7:33), even though the seven sons suffers due to the command of a heathen king. The crisis is interpreted as response to sin (cf. 7:32).

In LXX שכל is given various translations, showing us the width of this root. Some of the most relevant translations are: ἀτεκνῶω (‘to make childless, make/be barren, miscarry,’ cf. Gen 27:45; Deut 32:25; 1 Sam 15:33; Jer 15:7; Ezek 36:12-14; Hos 9:12, 14; Lam 1:20); ἄγονος (‘sterile, childless,’ cf. Ex 23:26, here parallel with στειρα – ‘sterile, barren’); ἄσθενέω (‘weak, feeble,’ cf. Mal 3:11).

In our text, Jer 15:7, the meaning of שכל is to make the people childless, to bereave and kill the children of the people. It would not be possible to emphasise the extremity of the retribution any further. This is emphasised with the parallel word for שכלתי, namely אבדתי. Here in v. 7, the root אבד means to “cause to perish, destroy, kill” in judgment for sin.¹³⁰ And to let someone perish, is to bereave them: to bereave a family of their family line; to bereave of life. For a nation, it means destruction, it indicates extermination.

¹²⁶ BDB, 1013-14.

¹²⁷ Victor P. Hamilton, “שכל,” in *NIDOTTE*, vol. 4, ed. W. A. VanGemeren (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), 106.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ BDB, 2.

v. 8 The theme of bereavement continues in v. 8: wives lose their husbands and mothers lose their sons (cf. Isa 47:8-9). From the overview of actions happening to ‘the people’ in v. 7, the poem’s ‘lenses’ now focuses in on the women. The language seems to be less metaphorical than of vv. 5-6: “Yahweh talks now about real widows and real mothers made childless.”¹³¹ In a way, the poem takes a step closer to reality and the effect is that of escalation of tension and chaos.

The expression ‘more numerous than the sands of the sea’ (מְרוּבֵּי יַם) is “stock hyperbole for an exceedingly great number that cannot be measured ([Jer] 33:22; Gen 41:49).”¹³² In Holladay’s words, it is “a terrible reversal of the great promise to Abraham and Jacob,” cf. Gen 15:5 and the expression ‘counting of stars.’¹³³

There are some text critical issues to consider concerning v. 8. and three of them will be commented upon here. Firstly, we follow *G*, *S*, and *T* in translation of ‘their widows’ (אֵלְמִנְתָּוּ) with the 3. masc. pl. Holladay notes that אֵלְמִנְתָּוּ “must be construed as an aberrant spelling of ‘his widows’ [...] the mem evidently dropped out by haplography.”¹³⁴ Secondly, *G* omits ‘to them.’ Here, Holladay suggests that this may be dittographic from עַל־אֵם.¹³⁵ Here, we have chosen to follow the reading of *S* when translating ‘and upon the young men’ (transliterated to Hebrew: בְּחַוְרֵי־לֵבָרֶעֱלָהֶם), keeping לְהָם. This 3. masc. pl. suffix encompasses both the young men and the mother. אֵם is translated into the plural (cf. Craigie, 196; *NRSV*). However, other commentators have kept the mother in singular (cf. Holladay, 421; Lundbom, 728; Thompson, 389).

The destroyer (שֹׁדֵד from the root שָׁדַד, ‘to devastate, ruin’) is sent upon both the young men and their mothers: killing the men and bereaving the mothers. This

¹³¹ Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, 724.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 728.

¹³³ Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 442; cf. Craigie et.al., *Jeremiah 1-25*, 204.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 421, n. 8a-a.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 421, n. 8b.

destroyer is brought upon them by Yahweh (הַבַּאֲתָרִי). The destroyer is sent at midday, the “time of supposed security.”¹³⁶ The young men are men of soldiering age being “crushed by the battle” at noon, “the time of surprise attacks.”¹³⁷ Noontime might also indicate dying unexpectedly, or prematurely.¹³⁸ The devastation for the women in v. 8 is indeed grave, both in character and in consequence. The ruin is said to come suddenly (פְּתָאֵם), with rage (עִיר, cf. ‘wrath’ in Hos 9:11) and terror (בְּהִלֹּתַי). As for the consequences (both in the short and long run), they too are critical. As we have seen in chap. 2, women were on a large scale dependent on men, their husbands as well as their sons, to have a place in society and in the household. In the setting of Jer 15:5-9, the women are faced with military invasion. And even if they would survive themselves, in the aftermath they would be left with nothing, only extreme trauma and deep emotional wounds.

v. 9 In v. 9, the poem focuses in on the *one* woman, the mother of seven – signifying “the fulfilled or complete mother” (cf. 1 Sam 2:5; Ru 4:15; 2 Macc 7).¹³⁹ Thusly, the escalation of the poem’s tension is taken on a higher level; as the picture of one woman languishing is enlarged, the intensity of the poem is magnified: “The poem is not symmetrical: the center of gravity is strongly toward the end, giving an emotional climax to the sequence.”¹⁴⁰ In the Norwegian translation, this is accentuated with the adverb ‘even’: “Even she who has borne seven children, withers.”¹⁴¹

Bereft, forlorn, or loss of fertility?

And the costs for this woman are disastrous: She languishes, אֲמַלְלָהּ, like the gates of Judah do in Jer 14:2. As we have seen in chap. 2, the meaning of the root אֲמַל

¹³⁶ BDB, 843.

¹³⁷ Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 443.

¹³⁸ Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, 728. Cf. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 443.

¹³⁹ Craigie, *Jeremiah 1-25*, 204.

¹⁴⁰ Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 425.

¹⁴¹ My translation from NO2011 into English.

varies greatly. It may mean to be feeble, to be or grow weak, to languish, to pine away¹⁴² or indicate the loss of fertility.¹⁴³

The Greek word used in Jer 15:9, LXX, is κενόω, which translates ‘to be left empty, waste away, languish’.¹⁴⁴ John Chrysostom, in his comment on the clause ἐκενώθη ἡ τίκτουσα ἐπτά, interprets thusly: “I.e., she with many children became without children.”¹⁴⁵

In translating אָמַלְלָהּ, NO2011 uses (as in 1 Sam 2:5) ‘withers’ (“visner”), while *NRSV* translates to ‘languishes’ in Jer 15:9, but ‘is forlorn’ in 1 Sam 2:5. To be forlorn and to languish is not the same thing. To be forlorn is to be left, or – perhaps – worse, to be bereaved (cf. v. 7). For a woman, to languish may mean the same as hitting menopause, as losing fertility. This is not a tragic thing if the woman already has given birth to seven children. However, the build-up of the poem is that of desolation (v. 5), destruction (v. 6), bereavement (v. 7) and devastation (v. 8). As mentioned, the movement of the poem’s lenses toward the woman in v. 9 magnifies the tension; likewise we may assume that the severity of אָמַלְלָהּ in v. 9 mirrors the grade of severity in the rest of the poem or, in fact, amplifies it. This acuteness is underscored by the clauses following: the woman ‘has breathed out her life,¹⁴⁶ her sun has gone down in the middle of the day. She is ashamed and abashed.’

The poem does not describe the ‘simple’ loss of fertility for a mother of seven; it implies the loss of her children, perhaps the loss of her husband as well, and definitely the loss of good, sustaining conditions in life. She is, we might say, as the ‘virgin daughter’¹⁴⁷ in Jer 14:17 “struck down with a crushing blow, with a very grievous wound” (*NRSV*). And the woman’s shame (בּוֹשׁ, הָפַר) is similar to the

¹⁴² Hayden, “אָמַלְלָהּ,” 426-27.

¹⁴³ BDB, 51.

¹⁴⁴ LEH.

¹⁴⁵ Chrys. *fr. in Jer.* 64.904 – quoted in Walser, *Jeremias in Codex Vaticanus*, 289.

¹⁴⁶ Note the assonance between נִפְקְדָהּ and נִשְׁפָּקָהּ.

¹⁴⁷ The expression ‘virgin daughter’ in Jer 14:12 is a personification of Jerusalem, similar to ‘virgin daughter of Zion’ in 2 King 19:21; Lam 2:13. For more on this, cf. H. Haag, “בַּת,” in *TDOT*, vol. 2, eds. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, transl. J. T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 334.

shame (בֹּזֵז), humiliation (כְּלָם), and dismay (הִתְהַרְתֵּם) the nobles and the farmers suffer under because of the drought (Jer 14:3-4).¹⁴⁸

Lastly, v. 9 disembarks by describing Yahweh's actions towards the rest – the remains of the people. The poem, in a way, 'zooms out' again and connects v. 9 with 'the people' in vv. 6-7. This "destruction of the remnant"¹⁴⁹ is by the hand of Yahweh; he gives (נָתַן) them 'to the swords of their enemies.' Yahweh 'hands them over' (cf. Num 21:3; Deut 7:2; Judg 20:13; Ps 118:18; Hos 11:8; Mi 5:3).¹⁵⁰ The expression of 'the remnant' (שְׁאֵרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל) may constitute a reversal of the 'first-fruits of Israel' (cf. Jer 2:3) to be the 'last-fruits of Israel' (cf. Jer 6:9).¹⁵¹

The curse is overwhelming. The destruction is total. The judgment is absolute. There is no mention of 'a shoot' or 'a branch' from where to once more grow and prosper (cf. Isa 11:1): even the *rest* shall perish.

3.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Jer 15:5-9, a divine lamentation as part of the counter-liturgy in Jer 14:1-15:9, is an oracle of judgment. The indictment and punishment of Yahweh interprets the attack on Jerusalem, assumed 597 B.C. The portrayal of Jerusalem, personified as female, is that of desolation and misery. No one is there for her, no neighbour, no prophet, not God. The cause for this is Jerusalem herself: she has forsaken Yahweh and, subsequently, walked away from his Law. Therefore, she is cursed (cf. Deut 27:26). Yahweh brings destruction and bereavement upon his people; they are winnowed, spread like the chaff in the wind, destined for devastation. Although there is no reference to Sheol in the poem, the punishment leads to death: families are to perish and the people is to be ruined.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 443; Craigie et al., *Jeremiah 1-25*, 204.

¹⁴⁹ Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 443.

¹⁵⁰ נָתַן may also be used for 'turning one's back on someone' (v. 5, cf. 2 Chr 29:6). See also Jer 15:4, "I will make (נָתַן) them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth" (*NRSV*).

¹⁵¹ Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 213.

The female terminology is expanded in vv. 8 and 9. There is no curse of barrenness, and no mention of the expression עֲקָרָה. However, אֶלְמִנָּתוֹ, שִׁפְלֹתַי, and אִמְלָלָה convey the horrid conditions; childlessness is, in the least, alluded to. The people are bereaved. Women who used to be safe, with husbands and sons, will now become widows and childless: they will be traumatised and in despair; empty and bitter as Naomi (cf. Ru 1:20-21). The fulfilled mother of seven, languishes. She is ashamed, abashed, and most likely bereft of her children. And the image from 1 Sam 2:5 is again reversed. The curse cast upon the people is conveyed as complete and the totality of the judgment irreversible.

4. SALVATION: ISAIAH 54:1-10

4.1 TRANSLATION

1) Rejoice, barren one that have not borne!
Break forth with shouts of joy and cry aloud
you that were never in labour!
Because more children shall belong to the desolate one
than children to the married one,
says Yahweh.

2) Enlarge the place of your tent
and let the curtains of your dwelling place be stretched out.¹⁵²
Do not hold back: lengthen your tent cords
and strengthen your tent pins.

3) Because right and left you will increase,
and your offspring will inherit the nations
and inhabit the desolate cities.

4) Do not be afraid, for you shall not be ashamed.
And do not be confounded, for you shall not be abashed.
Because the shame of your youth you shall forget,
and the reproach of your widowhood you shall not remember any longer.

5) Because your husband is your Maker,
Yahweh Sabaoth is his name,
and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel;
called God on all the earth.

¹⁵² NRSV has a similar translation: "let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out."

6) For as a wife forsaken, and hurting in spirit, Yahweh calls on you,
and [as] a woman of one's youth that was rejected,
says your God.

7) For a brief moment I left you,
but in great compassion I gather you.

8) In a flood of wrath I hid my face from you for a moment,
but in everlasting kindness I have compassion for you,
says your Redeemer Yahweh.

9) Because this is like the waters¹⁵³ of Noah for me:
As I swore not to let the waters of Noah
pass over the earth again,
thusly I swore not to be angry with you and not to rebuke you.¹⁵⁴

10) Because the mountains may depart
and the hills may shake,
but my love for you will never depart
and the covenant of my peace will never be shaken,
says Yahweh, who has compassion for you.

¹⁵³ Following the MT, but *G* proposes כְּמַי.

¹⁵⁴ Some support for the translation of v. 9 is found in the translation by Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 432-33.

4.2 STRUCTURE

vv. 1-5	<i>Appeals</i>
v. 1	Appeal to rejoice and the reason why
vv. 2-3	Appeal to expand the dwelling place and the reason why
vv. 4-5	Appeal to not be afraid or humiliated and the reason why
v. 6	<i>The calling of Yahweh</i>
vv. 7-9	<i>The abandonment of Yahweh coming to an end</i>
v. 7	The moment of abandonment
v. 8	The wrath of the moment
v. 9	The flood of the wrath
v. 10	<i>Yahweh renews the covenant of his peace</i>

4.3 CONTEXT, FORM, AND SETTING

W. A. M. Beuken argues for the unity of Isa 54. He sees vv. 1-6 as prophetic speech and vv. 7-17 as speech by Yahweh. Furthermore, a single woman is the addressee throughout the passage, apart from 17c which “prepares the way for the change-over to the plural form of address, which is found throughout Ch. lv.”¹⁵⁵ Others (e.g. Claus Westermann), too, see chap. 54 as one unit, but would divide the subsections between v. 10 and v. 11. There is a coherent theme in vv. 1-10: the profound shift from despair to salvation.¹⁵⁶

There are disagreements on how comprehensive the hymnic nature of the passage is. An element of promise may be detected in relation to a fertility oracle (cf. Gen 24:60). This may thusly be seen as a combination of a fertility oracle and an oracle of salvation.¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, in “the view of Westermann, the element of promise dominates the entire chap. in the sense that vv. 1-6 corresponds to the ‘Ich-Klage’, vv. 7-10 to the ‘Anklage Gottes’.”¹⁵⁸ We may here also have in mind the petition of

¹⁵⁵ Willem A. M. Beuken, “Isaiah liv: The Multiple Identity of the Person Addressed,” in OTS, vol. 19, ed. A. S. van der Woude (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 31.

¹⁵⁶ Jan L. Koole, *Isaiah III. (Volume 2: Isaiah 49-55)*, HCOT (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 347.

¹⁵⁷ F. Crüsemann argues for the fertility cult as the original *Sitz im Leben*, cf. Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 434; Koole, *Isaiah III*, 348.

¹⁵⁸ Koole, *Isaiah III*, 348.

Hannah in 1 Sam 1:11: "O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give your servant a male child" (NRSV).

The setting of the passage is that of Israel's restoration from the Babylonian exile, drawing upon the experiences of both the barren Sarah and the Egyptian bondage.¹⁵⁹ Will Yahweh yet again be able to bring blessing and salvation to his people?

4.4 INTERPRETATION

v. 1 The structure of v. 1 may be set up like this:

1a α Rejoice,

1a β barren one that have not borne!

1b α Break forth with shouts of joy and cry aloud

1b β you that were never in labour!

1c α Because more children shall belong to the forsaken one

1c β than children to the married one,

1d says Yahweh.

Westermann argues that 54:1 echoes "the age-old lament of the childless woman."¹⁶⁰ The prophet uses elements from contemporary laments in a way that must have seemed paradoxical to the hearers. It would seem meaningless and pitiless to call on a barren woman to sing and rejoice. But the explanation comes in 1c: 'Because more children shall belong to the forsaken one than children to the married one.' In this way, according to Westermann, 54:1 draws upon both hymns (such as Ps 113) and laments.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 345; John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 413, 416-18; John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, WBC (Colombia: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2005), 800-01.

¹⁶⁰ Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary*, OTL (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1969), 272.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 272.

Parallels are found between 1a α and 1b α as well as 1a β and 1b β . 1c α and 1c β are additional contrasting parallels, with the repetition of בְּנֵי (masc. plur. constr.): בְּנֵי-שׁוֹמְמָה and בְּנֵי בְּעוּלָה. A role reversal is about to happen: the desolate woman is to have more children than the woman with a husband. V. 1 is an imperative to rejoice targeting a barren woman, giving her the promise that soon she will become a mother.¹⁶²

The main meaning of the root רָנַן is 'to rejoice' and it belongs primarily to the cultic language (but is not limited to this). Parallel verbs to רָנַן, too, indicate loud expressions, e.g. צָהַל ('shout, cry') and פָּצַח ('break forth with'), as we find in v. 1. Usual subjects for רָנַן are people or personal concepts, e.g. Zion.¹⁶³ An appeal to rejoice may come as response to the redeeming acts of Yahweh – or as expectations to Yahweh's deliverance: "Deutero-Isaiah envisions proleptically the people's expected deliverance and return when he calls for rejoicing."¹⁶⁴ We find similar phrasing in Ps 98, a psalm of victory, with רָנַן, פָּצַח, and זָמַר ('to praise through music') in v. 4, שִׁיר ('song, to sing') in v. 1, and רוּעַ ('to shout') in v. 4 and 6. Additionally, in the context of a wedding, common celebration was rejoicing and song of women, subsequently alluding to wedding and marriage.¹⁶⁵

In the case of imperative hymns which includes the root רָנַן (cf. Isa 54:1; Zeph 3:14f), we may illuminate three elements of relevance: "(a) the impv. is a fem. sg., (b) the *ki* clause following the impv. contains an address to the one called to rejoice (in these cases Jerusalem/Zion), and (c) the topic points to the fertility cult."¹⁶⁶ This may, then, show connections to the fertility cult. However, it cannot be stated that

¹⁶² Cf. Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 433: "call for joy." See also Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah*, 413: "Chapters 54 and 55 are a lyrical announcement of salvation, and a call to participate in and rejoice in its reality." We may also bear in mind the Song of Hannah, a song of thanksgiving (rejoice) which, in its context, is ascribed to a bearing woman and includes a similar role reversal.

¹⁶³ R. Ficker, "רָנַן," in *TLOT*, vol. 3, eds. E. Jenni and C. Westermann, transl. M. E. Biddle (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 1240-41.

¹⁶⁴ J. Hausmann, "רָנַן," in *TDOT*, vol. 13, eds. G. J. Botterweck et.al., transl. D. E. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 516.

¹⁶⁵ Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 2001, 435: "jubilation and song at the lord's return."

¹⁶⁶ Ficker, "רָנַן," 1242.

רַנַּן is developed from this cultic scene as it occurs with many other motifs as well.¹⁶⁷

In relation to the Servant Song

Isa 54:1-10 follows the fourth and last of the Servant Songs (52:13-53:12.) The redemption described in 54:1-10 could be seen as the result of the sacrifice given by the Servant. John N. Oswalt reasons that there is little direct connection between the fourth Servant Song and chapters 54-55. However, going directly from 52:12 to 54:1 is not that simple either. The character of 49:14-52:12 is one of contention and appeal; Israel is to believe in future restoration. This changes in chapters 54 and 55:

Israel is restored – in the mind of the writer, at least – and is called to bask in that reality. If nothing intervenes between 52:12 and 54:1, the shift is unaccountable.

But if 52:13-53:12 is understood as an expression of the means by which a restored relationship between God and his people is possible, then the change in atmosphere is entirely understandable.¹⁶⁸

This understanding is supported by a comparison to 42:23 and 49:13. Both verses are responses of praise (רַנַּן and פָּצַח) and they stand “in direct juxtaposition with a Servant passage.”¹⁶⁹ Chaps. 54-55 continues to stress “the issues of sin, righteousness, mercy, pardon, and relationship with God” which we also find in the passage of the Suffering Servant.¹⁷⁰

Furthermore, there are several expressions repeated between the ‘Fourth Song’ and 54:1-10, such as נִשְׁמֹת (54:3, being ‘desolate’) and שָׁמְמוֹ (52:14, being ‘appalled’); זְרַעְךָ (54:3, ‘your offspring’) and זְרַע (53:19, ‘his offspring’); and פָּנַי הִסְתַּרְתִּי (54:8, ‘I hid my face’) and מִסְתַּר פְּנֵיהֶם (53:3, ‘hide faces’). In both passages

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah*, 413. Cf. Beuken, “Isaiah liv,” 41: “...the motivation for rejoicing is at the same time experience and promise. God reminds Israel of what can be observed in the life of desolate women.” While Oswalt and Beuken focus on the shift of theme, Koole additionally points out that “an immediate connection of chap. 54 and 52:11f. is improbable on account of the plural forms used there,” cf. *Isaiah III*, 347.

¹⁶⁹ Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah*, 415.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 414.

the character involved is promised “elevation after humiliation.”¹⁷¹ Koole argues that the fourth Servant Song has a bridging function, “in which the call to return in 52:11f. can now [...] turn into a description of reality.”¹⁷²

The barren woman

עֲקָרָה refers to a barren, infertile woman. אֵל יִלְדָה is not interpreted as unambiguously. There are several possible understandings of the expression ‘have not borne.’ This could either be describing a woman before her wedding or it may, as Baltzer points out, even be a reference to “the ‘virginity’ of a goddess” being a polemic statement towards other deities (e.g. Baal’s beloved Anat).¹⁷³ Nevertheless, עֲקָרָה and אֵל יִלְדָה are coinciding images: the barren woman will, in fact, be in labour (הִלְדָה, 1bβ) and have many descendants (1cα). This image alludes to Sarah (cf. Gen 11:30) and other barren mother stories. Sarah was barren, but she became “the mother of nations.”¹⁷⁴ In fact, Isa 51:1-3 is the only place outside the Pentateuch, that Sarah is mentioned specifically.¹⁷⁵ This underscores the “link between Sarah and the Jerusalem tradition” in Deutero-Isaiah.¹⁷⁶

The desolate woman

שׁוֹמְמָה (qal part. fem. sg. abs.) of the root שׁמַמַּה translates into ‘the forsaken/desolate woman.’ The same root is used about the desolate cities in v. 3. In v. 1, the expression conveys a deserted woman: her husband is not pleased with her; she has failed him in one way or another; and he has left her (cf. v. 6). Beuken considers שׁוֹמְמָה as one of the epithets given to ‘the woman’ in 54:1-10 that do not necessarily coincide well with the other epithets¹⁷⁷ (see further discussion below, under “*The identification of the woman*”).

¹⁷¹ Cf. Koole, *Isaiah III*, 347.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 348.

¹⁷³ Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 434.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 434. Cf. Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah*, 416-17.

¹⁷⁵ Beuken, “Isaiah liv,” 37-38: “Her [Sarah] entering on the scene certainly has to do with the growing influence of the Abraham tradition during the exile, as is reflected in the prophecies of Ezechiel and DI.”

¹⁷⁶ Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 434.

¹⁷⁷ Beuken, “Isaiah liv,” 35-37.

For “a woman שִׁוּמְהָרָה can mean that she has been cut off from marital intercourse (cf. 2 Sam 13:20).”¹⁷⁸ The great miracle is, then, that the solitary woman will now bear many children. She is no longer forsaken and will no longer be cut off from marital intercourse. In other words, the pre-exilic Israel and Jerusalem were Yahweh’s wife, with the exile they became desolate, and after the exile there was hope for deliverance.¹⁷⁹

vv. 2-3 Following the appeal to rejoice is the appeal to ‘enlarge the place of your tent’ (2a α). This clause corresponds to ‘let the curtains of your dwelling place be stretched out’ (2a β) and this accentuates the appeal. This is further emphasized by the parallels in 2b. In the Ancient Near East, the erection of the tents were the responsibility of the women. This image may allude to the years in the desert, after the exodus from Egypt.¹⁸⁰

The metaphor implies growth and prosperity, further explained in v. 3: they shall, indeed, increase both right and left, become large as nations, and inhabit the deserted cities. The vocabulary echoes the promises to Abraham: פָּרַץ (‘to break through’) is used in Gen 28:14, זָרַע (‘seed, offspring’) in Gen 12:7, and יָרַשׁ (‘inherit, possess’) in Gen 15:7-8. Jan L. Koole argues that v. 3 echoes Gen 28:14 as the offspring of Jacob is to “spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south” (NRSV). This would mean, then, that to increase both right and left “does not now mean dispersal and territorial expansion [...] but an increase in family.”¹⁸¹ If, in fact, we are to interpret ‘inherit the nations’ in the broadest sense, an interesting light can be shed by Isa 49:17-22: those who ‘inherit’ will not only be the “children born in the time of your bereavement” (49:20, NRSV), but also the children of the ‘nations’ and the ‘peoples’ (49:22). This gives the passage a universal movement.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁸ Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 435.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 435.

¹⁸⁰ Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah*, 416-417.

¹⁸¹ Koole, *Isaiah III*, 356.

¹⁸² Ibid., 357.

v. 4 Verse 4 comprises two bicola with delicate parallels between 4a and 4b, and 4c and 4d:

4a: Do not be afraid (α), for you shall not be ashamed (β).

4b: And do not be confounded (α), for you shall not be abashed (β).

4c: Because the shame of your youth (α) you shall forget (β),

4d: and the reproach of your widowhood (α) you shall not remember any longer (β)

אלֹ-תִירָאִי ('do not be afraid') is the formula used to encourage the anxious or afraid, found in many text where Yahweh *empowers* people, (cf. Gen 15:1; Num 21:34; Josh 8:1; Isa 41:10; Jer 1:8). This is the typical formula of an oracle of salvation: 'fear not.'¹⁸³

In this verse, we find four synonyms for being ashamed or humiliated: בּוֹשׁ ('ashamed,' 4a β ; 4c α), חִפּוֹר ('shame, disgrace,' 4b β), כָּלַם ('confounded, humiliated, discouraged,' 4b α), and חָרַף ('reproach, shame, mock,' 4d α). We find בּוֹשׁ and חִפּוֹר as common parallels in other texts as well (Isa 1:29; 24:23; Jer 50:12; Mic 3:7). In Jer 15:9, both of these roots is used to describe the desperate condition of the languishing woman. This woman had nothing left, she had breathed out her life. In Jer 14:3 (and similarly in e.g. Isa 30:3; 61:7; Jer 3:25; 51:51; Ezek 16:52) בּוֹשׁ and כָּלַם are parallel, describing the shame of the nobles when there is no water to find: "They are ashamed and dismayed and cover their heads" (*NRSV*). An important element to sustain life has been taken away and the people react with shame and humiliation. Ezekiel 16 and 23, on the other hand, talk about the shame and reproach of whoredom, when describing the sin of Jerusalem.¹⁸⁴

In Isa 54:4, the woman is asked to forget her shame, to not fear. What sustains life is about to be given back and she will no longer remember the pain from the past.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Cf. *ibid.*, 348.

¹⁸⁴ Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 439.

¹⁸⁵ שָׁכַח (forget) and זָכַר (remember) are used as parallel in other texts as well, cf. 1 Sam 1:11; Job 11:16; Ps 9:12.

The identification of the woman

‘The shame of your youth’ (4cα) and ‘the reproach of your widowhood’ (4dα) signify two different things. A young woman’s shame is the shame she suffers when rejected, when no one will marry her.¹⁸⁶ The reproach a widow suffers from is the consequences of being without husband and children, especially sons (cf. chap. 2.2). Here, in v. 4, society’s ‘codes’ of an unmarried woman and a widow are implied. With the background of Jer 15:8 we can sense the severity of the situation. But this is to be the case no longer! The unmarried shall find a husband (5a) and the widow shall find a redeemer (5b).

Beuken points out the plurality of the ‘female roles’ in vv. 1-6, as the woman is called both unmarried (4c), widow (4d) and abandoned (v. 6).¹⁸⁷ As mentioned above, these epithets are, in general, inconsistent. The only common denominator may be that women in these situations must live alone, without a husband, even though they are in the right age for marriage and though they have already been married.¹⁸⁸ A similar dissonance may be seen with the ‘roles’ of Yahweh as well: “He cannot at the same time be her first husband [...], kinsman [...] and the man who takes back his wife.”¹⁸⁹

Beuken speaks of the lament of the foremothers (cf. Isaac’s prayer for Rebekah, Gen 25:21) and argues for the *Sitz im Leben* according to Crüsemann: “It rather constitutes a prophetic expression of encouragement tracing its origin to the oracle of salvation which replies to the sterile woman’s lament.”¹⁹⁰ This genre has been transferred to Isa 54:

As the childless woman wails over her loneliness in the tent, so the mother bereft of her children complains that she has none to put up her tent. The abandoned mother, however, to whom the prophet addresses his oracle of salvation, will have to enlarge her tent-space in order to make room for her children. The image changes

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Beuken, “Isaiah liv,” 35-36. In n. 1, Beuken argues that the “shame of your youth” means the shame a nubile, yet unmarried girl/young woman had to bear.

¹⁸⁷ The image of nubility does not quite fit as Israel in fact had been married. And the image of widowhood does not quite fit since “God did not die.” Cf. *ibid.*, n. 1.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 42

as the situation of the woman Israel changes, whether ancestress [Sarah] or people, before God.¹⁹¹

Koole, also, brings up the discussion of the identification of the woman in 54:1, with regard to the question of universalism. As Zion is described as a mother bereft of her children in Isa 50:1; 51:20, how can she in 54:1 be described as a barren woman? The patristic tradition (cf. 2 Clemens 2:3) saw a distinction between Zion being described in chaps. 49-51 and who the woman in chap. 54 might be: it would no longer be “referring to the Jewish people but to the heathen world or at least a congregation from the heathen world.”¹⁹² This is an explanation, according to Koole, that does not do justice to the historical and literary context. The barren woman is to be related “to the situation of Israel during and after the exile until the great increase in the congregation, referred to in v. 1bβ, would be realized.”¹⁹³

I would argue that the plurality among the metaphors, used for Zion and concerning the restoration from exile, paints a picture which shows the severity *and* diversity in Israel’s self-awareness as forsaken by Yahweh. The metaphors are all within the semantic field of female conditions: being barren, deserted, or widowed – conditions offering little chance in life – explain how acutely aware Israel had become of their dependence on Yahweh and the greatness of his compassion. And the somewhat paradoxical mix of these metaphors do not weaken their position. Metaphors in themselves are often paradoxical. This may be exemplified by the related theme in Isa 49:20-21, with images such as “The children born in the time of your bereavement” and “I was bereaved and barren” (*NRSV*).

Universalism?

Oswalt argues that since the term ‘Zion’ is not used in 54:1-10 (as a matter of fact, not in the whole of 52:9-59:19, a part from the mentioning of ‘Jerusalem’ in 52:9), this can be seen as a conscious choice of the prophet. Subsequently, this would mean that the imagery is not only referring to Zion, but to all who suffer from barrenness or desolation:

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 42-43

¹⁹² Koole, *Isaiah III*, 350.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

the absence of that term [Zion] here when it had been used frequently immediately before suggests that, because of the work of the Servant, all who feel barren and dejected and alone as a result of their sins have reason to shout for joy now. All, Gentiles and Jews alike, may become the blessed people of God.¹⁹⁴

In this oracle of salvation we may see an expansion of the people of Yahweh. Are there, however, enough evidence to see the female imagery as a definite expansion of the people of Yahweh? Perhaps we may venture to explain it with Koole, with emphasis on the development of the kingdom of God: “In any case this verse [v. 1] involves a certain change in the description of Zion after chaps. 49-50; the emphasis shifts now from the city bereft of children to the spiritual reality of God’s kingdom, 52:7f.”¹⁹⁵ This echoes the promises to Abraham (through the barren Sarah) and Gen 12:3: “in you all the families of earth shall be blessed” (*NRSV*).

The epithets of Yahweh

v. 5 Oswalt describes the nature of the language in vv. 1-3 (and 11-17) as “almost that of explosive relief” and with “the most extravagant imagery.”¹⁹⁶ This description could go for the entire passage. V. 5 stands out in its richness of epithets of Yahweh. He is called ‘your husband’ (בַּעַלְיָהוָה); ‘your Maker’ (עֹשֵׂיָהוָה); ‘Yahweh Sabaoth’ (‘Lord of hosts’ – יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת); ‘your Redeemer’ (גֹּאֲלֵיָהוָה); ‘the Holy One of Israel’ (קָדוֹשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל); and ‘God on all the earth’ (אֱלֹהֵי כָּל־הָאָרֶץ). We find, here, theological themes such as creation, (‘your Maker’) and monotheism (‘God on all the earth’).¹⁹⁷

Husband and Maker

בַּעַלְיָהוָה can mean both ‘husband’ and ‘lord.’¹⁹⁸ Through the imagery of a marriage contract, the renewal of Yahweh’s covenant of peace (cf. 54:10) is emphasized. As

¹⁹⁴ Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah*, 415: Oswalt argues, in n. 25, that the “fem. nouns and verbs used throughout do not indicate a restricted connotation to Zion. The personification of a people or a group as fem. is common.”

¹⁹⁵ Koole, *Isaiah III*, 351.

¹⁹⁶ Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah*, 414.

¹⁹⁷ Themes such as these are found in the Song of Hannah as well, cf. Marttila, “The Song of Hannah,” 511.

¹⁹⁸ Cf. LXX: κύριος ὁ ποιῶν σε.

her 'Maker' (עֲשִׂיָּהּ), Israel owes her existence to Yahweh. The syntactic relationship between בְּעֲלֵיָּהּ and עֲשִׂיָּהּ deserves some further inquiry. If the subject is בְּעֲלֵיָּהּ and עֲשִׂיָּהּ is the predicate, then the emphasis is on Yahweh acting favourably unto his people. However, if it is the other way around, and Koole seems to think so, then "the congregation, which owes its existence to its Maker (עֲשִׂיָּהּ), can now learn that its loneliness has come to an end because it is wedded (בְּעֲלֵיָּהּ) by Yahweh."¹⁹⁹ It is my opinion, however, that it is not of great importance to argue what the subject and the predicate between in the clause are; the covenant Yahweh now makes (or renews) with his people here are of enormous impact either way. If the message is 'your Maker is your husband', Yahweh indeed shows full responsibility for his creation; not only has he created them, he will continue to maintain their existence by wedding them. If the message is 'your husband is your Maker' then the emphasis lies on the appeal to not fear; the one who weds you is your Maker, i.e. you can fully lay your trust in this marriage, pointing out that as 'your Maker' Yahweh will not (again) leave.²⁰⁰

Yahweh Sabaoth and the Holy One of Israel

'Lord of hosts' is an often used title on Yahweh by Isaiah and in various books of the OT (cf. 2 Sam 7:8; 1 King 18:15; 1 Chr 11:9; Ps 24:10; Isa 1:9; 5:9). This title is connected with the unicity of Yahweh (Isa 44:6) as well as creation and deliverance (Isa 45:12-13; 51:14-16).²⁰¹ Together with the title 'the Holy One of Israel,' 'Yahweh Sabaoth' echoes the Trisagion in Isa 6:3: קְדוֹשׁ קְדוֹשׁ קְדוֹשׁ יְהוָה זְבָאוֹת. 'The Holy One of Israel' is found – often with epithets, such as 'Redeemer' – in Isa 41:16, 20; 43:14; 48:17; 49:7. In 54:4, the name "denotes God's faithfulness to the promise which he once made to Israel and the unfathomable way in which he keeps this promise."²⁰² Between the two, 'Yahweh Sabaoth' and 'the Holy One of Israel,' the

¹⁹⁹ Koole, *Isaiah III*, 360-61.

²⁰⁰ Baltzer points out "that 'husband,' 'Creator,' and 'Yahweh Sabaoth' are one and the same." Cf. *Deutero-Isaiah*, 442.

²⁰¹ Koole, *Isaiah III*, 361.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 362.

first designates the heavenly powers of Yahweh while the latter signifies his earthly sovereignty.²⁰³

Redeemer

Furthermore, Yahweh redeems Zion, as Boaz redeemed Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 4:6, 14). Baltzer interestingly notes that redemption “is the declaration immediately touching on the present.”²⁰⁴ Redemption is a state of wholeness, a state of salvation. There is hope for the future and the effect is immediate.

God on all the earth

Koole rightly calls the title ‘God on all the earth’ “very striking.”²⁰⁵ It is not found elsewhere in Isaiah. Nonetheless, there are other proclamations of the incomparability and oneness of Yahweh in DI (40:18; 43:10, 13) and elsewhere in the OT, e.g. titles such as ‘Ruler/Lord of the whole earth’ (cf. Josh 3:11; Ps 97:5) and ‘King of the whole earth’ (cf. Ps 47:8). Combining these titles with ‘God on all the earth,’ would mean that the

Ruler and King has also become the Protector, the God in whom the entire world may trust [...] and whose glory (כְּבוֹד) fills the world, 6:3. The use of precisely this name as an addition to ‘the Holy One of Israel’ therefore links up meaningfully with the promise of Abraham’s abundant offspring, which will also include the nations vv. 1ff.²⁰⁶

v. 6 Yahweh is calling on his people as he would call on a forsaken wife (אִשָּׁה עֲזוּבָה).²⁰⁷ The image of a ‘forsaken wife’ coincides better with the context than the image of ‘the barren one’ in v. 1: “the wider context in DtIsa is the reinstallation of ‘the spouse of God’ in her original position.”²⁰⁸ אִשָּׁה עֲזוּבָה is a part of the

²⁰³ Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 442-443.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 442.

²⁰⁵ Koole, *Isaiah III*, 362.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ We also find עֲזוּבָה in Jer 14:5, with the image of the doe leaving her new-born fawn.

²⁰⁸ Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 434.

terminology of divorce (cf. 'to hate' in Isa 60:15) indicating that Israel has been sent away as a "woman can be sent away for unfaithfulness" (cf. Hosea and Ezekiel).²⁰⁹

The expression *עֲצַוְבַת רִיחַ*²¹⁰ ('hurting in spirit') conveys the intensity of the sadness and spiritual pain that the woman must endure when forsaken.

Additionally, if "this pericope can be seen in connection with chap. 53, the text here is not just talking about sorrowful circumstances but also awareness of guilt."²¹¹

The act of 'calling someone by the name' were fundamental parts of marriage contracts.²¹² Yahweh, the husband, has already been called in v. 5 (*יְהוָה*) and in v. 6 the woman, the wife, is called (*אִשְׁתֵּי יוּתֵי*) and her status is secured: "She is and remains 'the wife of [her husband's] youth' (*אִשְׁתֵּי יוּתֵי*)." ²¹³ *NO2011* translates v. 6b as a rhetorical question: "Can one discard the woman of one's youth?"²¹⁴ The answer to the rhetorical question is: No, he cannot cast away the woman of his youth. Syntactically, it is not clear that this should be translated into a rhetorical question; commentators and other translations tend not to (cf. Baltzer; Oswalt; Watts; *NRSV*; *KJV*). Whether or not, the message is: Yahweh will no longer reject (*מֵאֵס*) his people, he has remembered 'the wife of his youth.'²¹⁵ The 'woman' will now be restored to the marital covenant and motherhood. Additionally, we may note that fidelity to "the 'wife of one's youth' is both a wisdom recommendation (Prov. v 18) and a prophetic demand (Mal. ii 14f)."²¹⁶

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 443.

²¹⁰ Notice the assonance between *עֲזָבָה* ('forsaken') and *עֲצַוְבַת* ('hurting'). Cf. Oswalt, 1998, 420, n. 37.

²¹¹ Koole, *Isaiah III*, 364.

²¹² Yahweh's marriage to Zion is usually depicted as monogamous, with the exception of Ezek 23 where Yahweh is conveyed as "the bigynous husband of Oholah/Samaria and Oholibah/Jerusalem," cf. Marsman, *Women*, 456.

²¹³ Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 444.

²¹⁴ My translation of *NO2011* into English, Isa 54:6b. Koole translates similarly: "and a wife of youth, would she be rejected?" Cf. *Isaiah III*, 344.

²¹⁵ "The wife of youth' expresses connotations to the blissful time of newly weds, cf. Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah*, 421.

²¹⁶ Beuken, "Isaiah liv," 37, n. 1.

In a way, v. 6 builds a bridge between vv. 1-5 and vv. 7-10. The imagery changes from metaphor to simile with the use of the participle כּ. Furthermore, the theme of Yahweh 'calling on' bridges to vv. 7-10 where Yahweh himself is speaking in 1. sg.

vv. 7-8 There are close connections between the parallels we find in v. 7 and v. 8. In both 7a and 8a, expressions and language are taken from words of lament (cf. Lam 5:20; Ps 88:15).²¹⁷ Each of the four declarations in these two verses starts with the participle כּ ('in, at, with').²¹⁸

We find a contrasting parallel between 7a קָטַן רִגְעוֹ ('moment small/brief') and 7b גְּדוֹלַת רַחֲמֵי יְהוָה ('compassion great') – this clause provides an echo to גְּדוֹלַת as an epithet of Yahweh (cf. Jer 10:6; 32:17-19). The verse conveys: yes, it is true, Yahweh had left Zion, but only for a moment. He has now come back and will gather (אִסְבְּבָהּ) his people. Baltzer calls the expression of Yahweh 'gathering' his people, *strange*. However, he mentions it may "be a collective understanding of 'the woman.' [...] In Nehemiah it is a catchword for the 'gathering' of the community."²¹⁹ In BDB, the term from 54:7 is explained in the paragraph as "*gathering* his dispersed people."²²⁰

The same root, אִסְבְּבָהּ, is used for 'gathering' in Deut 30:1-4. This text speaks of the blessings and curses that Yahweh have set before Israel and the commandments that the people must keep. If they do so, then Yahweh will have compassion (רַחֲמֵי) for them and gather (אִסְבְּבָהּ) them: "Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back" (30:4, *NRSV*). 'Gathering' thusly means salvation. Again are the promises of the Torah brought to mind.

²¹⁷ Cf. Koole, *Isaiah III*, 348.

²¹⁸ Cf. Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 444.

²¹⁹ Ibid. 445-46, n. 341.

²²⁰ BDB p. 868. In Jer 15:7 we have seen the opposite; Yahweh is there dispersing his people: "I have winnowed them with a pitch-fork by the gates of the land."

Another similar contrasting parallel is between 8a and 8b. 8a explains: for a moment (רְגַע, again!) – and in ‘a flood of wrath’ (בְּשֹׁפָרִים קִצְוֹת²²¹) – Yahweh hides his face (הִסְתַּרְתִּי פָנָי). Hiding one’s face is the equivalent of withdrawing one’s grace and mercy.²²² Showing mercy, too, may be described in different ways connected to the פָּנִים: concealing one’s face from the sins of others (cf. Ps 51:11; Isa 59:2); or to shine (יָאֵר) one’s face onto someone (cf. Num 6:25, here as a parallel to יִתְנַחֵם – ‘being gracious to’). One would also ‘seek favour in the sight’ of someone, cf. Ruth 2:2, 10. The flood of wrath which only lasted a moment provides, then, a great contrast to the everlasting kindness (חֶסֶד עוֹלָם, 8b) in which Yahweh now promises compassion (רַחֲמִים, 8c).

Compassion and everlasting kindness

רַחֲמִים is of the root רָחַם, meaning ‘mercy’ or ‘compassion.’ This root is shared by all the Semitic languages with similar derivations: ‘compassion,’ ‘mercy,’ ‘affection,’ ‘love,’ ‘protection,’ and ‘womb’ (the latter: רֶחֶם).²²³ רָחַם belongs in the “social realm” and can be used with ‘forgive,’ ‘pardon,’ ‘pity,’ ‘strengthen,’ but to neither of these terms can be fully synonymous רָחַם – it is “a fundamental attitude that takes effect in various actions.”²²⁴ As an attribute of Yahweh, רָחַם is a gift he can freely give – or withhold.²²⁵ The parallel between רַחֲמִים and חֶסֶד עוֹלָם in Isa 54:7-8 in the setting of the marriage between Yahweh and Israel emphasizes the “overtones of the intimacy that exists between Yahweh and his people.”²²⁶ Similarly, Baltzer points out that חֶסֶד עוֹלָם may be “a marriage vow reduced to a brief formula” cf.

²²¹ Notice the rhyming of שֹׁפָרִים קִצְוֹת against שֹׁפָרִים קִצְוֹת since שֹׁפָרִים would be the regular root from which to derive, cf. BDB, 1009.

²²² E.g., cf. Deut 31:17; Ps 30:8; Isa 8:17; 64:6; Jer 33:5; Mi 3:4. See also Isa 59:2: “your sins have hidden his face from you” (NRSV), cf. BDB, 711. One may also hide one’s face in shame, cf. BDB, 711, (cf. Isa 50:6).

²²³ H. Simian-Yofre, “רָחַם,” in *TDOT*, vol. 13, eds. G. J. Botterweck et.al., transl. D. E. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 438.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 451.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 442-43.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 441

Hos 2:21-22.²²⁷ The combination of terms such as **רַחֲמִים** and **רֶחֶם**, in Hos 2, is the bride price Yahweh is paying for the marriage with Israel.²²⁸

רַחֲמִים means ‘kindness, goodness’ or even ‘love’ and ‘lovingkindness.’ The etymology of the root is unknown and it has a wide semantic range of usage, both within the secular and the religious contexts.²²⁹ The beneficiaries of Yahweh’s ‘kindness’ or ‘love’ varies and may be individuals, such as Ruth, Orpah, and Boaz (cf. Ruth 1:8; 2:20), but also whole people, devout to Yahweh (cf. Exod 20:6; 34:7; Jer 32:18) – it is by ‘kindness’ Yahweh has led Israel out of Egypt, through the desert and, indeed, back from exile, after judgment. **רַחֲמִים** is also an act of ‘strength,’ ‘victory,’ and ‘salvation’ and is something that endures ‘for ever.’²³⁰

רַחֲמִים is found in two common liturgical formulas in the OT. One of them is provided in Exod 34:6, with **רַחֲמִים**: “a God merciful [**רַחֲמִים**] and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love [**רַחֲמִים**] and faithfulness” (*NRSV*).²³¹ The other is in Ps 100:5 (cf. Jer 33:11): “For the Lord is good; his steadfast love [**רַחֲמִים**] endures forever” (*NRSV*).²³² The very nature of **רַחֲמִים**, it seems, is that of loyalty.

We may assume that the religious concept of **רַחֲמִים** was borrowed from the secular sphere, as both ‘agreement’ and ‘divergence.’ The agreement with the secular use is mirrored by the active, social and enduring nature of **רַחֲמִים**.²³³ The Book of Ruth is an example of how **רַחֲמִים** is “a relational concept” (cf. Ruth 3:10).²³⁴ The divergence is seen in “the expansion of the realm of [**רַחֲמִים**] from the fellowship of the family and

²²⁷ Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 444.

²²⁸ Simian-Yofre, “**רַחֲמִים**,” 447.

²²⁹ H.-J. Zobel, “**רַחֲמִים**,” in *TDOT*, vol. 5, eds. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, transl. D. E. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 44-54.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

²³¹ Similarly to what we already have seen in Jon 4:2 and Joel 2:13.

²³² Zobel, “**רַחֲמִים**,” 57-58.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 51, 62.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 49. The term, in secular use, is also connected with **מִשְׁפָּט** (‘justice’).

clan to the nation of Israel and finally the whole world."²³⁵ In postexilic theology, the term was closer connected with the idea of the בְּרִית ('covenant,' cf. Isa 54:10).

Despite this, however, חֶסֶד did not become a legal term, but continued to denote "promise and grace, mercy and unexpected kindness."²³⁶

Indeed, חֶסֶד עוֹלָם and רַחֲמִים show that Yahweh is proclaiming a restoration of the relationship between him and his people. Yahweh's newly professed loyalty to the covenant (בְּרִית) is further developed in vv. 9-10.

The flood of wrath

v. 9 Water is an important theme in DI, both as a threat towards life and as a gift bestowing life. Yahweh is lord over the weathers and, cf. Isa 55:10-11, "the rain 'that waters the earth' is the correspondence to God's word."²³⁷ V. 9 takes up the theme of the 'flood of wrath' from v. 8 and illustrates this with the image of 'the waters of Noah.' G proposes כִּימֵי, the 'days of Noah,' instead of כִּי־יָמֵי. Concerning this, Baltzer writes: "If read as 'the days of Noah' (correctly the phrase would have to be written: כִּי־יָמֵי 'as the days') this could be a reminder of the beginning of the story of the flood as told in Genesis 6-9. [...] On the other hand, v. 9a could be pointing to the end of the flood story when it says that 'the waters of Noah should not again cover the earth'."²³⁸

In v. 9, Yahweh repeats his promise from Gen 9:9-11 and swears (נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי) to withhold his anger (לֹאֶקְצֹף) and reprimand (לֹאֶמָּוֶר). With the expression 'the waters of Noah,' "Yahweh declares that the exile has the same meaning for him (לִי) as the Flood once had" and now, a new beginning is laid before Zion as was the case after the Flood and by the covenant with Noah (cf. Gen 9:11).²³⁹

²³⁵ Ibid., 62-63.

²³⁶ Ibid., 64.

²³⁷ Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 446.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Koole, *Isaiah III*, 370-71.

Steadfast love and the covenant of peace

v. 10 The renewal of Yahweh's promises is further established in v. 10: 'the covenant of my peace will never be shaken.' The liturgical formulas about Yahweh's 'steadfast love/kindness' (cf. Exod 34:6; Ps 100:5) is echoing in the background.

The roots **נָשַׁב** ('depart') and **נָטַט** ('shake') correspond twice.²⁴⁰ Firstly, in 10ab, 'the mountains may depart (**נָשַׁב הַרְיָמוֹת**)' and 'the hills may shake (**נָטַט הַתְּהַמָּוֹת**). Secondly, in 10cd, 'my love for you will never depart (**נָשַׁב אֶהְבֵּב**)' and 'the covenant of my peace will never be shaken (**נָטַט אֶתְּכֵּן**).' The mountains and hills are "models of permanency,"²⁴¹ but even though something as seemingly permanent as mountains and hills may falter, the love (**אֶהְבֵּב**) of Yahweh and the peace (**שְׁלוֹמִי**) of the covenant (**בְּרִית**) shall not falter. Because Yahweh is **יְהוָה יִרְחֶמֶךָ**; he is one who has compassion for his people. Here are 'covenant' and 'love' held together (and yet another connotation to a marriage contract is given²⁴²). The enduring character of Yahweh's kindness is revealed through the covenant of Yahweh's peace, upon the promise of compassion.

Peace is, indeed, more than the absence of war and hostilities: "it describes a condition of wholeness. God commits himself that the relationship between him and his people will be one of productivity, fruitfulness and blessing."²⁴³ Interestingly, when 'covenant' is mentioned in Isaiah in the context of the Servant, (Isa 42:6; 49:8; cf. Mal 3:1-2) it is usually as a 'covenant to the people.' The Servant, subsequently, "mediates the covenant and is its personification."²⁴⁴ The promises of old are restored and Israel may yet again believe in the future.

²⁴⁰ Note the assonance between the roots, especially with **נָשַׁב** and **נָטַט**.

²⁴¹ Koole, *Isaiah III*, 372

²⁴² Cf. Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 446.

²⁴³ Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah*, 423.

²⁴⁴ Koole, *Isaiah III*, 374; cf. Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah*, 424.

4.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Isa 54:1-10 is an oracle salvation, of hymnic nature. A single woman is addressed throughout the passage. The woman is called the 'barren one' and in the oracle we may detect her foregoing lament. She is one who never became a mother, one who was forsaken and rejected by her husband, one with shame from youth and widowhood. How meaningless for her to rejoice. Yet this woman is urged to rejoice and shout aloud – for she will at last become a mother. Her offspring will be so numerous, she must make the dwelling place of her family larger. She is encouraged to no longer be afraid, because the shame and disgrace she has carried thus far will be taken away. Because her husband is no other than Yahweh, the Lord of hosts. Her redeemer is no other than the Holy One of Israel, God of all the earth. She was once left by Yahweh, she was once subjected to his wrath, but she will be forsaken no longer. Yahweh renews the covenant of his peace, with great compassion, kindness and love.

The restoration of the woman, the wife, is a metaphor for the restoration of Zion and Israel, from the exile in Babylon. However, the oracle stretches far beyond the implications of the exile; the perspective is that of salvation history. "The figure of laughing Sarah emerges" from the image of the barren woman rejoicing and the promises to the patriarchs and matriarchs appear.²⁴⁵

The text is filled with covenantal terms and phrases which refer to Yahweh's covenant with the ancestors of the people, the patriarchs, and with the people itself. To the right and to the left the descendants of the woman will increase (v. 3) while the offspring of Jacob is to expand 'to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south' (Gen 28:14). Yahweh will gather the woman (i.e. the people, v. 7) as he does in Deut 30:3-4. Yahweh will keep his covenant and have compassion (חַסָּד, v. 7, 8, 10), kindness and love (רַחֲמֵי, v. 8, 10) as portrayed in Exod 34:6. Yahweh will be steadfast and loyal. The covenant from old is restored. And through the echoes of the covenant and the preceding Servant Song, Isa 54:1-10 may be seen to take on a

²⁴⁵ Cf. Koole, *Isaiah III*, 345.

universal tone – the Servant functions as a bridge to the new reality and an expansion of the concept the people of Yahweh.

In this oracle are the “image and the thing imaged”²⁴⁶ coinciding. Salvation is conveyed with the metaphor of a barren woman bearing children. At the same time, the oracle proclaims a literal expansion of the people of Yahweh, through numerous descendants and, perhaps, even through the encompassing of other people.

The blessing is overwhelming. The salvation is all-embracing. As a wife protected by the marriage contract, the people of Yahweh is to be protected by the covenant of his peace. In fact, they are restored not only as a wife, but as a mother – with regained position and value. And where there are children, there is future filled with life and hope.

²⁴⁶ This expression is borrowed from Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 435, only here Baltzer uses it with regard to the wife-metaphor.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Yahweh's covenant with his people is one of promise of blessing. In this thesis, we have investigated the blessing of offspring and a sustained family line, like the promise given to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3; 15:5) and his barren wife, Sarah (Gen 18:9-15; 21:1-7). The opposite, barrenness and childlessness, may then be seen as a curse, as a fate not preferred. Childlessness is portrayed as a punishment for adulterous sin in Num 5. In the Law, Yahweh stands as the benefactor of blessings in return for obedience (Deut 7:12-14; 11:27) and the mediator of curse in return for disobedience (Deut 11:28; 27:26).

Subsequently, in the historical books of the OT, the blessing of offspring is given to those who show obedience to the Law. By exploring the Book of Ruth and the story of Hannah, we have seen the despair in which the childless women suffered. Naomi and Ruth return empty to Bethlehem, as widows and childless. Hannah is tormented by her rival-wife because of her barrenness. They are in need of a redeemer and/or a son. We have seen what positive impact a male heir had in the lives of women with regard to their status in the household, thusly intertwined with their social and economic security. These narratives – these blessings – are set in the greater setting of salvation history: the same male heirs, Obed and Samuel, are not only blessings to Naomi, Ruth, and Hannah, they become significant characters in the larger narrative, as grandfather to David and judge of Israel. The portrayal of the offspring's impact on the women elucidates the impact of the elevation of Israel. Yahweh is both compassionate towards these women and loyal to his covenant.

The image of Yahweh as sovereign, causing both life and death, is further emphasised in the Song of Hannah. He lifts up and empowers the weak, the marginalised, the poor, and the faithful and he weakens the strong and mighty. In him is the power to kill and to bring to life, to bring low and to exalt. The barren woman may be blessed with – seven – children and the mother to many languish.

In the oracle of judgment in Jer 15:5-9, interpreting the Babylonian attack of 597 B.C., Jerusalem and the people of Yahweh are condemned for their sin and their

rejection of Yahweh. Whilst this oracle does not speak of childlessness as barrenness (there is no mention of the term **עֲקָרָה**), Yahweh imposes a most severe punishment; he bereaves and destroys his people. He reverses his promise to Abraham by making the widows 'more numerous than the sands of the sea' and destroying the sons of mothers (v. 8). And, in v. 9, the mother of seven, languishes, implying the loss of her children; she is struck down in a time of life when she should be flourishing. The women portrayed as losing their husbands, their sons; a truly grave situation women such as Naomi and Ruth were familiar with. In Jer 15:5-9, however, there is no end to the rage of Yahweh and the curse is crushing. Not even a remnant shall be left safe and unharmed; even the rest shall perish. It truly seems as though the promises to the patriarchs and matriarchs are erased, far beyond hope of restoration.

Nevertheless, the oracle of salvation, in Isa 54:1-10, does depict a restoration – an overwhelming one as such. There will be redemption for the exiled Israel. Yahweh is conveyed as steadfast to his covenant, in his love and compassion; in its allusion to Sarah, 'the mother of nations,' the oracle is placed within the history of salvation. As the barren and forsaken woman is to rejoice and no longer bear any shame or fear, the greatness of Yahweh and end of his abandonment are proclaimed. There is no longer a threat of causing numerous widows, but promises of the blessing of numerous descendants. Yahweh shall gather (Isa 54:7) instead of disperse (Jer 15:7). The forsaken woman will have her husband; the widow will have her redeemer, as with Naomi and Ruth; and the barren mother will have her children, as with Hannah. She needs no longer fear marginalisation. The woman shall rejoice and break forth with shouts of joy as she becomes mother to many; the promises to the patriarchs and matriarchs endures and Israel will regain fullness, prosper, and even expand – implying the other peoples, as of the promise to Abraham in Gen 12:3. The covenant is restored and the promises of **רַחֲמִים**, **תְּסֻדָּה**, and **שְׁלוֹמ** are renewed.

We see, then, that in the prophetic literature, the motifs of childlessness as curse and motherhood as blessing (as seen in the Law) are applied in oracles of judgment

and salvation; alluded to, e.g. by 'bereavement,' in Jer 15:5-9 and referred to, e.g. by 'barrenness,' in Isa 54:1-10. Here, too, the motifs are intertwined with other conditions vulnerable for women, such as rejection, abandonment, shame, and widowhood. That which we have seen from the Law's regulations on curse and blessing as well as the conditions in the lives of Naomi, Ruth, and Hannah, give us the background of understanding these motifs of fundamental human reality. Curse and blessing respectively signals profound distance and intimate closeness to Yahweh; and the exclusion of judgment and the redemption of salvation define the people's relation to Yahweh in an overwhelming, all-encompassing manner.

The motifs of childlessness as curse and motherhood as blessing are encompassed in the biblical narrative from the Law, through the historical books, to the prophetic literature. Whether portrayed as illustrations of God's intervention in the narratives or depicted in more metaphorical language in prophetic oracles, childlessness and motherhood are more than terminology. The motifs fully seize the fundamental reality of humankind. The lack of descendants means an end of the family line and, ultimately, an end of life. Thusly, childlessness may convey judgment. While the prospect of descendants, of children, means – unmistakably – life. And thusly, motherhood may convey salvation.

6. AFTERWORD

The purpose of this afterword is not to turn my thesis into one of systematic theology. There are, however, some thoughts I wish to express.

In our days, technology has greatly developed the ways of procreation. Additionally, it has become more common to choose not to have children. Still, we find that the longing for children has not ceased from what it was in the antiquities; I believe that the reasons for wanting children back then were as many as they are in the world today.

Many people would still use the expression 'gift of God' when describing their joyful feelings about having children. Parents to a new born child, or adoptive parents, may truly, deeply feel *blessed*. But what, then, do we call childlessness, be it caused by barrenness or loss?²⁴⁷ I am not sure of the term *curse*. We may, perhaps, rather call it bereavement. The bereavement of the opportunity to love or the bereavement of someone who is loved and who, in a way, is a part of oneself. Given an abstract nuance, bereavement may be connected with nothingness. A void-creating element.

When we speak of God in connection with childlessness, we touch upon a multifaceted image and walk into a terrain in which it can be hard to navigate. It will always be difficult to try to understand the sovereignty of God. But I find comfort in the ambiguity behind the acts of sovereignty that, I believe, can be detected in the Bible (as in the Book of Job). That there are still no easy answers or explanations.²⁴⁸

Children truly carry hope for the future and the potential of life sustained – in a family, in a society, and in the world. In a very fundamental way, they are the gift of life, given in life and from life. Life is, I believe, ultimately a gift of God. And in life, there are both meaningless bereavement and overwhelming joy.

²⁴⁷ I talk, here, of unwanted childlessness, not childlessness wanted and chosen.

²⁴⁸ I also wonder about the impression I have gained, that there are more specific promises of blessings of motherhood, than actual threats of curse of childlessness. That, however, is another study.

* * *

Finally in this thesis, I would like to thank my parents, for proofreading the thesis and for giving steadfast support. Also, thanks to friends that have helped me be distracted in vital breaks from the work, through exercise, conversation, and laughter. Additionally, I would like to thank the librarians at MF who, through their service, help and motivate. And most importantly, I wish to show great gratitude to my supervisor, for important feedback, guidance, encouragement, and dialogue.

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