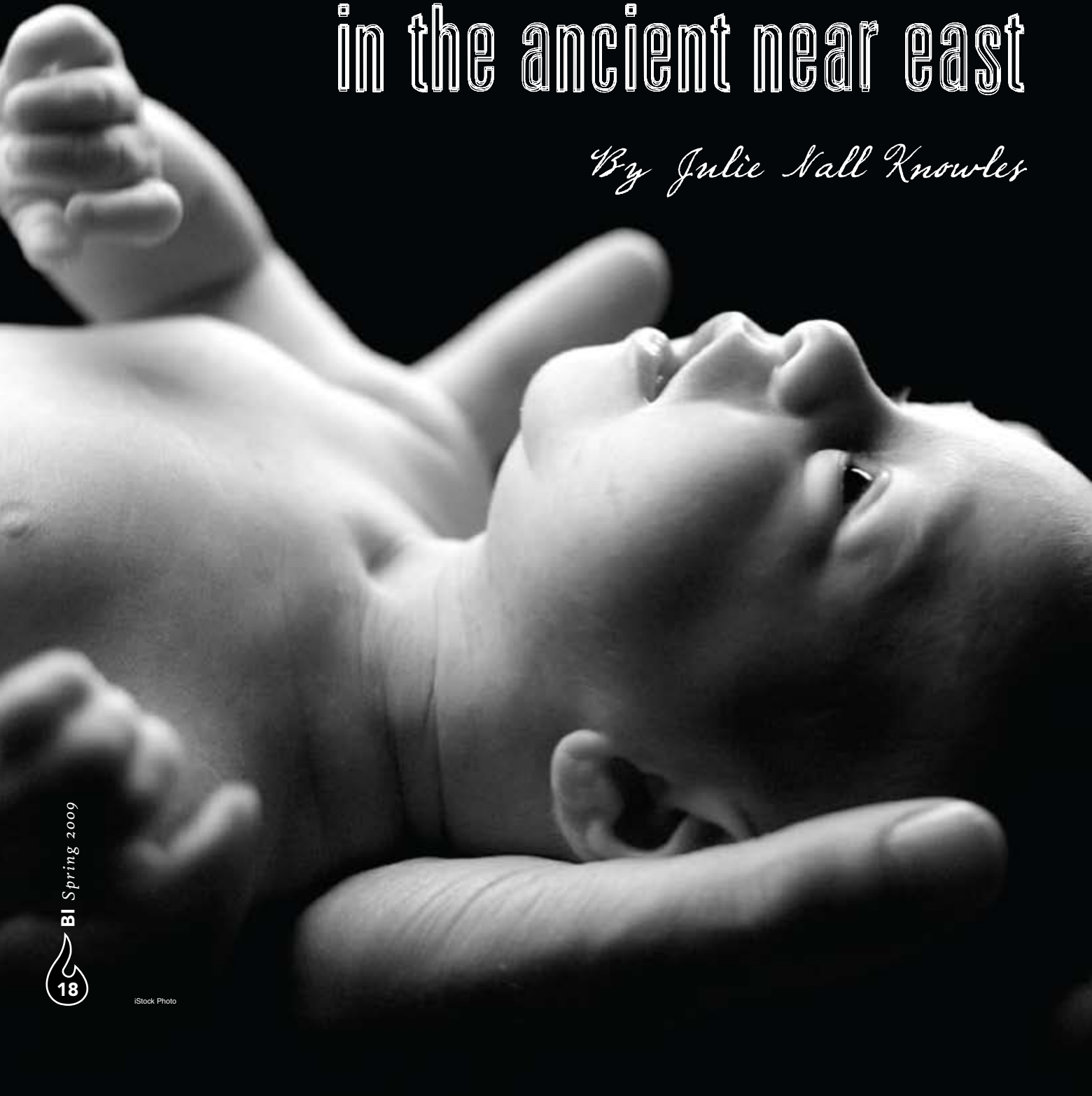


# barrenness

in the ancient near east

*By Julie Hall Knowles*



Hannah knew the importance of bearing children when she married Elkanah, who lived in a hill village about 15 miles from Shiloh. Women produced children, as many as possible, to maintain both lineage and tribe. Children, especially a son, would continue the names of Elkanah's fathers (1 Sam. 1:1) and transmit their possessions for years to come.

To hasten conception, Hannah may have used mandrakes—like Leah (Gen. 30:14-17) and the Beloved in Song of Songs: “The mandrakes send out their fragrance...I have stored [them] up for you, my lover” (7:13).<sup>1</sup> Women ate the mandrakes' roots, long associated with fertility, as “love-apples” and “tied them around their body in order to conceive.”<sup>2</sup> Time passed.

Could Hannah have been infertile? One remedy prescribed 21 stones on a linen thread tied around a barren woman's neck<sup>3</sup>—reflecting the mystic multiplication of 3 times 7. Swallowing tabernacle dust mixed with holy water (the “bitter water” ordeal) could result in fertility for a faithful wife (Num. 5:11-31); barren women swallowed dust or dirt as “straight fertility magic.”<sup>4</sup> After a while, Elkanah could have divorced Hannah for barrenness. A similar stipulation appears in the Code of Hammurabi (Old Babylonian Empire, ca. 1700 B.C.).<sup>5</sup> However, a marriage agreement between Hannah's and Elkanah's fathers may have required Hannah to find someone to

bear children for her husband. An ancient Nuzi Akkadian adoption tablet details such a contract:

Kelim-ninu has been given in marriage to Shennima. If Kelim-ninu bears (children), Shennima shall not take another wife; but if Kelim-ninu does not bear, Kelim-ninu shall acquire a woman of the land of Lullu as wife for Shennima.<sup>6</sup>

Could Hannah have “acquired” her fellow wife? Anyway, following law and custom accepted across the land, Penninah arrived. She gave Elkanah both sons and daughters (1 Sam. 1:4).

The growing family traveled annually to worship in Shiloh, then the home of the ark of the covenant. On each pilgrimage, Penninah reminded Hannah that she had no children (vv. 6-7). Early Israelites thought illness and tragedies resulted from sin; barrenness was considered sin, sickness, and one of the worst of disgraces. Why did Hannah not defend herself?

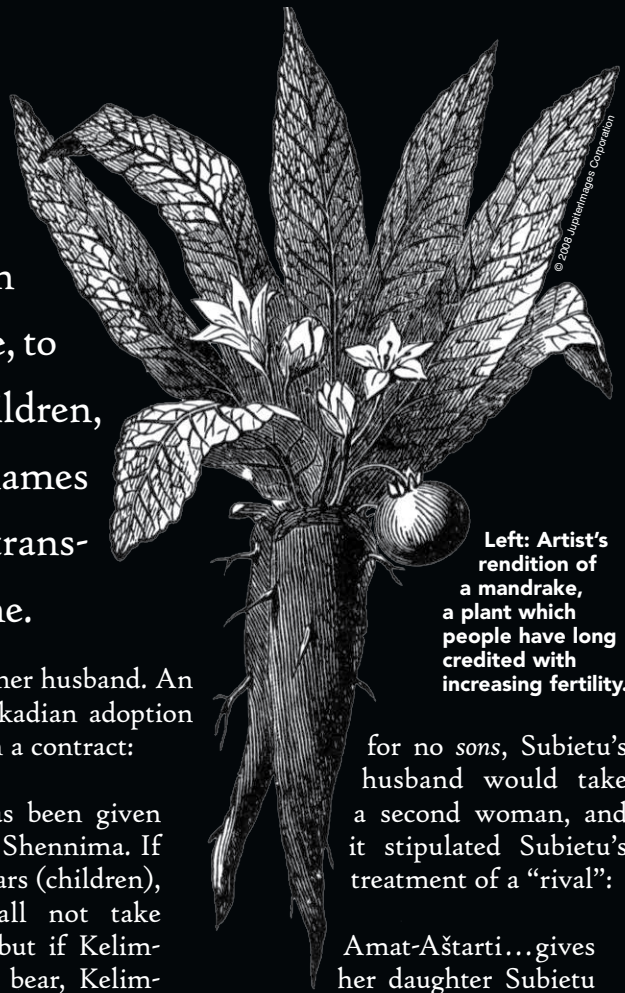
Possibly, her marriage agreement ordered Hannah to treat a second wife amiably. In Calah, Assyria's ancient capital (near Mosul, Iraq), a lady named Subietu had a contract stating that

for no sons, Subietu's husband would take a second woman, and it stipulated Subietu's treatment of a “rival”:

Amat-Aštarti...gives her daughter Subietu to Milki-ramu, the son of Abdi-Asuzi....(most of the text outlines the dowry). If Subietu does not bear sons he shall take a handmaid.... She (the wife) shall not curse, strike, nor be furious and treat her (the handmaid) improperly.<sup>7</sup>

A wife's dowry likely prevented many husbands from discarding a barren woman, for the Code of Hammurabi established that if a man discarded his barren wife he had to return the dowry to her he had received when they were married.<sup>8</sup> But Elkanah loved Hannah and continued taking her to Shiloh (vv. 5-8).

Hannah could have stayed home and joined Canaanites as they observed pagan rituals. She could have helped women



Left: Artist's rendition of a mandrake, a plant which people have long credited with increasing fertility.

## LESSON REFERENCE

BSFL: 1 Samuel 1-2



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ G.B. HOWELL/ LOUVRE MUSEUM (35/16/43)

**Above:** Ivory baton with the head in the shape of a pomegranate; dated 14th–13th centuries B.C.; from Minet el Beida, which was just outside of ancient Ugarit in Syria.

**Right:** The recipes on this tablet cover barrenness, pregnancy tests, and treatment for gynecological conditions. Dated about 600–400 B.C.; likely from Babylon.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON (31/9/44)



**Pomegranates** growing at Byblos in June. Because of their numerous seeds, pomegranates were considered to aid in fertility.

“mourning” for Tammuz, the Akkadian god of fertility (Ezek. 8:14) or danced around a cult object (pole?), worshiping the fertility goddess Asherah. Forms of her cult were located mainly in Syria and Canaan. Also in Canaan, seasonal ceremonies celebrated Baal, the highest fertility deity. By joining Baal devotees, “it was believed possible to insure fertility of crops, to secure offspring with divine sanction, or to feel one’s self assimilated to the deity.”<sup>9</sup> Inscriptions on a tablet from Ugarit, an ancient city on the Mediterranean coast (Ras Shamra, Syria), outline cultic practices; one line translates, “Over the fire, seven times the sweet-voiced youths chant, ‘Coriander in milk, mint in

butter.”<sup>10</sup> If this were a dish eaten in a ceremonial meal, could neighbors have invited barren Hannah to join the worship of Baal?

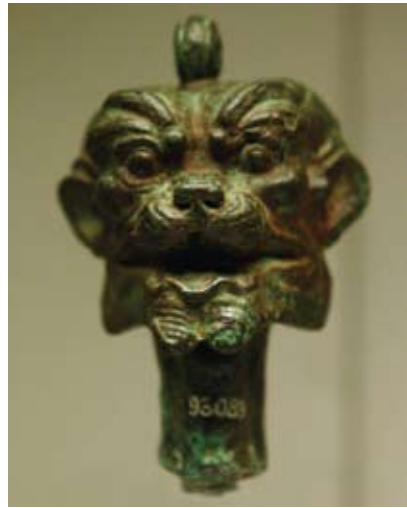
Though near despair, Hannah never stooped to idolatry. She was neither sick nor sinful, yet

“the LORD had closed her womb” (1 Sam. 1:5). Once, after their sacrificial meal at Shiloh, Hannah abruptly left and hastened to Yahweh’s sanctuary. There, she urgently begged God for a son (vv. 9–11). “It is completely in



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ G.B. HOWELL/ LOUVRE MUSEUM (35/15/99)

Several Ugaritic epics about Dan’el exist. Dan’el legends told of a local hero who was responsible for good social order of a territory that covered several cities. This story from Ras Shamra, dates to the 14th century B.C. and tells of Dan’el and what happened after the death of his son Aqht. After Aqht’s death, Dan’el found himself without male descendants. Again, Dan’el prayed to the god El. El took his servant by the hand and blessed Dan’el. El instructed Dan’el to mount his bed and to kiss his wife. Further, he promised that she would conceive. As the story progresses, Dan’el’s wife does become pregnant. Again, Dan’el has a son in his house, “a scion in the midst of his palace. A son who sets up the stele in the sanctuary of his ancestral god...who delivers his spirit from the earth, and the dust guards his footsteps.” Dan’el’s face lights up. He parts his jaw and laughs, places his foot on the footstool and lifts up his voice and cries: “Now I will sit and rest in peace and my soul will rest, my heart will be at ease in my breast, for born to me is a son like my brothers, a scion like unto my kindred.”



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BRITISH MUSEUM/LONDON (31/9/35)

**Left: The Assyrian demon Pazuzu; despite his ferocious appearance, which varied in detail, Pazuzu helped mankind because he was anathema to Lamashtu, the female demon who preyed on women in childbirth. He sometimes appears on amulets directed against her. This head of Pazuzu was probably attached to bedroom furniture.**

**Lower left: Taweret was an Egyptian goddess associated with childbirth and is usually shown, as here, in the form of a pregnant hippopotamus with the face of a lion. The inclusions within the stone must have made this sculpture particularly difficult to work. Dated 664–343 B.C.**

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (8/7/11/4)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BRITISH MUSEUM/LONDON (31/6/23)

accordance with Eastern custom that Hannah asks not for a child, or children, but for a son.”<sup>11</sup>

In the Ugaritic epic poem of Aqht, the hero’s father Dan’el prays for a son in a shrine to his gods.<sup>12</sup> In the poem “there is no sign that Dan’el acknowledges a physical disability either in himself or in his wife.”<sup>13</sup> The high god, El, sent Dan’el home to his wife; in due time, a son, Aqht, was born.

At the sanctuary of the God of Israel, Hannah cried so bitterly and prayed so fervently that to Eli the priest she seemed like a drunken cult debauchee (vv. 11-14). “Do not take your servant for a wicked woman,” Hannah protested, “I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief” (vv. 15-16).

“Go in peace,” Eli answered, “and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him” (v. 17). With joy, Hannah

returned home, conceived, and gave birth to a son.

Hannah named him Samuel (“His name is God”) and dedicated him for a lifetime of priestly service (1:20–2:11). While Eli trained Samuel, Yahweh blessed Hannah with five more children (2:21). To be sure, it is our God who “settles the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of children” (Ps. 113:9). **B**

1. All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).

2. Raphael Patai, *Sex and Family in the Bible and the Middle East* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 74-76.

3. Robert D. Biggs, “Medicine, Surgery, and Public Health in Ancient Mesopotamia” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. in chief Jack M. Sasson (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1995), 3:1917.

4. Patai, 91.

5. W. W. Davies, *The Codes of Hammurabi and Moses* (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1905), 138 (p. 65).

6. “Documents From the Practice of Law” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 220.

7. John Van Seters, “The Problem of Childlessness in Near Eastern Law and the Patriarchs of Israel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 87.4 (December 1968): 407.

8. Davies, 138 (p. 65).

9. Beatrice A. Brooks, “Fertility Cult Functionaries in the Old Testament,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 60.3 (1941): 230.

10. This line has been suggested to be a Canaanite pagan ritual forbidden to Israelites, the law “Do not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk” (Ex. 23:19; 34:26; Deut. 14:21). However, in this Ugaritic tablet, no animal is being cooked. See Jack M. Sasson, “Should Cheeseburgers Be Kosher?” *Bible Review* 19.6 (December 2003): 43.

11. Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 25.

12. Baruch Margalit, *The Ugaritic Poem of Aqht: Text, Translation, Commentary* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 144.

13. *Ibid.*, 264.

Julie Nall Knowles is associate professor of English at The Baptist College of Florida, Graceville, Florida.