RST 35.2 (2016) 212–213 Religious Studies and Theology (print) ISSN 0892-2922
doi:10.1558/rsth.v35i2.32563 Religious Studies and Theology (online) ISSN 1747-5414

Reconceiving Infertility. Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness, by Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden. Princeton University Press, 2015. 328pp., Hb. $43.95. ISBN-13: 9780691164830

Reviewed by Felice Lifshitz, University of Alberta, felice.lifshitz@ualberta.ca

Keywords
Christianity, Judaism, Hebrew Bible, New Testament, Infertility, Procreation, Childlessness, Child-bearing, Disability, Motherhood, Eschatology

The authors of this laudable book challenge the religious discourse on childlessness "in which fertility is a sign of divine blessing, procreation an obligation, and infertility a sign of divine judgment and moral failure" (14). Moss and Baden seek instead to valorize infertile bodies, and thereby provide solace to childless individuals tortured by that religious discourse. Historians of Christianity will be unsurprised by some of their arguments; it is, for instance, widely known that, for the apostle Paul as for many medieval Europeans, "celibacy is to be preferred" (173). But even those who are familiar with late antiquity and medieval traditions devaluing procreation and childbearing will find the authors' analyses illuminating. Indeed, specialists of all stripes should learn much from this clever book. Finally, readers who come to the book primarily in search of personal consolation or professional counseling strategies should find it both accessible and enjoyable. However, the fact that only some of the chapters rely solidly on biblical texts will limit the utility of the study with believers for whom non-biblical writings carry limited weight.

Approximately half of the chapters are built on solidly biblical foundations. Chapter One investigates the stories of Hannah, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and the unnamed mother of Samson, biblical matriarchs who are (at times) infertile yet also blameless. Moss and Baden argue that these stories reveal a view of conception in which all women are created infertile, but God miraculously opens wombs so that some women conceive. Why God fails to open a given womb remains a mystery, but this biblical perspective on infertility as "a divine shortcoming" (67) removes "the social stigma of responsibility from the infertile woman" (69) by decoupling infertility from sin. Chapter Two presents the divine utterance "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28) as a specific blessing, rather than a universal imperative. A few individuals (Adam and Eve, Noah and his sons, and Abraham) had to be personally blessed with offspring, but no single one of their descendants was (or is) individually enjoined to procreate. Furthermore, the authors argue that Eve (the only woman ever included in a fertility blessing) was infertile, with "no expectation or even real possibility of offspring" (86), until she was cursed with fertility in Genesis 3:16. Despite the possibility of pregnancy, however, not all women become pregnant, because God does not open all wombs. The consolatory message to those who avoid procreation is that "they are the very ones who do not participate in the cursed female state" (89). Chapter Four demonstrates that the family model in the Gos-

pels is "divorced from individual procreation and procreative abilities" (141) and "untethered from biology" (141). Whether we consider the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, or the position of Jesus as the (adopted) Son of God, or the community of believers around Jesus both before and after the crucifixion, we find legitimate families that (like medieval monastic *familiae*) were "made and not begotten" (144).

Bible-believing readers (as opposed to scholars of religion) may find the remaining chapters less satisfying. Chapter Five elucidates "the diversity of opinion about marriage and procreation in the ancient world and in the early church" (199) by setting Paul's preference for celibacy against the Pastoral Epistles penned in Paul's name, with their "view that salvation for women could be found only through childbearing" (192). Readers who take seriously the canonical teachings of 1 Timothy on the necessity of childbearing to female salvation are unlikely to be comforted by the message of apocryphal apostolic acts "in which physical infertility and undesirability are prized" (196). Even more problematic in this regard are Chapters Three and Six, concerned with eschatological theories expressed in rabbinic commentaries, post-biblical Jewish writings, Christian pseudepigrapha, and Patristic treatises. There, Moss and Baden discern a "truly Edenic" world to come in which "[t]he barren woman will ... return to Eve's original state of perfect contentedness, even without a child" (133) and "all will find themselves eunuchs" (228). From this perspective, the barren body anticipates the perfect, non-procreative bodies of the resurrection, and "[t]hose who cannot bear are not being punished; they are, rather, glimpses of humanity's eventual state" (135).