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A CASE STUDY USING ART IN RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION TO FOSTER EMPATHY
BY PROVIDING DEEPER INSIGHT AND ENCOURAGING CONTEMPORARY DIALOGUE

MFA Thesis by Esther Hi'ilani Candari

Liberty University, School of Communication and the Arts
Department of Studio and Digital Arts

Christopher Phillips, Chair

Joshua Wilson, First Reader

Monique Maloney, Second Reader

Todd Smith, Department Chair



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Left: *Jacob Keeping Laban's Flock* by Gustave Dore





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A case study using art in religious instruction to foster empathy by providing deeper insight and encouraging contemporary dialogue

This thesis draws upon a review of current literature related to the empathy-building potential of fine art and experiences of infertile women, especially those within Judeo-Christian communities, to build a case study for utilizing fine art to create stronger more empathetic communities. For this case study, the researcher utilized an online survey of infertile Judeo-Christian women to further clarify the specific needs of this minority group. Then she drew upon a broad array of current and historical literature and artwork to discern what cultural and theological trends may have framed infertility as

a stigma. Using this information she then produced a series of three paintings aimed to spark constructive conversation and increase understanding and empathy within the selected communities. These paintings, which depict the Biblical stories of three infertile women—Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah—were executed in a realist tradition with special effort made to communicate emotional and historical nuance, breaking from the stereotypical miracle and natal-centric narratives of western art history and Judeo-Christian theological tradition.

INTRO: THE PROBLEM

Empathy, while a much-needed topic of discussion in contemporary society, is in and of itself an impractically broad topic for research. This study aims to give a limited example of how it can be fostered using a specific tool of communication—fine art—focusing on a specific challenging topic—female infertility—and in a specific social setting—religious instruction. The results of this study will ideally lead to a model of practice for fine artists working with religious topics, and for religious educators utilizing that work, that maximizes opportunities for providing deeper insight, encouraging contemporary dialogue, and fostering empathy. For a broader audience, the implications of this study will provide a springboard for developing new or more effective methods to utilize fine art as an empathy-building tool.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research in this thesis will explore the following questions in search of an answer to the research problem.

- What are professionals saying about the need and definition of empathy?
- Why might art be an effective tool to foster empathy?
- What is a specific minority group for which this tool could be used to foster empathy?
- What are professionals saying about the social and emotional experiences of individuals in this group?
- What is a specific social setting in which empathy could be fostered?
- What are the current attitudes in this social group towards the selected minority?
- How did these attitudes develop?
- What are some lesser-known historical or cultural facts that could be used to create understanding?
- How do the members of this minority group think that the narrative or culture related to the perception of their defining characteristics could be improved?
- What type of art can be created to restore historical nuance and spark empathy-building contemporary dialogue?



the research

EMPATHY: THE WHAT AND WHY

The question, “Why do humans ostracize, injure, and even kill other humans?” is as old as the story of Cain and Abel. Contemporary researchers argue that behaviors ranging from bullying to assault to mass shootings are rooted in a lack of empathy (Bradshaw 109). However, where does this lack of empathy stem from? In comparatively well-educated America, these systemic flaws are most likely not due to a lack of overall education but possibly due to education not being a definitive precursor to empathy. Swanger argues it is rooted in educational tactics and cultural attitudes that communicate “empathy is neither a skill useful to society nor a virtue prized by it” (Swanger 41). This connection is elegantly illustrated by Plato’s metaphor of the cave, which depicts the enlightened turning their backs on those still trapped by the cave, arguably implying that education and knowledge of facts do not equate compassion—compassion being empathy in action (Swanger 41).

What then is this elusive and essential element of human society? Simon Blackburn describes it as being “the sense of being emotionally and cognitively ‘in tune with’ another person, particularly by feeling what their situation is like from the inside or what it is like for them” (O’Brien 1). Another way to describe it is as an interpersonal connection built not merely on knowledge of the facts but on the facts in context of the emotions experienced by the person who is living with the facts. This type of interpersonal connection is built through “emotional and cognitive engagement that features... inquiry into... cultural, or spiritual values, and may include what Hubbard (2007) describes as an embodied, or physical response” (Jeffers 18). Once empathy is fostered it can then play a vital role in creating and maintaining a just and harmonious society by “[submitting] to our attention the social problems and injustices that lead us to take a stand and thus, those social problems become ours” (Rusu 139). This motivation towards action is the bridge between knowing and understanding.

The existence of empathy begs the question, “What then is its opposite?” If holistic understanding is the definition of empathy, then a lack of understanding—a separation of self and “other”—must be the opposite. This process of “othering” is what sociologists use to describe the justification behind the hateful and violent acts listed at the beginning of this section. And while the term “othering” may be a recent development, the concept is not. In Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, the condemned Shylock appeals to the other characters by pleading with them to recognize their shared humanity rather than their divisive identities as Jews and Christians. He argues that by casting aside their view of him as an “other” empathy for his plight would develop in its place (Swanger 44).

Opposite page, clockwise:

Abduction of the Sabine Women (detail)
Nicolas Poussin c. 1635, Collection of the MET

Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California
Dorthea Lange 1936, Collection of the MOMA

Guerica (detail)
Pablo Picasso 1937, Collection of the
Museo Nacional Centro De Arte Reina Sofia

The Creation of Adam (detail)
Michaelangelo c. 1512

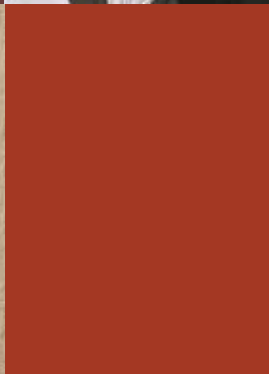
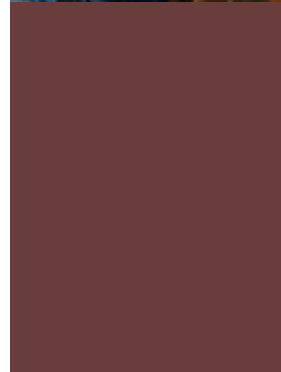


ART: AN EFFECTIVE TOOL

The vast majority of academic theory and research on the topic of empathy conclude that empathy reaches beyond the facts and knowing a person or circumstance to a holistic understanding; therefore, it proceeds that the mode of communication used to foster empathy must be one that can communicate not merely empirical or quantifiable information but must also evoke emotion and situational insight. The visual arts provide just such a form of communication. They are able to do this by “[condensing] multiple existential values and [embracing] a micro-existence of human uniqueness” (Rusu 141). This presentation of the nuance of human experience in a succinct way allows the viewer, in a split second, to go beyond the facts surrounding someone they might see as an “other” and share that individual’s perception of existence. This “shared vision of our humanness” is a definition of empathy and thereby the “elimination of otherness” (Swanger 44).

Within the world of art theory, the ability that visual art has to create community through “empathic social interaction” is known as connective aesthetics (Gablick 16-17, in Jeffers). The artist Delacroix argued that this power came from art’s ability to externalize the internal human psyche, thereby making the community participant in it (Rusu 143). The concept of aesthetics itself is rooted in the

The concept of aesthetics itself is rooted in the power of emotion, aesthetic being the emotional antithesis to the numbing of anesthetic.



power of emotion, aesthetic being the emotional antithesis to the numbing of anesthetic. Moreover, the roots of the modern use of the word empathy can be traced to the aesthetic theory of *Einfühlung*, which was translated to “empathy” and adopted by modern psychology in 1909 (Lanzoni 333) (Swanger 48). Therefore, to find a road to greater empathy, logic bears that society should retrace its steps to the origin of the word itself, which then leads directly to the doorstep of aesthetics and the visual arts.

An example of an effective use of the connective and empathic powers of art can be found in the research of Arnold et al. who utilized an exhibit of works by Deidre Scherer focusing on end of life experiences and death to build empathy among education students who would need to address these heavy topics with their future students. Their qualitative research found that:

The art experience allowed the students to grieve the loss of members of their own families and to move towards a greater sense of closure about personal losses. Further, this educational strategy allowed students to connect vicariously with the subjects depicted in Scherer’s images in order to experience their feelings. This connection to the feelings of others is a form of empathy. (Arnold et al. 344)

Not only did the students experience short-term connection with the subjects of the artwork and similar experiences in their lives, but they also expressed permanent transformations within themselves and their maturity levels (Arnold et al. 343). In all this study supports the idea that art is not only an effective way to open the door for conversations on difficult topics, but it also provides the tools to pass through that door and emerge a substantially changed and more empathic individual and community.

Another example can be found in a study conducted at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. In comparing survey results from a broad demographic of students who had or had not attended field trips to the museum, the researchers discovered that those who attended showed an average of 6-9 percent increase in critical thinking skills, historical empathy, and social tolerance (Green 2). This study illustrates art’s power to help even the youngest of learners to better understand history, connect it with the present, and act with greater compassion within their community due to these experiences.

The art theory and empirical evidence both support the hypothesis that visual art is an effective mode of communication for fostering empathy in individuals and communities. Art provides the understanding ‘of’ and moral instruction that traditional western Aristotelian education often lacks (Swanger 48), and “[Educators who dismiss art], don’t simply slight art; they diminish their range as moral theorists and educators” (Swanger 42). By using art to foster empathy, communities can provide the aesthetic to counter the anesthetic of “othering.”



Right to left:

September '88
Deidre Scherer
thread on fabric
15 x 14 inches
1988

Bigger Than Each Other
Deidre Scherer
thread on fabric
36 x 30 inches
2000



INFERTILITY AS A CASE STUDY

To build a case study and expand upon the currently established literature, a specific instance of “othering” needs to be identified and targeted for experimentation. “Othering” is caused by a trait or circumstance that leads an individual to be seen as an “other” by the majority of a community. This trait or circumstance is known as a “stigma” (Remmenick 824). This stigma, which can be visible or invisible, leads to a perception that the individual or group is “[not a] whole and usual person [but] a tainted [and] discounted one” (Goffman qtd. in Remennick 824).

An example of such a stigma is infertility. Infertility is defined as “the inability of a couple to conceive after 12 months of regular vaginal sexual intercourse (two or three times per week)” (Hardway 201). It is a disease that affects approximately 20% of couples in the United States (Ezzell 427)(Jansen 184), and while visible corporeal signs do not mark the disease itself, the result, childlessness, is highly visible and stigmatized. This stigmatization often leads to adverse effects such as “long-term depression, lower life satisfaction, or social isolation (Jansen 184). Studies have shown that up to 38% of infertile couples perceive that they are socially excluded, with 15% specifying that they “Thought of themselves as isolated in public and losing value in public” (Erin 46). All of these factors point towards a demographic who is experiencing an actual and perceived lack of empathy within society.

Within the demographic of infertile individuals, there is an uneven divide along the gender line in regards to the negative effects of stigmatization. While the biological factors are split nearly evenly, with estimates ranging from 1:1 to 4:6 (Ezzell 427), studies show that, despite evidence that men are more sensitive to gender-related social stigma (Slade et. al 2314), women bear the brunt of the social

stigma for infertility (Remennick 823). Femininity and womanhood are often conflated with motherhood (Jansen 184)(McQuillan 1008) and some researchers argue that “Motherhood is one of the most enduring rites of passage to adult femininity for women” (Whitehead 96).

Because of this trend, infertility becomes what sociologists and psychologists describe as a “master status,” “that is, the main prism through which they define themselves and are judged by others (Remennick 825).” This master status often trumps other accomplishments or identifications, leading to negative effects such as lower quality of marriage and general well-being (Mcquillan 1009). This is true even when the biological fault lies with the man and not the woman because, despite the advances of modern medicine that allow for that determination, the subject remains taboo. The result of this shame is that the test results remain unannounced to the public, and the “default assumption [becomes], as it was in the ancient world, that infertility is a female problem” (Moss 39).

While it does affect genders unequally, infertility is—in many ways—the ideal candidate for a case study on overcoming “othering”. I argue this is because it is a stroke of biological luck that does not consider race, religion, or economic status, but it is a stigma that affects a large circle of individuals ranging from those immediately affected, to their families and health providers (Cook 89).

Approximately 20% of couples in America experience infertility.

Right:

Abraham and Sarah in the court of the Pharaohs, Giovanni Muzzioli 1875
The collection of Museo Civico d'Arte



THE EXPERIENCE OF INFERTILE WOMEN

The process of fostering empathy requires a holistic approach to understanding; therefore, it is essential that this study establishes a holistic summary of the experiences of infertile women, rather than merely focusing on the outwardly visible manifestations of the adverse effects of stigma. The psychological and sociological research on this topic is extensive and consistently shows evidence of negative effects on women's physical, emotional, sexual, spiritual, and financial health (Ezzell 427), including the following feelings: distress, loss of control, and social isolation (Mcquillan 1009). For closer inspection, this study will divide them into two main categories: psychological or internal effects and social or external effects.

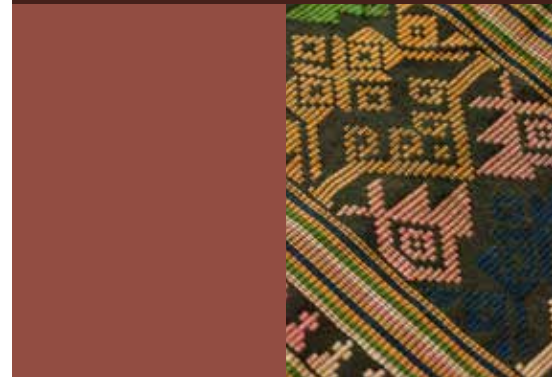
The mind is tied to all aspects of an individual's experience, so factors—such as a master status stigma—that can create overarching psychological states affect the entirety of that individual's day-to-day experience. In the case of infertility, symptoms of anxiety and depression are the mental health concerns most frequently reported by infertile women. Symptoms are often exacerbated by the unavoidable reminders of infertile women's predicament, such as pregnant friends and strangers (Ezzell 427). Compounding the already oppressive states of anxiety and depression, studies have suggested that the psychological stress induced by the experience of infertility can lead to changes in the hypothalamic-pituitary-gonadal axis that exacerbate the root condition of infertility and decreased responsiveness to infertility treatments (Ergin 28), thereby creating a vicious positive feedback loop.

Moving beyond the internal experience of infertility to the lived experience of an infertile woman within society, the literature consistently shows evidence for infertility as an all-consuming master status stigma. Evidence for this can be found in both qualitative and quantitative research.

In her thematic analysis of online infertility forums, Krista Whitehead describes an obsession with motherhood as a "gendered entitlement". She states, "Consistently, members of the infertility community use what other women have (pregnancies, babies, and families) as a measure of what they believe they ought to have" (Whitehead 101). Ergin et al. discovered that their test communities spread the news of a couple's infertility at a rate of 58% with the attitudes towards women being mostly negative (Ergin et al. 47).

In Remmenick's surveys conducted in 2000 with infertile Israeli women, one woman shared,

"I just don't feel as a whole woman, something very central is missing. Nothing else I have can make up for it—neither my high paying job, good looks, or success with men...the moment you tell pople you have no children, you become an outcast in a way. They don't say it openly, but it shows in different ways."



80% of medical treatments undergone by infertile couples are unsuccessful.

I just don't feel as a whole woman, something very central is missing. Nothing else I have can make up for it—neither my high-paying job, good looks, nor success with men... the moment you tell people you have no children, you become an outcast in a way. They don't say it openly, but it shows in different subtle ways. (Remennick 827)

These subtle ways often manifest as “misplaced sympathy, insensitivity, or a general lack of understanding” and often lead to women “[withdrawing] at gatherings of family and friends as a result of feeling marginalized” (Jansen 185-186). Even when little or no stigma is enacted, “felt stigma and internalized blame lead individuals to frequently respond to everyday social interactions as if they were enacted stigma” (Jansen 184). All of these examples point towards a demographic in need of expressed empathy for their internal struggle and enacted empathy for their social stigma.

The rise of modern feminism, which by nature should be empowering for women, presents a paradox in the case of infertility. As Morris points out, while “feminism gave permission for infertility to be acceptable” (Morris 18), and even “in some cases [to be] a feminist statement... Consequently... feminism has been limited in representing women who want to be mothers and are having difficulty becoming so” (Morris 63-64). Those espousing more extreme views of feminism may even scorn women who seek infertility treatments because doing so can be read as a manifestation of succumbing to conventional gender roles and pronatalist constructions of fulfilled womanhood (Morris 18). What once may have been a “liberating narrative” has left infertile women “[oppressed by] its limitations” (Morris 64).

Another consideration in the construction of a holistic understanding of the lived experience of infertile women is the accessibility and viability of infertility treatments. Economists estimate the average amount spent by infertile couples on infertility treatments to be between \$34,000-50,000 (Howard 1) (Morris 64). This steep price not only creates a financial strain on individuals but it also stratifies who is able to seek treatment, limiting it—in most cases—to upper-middle-class families and above. But even for those who are able

to afford these procedures, “Reproductive technologies are hardly the panacea that they are often made out to be since as much as 80 percent of infertile couples do not achieve viable pregnancies through these means” (Morris 59). Such a low success rate presents a bleak outlook for women who face lifelong stigma for a condition completely out of their control.

Even if the effort to foster empathy for infertile women is approached from a utilitarian perspective, there is still a strong argument for its social benefit. Studies show that stigmatized groups often respond by stigmatizing the majority, especially weaker members of that majority. In the case of infertility, this manifests in infertile women's contempt for those that they view as unfit mothers due to socio-economic status or a perceived lack of moral standards (Jansen 186-188). This reverse stigmatization does not have a substantial impact on society due to infertile women's status as the minority, but the attitudes and actions propagated by it are likely to affect community relationships negatively (Jansen 187). Hence, it is in the interest of the community as a whole to seek a more holistic understanding of the experience of infertility and strive for greater empathy in regards to those who are affected by it.

Left:

Prayer of Hannah the Mother of Samuel the Prophet
Vasili Vereshchagin 1864





THE SETTING

To effectively foster empathy, this study focuses on a specific educational and social setting as the base for positive social change. In the case of infertility, Judeo-Christian religious instruction provides a setting that is both uniquely equipped to foster empathy and, inversely, is currently marked by higher levels of stigma and reduced education on the topic.

As Jansen emphasizes, "A mutual understanding of infertility needs between friends and family is essential to decreasing the potential negative psychosocial consequences of infertility" (Jansen 188). The setting of a church or religious community is usually marked by strong familial and friendly bonds, and thereby ideal for addressing the needs of infertile women within these bonds but it is important that these needs are actively addressed so as to ensure that infertile women clearly perceive the support of their community. The importance of perceived social support is emphasized in Slade et al.'s study of new attendees at an infertility clinic. The researchers state, "Higher perceived social support is...associated with greater global life quality for both men and women and lower emotional distress for women with fertility difficulties" (Slade et al. 2309).

Positive social support is correlated with low emotional distress in women who experience infertility.

Specifically, within Judeo-Christian circles, the teachings of the Bible, especially when read with a historical pedagogy in mind, are uniquely structured to promote and produce social change (Moloney 2). Dan O'Brien, a philosophy professor at Oxford Brookes University specializing in epistemology, argues that one of the founding principles of these religions is that "Piety involves not just worship of God, but also other people—the children of God—and in acting piously one participates in God's stance towards them; one joins God in attending to them" (O'Brien 2). Alternately, to use the words of Christ Himself, "If ye have [showed compassion] unto one of the least of these...ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40). The Bible dictates, and emphasizes the benefits of, a life focused on a supportive religious community (1 Corinthians 1:10, Zechariah 7:9-10, Romans 12:16), empathy (Ephesians 4:32, Romans 12:15), and active compassion (Isaiah 58:10, Galatians 6:2); thereby setting the stage and providing the tools for teaching the attitudes and actions that will produce these results.

Infertile individuals and couples also often explore and struggle with spiritual and theological issues in relation to their infertility. These issues range from existential questions about the meaning of suffering or more concrete dilemmas surrounding the ethics

and theological implications of various reproductive technologies. Ideally, their religious community should be able to provide support and answers through these experiences (Ezzell 427). The previously mentioned theological elements combined with these social elements make Judeo-Christian religious instruction and community a theoretically ideal place for infertile couples to find the support that is suggested to be paramount to overcoming the negative effects of infertility (Ergin et al 49)(Jansen 185).

The work of Roudsari et al. emphasizes the importance and benefit of a strong religious aspect in an infertile woman's life. In their study of Christian and Islamic women in England, they found that women who used coping methods such as engagement in religious rituals; seeking support from lay members and clergy; seeking opportunities to serve others like themselves; and reframing their infertility as a divinely appointed state, exhibited greater ability to positively cope and achieve a state of serenity (Roudsari et al. 117-118). Studies such as this support the hypothesis that religious communities can be an effective environment for providing infertile women with support and positive perspectives.

Despite the fact that religious instruction and communities seem to be the ideal environment for infertile women to find succor and support, the current literature indicates that they are often the opposite. Infertile women frequently express frustration that those closest to them often deluge them with unasked for or unwelcome advice and information. In religious settings, elements such as uninvited laying on of hands and prayer are part of this deluge (Jansen 185-186). This bombardment is then compounded by the marked increase in, emphasis on, and association with families and children that occurs within Judeo-Christian settings. Sadly, the current data indicates that living in a pronatalist–or biological family-focused–society often leads infertile women to have lower self-esteem, exhibit social withdrawal, and feel deprived and alienated” (Remennick 828).

SURVEY RESULTS

For the purpose of gathering information more specific to this study, I created a survey and distributed it online and to central Virginia churches, synagogues, women’s groups, and fertility clinics. The research pool was limited to women who:

- 1) Are between the ages of 18 to 50
- 2) Had experienced infertility (the inability to conceive after 1yr of consistent effort, or the inability to carry a fetus to full term after three years of consistent effort)
- 3) Are active participants in a Judeo-Christian religion.

When presented with the question “How would you respond to the following statement: ‘My experience with infertility has negatively affected my ability to create strong relationships with other members of my religious community?’” and given the options: “1 is Strongly disagree, 2 is Disagree, 3 is Neither agree or disagree, 4 is Agree and 5 Strongly agree,” 30% of the women responded with four or five. When the women who responded with four or five were asked to explain their answer they gave statements such as the following:

“It’s really difficult to be a young married couple while struggling with infertility, especially when everyone around you is married with kids.”

“Big family is a part of the culture. People always asking when and why not gets exhausting.”

“I felt completely alone when we were struggling with getting pregnant. And going to church and seeing people who just got married that were pregnant broke my heart.”

Right: *The Holy Family*, J. Kirk Richards 2009



“A lot of people didn’t know how to deal with the fact that we had trouble conceiving. Some would ask me every month if we were pregnant, which was hard. Others avoided me...At one baby shower, I found out that another woman my age just found out she was expecting and I started crying. I left the room very quickly because I didn’t want her to feel bad. I was honestly happy for her, just surprised and sad for myself. An older woman drew attention to my crying and said loudly, ‘What is your problem?’ Which made it worse.”

“In a family-oriented church without children, nobody invites you to things and you don’t want to go to the things you are invited to. People become friends at their kid’s soccer games and dance recitals.”

The 36.7% who responded with a 1 or 2 explained their answer with statements such as the following:

“I have members in my community with the same issues.”

“I was open to friends and family within the church about our infertility struggles and often had them praying for us. I felt supported the majority of my experience.”

“Although I would have initially chosen 5, over the years my experience has helped me deeply connect with others who are struggling or have struggled.”

“As I have been open, I am surprised at how many women have this. It has built friendships.”

These comments give us a glimpse into religious communities that are functioning as they theoretically should and give hope for the women in communities where there is room for improvement.

In addition to the intensely pronatalist structure of Judeo-Christian communities, infertile women within them also have to cope with negative implications made by certain pedagogies of theology and a distinct lack of discussion and education on the topic of infertility. All too often, when teaching from biblical texts, it is easy for religious instructors to associate infertility with “the language of sin and punishment” or “divine displeasure which further emphasizes a theme of “them” and “us” (Moss 68-69). Even if this theological othering can be overcome, Judeo-Christian communities still need to address the documented lack of education on the scientific facts of infertility, available infertility treatments, and the way related decisions can be influenced by theology. This dearth of information extends to both the lay members and clergy and leaves infertile religious women uniquely stranded between medical professionals who cannot discuss faith-based issues with them, and religious leaders and communities who cannot discuss either their medical issues or related theological concerns (Scully et al. 27).

In my survey when the women were asked: “Do you feel your community has adequate information and opportunities to discuss the experiences and needs of infertile women?” A strong majority (70%) answered “no”. When asked to explain their answer they shared statements such as:

“Infertility or miscarriage is never discussed openly in the church. And people are awkward talking about it. We believe ‘Life begins at conception’ but we tell people not to announce a pregnancy until after the first trimester. We don’t want to deal with the 1-in-4 probability of a miscarriage, so tell people to suffer alone and in silence.”

“I don’t hear or see much acknowledgement of women/couples dealing with infertility. The church overall is not always great about acknowledgement of those who may be hurting for various reasons.”

“My religious community and beliefs in general are so focused on family/parenthood. When you are in the depths of infertility it’s hard to feel purpose and relate to the topics being discussed/taught when you are unable to take that step of having children.”

Answers such as this do not need to be the majority. Adjustments to instructional methods can lead to increased empathy and positive social change.

AN EXAMPLE

A successful example of art’s ability to lead to positive social change and a stronger community can be found in the historic Pilgrim Baptist Church of Chicago. This church, known for its role in creating the genre of American gospel music, was decorated with monumental murals of scenes from the life of Christ. What made these murals unique though, was the racial diversity depicted, including the variety with which Christ was painted in each scene. By altering it scene to scene, his race was treated as a fluid aspect of the narrative, rather than a defining aspect of his personality. The painter of these murals, William E. Scott, “manipulated an existing form to serve the spiritual needs of the members of the church’s congregation, to help them identify with Christ, and to feel at home in their place of worship, using images that looked like them” (Pinder 78). Working in tandem with the music director of Pilgrim, Scott was able to foster a strong sense of empathy within the congregation that allowed them “to identify with the message they heard there each Sunday. To do this, they had to see themselves in...the Christs...

and to feel themselves in the music that surrounded them” (Pinder 96). These tactics not only helped members overcome the self-hatred that they had internalized in an era of violent racism and segregation but also quickly built a diverse, large, and thriving community (Pinder 78).

“To identify with the message they heard there each Sunday... they needed to see themselves in the artwork and to feel themselves in the music that surrounded them.”

- Pinder on Pilgrim Baptist



Above:

One of the few remaining photographs of Scott's work at Pilgrim Baptist which burned down in 2006.

Last Supper, William E. Scott 1936-37

Below:

*Pilgrim Baptist Church Chicago
Art Institute of Chicago 1960*



THE HISTORY: THEOLOGY & CULTURE

The Judeo-Christian tradition is no stranger to stories of infertility. Many of the key storylines throughout the Old Testament and New Testaments involve infertile characters. How is it then that current cultural attitudes create a religious climate that is often psychologically and socially detrimental to infertile women? Biblical scholars argue that it is the result of societal structures and perceptions influencing which interpretations of infertility stories have become prevalent. To dissect these interpretations, the development of religious perceptions surrounding both infertility and fertility must be explored.

According to the biblical account, the genesis of man is bracketed with a divine mandate to “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth” (Genesis 1:28 KJV). To many, this is an innocuous beginning to the description of a divinely appointed lifestyle. But as Baden and Moss point out, “these words can read very differently to those who are unable to have children. Are they somehow in violation of the divine directive—or are they somehow cursed with infertility?” (Baden and Moss 1). When the Bible is read with this lens it is easy to perceive “a theme of infertility as a blow of fate or punishment for sins [recurring] in many parts of the Old Testament” (Remennick 822). While some may argue that infertility is rarely explicitly stated to be a punishment for individual sin, there is power in what is said about fertility, not just in what is not said about infertility. As Moss points out, “When [in regards to fertility] the emphasis is put on the aspect of blessing, then it is all too easy to consider those who cannot procreate as cursed” (Moss 71).

The biblical account echoes modern research that indicates infertility functions as a master status for women. In all of the

narratives involving the experience of infertility, it is described as a defining, if not sole, characteristic of the woman who is experiencing it. As Moss describes,

The exclusive quality of infertility - the sense that it is the only aspect of these women that is worth mentioning - is not limited only to the narratorial voice. [For example] Not only is infertility Hannah’s defining descriptive feature, but it also seems to be all anyone can speak to her about. (Moss 23)

This one-dimensional drawing of biblical characters makes it easy to simplify their character arc too, “fertility [as] their goal and infertility the obstacle they must overcome” (Moss 25). Interpretations such as this serve to bolster a limited view of womanhood that can quickly become discouraging for those for whom the “obstacle” may never be overcome.

Historical records give further insight into current theological and cultural attitudes towards infertility and document the deep roots of perceiving fertility as a divinely blessed state, a route to salvation, and infertility as a broken or cursed one to be overcome. While early Christian and Catholic doctrine provided a space for sanctification through the celibate and barren lifestyle of a convent, the rise of Protestant doctrine provided no such space (Oren-Magidor 86). The father of Protestantism himself, Martin Luther, preached, “although women had brought about the Fall, they were sanctified by the bearing of children” (Oren-Magidor 87). The effects of this ideology can be seen today in the equation of fertility with fulfilled womanhood (Oren-Magidor 97). This theological torch was carried on by prominent preachers such as Cotton Mather who, “[promoted] the idea that barrenness could signal sinfulness or a trial of faith, but [rejected] the idea that childlessness indicated a woman’s certain damnation (Oren-Magidor 92).”

As the Protestant movement continued to develop, stories of infertility were often used as allegories of the power of prayer and promoted a prosperity-gospel-style approach to fertility. To further the message of fertility-by-faith and female spiritual frailty, some preachers went as far as to incorrectly retell the story of Abraham and Sarah by claiming that, when promised posterity, Abraham believed unquestioningly while Sarah laughed (Oren Magidor 98).



While there is debate as to whether the laughter referred to in the story of Abraham and Sarah is an indication of disbelief or deep joy, what is indisputable is the reference to laughter on the part of both Abraham and Sarah (Skhop 42-43). This is by no means an isolated case of “selective preaching” to support culturally popular gender roles, and gives insight into how some modern misconceptions may have developed.

Some of these misconceptions have arguably decreased in many modern Judeo-Christian sects, but the results from the survey conducted for this thesis show that when asked the question, “Do you feel that the way your religious group presents stories of infertile women in the Bible (i.e. Sarah, Rachel, Hannah, etc.) makes you feel included or excluded?” over a third (36.7%) of the women answered, “excluded.” When asked to explain why they selected their answer, they gave explanations such as:

“Because they are presented as one-dimensional characters instead of real women with multiple facets of feeling.”

“It’s always presented in a historical way, not necessarily a present situation way.”

“Their struggle isn’t really talked about. More so when they were finally blessed with child.”

“Little discussion of how the women felt in sorrow and pain as they contemplated their life role. Unrealistic ideas of what Faith looks like in disappointment. No discussion of what a woman in such circumstance should do/focus on or how to be a participant in church society outside of parenting and teaching kids classes.”

“Stories from the scriptures are used like this: These women had faith. That equals children. So just have faith. Easy. I have faith. That has not equaled children. I know I have faith. But not everybody else knows I have faith. We have no scripture story of faith leading to childlessness.”

“‘God trusted these women,’ so he doesn’t trust me?”

“The focus always implies that there was something wrong with these women, when in fact it’s often a problem with the men. They make it sound so negative, too, like using the word barren to describe them.”

This data suggest that the current visual narrative leaves a significant percentage of infertile women feeling estranged by their religion’s depictions of women like themselves. While communities can not change the past or the historical reasons for current narratives, they can foster a culture of transparency as to how these narratives developed. They can also take the time to listen to the way history is impacting the women of the present and work to adjust their narratives accordingly.

“‘God trusted these women,’ so he doesn’t trust me?”

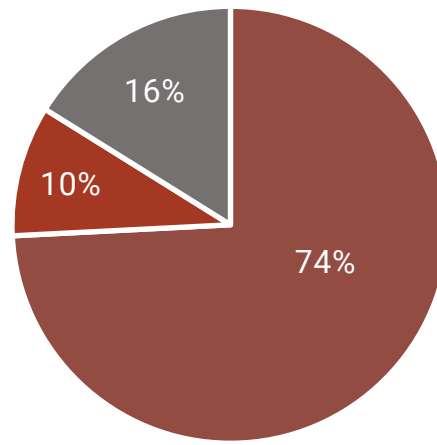
Below:

The Visitation of the Virgin to Saint Elizabeth, Workshop of Goossen van der Weyden c. 1516, the collection of the National Gallery in London





THE HISTORY: ART



- Resolved infertility
- Unresolved infertility
- Not related to infertility

Artwork from left to right:

Landscape with Elkana and his Wives Anna and Pennina
Collange Adeline 1647, the collection of the Louvre

Laban Searching for his Household Gods (detail)
Gabriel de Saint-Aubin 1667, the collection of the MET

The Naming of Saint John the Baptist (detail)
Barent Fabritius c. 1650-55
The collection of the National Gallery, London

The Holy Family with Saints Elizabeth and John
After Nicholas Poussin c. 1700,
The collection of the National Gallery, London

Virgin and Child with Saint Elizabeth and Saint John the Baptist (detail), Agnolo Brozino 1540-45
The collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum

Departure of Abraham (detail)
Workshop or imitator of Jacopo Bossano c. 1570-90
The collection of the National Gallery, London

Sarah Complaining About Hagar (detail)
Etienne Deluane 1569, The collection of the MET

The Holy Family with Saint Anne and the Young Baptist and his Parents (detail), Jacob Jordaens c. 1620 & 1650
The collection of the MET



For the sake of drawing clearer lines between the theological and social research of this thesis and its artistic application, and since there was no available literature on this specific topic, I conducted a thematic meta-analysis of all pre-20th century artworks tagged with the names of the following infertile biblical characters—Sarah, Rachel, Hannah, and Elizabeth—from the online databases of the following art museums: the Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the National Gallery in London. Of the thirty-one artworks reviewed, twenty-six included subject matter related to infertility or the resolution thereof; however, only three of the works addressed the lived and unresolved experience of infertility. This meant that the remaining infertility related works, twenty-three, or 74% of the total works reviewed, emphasized an exalted state of fertility. This quantitative analysis, as well as a qualitative analysis of overarching thematic trends, strongly agrees with the written literature that argues for historical precedence of 1) infertility as a master status, 2) the perception of infertility as an impediment to be overcome by faith, and 3) the perception of fertility as a state of blessing and faithfulness.

If artwork has been used across the course of history to support and disseminate popular theological and cultural perceptions of infertility, then it logically bears that it could be used to rebrand it as well. After all, as Moss argues, the advancement of modern medicine may have provided humanity with a much clearer answer to what infertility is but the meaning of infertility and why it occurs is still culturally dependent (Moss 25) and art is the visual distillation of culture.



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REBRANDING: THE THEOLOGICAL NARRATIVE

In the context of Judeo-Christian religious communities, I argue that rebranding the concept and experience of infertility with an emphasis on empathy building will be most successful if narratives are presented that focus on the following points: 1) Interpretation of the Bible without the lens of infertility as a state of brokenness, and 2) Reading of the Bible in context of a more detailed understanding of the lived experience of infertility within pronatalist societies such as ancient Israel.

Answers to the question of “how to address infertility as a state other than brokenness” can be found in the work of biblical Hebrew scholars such as Carasik, Morris, and Moss, who argue that closer readings of the original Hebrew reveal a perception of barrenness as the natural state of all women and every conception a singular example of divine intervention (Backon 1) (Baden and Moss 2) (Morris 15) (Carasik 435) (Moss 57). One of the main tenets for this argument is the use of the phrase “God opened her womb” to refer to both classically fertile and barren women (Moss 48). This reframes infertility as neither negative or positive but simply neutral and gives room for both fertility and persisting infertility to be seen as natural and divinely appointed states. While this readjustment of the cultural lens is by no means an answer to all fertility and conception related theological dilemmas such as conception via rape, it does offer a new perspective. This perspective allows readers to perceive that “though some ancient interpreters tried to identify some rationale for these women’s infertility, the Bible itself attributes no faults to them. They are, simply, barren—and blameless (Baden and Moss 2).”

A close reading of the biblical accounts of infertility, especially those of the Matriarchs, soundly refutes the perception of infertility as

the wages of sin. These women are described, both implicitly and explicitly, as devout, devoted, and pure (Moss 49). The challenge is then reading the Bible with this space for alternate perceptions of infertility while avoiding a diminishment of motherhood and childbearing and still appreciating the agonizing psycho-social experience of the infertile characters.

Ancient Israelites may have approached the meaning of infertility differently than modern readers of the Bible, but contemporary historical records and the words of infertile women in the Bible paint a lived experience that is even more daunting than that of infertile women today (Moss 38). Yet again, one of the primary sources of this more well informed and nuanced understanding of the Bible can be found through considering the original Hebrew text. For example, as Moss points out,

Rachel, in naming Joseph, makes clear what infertility feels like: “God has taken away my disgrace” (Gen 30:23), she says, using a Hebrew word, *herpa*, that is used elsewhere in the Bible to denote uncircumcised men (Gen 34:14), men with their eyes gouged out (1 Sam 11:2), cowardice (1 Sam 17:26), a rape victim (2 Sam 13:13), and the collapsed walls of Jerusalem (Neh 2:17). The experience of infertility in ancient Israel was utterly crushing. (Moss 39)

In most ancient cultures, including the Israelites, posterity was the route to spiritual exaltation and temporal security. Therefore a woman, inherently legally and culturally limited by her gender, was left wanting for more than children when she was declared barren

(Moss 24) (Stein 492). Children served as a mark of social status (Moss 35) as well as a retirement plan and spousal life insurance; without them, a woman was left immensely vulnerable (Moss 31). Modern Jewish scholars have pointed out the historical weight of infertility in the continued perception of infertility “as the worst possible misfortune [for a Jewish woman]” (Remennick 822).

Another aspect of the lived experience of infertile Biblical women to consider is the lack of medical remedies for infertility. They were limited to faith and superstition or polygamy and surrogacy. While the route of polygamy may have “[solved] the genealogical problems of the husband, it [threatened] to turn the infertile wife into little more than a burden for the rest of the household, as Hannah may well have felt each time she received her lonely portion” (Moss 32). Though the concept of mental health is largely absent from the Bible, modern psychologist Stein argues that in the case of Hannah, “A sufficient number of symptoms are mentioned to make a diagnosis of depression,” (Stein 492) a diagnosis parallel to trends found in modern infertile women and arguably the result of a society that expected a woman to be fertile and provided few answers and comforts to those who were.

In the survey conducted for this thesis, women responded to the question “If you wanted to, and could, what is one thing you would change about the way your religious community teaches about the issue of infertility and women who experience it?” by sharing comments such as the following:

“Definitely the difficult question of what happens to a baby when it isn’t born, and that infertility is absolutely not a punishment, but just a health issues like any other illness.”

“Stop giving the standard ‘church answer’ that all those who are righteous will receive these blessing ...eventually and expect women to just be OK with that answer. For once I would love for a leader to come out and say, ‘This is hard, it isn’t fair, and yes those blessings are promised, but we don’t expect you to just accept it and go about you life like it doesn’t impact you daily. You can be upset, you can hurt, you can even question why, that doesn’t make you weak, or mean you have no testimony. It means you are a human with real emotions.’”

“That it’s okay to talk about it. Many are going through the same thing.”

“That it is something that can and should be discussed openly without being afraid of hurting others feelings.”

“Talk about it. Loss shouldn’t be taboo. Loss of a friend, spouse, child, infant in utero, or dreams of children are all losses that need to be allowed to be experienced in acceptance and sympathy so we can grow.”

“You can be upset, you can hurt, you can even question why. That doesn’t make you weak, or mean you have no testimony. It mans you are a human with real emotions.”

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“The fact that motherhood can become a form of idolatry for both women who have children and for women who desire children.”

“The lack of talk about pregnancy planning, infertility, infant loss, and childlessness. The unspoken rule of keeping it all to ourselves. Mom shaming and shaming of women who do not have children. More women who have no children in leadership. I don’t think they are considered for leadership as much as women with children.”

“We are more than our womb. We are smart, talented, driven women. We have careers. We have huge capacity to contribute as involved decision-makers and teachers. Motherhood isn’t the only path a noble woman can take. Validate and praise those without children. We offer our trades, talents, and wisdom.”

By expanding community members’ understanding of the Bible’s pedagogy will allow readers to see “beyond a shallow or selective hermeneutic that merely confirms preconceptions and priorities whilst omitting the weightier matters that the Hebrew Bible teaches” (Moloney 1). As Moss argues, the historically “reductive readings are misguided...there are, in the Bible and in the cultural context from which it emerged, conceptions of infertility that push back strongly against the dominant paradigm” (Moss 230). The type of pushback that will result in stronger, more empathetic communities will be most likely to succeed if based on an educational approach to rewriting the narratives surrounding infertility. This style of “Education for social transformation is at the heart of God’s purposeful actions through history” (Moloney 2), and, as previously established in this thesis, visual art is an effective tool for providing this education.

“Education for social transformation is at the heart of God’s purposeful actions throughout history.” — Katherine Moloney





Artwork Counter-clockwise:

Hannah Dedicating the Infant Samuel at the Tabernacle, Frank W. W. Topham

Dante's Vision of Rachel and Leah
Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1855

Hagar and Ishmael Sent Away from the House of Abraham, Jose Salome Pina 1852
The collection of Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City

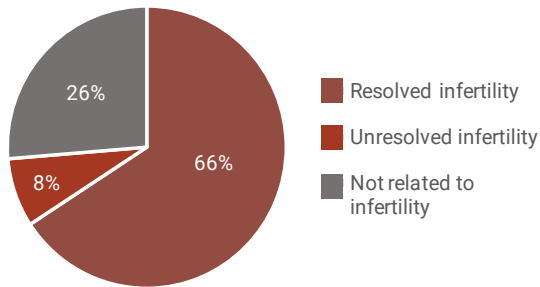
Abraham et Sarah, Marc Chagall c. 1800



REBRANDING: THE VISUAL NARRATIVE

To begin rebranding the visual narrative, the baseline of currently available art must be established so as to draw a clear picture of the type of art needed to educate viewers on and facilitate conversations about the two elements of rebranding that were proposed in the previous section. Those two elements are: 1) interpretation of the Bible without the lens of infertility as a state of brokenness, and 2) reading of the Bible in the context of a more detailed understanding of the lived experience of infertility within pronatalist societies such as ancient Israel.

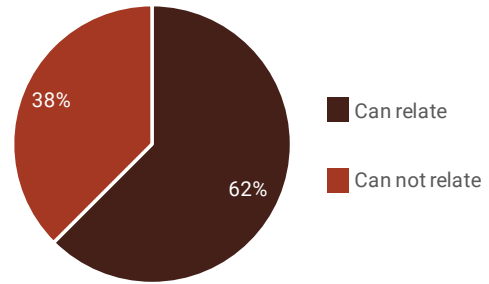
To establish this baseline I conducted a thematic meta-analysis of works responding to the search terms—Sarah, Rachel, Hannah, and Elizabeth (and that clearly represented the biblical characters with those names)—on the following websites: fineartamerica.com and art.com. These websites and search terms were selected using the rationale of determining an example of which works would be readily available for religious leaders and educators to purchase for use in publications or decorations for religious spaces.



Of the thirty-eight artworks reviewed, twenty-eight included subject matter related to infertility or the resolution thereof. But only three of the works addressed the lived and unresolved experience of infertility. This meant that the remaining twenty-five, or 65.8% of the total works reviewed, emphasized and exalted a state of fertility. This quantitative analysis, as well as a qualitative analysis of overarching thematic trends, exhibits a slight improvement in the breadth of subject matter in relation to infertile biblical characters compared to works from the museum collections, but it still shows an overwhelming lack of images that emphasize the lived experience of infertility or provide room for interpretations other than infertility as an impediment or punishment to be overcome by faith.

Of the participants in my survey, when asked if they could relate to the artwork commonly used in their congregation to represent infertile characters, over a third (36.7%) said no. When asked to explain why they responded this way, they shared comments such as the following:

“They’re always portrayed as historical characters, not relatable people.”



“Their story mostly centers around the coming of the children. Who were they before kids? How were they faithful as non-mothers? Who are we as Christian women without being mothers?”

“I’ve seen pictures of women in the Bible but again not much that specifically display the emotional despair that is felt because of infertility. The hopelessness, feeling left out, the loneliness, etc.”

“No. Because they all had the magic baby ending that negated their struggle.”

The 63.3% who felt that they could relate to commonly used artwork listed reasons such as the following for that relatability.

“Yes, now. Because I now allow myself to dig for their humanity.”

“I feel like I’ve been there with them. Their stories brought new meanings of faith into my life.”

“I am comforted to know that great women in the Bible are like myself. That we have not been forgotten by the Lord. I have found great comfort in their stories of faith.”

Below:

Rachel Steals Her Father's Graven Images, Marc Chagal 1960



Artwork from left to right:

Sarah Presenting Hagar to Abraham
Adriaen van der Werff 1699

The collection of the Hermitage Museum
Holland

Sarah and Three Angels, Richard Mcbee

The Meeting of Jacob and Rachel
William Dyce 1853

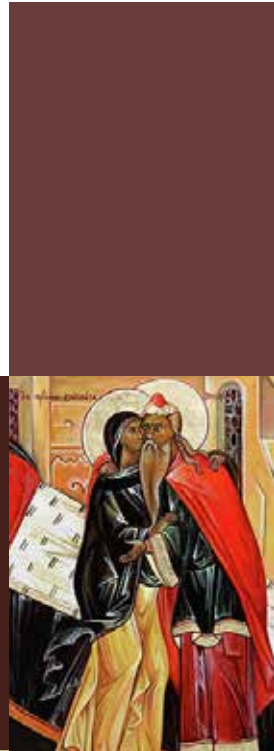
The Conception of John the Baptist
Natalia Lvova 2019

*“Who were they before kids? How were they faithful as non-mothers?
Who are we as Christian Women without being mothers?”*

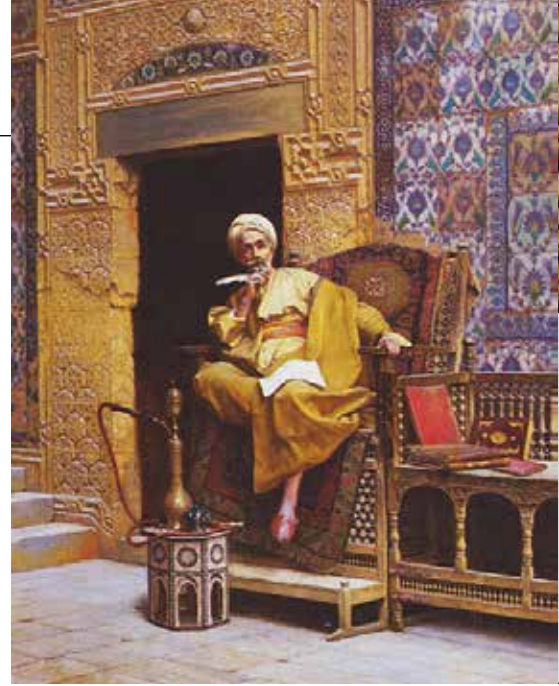
In the realm of art theory and psychology research, there is much debate as to what type of art and imagery is best at fostering empathy. Some point out the powerful effects of masterworks of realism, such as Rembrandt’s rendition of the Supper at Emmaus in which the “depiction of human empathy is sincere and beautiful, and relies on careful observation of the human body and human behavior” (O’Brien 6). While others argue that “Relation to non-human creatures has proven to a space in which we gain knowledge of what it is to be human” (Bradshaw 111). Some even argue that the simple element of color could have a positive effect on perception and the psyche of an individual, “as it stimulate[s] not only the eye but the nostrils and throat: it...make[s] things warmer and easier to see” (Lanzoni 343).

While each of these arguments has its merit, one psychoneurological process that can not be easily disputed and has a high level of consensus as to its application for empathy invoking art is that of the mirror neuron system, a system that is exceptionally well developed in humans. This system, which prompts humans to mimic the physical actions and expressions of other humans, or depictions thereof, is the gateway to the emotions tied to those actions and expressions. As Antonio Damasio stated, “You... have the possibility of simulating the body states of others; you can go from the body of the self to the body another and through the body, into the mind of another” (qtd. in Jeffers 20). Because of the extensive body of proof related to the relationship of figurative art to the mirror neuron system, I will be utilizing this style of artwork for my proposed solution.

On the specific topic of religious artwork, O’Brien offers a formula by which “art can be seen to provide theological illumination. It can aid meditation and contemplation, it can communicate religious truths through iconography, and it can say things that words cannot” (O’Brien 5). Elgin and Goodman argue that a successful work of art should, “transform perception and transfigure its objects by bringing us to recognize aspects, objects, and orders which we had previously underrated or overlooked (Elgin and Goodman 22).” Art provides an opportunity for individuals to allow a pleasurable aesthetic experience to aid them in considering alternate interpretations to long-held theological or cultural constructs that they had previously left unquestioned.



the visual process



Utilizing the qualitative data from the survey to focus on the perceived needs of my test group, keeping in mind the markers of successful religious art proposed by O'Brien, Elgin, and Goodman, and integrating my proposed facets of "rebranding" infertility, I created works for this thesis that fit the following parameters:

1. A series of figurative paintings in the style of contemporary representationalism.
2. Each piece serves as a didactic visualization of the social and psychological experience of a woman in the Bible who experienced infertility.
3. Each specific piece focuses on a scene from the story that is recorded in the Bible but rarely, if ever, portrayed in historic or contemporary art.

By focusing on the lived experience of infertility, rather than the miracles these women were eventually blessed with, these pieces will provide a springboard for discussion on infertility in religious communities. Infertile women viewing the work will be provided, like the members of the Pilgrim Baptist Church, an opportunity to see themselves visualized in the lore and teachings of their religion. This opportunity should provide a greater sense of belonging and empowerment, emotions that are key to the mental health of infertile women (Roudsari et al. 117). For individuals unaffected by infertility, these pieces will provide insight into the challenges faced by those experiencing infertility and allow them to experience vicariously, through the mirror neuron system, the emotions depicted in the paintings. The didactic nature of the paintings, combined with their emotional effect, will give viewers the knowledge "about" and the knowledge "of" the experience of infertility that is essential to building empathy.

Images Counter-clockwise:

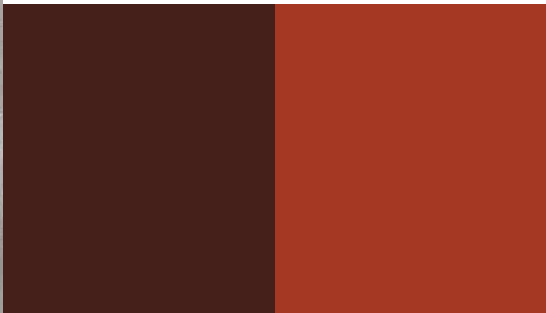
The Scribe, Ludwig Deutsch 1911

Palestinian Mother, Unknown photographer/year, Khalil Raad Collection

Bedouin Woman in Jerusalem, Unknown photographer 1898-1914

The Matson (G. Eric and Edith) Photograph collection at the Library of Congress

The Bride of Bethlehem (detail), William Holman Hunt 1884, Private collection





SELECTING SUBJECTS & SCENES

Much of my work as an artist is portrait based with a high level of focus on externalizing the inner complexities of my subjects. For this project, I decided I would best be able to utilize the skills I have developed if I selected characters who are well fleshed out by canonized scripture. Moreover, I wanted to ensure that each of the stories focused on a different aspect of the experience of infertility. For these reasons, the Old Testament characters of Sarai/Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah were selected. A primary goal with each of these characters is to resolve the issue of one-dimensionality that was mentioned multiple times in both the literature I reviewed and the survey results I collect. While each of these paintings explores the effects of infertility on these women's lives, I wanted to simultaneously make them more than their infertility. The objective was to move beyond the trope of "infertile-woman-saved-by-miracle-birth" and become individuals with personalities, hopes, dreams, fears, petty dislikes, superstitions, and desires.

The story of Sarah gives us a glimpse into the life of a woman promised posterity by God (Genesis 17:17), who felt the weight of her husband's divinely appointed position (Genesis 12:1-2, 15:4-6, 17:6-9) and its implications on her, and a woman who struggled to navigate her relationship with another woman who was considered her social inferior but had the one blessing, fertility, that Sarah was denied (Genesis 16:4-6). After close study of the chapters in Genesis that document the story of Sarai who became Sarah, I decided that rather than focusing on a specific scene in the biblical narrative, it would be more effective to fabricate a plausible simple moment that would serve as a composite exploration of all of these tensions in Sarah's life. An important facet of this visualization was to give a face to the woman who was reportedly so beautiful that multiple rulers of powerful empires were ready to rob and kill for her, even when she was well past her childbearing years (Genesis 12, 20). Despite the fact she is the "mother of nations," depictions of her that stray away from the tropes of a Madonna-like-mother-of-Isaac or ancient-hag-in-contrast-to-Hagar are scarce.

The story of Rachel gives a glimpse into the tension that infertility can cause in familial relationships and, in respect to her relationship to Leah, is a prime example of "the grass is always greener on the other side." Rachel, the beloved, beautiful, and doted-on wife had a life of luxury and love from her husband, but she was consumed with a desire for children. Leah, the plain and neglected wife, had the exact thing that Rachel lacked but she also thirsted for what Rachel had (Genesis 29, 30). After reading through the chapters in Genesis featuring Rachel, I determined that the moment that best highlights this strained dynamic is found in Genesis 30:14-16. This details the moment when a young Reuben returns from the fields with a mandrake root and a bartering war ensues between Rachel and Leah over this root. The mandrake root was believed to have aphrodisiac-like qualities and increase fertility and is traded to Rachel in exchange for Leah spending the night with Jacob who apparently lives primarily with Rachel. The goal with this painting is to capture the longing that each sister has for what the other has and the loneliness and divide this creates.

Finally, the story of Hannah gives a glimpse into the strain often placed on a marriage by infertility. The passages in the book of 1 Samuel that focus on Hannah's encounter with Eli are familiar to many, but I found myself drawn to a short passage immediately preceding that. 1 Samuel 1:8 captures the tender but frustrated plea of a husband that easily translates across millennia. Elkanah, Hannah's husband, is at a complete loss for how to comfort his wife or resolve her challenges. In the statement "Am I not better to thee than ten sons?" he captures the divide between the experience of a childless man and a childless woman in ancient Israel. It is this all too timeless scenario of "wife is hurt, husband desperately wants to fix it but doesn't know how," that this piece aims to tap into. By bringing to life a relatable moment in a marriage that existed thousands of years ago, this piece provides both a contemporary and historical entry point into the experiences of women who face infertility.



ESTABLISHING AN AESTHETIC

Once the basic narrative structure of my paintings was selected, the next step was to establish an aesthetic direction for the staging, props, and scenery. Since one of the goals of this project was to reinfuse these stories with historical context it made sense to pursue a more historically accurate aesthetic.

This process began with research into the clothing and accessory trends during biblical times. I quickly discovered that, due to holes in currently available archeological evidence, there is little clarity on the exact appearance of a “typical” biblical costume. What evidence there is suggests two main garments worn by both genders; first, a shift-like dress, and second, a long loose coat. These were often worn with various accessories such as jewelry, belts, and headscarves. The women’s and men’s clothing were clearly differentiated but the records are unclear as to by what means (Batten).

Using this basic model of clothing as a foundation for my planning, I then moved forward in time to the Orientalist Art period which, albeit inaccurate and imperialistic in nature, provided previously unprecedented documentation of near and middle eastern fashions. Between these paintings, the more journalistic work of painters/ engravers such as David Roberts, and early photographs of traditional Bedouin and Palestinian women, I was able to fabricate a series of costume concepts that are most likely not a completely accurate representation of history but provide a level of authenticity unparalleled to that of a loosely draped sheet.

The rich paintings of Orientalist painters such as Jean-Léon Gérôme, Ludwig Deutsch, and Eugène Girardet also provided inspiration for a warm earth-toned scattered with a few hints of rich blues and oranges and “archway” lighting scenarios. I have also noticed that

many churches prefer neutral colored art and decor and therefore an understated color palette should help the paintings appeal to a broad range of denominations.

Once these overarching design decisions were made, it was time to proceed with literally constructing this quasi-realistic biblical world. Due to budget restrictions and limited access to street markets in Jerusalem, prop collection consisted primarily of countless thrift store trips, Craigslist scours, and Amazon treasure hunts. Through these various avenues, I slowly built a collection of pots, baskets, fur pelts, and small pieces of furniture.

The most labor-intensive piece by far was the costumes. This process began with sourcing materials, which due to budget restrictions, consisted primarily of an assorted collection of shower curtains, drapes, and linen dresses. The two main focuses of my fabric selection were 1) color, and 2) draping quality. After the materials had been acquired I proceeded to cut and sew the garments either by using simplified versions of Folkwear’s historically accurate Palestinian, Turkish, and Moroccan clothing patterns or by altering



Right to left:

Ramallah Woman

Unknown photographer c. 1929-46

The Matson (G. Eric and Edith) Photograph collection at the Library of Congress

The Fruit Seller

Eugène Alexis Girardet c. late 1800's

Private collection



existing garments to approximate them. Many of the items sewn for the women also included handcrafted embroidery and beading details.

Simultaneous to the costume construction, I also began developing simple color and value sketches of my painting composition. This guided me in my costume construction process as the color of the various characters' costumes would greatly affect the composition and mood of the painting. After the costumes and sketches were complete I used a mannequin to style and document each costume exactly as it would be worn by the models.

The models were recruited by word of mouth or social media and were selected based on two prioritized criteria: 1) are they, or could they pass, as Middle Eastern? and 2) do they fit the image in my head of what I think the character should look like? I ultimately ended up selecting a young Jewish couple to model as Hannah and Elkanah, a middle-aged Brazilian woman as Sarah, a young Filipino woman as Hagar, a young Hispanic woman as Rachel, a Jewish woman as Leah, and an olive-complexioned Caucasian boy as Reuben.

Once the models, costumes, and props were finalized I proceeded to photograph them as I had planned for them to appear in the paintings. This included an intensive staging and lighting set up for two of the paintings including the construction of a fake arch and Bedouin-style tent and differentiated cool fill lighting vs. warm key and rim lighting. Some of the elements were not the size I wanted for my compositions so I photographed them separately to be added in later. These initial photographs were edited for color and lighting and then composited with a collection of stock images and some digital painting to construct detailed reference photos.

Using a projector I then traced these photos onto a medium weave oil-primed linen mounted onto cradled boards that I had built. This initial tracing provided basic proportions which I then fleshed out with a detailed under-drawing and basic grisaille layer. This layer was followed by an initial block in layer to establish shapes, colors and values. After this layer was dry two to four layers of impasto and or glazing were added to further develop details, unify colors, and clarify form. Due to the scale of the pieces, the brush strokes remained smooth and generally well blended but I focused on developing abstract texture in large areas such as the sky and ground.

All of the paintings were simultaneously developed, three to ten days at a time. This evenly spread development helped me to maintain unified colors and pace myself for a uniform level of finish. One of the challenges I faced during this development was finding a way to keep the value relationships harmonious across all three paintings. Ultimately I had to adjust many of the shadow areas with glazes to achieve an equal and satisfactory sense of depth and drama in each painting. Another flaw I discovered was a lack of emphasis on





atmospheric depth in my reference photos. This forced me to paint over the more distant areas multiple times to find a balance of color and value shift that correctly reflected the depth of the scene.

As the paintings were nearing the end I began to develop designs for the framing. After researching prices and options I decided to order precut unfinished lengths from a planing mill in a simple and elegant low-profile design. These were glued, primed, and then finished with a combination of antique finished black satin paint, an old-world gold finish, and gold geometric corner ornaments that echoed the embroidery designs on the costumes.

Throughout this process, I strove to maintain an emotional connection to my subjects and the living individuals my work was aiming to benefit. I often returned to the Bible passages that cover these stories and hung on every word of feedback from my survey as the results continued to trickle in. By staying grounded in the purpose of the artwork it helped clarify little creative decisions that arose along the way. Most of all it helped me to find joy and purpose in the process. To use the words of Cezanne, "If I'm unemotional, if I draw and paint as they do in the schools, I'll no longer see anything" (Qtd. in O'Brien 9).



Images counter clockwise:

1. Second layer of portrait painting process.
2. Antique bronze vase used as a prop.
3. An array of paintbrushes.
4. Detail of paintbrush washing jar.
5. Costume for the character of Leah.
6. Detail of paint on glass palette.
7. Costume for the character of Hannah.
8. Underdrawing in process.
9. Costume for the character of Rueben
10. Reference photo creation process.
11. Detail of paint tubes.





the visual



solution

Images right to left:

1. Model and costume for the character of Rachel
2. Detail of paintbrush, paint, and palette
3. Digitally composed reference photo for the painting "As Grains of Sand"
4. Detail of antique ceramic bowl used as a prop
5. Detail of painting supplies
6. Detail of antique brass and enamel pitcher prop
7. Array of paintbrushes



as grains of sand



This painting, depicting an unspecified by scripture but plausible moment in the life of Sarah, gives the viewer a glimpse into the complex emotions of an infertile woman contemplating the unfulfilled promises and blessings in her life. Sarah sits quietly in the shade of her tent, gazing into the distance as kernels of grain sift through her hand. These kernels serve to symbolize both the divine promises made to her and Abraham concerning their innumerable posterity, and the time she doubtlessly felt slipping through her fingers as these promises were left unfulfilled day after day. Moving downward in the frame, there is a luscious spread of food representing the relative comfort and wealth she experienced as the wife of a well-established herdsman and farmer. But even this fruitful bounty mocks her barrenness, especially the taunting succulence of a recently opened pomegranate—a fruit synonymous with fertility in many cultures. The jug of olive oil alludes to both her sanctified status as matriarch and her royal name and lineage. This is echoed as well by the blue of her robes. In the Rabbinic tradition, blue is the color of heaven and royalty.

Moving deeper into the frame we see the heavily pregnant form of Hagar in the distance. She stares with contempt towards Sarah, who although seemingly unaware of the gaze, is no doubt constantly aware of the juxtaposition between Hagar's fertility and her infertility. The complexity of their relationship is alluded to by the basket of grain in Hagar's hand. As the surrogate mother, she harvested and bore the seed, which was ultimately to be delivered to the hand of Sarah. While the painting primarily emphasizes the psychological, or interior state of Sarah, it gives the viewer a glimpse into the challenges placed on women both inside and outside of the "tent" of infertility and the pain, discontent, and division this divide can cause.

*"I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven,
and as the sand which is upon the sea-shore."*

—*Genesis 22:17*



of the barren & fruitful



This painting captures a poignant moment in the life of Rachel. A young Reuben has just returned from the fields to his mother, bearing in his hands a mandrake root, an ancient aphrodisiac. Desperate for its supposed fertility benefits, Rachel has begged her sister for the root and Leah has bartered it for the one thing she envies her sister for; the time and attention of their shared husband. While each sister has seemingly momentarily gained the prize she wants, there is still a lack of contentment on either of their faces and the waving field of grain still divides the space they occupy.

Rachel clings to her recently acquired mandrake root, the representation of both what she has—the affections of her husband—and what she will give anything for—children. Facing the opposite direction, Leah clings to what she has—a beautiful young child—but she gazes into the distance at what she also desperately craves, the affections of her husband. Each is completely absorbed in the pain of their individual experience and seemingly unaware of the beauty and bounty that surround them. The child gazes intently back at the viewer, both as an homage to the work of my hero, Carl Bloch, and as a silent invitation for the viewer to stop and consider the pain and longing that may exist in their seemingly beautiful and serene social circles.

“Then Rachel said to Leah, Give me, I pray thee, of thy son’s mandrakes. And she said unto her, Is it a small matter that thou hast taken my husband? and wouldst thou take away my son’s mandrakes also?”

—Genesis 30:14-15



am I not?



While the previous two paintings in this series explore some of the tensions between an infertile woman, her sense of self, and other fertile women, this final painting touches on the tension caused in a marriage. It captures the moment when Elkanah, the husband of Hannah, pleads with her, “Am I not better than ten sons?” The apparent worry, frustration, desire to fix the situation, and love for his wife recorded in the Bible carry through millennia.

The figures are situated just inside the doorway of a storage room, giving the viewer a sense of being almost uncomfortably close to an intimate and painful moment. Elkanah reaches out for Hannah with one hand as she turns away in sorrow. Their backs are to the warm welcoming light of the outside world and their focus is intently on the darkness within. Hannah gestures as she speaks but her hand also leads to a spilled basket of pomegranates to her right, alluding to her inability to maintain a viable pregnancy. This message is emphasized by the empty net above her head.

Just as the tension of Hannah’s weight against Elkanah’s pull can be seen in their hands, so the viewer can feel the dichotomous relationship of attraction and frustration between a couple who love each other but are grappling with the psychological and social pressures placed upon them by the experience of infertility.

“Then said Elkanah her husband to her, Hannah, why weepest thou? and why eatest thou not? and why is thy heart grieved? am not I better to thee than ten sons?”

—1 Samuel 1:8



conclusion

American communities' need to seek and foster empathy is evident in a multiplicity of social issues, but, thankfully, art provides an ideal tool to communicate not only facts, but the emotions that lead to an understanding of and empathy for others. In the case of infertile women, they are particularly in need of empathy within Judeo-Christian religious communities, and art—combined with religious instruction—can inspire a reversal of negative cultural attitudes. By providing art that opens the doors for greater historical nuance, effective contemporary dialogue, and —ultimately—empathy, artists and religious educators alike lay the foundation for stronger and more inclusive communities and thus fulfill the divine mandate to love as He loved (John 4:11).

“They who are willing to be called the Lord’s people ‘are willing to bear one another’s burdens, ... to mourn with those that mourn; ... and to comfort those that stand in need of comfort.’ ”

—President Russell M. Nelson

Right:

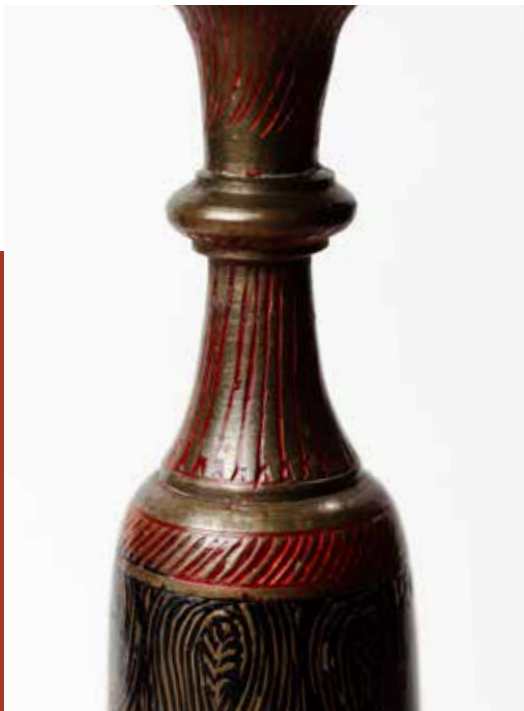
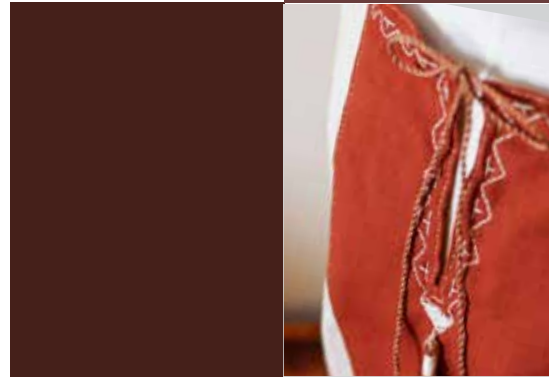
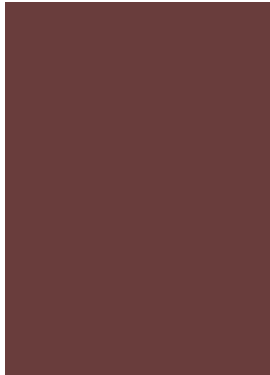
Bedouin women carrying water
Underwood & Underwood 1919



From watching the neighbors' children
And whose hands are thin from yearning
To hold a soft small body
And to rock its cradle,
Mother Rachel brings healing [mandrake] leaves
Discovered on distant mountains,
And comforts them with a quiet word.

—Kathryn Hellerstein

(Dresner 451)



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my husband, Steven Christiansen: This thesis would not have been possible without your dedicated, selfless, and constant support. While this project may have been my brainchild, you are the one who coached me through the long nights, setbacks, and self doubt. Thank you for the countless ways you sacrificed and lived your love.

To my parents, Sherry and Benjamin Candari: Thank you for teaching me to set my eyes on continual improvement and pursue my passion. It has been an honor to continue a family legacy of hard work, community betterment, and prioritization of education. Thank you for laying the foundation for me to build upon.

To my artistic and academic mentors, Christopher Phillips, Joshua Wilson, Joseph Brickey, Jeff Merrill, Viliami Toluta'u, and Jose Hernandez: Thank you for walking beside me during all my growing pains. Thank you for pushing me to be better and do better. Thank you for being the kind of educator, leader, artist, and disciple of Christ that I aspire to be.

appendix



survey results

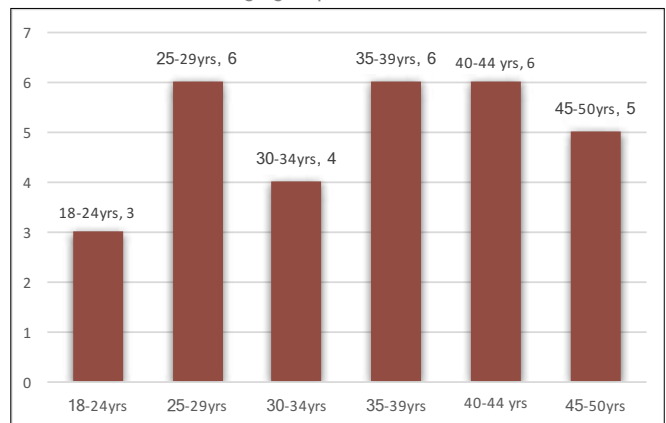
DEMOGRAPHICS:

Total: 30 participants

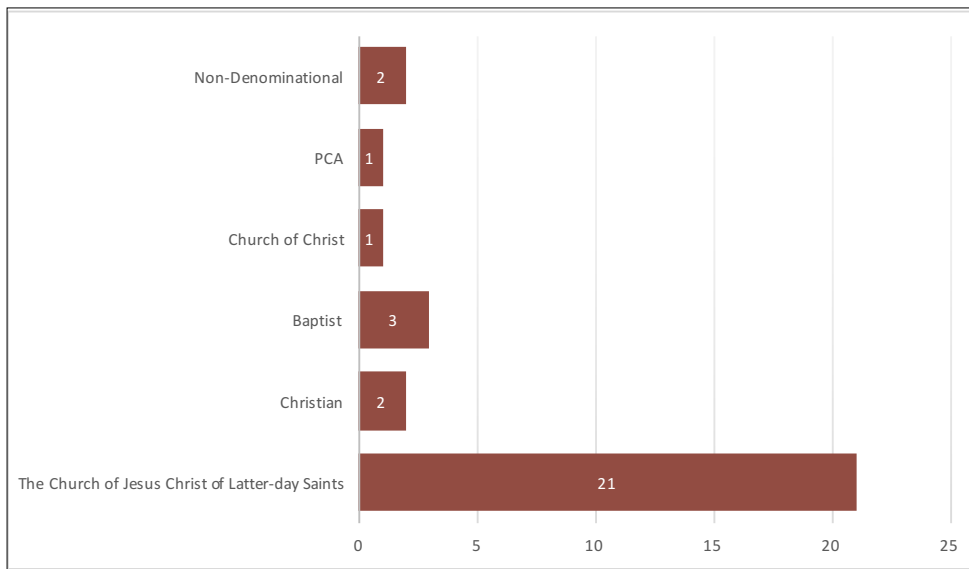
Requirements:

1. Female (Sex assigned at birth)
2. Between the ages of 18 and 50
3. Experienced infertility (The inability to conceive after one year of consistent effort, or the inability to carry a fetus to full term after three years of consistent effort)
4. Active participant in a Judeo-Christian religion

Age group distribution

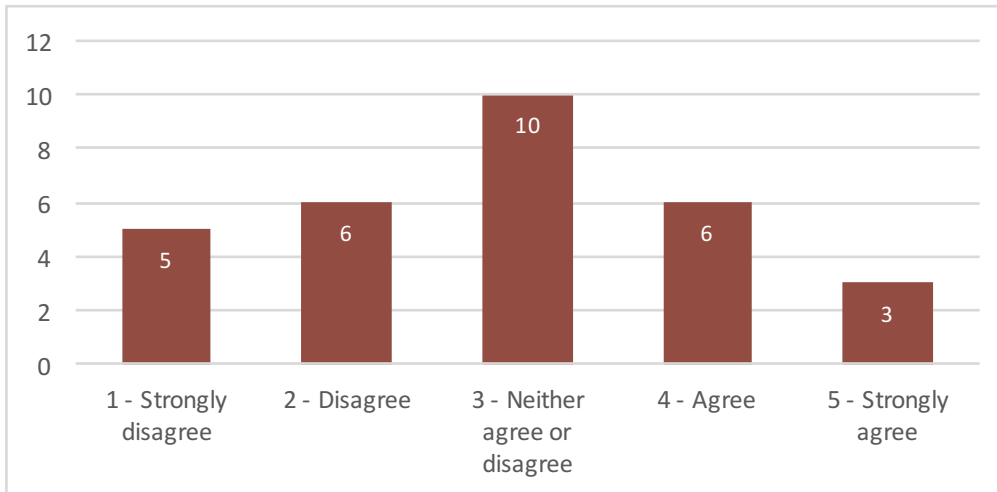


Denomination affiliation distribution



QUESTION:

How would you respond to the following statement: “My experience with infertility has negatively affected my ability to create strong relationships with other members of my religious community?”



Briefly describe why you chose this number.

“I have a hard time connecting with other women in my church who have children as I do not. I don’t feel connected or have many friends within my church because of this.”

“While experiencing infertility it was hard to surround myself in such a family oriented environment. Now that we have a child I’m more comfortable creating relationships with others within my religious community.”

“I used to strongly agree. I’m 40 and that ship (having kids) has sailed. I now disagree. I choose to make friends and find my power.”

“Equal parts alienating and connecting”

“While experiencing infertility I did have a hard time connecting with most other members. There was one other couple who were experiencing the same type of trial so I did feel some support from them. Now, as I am older I realize a lot of the trouble I had making connections was on my end, not coming from them. It was self imposed as I didn’t feel I wanted to connect with them.”

“It’s affected some relationships in a negative way, but it has not prevented me from establishing relationships altogether.”

“I agree, that was true when I was younger (& frankly, before I had kids). Now, that statement is not true. Sorrow, disappointment & testing of Faith is universal, If specifics are not. I can sympathize & support others with similar or totally different sorrows because I have experienced sorrow. This was not true while I was in my deepest sorrow, then the infertility made me feel completely isolated and sometimes outcast. I am much stronger in my identity of self now.”

“I don’t have trouble making new relationships within the Christian community, but my experience with a few members of my faith community during my time of infertility are now broken because of their actions or behaviors during it.”

“During the years I was unable to conceive (96-98) and the years I was unable to carry to term (01-08) I didn’t fit in with the “large family” mamas I next identified with because my children were missing, and I wasn’t having babies along with those who were having babies. My experience also made others feel uncomfortable around me and some people accused me of lying about my losses. (They total 8.)”

“A lot of people didn’t know how to deal with the fact that we had trouble conceiving. Some would ask me every month if we were pregnant, which was hard. Others avoided me. This happened when several other women became pregnant at the same time. It was hard to be around them at church because I didn’t really have anything to talk to them about when they were talking about their pregnancies. At one baby shower, I found out that another woman my age just found out she was expecting and I started crying. I left the room very quickly because I didn’t want her to feel bad. I was honestly happy for her, just surprised and sad for myself. An older woman drew attention to my crying and said loudly, “What is your problem?” Which made it worse.”

“It’s really difficult to be a young married couple while struggling with infertility, especially when everyone around you is married with kids. Big family is a part of the culture. People always asking when and why not gets exhausting. “

“It is one of the top priorities in my religion to start a family and continue to build Zion. When you have been married for a while you always get lots of intrusive questions about why you don’t have kids and after the first few it becomes a super touchy experience that I started to stop trying to reach out or make friends because all my friends eventually had kids of their own.”

“Most women in my age group have young children or meet and socialize because their children are same age, in nursery together, etc.”

“I felt completely alone when we were struggling with getting pregnant. And going to church and seeing people who just got married that were pregnant broke my heart.”

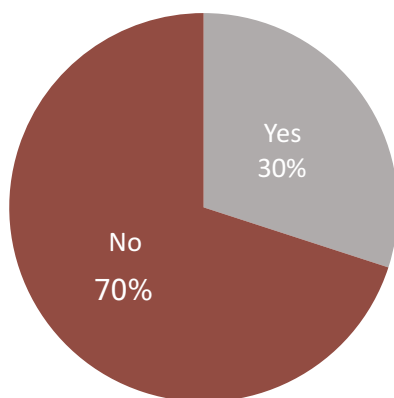
“I dont want people to ask me why i dont have kids...and a million other questions like it. Or when a woman who doesnt think you have been trying and must not be focused on it tells you youre clock is ticking for having kids..i dont want sympathy...and also dont want advice...cause so far its never been helpful from other women who live near me”

“In a family oriented church with our children. Nobody invites you to things, you don’t want to go to the things you are invited to. People become friends at their kids soccer games and dance recitals.”

QUESTION:

Do you feel your community has the adequate information and opportunities to discuss the experiences and needs of infertile women?

Responses



Briefly explain why:

“I felt alone and ashamed as of there was no place for my pain and that no one would understand. And as if I was being punished by God. (I don’t feel that way now)”

“Infertility or miscarriage is never discussed openly in the church. And people are awkward talking about it. We believe “life begins at conception” but we tell people not to announce a pregnancy until after the first trimester. We don’t want to deal with the 1-in-4 probability of a miscarriage, so tell people to suffer alone and in silence.”

"It's really uncomfortable to talk about with anyone. Everyone I personally have reached out to has said "it'll happen when it's supposed to happen" nobody has ever pointed me in a direction for how to handle this."

"I fell like this is still such a personal topic. Even though once you start talking about it so many others can relate, it is a perception issue. My role as a woman is hugely defined by my ability to bear and raise children. All the reassurances of blessing eventually being fulfilled and "in the Lord's time" hold little value when you are in the depths of despair and wondering why, if you are living righteously and have this ultimate of righteous desires, are you still unable to bear children. How many of us want to admit we feel like we have somehow failed our God given duty?"

"Yes and no. I wish it was talked about more, but its definitely becoming a more talked about subject."

"I've never heard it discussed."

"Infertility isn't talked about, they expect you to deal with it on your own."

"Having children is a big part of my church and those who cannot do so have many support options."

"Infertility is not a problem that religion solves. Church leaders do talk about being sensitive to diverse families and encourage members to be inclusive."

"I felt like my needs were met."

"Infertility is a fairly socially unacceptable conversation anywhere, including with church members."

"The denomination's pastors have been sensitive to the demographic in my experience, not holding up motherhood as the only way a woman has value in God's eyes."

"The subject makes people uncomfortable. Either they completely misunderstand it or they shy away from it all together."

"Well unless they've gone through it, they can't really understand."

"Only times i hear people talk about it it makes me depressed."

"I don't hear or see much acknowledgement of women/couples dealing with infertility. The church overall is not always great about acknowledgement of those who may be hurting for various reasons. When the need arises, they are willing to discuss and have the resources."

"For me it was a private experience and I was never aware of others experiencing the same problems and especially not aware of any groups that could address these issues."

"Honestly, it was a toss up. There are a lot of people who know a lot and there's plenty of opportunity, but I still think it should be talked about more."

"My religious community and beliefs in general are so focused on family/parenthood. When you are in the depths of infertility it's hard to feel purpose and relate to the topics being discussed/taught when you are unable to take that step of having children."

"Yes on opportunities, no on adequate information (it's not really their area of expertise so i wouldn't expect them to)"

"It's not talked about at the church level, only between individuals. At the church level there is a lot of talk about motherhood, which can be painful when you desperately want to be a mom but can't."

"I think this topic is lacking in society as a whole and more education needs to be provided to everyone."

"No one talked about it, or how to get pregnant, or that there are many many reasons why someone can't get pregnant. Makes you feel alone, lost, no options, that you are some how at fault."

"Most know how to help but some choose not to take that Advice."

"We don't talk about it openly. I think some of that comes from generally not talking about the process of getting pregnant publicly. Sometimes other members of congregations will "lovingly" joke about why you don't have kids yet, but I know a lot of women who react in hurt frustration to an ignorant question than openly saying "we're struggling." I wish we'd say "we are struggling" more often and in more situations to allow our fellow congregants to be there to support us."

"Because I feel like it's taboo to really address even though many have the same issue. "

"It's not discussed. People say "if you don't have kids here, just be faithful and keep your covenants and you can have them in heaven."

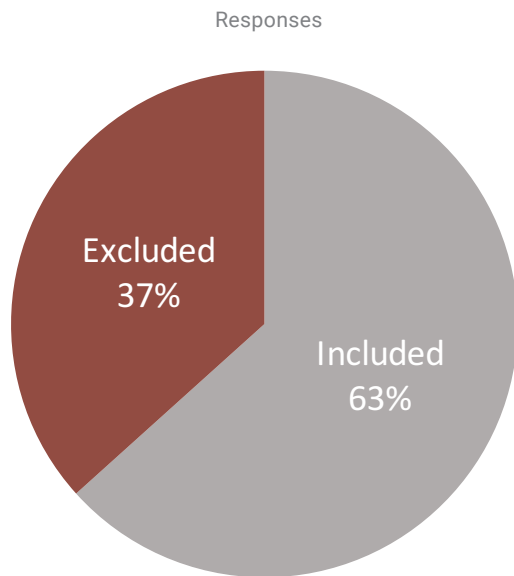
"Yawn."

"Emphasis on being a mother as the pinnacle of spiritual progression excludes single women and women struggling with infertility."

"I don't want to talk about it with anyone. None yo business."

QUESTION:

Do you feel that the way your religious group presents stories of infertile women in the Bible (i.e. Sarah, Rachel, Hannah, etc.) makes you feel included or excluded?



Briefly explain why:

"Because they are presented as on dimensional characters instead of real women with multiple facets of feeling."

"It's always presented in a historical way, not necessarily and present situation way."

"At least it's talked about! They could just leave it out completely. This is a tough one. I think an effort is made, but in the end they were blessed with children, in this life."

"I wish they were talked about more, but hearing about very God fearing women also struggle is comforting. its always nice when you can feel like you have camaraderie. You're not alone."

"Usually the topic isn't dwelt on very long."

"There struggle isn't really talked about. More so when they were finally blessed with child."

"I would say that these are not topics which are covered often or in the manner of infertility."

"These were faithful strong women, and I can be one too."

"For me, it came down to accepting the will of God"

"Little discussion of how the women felt in sorrow and pain as they contemplated their life role. Unrealistic ideas of what Faith looks like in disappointment. No discussion of what a woman in such circumstance should do/focus on or how to be a participant in church society outside of parenting and teaching kids classes.

"They focus on Christ more, and less on some kind of ritual or manipulation to allow women to successfully bear a child."

"It reminded me that God saw and was close to those barren women, and He saw me too."

"Well I'm not really sure how to answer this. All of those women eventually gave birth (as did I) if you never give birth due to infertility, you can't even relate to these women from the bible. People might believe your infertility is die to lack of faith, but I never felt like that."

"Its usually skipped over unless ots by a apostle or prophet speaking It brings normalcy to the topic."

"This is a non-issue. A story is a story and there is no need to filter the facts."

"The focus always implies that there was something wrong with these women, when in fact it's often a problem with the men. They make it sound so negative, too, like using the word barren to describe them."

"I related to those women in a different way than I had before. I felt pain for them I hadn't before, but also found strength in their great faith."

"Their stories we're relatable and gave me hope."

"I know I'm not alone"

"I have found those stories to be helpful, and find that these women are presented as faithful through difficult struggles when presented at church."

"It helps you to know you're not alone."

"If there are women in the Bible then this is an important issue to God and we need to be more open about it. He wants to talk about it..."

"Because the women were all given children and that's when their stories began"

"You know, I had never thought of them as examples of infertility!"

"There are times for both sentiments but it's harder the longer the issue is there to believe that I will receive the miracle and blessing of

having my own children."

"Stories from the scriptures are used like this: These women had faith. That equals children. So just have faith. Easy. I have faith. That has not equaled children. I know I have faith. But not everybody else knows I have faith. We have no scripture story of faith leading to childlessness."

"I would actually more accurately have put "neither" above. I've ever really thought about it. Except the hope the stories offer for miraculous eventual motherhood."

" "God trusted these women" so he doesn't trust me??"

QUESTION:

What aspects of these stories, if any, do you feel are underplayed?

"The pain, judgement, loneliness, blame. The false idea that if you are perfectly obedient you'll receive the blessings of motherhood."

"What happens to the pregnancy when it fails, how long the women waited, how they must have felt on a daily basis, how they must have felt abandoned by God."

"The stories are usually told "she wanted to have a baby and tried for a really long time and then God blessed her with a baby" I feel like it super undermines how lonely, stressful, and sad this journey really is."

"It is hard to depict the struggle of rejoicing for friends who are pregnant because you really are happy for them, and the reality of knowing you may never have that yourself. It is difficult to understand the thoughts of self-doubt and inadequacy as you are constantly told families are the Lord's plan and everything hinges on bearing a raising righteous children and you are left alone in your thoughts of "why not me?" Also there is a huge part left out and that is the side of the husband. My husband felt utterly powerless to comfort me. Men like to 'fix' things and he could not 'fix' this. He was suffering too but those who knew about our struggle only ever asked how I was doing. It was hard on both of us. That is the real underplayed aspect."

"That they are not any less in the eyes of the Lord. And neither are women of modern day."

"It's a defining characteristic of that person's situation and is usually mentioned almost in passing."

"The struggle before conceiving"

"The infertility aspect. I have never heard them discussed in that manner openly before."

"The emotional struggles of waiting for the blessing of children"

"The cultural expectations"

"I don't know, actually. Sarah's Faith in her husband and God?"

"I haven't experienced that. Now as a teen in a fundamentalist upbringing I heard a lot of details about the women's lives that were assumed, that I never found in scripture."

"That during their years of waiting, God was indeed enough."

"How sad they are that they could not have a child."

"The loneliness...or feeling guilty for making a husband hope for a pregnancy that didn't turn out"

"N/a"

"None."

"Just not enough detail in the stories, and not enough focus on the women in a positive way."

"The long long wait before their impossible blessings."

"Their stories touch on infertility and miracles that may have brought about a child but there is so much more to infertility than that. The emotional, psychological and physical ways it affects the individual and especially their relationships with their spouse/family and those around them."

"None that comes to mind"

"I don't feel like they are"

"N/A"

"That it only takes great faith and time and you will get a child. I know many women who have great faith and have prayed and waited 20+ years and have never been blessed with children. Sometimes faith and prayer and time don't fix the issue!"

"The years of infertility and their life, worth, and righteousness before they had sons"

"The fact that they were infertile. We focus on their faith, but not that super relatable and important piece of information"

"I can't think of one at the moment"

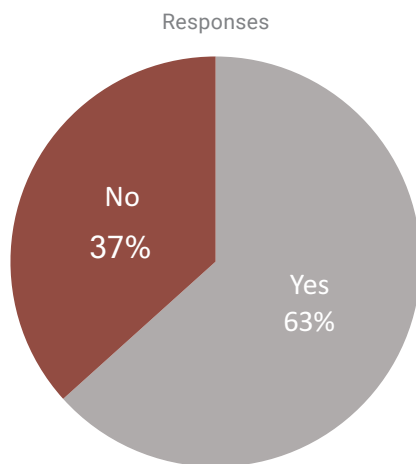
"I wish I could read about someone like me. Someone who has incredible faith and strength, yet I've chosen not to have kids (after trying for 10 yrs unsuccessfully to get pregnant)"

"The struggle of the women is underplayed in favor of the miracle God works in their lives. They are inspiring to those of us who have seen miracles bringing children into our lives after a long wait but it can seem even more hopeless for those to whom the blessing never comes."

"They built their lives together as friends and spouses and were happy together. Lack of children didn't necessarily make them sad."

QUESTION:

Do you feel like you can relate to the typical images (paintings/illustrations) of infertile women in the Bible (i.e. Sarah, Rachel, Hannah, etc.)?



Briefly explain why:

"Yes, now. Because I now allow myself to dig for their humanity."

"They're always portrayed as historical characters, not relatable people."

"I mean, we're struggling with infertility and all praying for a baby. That's exactly what those women did."

"In some ways. The Bible is not very forthcoming with details of women, but the women do express sadness, frustration, even anger so on that level yes."

"Again yes and no. Every situation is different. But its nice knowing there are others."

"I wish we heard more of their personal experience"

"Not being able to get pregnant makes you feel lonely, so having them to relate to give some comfort."

"As someone who needed alot of help becoming pregnant after years of infertility I do feel that I can relate."

"Same as above"

"Using prayer, Faith, patience and being willing to accept whatever the Lord sees fit to put upon me."

"Their story mostly centers around the coming of the children. Who were they before kids? How were they faithful as non-mothers? Who are we as Christian women without being mothers?"

"I was infertile for 5 years, and then had my first child after treatments, followed by 2 surprise babies in the next 3 years. "

"Because my struggle was more staying pregnant than in getting pregnant. I also ended up with a larger than average family because I never gave up hope that God would fulfill His plan to give me a larger family."

"Sort of. I never felt the despair I think they felt since I didn't feel any less of a women when we struggled to conceive. Other women made me feel left out. It was just a couple of the older women in the congregation that were helpful during this time and one of them suffered infertility."

"NA"

"It doesn't bother me. I never had a desire to be pregnant. I have 4 adooted sons."

"I feel like infertility today has some solutions but women in the scriptures did not have access to the medical care of modern times."

"I feel like I've been there with them. Their stories brought new meanings of faith into my life."

"I've seen pictures of women in the Bible but again not much that specifically display the emotional despair that is felt because of infertility. The hopelessness, feeling left out, the loneliness, etc."

"It reaffirms that God is in charge."

"I related to the pain they experienced, to their struggles to connect with spouses, to all the things they tried in order to conceive."

"N/A"

"I am comforted to know that great women in the Bible are like myself. That we have not been forgotten by the Lord. I have found great comfort in their stories of faith."

"They are always celebrating their miracle pregnancy"

"But depends on who the artist is. I imagine infertility is difficult to portray through art, so I have never seen them portrayed and thought "example of faith through infertility!" I'd like to see that/think that."

"Because most of them are the women praying and pleading with their Heavenly Father asking with faith and hope."

"No. Because they all had the magic baby ending that negated their struggle."

"Again, I want to say neither. I've never seen images of them."

"I don't look to them like that. I look at their character in general not necessarily about lack of kids."

QUESTION:

If you wanted to, and could, what is one thing you would change about the way your religious community teaches about the issue of infertility and women who experience it?

"Motherhood is the highest blessing and achievement a woman can attain to. Very unhealthy. Especially if your desire to have children is unfulfilled."

"Definitely the difficult question of what happens to a baby when it isn't born, and that infertility is absolutely not a punishment, but just a health issues like any other illness."

"I would tell people to be more comfortable talking about it. To reach out to young couples you think might be struggling and help them through the tough stuff"

"Stop giving the standard 'church answer' that all those who are righteous will receive these blessing ...eventually and expect women to just be OK with that answer. For once I would love for a leader to come out and say, "this is hard, it isn't fair, and yes those blessings are promised, but we don't expect you to just accept it and go about you life like it doesn't impact you daily. You can be upset, you can hurt, you can even question why, that doesn't make you weak, or mean you have no testimony. It means you are a human with real emotions."

"I hate the stigmas. You're not praying hard enough. You're not worthy enough. You must not want kids. It's a medical condition. And I also hate when people try to be comforting and they say well theres other ways to be a mother. By being a teacher or an aunt. No it's not the same."

"Don't make it so taboo and "bad" or don't bring it up at all"

"That it's okay to talk about it. Many are going through the same thing."

"That it is something that can and should be discussed openly without being afraid of hurting others feelings."

"Childbearing isn't always a choice. For some of us, we'd choose children if we could... but our bodies aren't cooperating!"

"Clarify cultural perceptions/expectations"

"Talk about it. Loss shouldn't be taboo. Loss of a friend, spouse, child, infant in utero or dreams of children are all losses that need to be allowed to be experienced in acceptance and sympathy so we can grow."

"That women who have many children closely spaced together shouldn't offer advice on how to cope with infertility, unrequested. In my case, my husband was the one with sperm abnormalities, but I had several well meaning friends with full quivers quiz me on what I ate, and what I didn't, and suggested that my diet could be keeping me from becoming pregnant. This was hurtful at the time. My mother offered up the advice that I should adopt."

"The fact that motherhood can become a form of idolatry for both women who have children and for women who desire children."

"Well they don't really teach about it. I would hope that the women would be more supportive and understanding of those who have trouble."

Not sure.... maybe dont assume that if im not super focused on a career and just working for paying some bills but also not a mom that im not a failure in all women goals

"Acknowledgement of it, recognizing that it can be tough for males too, being mindful of it on Mother's Day"

"Encourage mentorship."

"The focus should be on infertility as a couple, not as an individual. We would talk about it more explicitly."

"I feel like my religious community has only more recently begun to really talk about infertility. While it's wonderful to teach about faith and hope it would also be helpful to teach others how to be compassionate of those going through infertility. Infertility isn't a punishment given due to lack of faith. Simply doing good doesn't just magically fix things. Continuing to include those going through infertility but also understanding when they feel too overwhelmed to participate also helps."

"Can't think of anything. I never felt it was their job to help me. Just making me feel loved was all they could do and they did that."

"I just think bringing it up more often could take some of the shame out of it."

"I think more needs to be taught on the actual science behind infertility more than its "God's" plan."

"The lack of talk about pregnancy planning, infertility, infant loss, and childlessness. The unspoken rule of keeping it all to ourselves. Mom shaming and shaming of women who do not have children. Mom women who have no children in leadership. I don't think they are considered for leadership as much as women with children."

"That's I'm not strong dispute my trial and it's ok I will eventually have kids. I'm strong because of my trial and if I have kids great if not I'm still a valuable and spiritual woman"

"God isn't punishing you. You are not less than I had a "friend" who flat out told me that I would be married if I would repent. I imagine the same message gets to infertile women as well. I know I'm not being punished... it's a "thorn and thistle for my good." It still hurts and I'm still sad and struggle with some unique emotions, but God isn't mad at me."

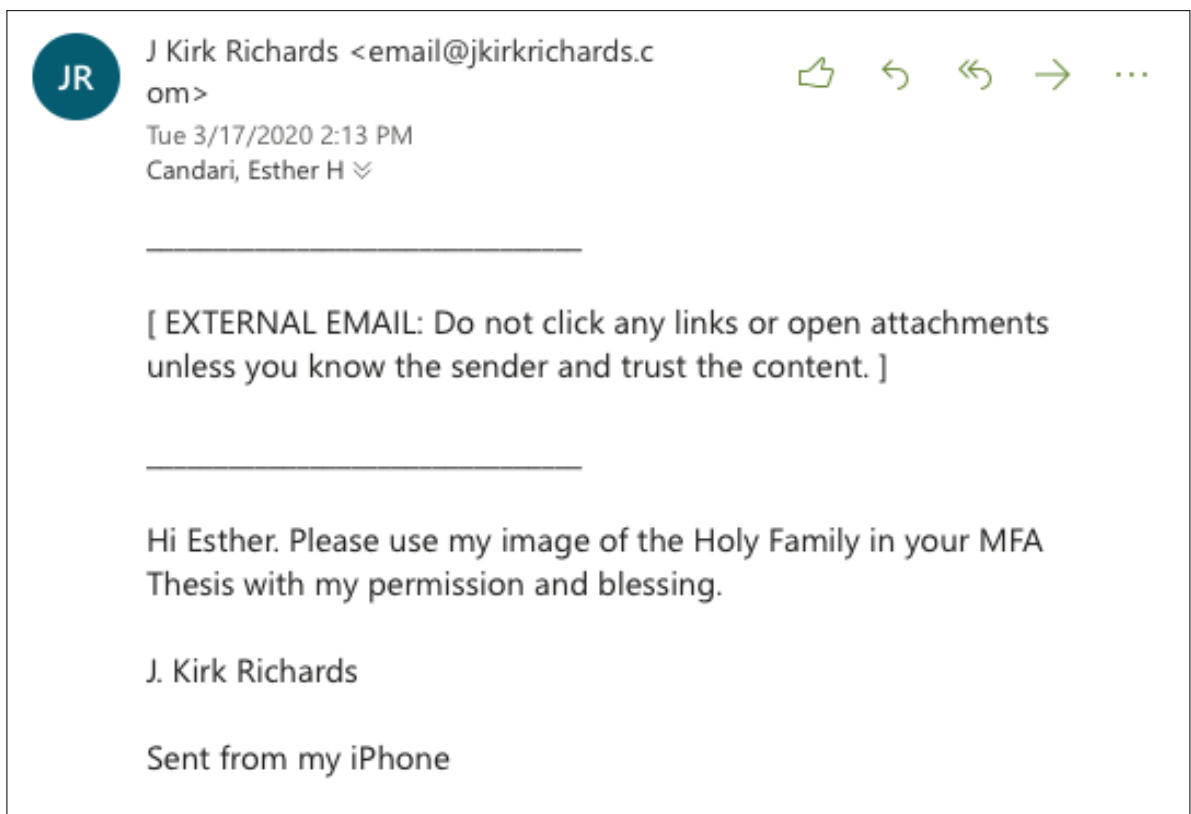
"I would have them teach more about how to love and support those who struggle with infertility"

"We are more than our womb. We are smart, talented, driven women. We have careers. We have huge capacity to contribute as involved decision-makers and teachers. Motherhood isn't the only path a noble woman can take. Validate and praise those without children. We offer our trades, talents, and wisdom."

"On a larger scale, I wish my community could find ways to celebrate family without marginalizing those who aren't currently living the "ideal" in a million ways, most out of their control. I don't know how to resolve that tension..."

"That's an excellent question. If I think of something I'll send you a pm."

permission for publication





Deidre Scherer <dscherer@svcable.net>

Fri 3/20/2020 1:34 AM

Candari, Esther H



[EXTERNAL EMAIL: Do not click any links or open attachments unless you know the sender and trust the content.]

Dear Esther,

Thank you for recognizing the value of my work -and for knowing to ask for permission to use them. Because you are a student, I give you this one-time specific permission to use these images for your thesis without a fee:

Deidre Scherer
September '88
thread on fabric
15 x 14 inches
1988

Deidre Scherer
Bigger Than Each Other
thread on fabric
36 x 30 inches
2000

Please note the correct spelling of my name and the correct title for *Bigger Than Each Other*. I hope you have a better image than that screenshot...?

With Best Thoughts,
Deidre

Deidre Scherer
PO Box 156
Williamsville, VT 05362
deidre@dscherer.com
www.dscherer.com
802.348.7807



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*“Sing, O barren, thou that didst not bear; break forth in singing,
and cry aloud, thou that didst not travail with child.”*

~ Isaiah 54:1