

CHAPTER 4

HARVEST SONG OF STAN AND SENA: SURROGATE MOTHERHOOD

The first of the four couples invited by the author to become storytellers in the research for this thesis were Stan and Sena. With the inclusion of co-researchers who had experienced IVF (in vitro fertilisation) and surrogate motherhood, the issues of kinship and assisted reproduction were introduced. Over a 14-year period, Stan and Sena had undertaken a great many fertility treatments, ranging from GIFT to IVF, eventually resorting to surrogate motherhood in their determination to become parents. With their third attempt, and their second surrogate, there was a pregnancy, and triplets were born.

The researcher will focus initially on a few theological and ethical considerations concerning fertility treatments, including surrogate motherhood that emerged from the conversations with Stan and Sena. Some aspects of the well-known Biblical narrative on surrogacy involving Abraham, Sarah and Hagar will subsequently be discussed. Following this, the narrative of Stan and Sena will be presented in a weaving pattern, which will include the ideas and feelings of the reflecting team and the researcher.

4.1 Biology and Theology

Depending on your point of view, those, along with the other significant role players involved who are brave or foolish enough to undergo assisted reproduction procedures have been described as an inaccessible population (Ragoné 1994:3). Directors and facilitators of surrogate mother programmes, commissioning parents and surrogates are usually reluctant to discuss their decisions and experiences openly. The reasons are manifold, and reflect some of the emotional, scientific and ethical complexities that are, to say the least, compelling and controversial. According to Ciccarelli and Beckman (2005:38), many more research questions of interest need to be posed concerning the potential impact on the children who are born of assisted reproduction involving a third party, as well as children in the surrogate's family. Interestingly, much greater research attention has been given

to the surrogate mother than to the intended (or commissioning) parents. Surrogacy arrangements involve complex interpersonal processes and interactions. There are three individuals involved, each with their own needs and hopes, as well as those of their families, who, in the case of the surrogate, usually include minor children. Add to that public policy and the culturally reinforced influence of the ideal family (Van den Akker 2001:137) and it becomes clear that infertility does not happen in a vacuum. This is true, too, of attempts to become more 'able' within the disablement that it renders.

Theologians and ethicists have expressed their concerns on various levels. The idea of assisted reproduction and surrogacy seems able to unsettle and challenge the traditional convictions on families and parenthood. Some Christian authors regard the use of IVF as a blessing, as long as it takes place within the context of marriage and only the genetic material of both husband and wife are used (Verster 2002:40). Reform Judaism apparently has no qualms about the scientific, laboratory environment in which conception takes place. This constructs IVF as a legitimate measure and a medical procedure in response to the disease of infertility, and represents the view that parenthood is determined genetically. The belief is that moral scrutiny should indeed guard over science and technology, but, at the same time, the couple's desire to have children is of greater concern, and the appropriate response towards them should be compassion, and deep gratitude when their hope for parenthood is realised with the aid of such a procedure (Washofsky 2000:236).

Some Orthodox Jewish scholars and Halachic writings dealing with Torah, (the legal section of the Hebrew Bible) refer to IVF as 'a morally repugnant act, which carries frightening implications for the future of the family and of society at large' (2002:2360). One of the reasons for such a harsh position is that the IVF procedure usually involves the fertilisation of many eggs at a given time in the hope that conception will take place, with at least one embryo implanting in the uterus. The embryos that are not implanted in the womb would in all probability be discarded. Reform Judaism, on the other hand, seems to interpret the morality of this issue in terms of the legal and moral status of the human foetus, as well as the question of whether the embryos are 'wantonly' disposed of. Regarding the

second matter, the Reform Responsa's interpretation is that, in the light of the fact that IVF as a legitimate medical procedure can be judged to be moral and good, the destruction of the remaining embryos 'is justified as the necessary, if unintended, consequence of a morally permissible act' (2002:237). As long as such an embryo is honoured with dignity as potential human life, it may be discarded, utilised in medical research or offered to another couple as an adoptive child (Washofsky 2002:237). As far as the first issue, that of the status of a foetus is concerned, Jewish opinion does not grant the same consideration to a foetus as it does to a live human being, although potential life is always highly valued. The Jewish legal point of view does not regard a foetus in the womb as a person until it has been born, or at least until the greater part of its body has entered the world (Freeman 1996:5). In wrestling with the notion of personhood, clearly a grey area, a range of views had prevailed on when a foetus becomes a person. For example: a pregnancy consists of 'mere fluid' up to the fortieth day; or it is seen as an organic part of the mother's body (Freeman 1996:3).

According to Schenker (2003:246), Jewish Reform Responsa are the analyses and discussion of various attitudes of rabbinical scholars about the way religion should be applied in the changing world with regard to the legal codes, with written opinion given by qualified authorities in answer to questions about aspects of Jewish law.

Most Christians believe that life begins at conception (O'Neill 2005:16). That being the case, it makes sense to accept that an embryo quite possibly embodies a soul, and that to deliberately destroy it could at worst be murder, and at best amount to a callous disregard for the value and purpose of life as it is intended by God. Psalm 139 is often cited as proof that each developing embryo is lovingly formed and wanted by the Creator. Indeed, the psalm says its future earthly life is ordained and known by God long before it came to be. 'For You did form my inward parts: You did knit me together in my mother's womb (Psalm 139:13), and 'Your eyes saw my unformed substance, and in Your book all the days of my life were written before ever they took shape, when as yet there were none of them' (Psalm 139:16).

These scriptures are concerned not so much with the biology of reproduction as with the miraculous, hidden action of God in bringing new life into being. Psalm 139:16 focuses on God's knowledge, as Maker, in terms of the human being He fashions. God, who also fashions the future, plans and knows what will become of the person while s/he is still in an embryonic state. In the case of the prophets, it seems as if they were called or chosen by God for a specific task even before they were born (Jones 2004:10). Jeremiah 1:5 says:

Before I formed you in the womb I knew and approved of you as my chosen instrument, and before you were born I separated and set you apart, consecrating you: and I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.

Christians, Jews, Muslims and those of other religious traditions commonly believe that human beings possess a soul that originates from God and that human life is a gift from the Creator. Jones understands the embryonic Christ to be in solidarity with all human embryos as related to and dependent on God, 'even while it consists of a single cell or just a few cells' (Jones 2004:251). If each embryo is recognised as human life, ethical qualms should indeed be expressed about the fate of the 'extra' fertilised eggs that could potentially be frozen or discarded if they are not 'needed'. For instance, let us speculate that, out of about ten eggs retrieved following the administration of drugs to produce these multiple eggs, four are implanted and three start to grow. The woman gives birth to triplets and does not want any more children. One possible option would be to donate such fertilised eggs to a couple so that the woman or a substitute can gestate the eggs. Dobson (in Van Regenmorter & Van Regenmorter 2004:112) sees this procedure as an opportunity to give life to embryos that would otherwise be destroyed. This is very different from creating a child by using an outside donor or donors, as the embryo (potential human) already exists. The situation could be equated with adoption, albeit at a very early stage of development.

The interesting belief that the mother of a lost foetus will one day be able to meet him or her as a person in the life hereafter is often expressed. Many of those who have either suffered miscarriages or voluntarily terminated their pregnancy find a great deal of solace in such a hope. As Toni says: 'There is nothing in my life that I

regret more than aborting my baby.’ One day after I pass from Earth I’ll look into the face of Baby and see the gift I refused’ (O’Neill 2005:98).

The ethical question of whether it is ever justifiable to either destroy pre-birth life or prevent it from developing to its full potential refers not only to reproductive procedures like IVF, but also to other biomedical technologies like cloning and stem cell research. Van Niekerk (2005:202) posits that it seems inevitable that there will be some experiential victims in the process, in terms of lost embryos. He echoes Washofsky’s idea (2002:237) that a few cells (despite the high worth placed on them) cannot be granted the same value as the identity of a living person, and that as long as these moral problems are confronted with an ‘ethic of accountability’ difficult choices can be made and defended in terms of all the role players and their points of view. That would include ethical concerns from religious, scientific, cultural and utilitarian quarters. He accepts that human life has a very high value, but not an absolute value in the sense that life (in the form of cells or embryos) may never, under any circumstances, be ended, because the complex reality of life often demands making intricate choices. The argument that biomedical technologies are wrong because they go against the natural order would mean that all technological advances should be seen as somehow problematic, including heart bypass operations, organ donations and blood transfusions. It is certainly true that biomedical technologies can be misused, so it is crucial that they be regulated and conducted in a responsible way.

4.2 Surrogate motherhood

Rao (2005:32) posits that surrogacy holds contradictory consequences for the family. Although it appears to reinforce the traditional family concept by allowing infertile married couples to create biological children, it could fundamentally destabilise and disrupt the traditional idea of family. It makes possible the formation of families by gay men, lesbians and single people, and undermines the conventional model of a two-parent, heterosexual, biologically connected family. It redefines family as a social construct rather than a definite biological fact. It potentially takes the concept of ‘family’ out of entwined intimate relationships into the area of commercial exchange of reproductive goods and services on the marketplace. Moreover, surrogacy contracts potentially open family ties up to a

world of private ordering, where individual choice powerfully overrides natural biology.

Surrogate motherhood is often seen as symptomatic of the disintegration of traditional families, and feminists have also voiced their concerns about the potential abuse of women as surrogates (Ragoné 1994:2). Feminists see surrogate motherhood, especially the commercial variety (in which a woman is paid a fee, not just compensation, to carry and give birth to a child and then give up the child to ‘commissioning parents’) as morally objectionable in the extreme. Some radical feminist standpoints are that surrogate motherhood is ‘reproductive prostitution and incubatory servitude’. The surrogates have been labelled as ‘incubators for men’s sperm’ and ‘breeder women’, their husbands are called ‘pimps or cuckolds’, and the children born are named ‘chattel and merchandise’ (Wilkinson 2003:170). However, their main concerns are the possible harm to surrogates, their children and society, the commoditisation of surrogates, children or women in general and lastly, the exploitation of poor and vulnerable women (Wilkinson 2003:170).

Words like ‘procreation’ and ‘reproduction’ hint of potential human and scientific intervention that might override the significance and purpose God intended in the union of marriage. Meilander (1996:11), professor of Theological Ethics, points out that the above words collide with the language of Ancient Israel of ‘begetting’ and ‘siring’: words that speak of the natural ‘phenomenon of transmission of life from father to son’. He is concerned with the idea that a child can ‘be made’ scientifically and not ‘begotten’ as an embodiment of the mutual, passionate ‘self-giving’ of the father and mother, as the true *procreation*, where ‘love-giving’ turns to ‘life-giving’. Artificial reproduction and surrogacy undermine the moral lines of kinship, Meilander argues. Even when there is no third party involved in terms of donor eggs or sperm, or a surrogate mother, he rules against assisted reproduction, because it leads in the direction of objectifying and instrumentalising the body. He regards surrogate motherhood (where the surrogate donates her egg) as a violation of the human dignity of the child, the gestational mother and the rearing mother. He sees procreation as a task that God undertakes according to His ‘command for the sustaining of human life’, not as a right or a means of self-

fulfilment. His advice to childless couples is to accept that God has other tasks beside childrearing in store for them, and that He is able to bless their marriage union in other ways, in order to render it creative and fruitful (Meilander 1996:25). The Van Regenmorters (2004:105) disagree. While they do concur that sex, love and procreation belong together, they also view procedures such as artificial insemination or in vitro fertilisation using the couple's genetic material as merely assisting the natural process.

The two major types of surrogacy arrangements are traditional surrogacy and gestational surrogacy. In the first instance, the surrogate is impregnated with the sperm of the male partner of the intended couple. In such a case, the surrogate is both the genetic mother and the birth mother. In the case of gestational surrogacy, the sperm and eggs of the intended parents are implanted in the surrogate. She therefore has no genetic link to the child, although she carries the baby and gives birth to it. This is a complex procedure made possible by sophisticated assisted reproductive techniques. In IVF, eggs from the commissioning mother (egg donor) are extracted, and mixed with the commissioning father's sperm (sperm donor) in vitro. The embryo is then transferred into the uterus of the surrogate, who carries the pregnancy to term and delivers the baby. Altruistic surrogate motherhood (unlike commercial surrogate motherhood) usually takes place when friends or relatives reach agreements. No payment is transacted, or else there is payment only to cover expenses directly related to the treatment, pregnancy and delivery (Galbraith, McLachlan & Swales 2005:13). The couple contracting with the surrogate are called the 'intended, social, commissioning or contracting parents (Ciccarelli & Beckman 2005:22).

The South African Children's Act 38 of 2005, referring to surrogate motherhood, stipulates the following concerning the *confirmation by court*:

A court may not confirm a surrogate motherhood agreement unless

- a) the commissioning parent or parents are not able to give birth to a child and that the condition is permanent and irreversible,
- b) the commissioning parent or parents are in all respects suitable parents to accept the parenthood of the child that is to be conceived,

Inter alia, the Act stipulates that the *surrogate mother* should in all respects be a suitable person to act as surrogate mother. In addition, she is not allowed to use surrogacy as a source of income and she must have entered into the agreement for altruistic reasons, not commercial purposes. The potential surrogate mother must have a documented history of at least one pregnancy and viable delivery, and must have a living child of her own.

Before artificial fertilisation of the surrogate mother takes place, *the surrogate mother agreement* has to be confirmed by the court, and the agreement is valid for a period of 18 months thereafter. In accordance with such an agreement, any child born of a surrogate mother is to all purposes the child of the commissioning parent or parents from the moment of birth.

The Act stipulates that a surrogate mother who is also the genetic parent of the child concerned may, at any time prior to the lapse of a period of sixty days after the birth of the child, terminate the surrogate mother agreement by filing written notice at the court. Whether the agreement is terminated either before or after the child is born, the child is then the child of the surrogate mother and her husband or partner, if any, or, if none, the commissioning father.

The aim of the law is to take the rights, obligations and position of all relevant parties into consideration. Concerning surrogate motherhood, the Children's Act expresses the complexity of balancing the positions of the surrogate, the commissioning parents and the child being born from such an arrangement.

One surrogate exclaimed: 'This baby is one of God's special children, and I'm glad I'm in on it' (Ragoné 1994:69). Another said: 'She (the adoptive mother) was emotionally pregnant, and I was just physically pregnant' (1994:125). An intended (commissioning) mother expressed her feelings about the arrangement as follows: 'Ann is my baby, she was conceived in my heart before she was conceived in Lisa's body' (Ragoné 1994:126). A commissioning (biological) father expressed his concern: 'Yes, the whole thing was at first rather strange. I thought to myself, here she (surrogate) is carrying my baby. Isn't she supposed to be my wife?'

Another biological father said: 'I really empathise with Mark (the surrogate's husband). I really don't understand how he could let his wife have another man's child. I know I couldn't. It's not just her (surrogate) you are affecting' (Ragoné 1994:122).

Surrogacy adds up to basic ideas about parenthood, gender relationship and the importance of a genetic link to the child. As Ciccarelli et al (2005:39) point out, more empirical research is required to aid all the role players in all the stages (pre-contract, during pregnancy, post-birth and long-term) of the surrogacy process to alleviate the stress, stigma and possible long-term regret. It seems that, if expectations of and satisfaction with the relationship between the surrogate and commissioning couple are good, a lot of anxiety, distress and post-birth regret can be avoided. The psychosocial effects of and concerns about surrogacy have been dramatically highlighted by the case of Baby Cotton in the UK, and Baby M in the US, when the surrogate mothers resisted handing over the babies to the commissioning parents, and a court order was eventually obtained to induce the birth mothers to do so (Edelman 2004:125).

In her research on surrogacy, Ragoné (1996:136) found that all the participants involved in the surrogacy process, fathers, surrogates and mothers, wished to find traditional meanings in such extraordinary circumstances. By that Ragoné means that all the role players reconstruct traditional cultural kinship values so that surrogacy becomes consistent for them. For example, from the couple's point of view, traditional surrogacy is conceptualised as an attempt to achieve a traditional and acceptable end (not a radical departure from tradition) by having a child who is biologically related to at least one of them. At the same time, although blood kinship is the initial motive and end goal for surrogacy, it is precisely because the surrogate's involvement (biogenetically, or at least in terms of 'lending' her womb) leads to the biological link that such relatedness is de-emphasised in order to make surrogacy consistent with cultural values about the correct relations between husbands and wives (Ragoné 1994:136). As a group, surrogates, for their part, tend to focus on those aspects of surrogacy that are consistent with traditional reproduction, for instance, the significance of motherhood and family. In the words of a surrogate mother: 'This is the 'gift of family' to the couple, I want to help them

to become parents'. Like the intended parents, they de-emphasise those aspects of surrogacy that represent a departure from traditional beliefs about motherhood, family and reproduction. A surrogate mother put it like this: 'The baby isn't mine. I'm only carrying the baby'. Another surrogate said: 'Parents are the ones who raise the child. I got that from my parents, who adopted children. I don't think of the baby as mine; it is the parents, the ones who raise the child, that are important'. In this way, inconsistencies between the traditional female role of wife and mother and the new 'persona' as surrogate can be avoided. However, it seems to be a Catch 22 situation: on the one hand, surrogates say that they are motivated by their 'love of children, pregnancy and family and that their desire to help others' encourages them to become surrogates. On the other hand, to give one's child away after one has given birth seems to reveal the opposite, and can be interpreted as a rather 'unmotherly' thing to do (Ragoné 1994:136).

Baslington (2002:57) proposes that some surrogate mothers appear to learn not to become attached to the unborn baby. If such feelings were to arise, they would counteract this by re-directing their emotions towards the couple. They would in some way focus on and bond with the couple, and not the baby, to the extent that most of them would regard a problem in the relationship with the couple as 'the worst part' of the surrogacy arrangement (2002:66). In thinking of surrogacy as a 'job with payment' influenced some surrogates not to think of the baby as their own (2002:69). Baslington asserts that the concept of maternal instinct is both a 'natural phenomenon with biological antecedents' and 'socially constructed, having cultural, social and ideological factors' (2002:69).

In her research, Schwartz (2003:163) found that surrogate mothers are psychologically stable women who, with various motives, are willing, even anxious, to gestate a fertilised egg, give birth and surrender the baby. They are able to compartmentalise their role in the surrogacy arrangement, and are willing to experience physical and psychological stresses beyond the normal strains that go hand in hand with pregnancy. Motives range from finding pregnancy enjoyable (more than childrearing), altruism, fulfilling the need to do something good and in the process gain a sense of self-worth, or the wish to repair a previous negative

experience, such as an abortion or giving a baby up for adoption (Schwartz 2003:164).

Strathern (2005:294) says reproductive technologies point to the relationship between technology and biology, reflecting the two components of maternity highlighted in surrogacy: the social motherhood of the commissioning mother and the biological motherhood of the genetic mother. It must not be forgotten, either, that the social mother could also be the genetic mother. Reproductive technologies assist the biological processes or make up for natural impairment, in the same way that the woman who acts on behalf of another's motherhood is a surrogate for her capacity to bear a child. Each person's role in the surrogate process is, in itself, incomplete and needs the actions of the other role players to complete the total social process. Technological intervention attends to only one part of the whole developmental sequence. The Law, theologians and ethicists have repeatedly asked the question pertaining the identity of the 'real' mother in the surrogacy process. Strathern posits that the surrogate mother is like a mother, yet not the 'real' mother, as she assists the real mother to overcome a particular impairment. That is the role she plays as an informed and willing substitute right from the start. She carries the child under her heart for nine months and both her biological and emotional processes nurture and envelop the child. But if there were no 'real' mother to receive and raise the child, the surrogate's actions would be meaningless. The real mother is not only created by biology, but is also socially constructed in communal processes.

Ragoné points out that in surrogacy the 'gift of life' theme has often been repeated in the context of blood and organ donation. She found the same theme in surrogate motherhood, and sees it as an attempt by participants and society to 'retard, at least symbolically, the trend towards the commodification of life' (2005:210). Surrogate mothers would often conceptualise the children they are producing or gestating as 'gifts' or 'the gift of life', which is so highly prized because of the importance of biogenetic relatedness in family kinship ideology. Family and kinship are underscored by the inviolability of the blood tie, and the emotional value of surrogacy, even if some form of material payment is involved,

creates language where words like priceless, indebtedness and gifting find a home.

In an ideal world, a surrogate child could have the privilege and opportunity of having a relationship with both mothers, even if one is more of a 'real' mother than the other in certain respects. Some surrogacy agencies require 'an open relationship' between the commissioning parents and surrogate mother, meaning that the surrogate should be allowed to have unrestricted contact with the child and the commissioning couple. Although parents involved in surrogate arrangements often resolve initially to maintain continuous contact, in most cases this is not realised. The parents might, after a while, see the surrogate as an intruder, fearing she could reclaim the child, or else they simply feel that her presence complicates the family situation. The surrogate, from her side, might feel that she has played her part and would like to move on with her life without having to be confronted with the intimate family dynamics (Schwartz 2005:165).

Who is the real mother, then? One answer lies in the Biblical story of King Solomon and the two mothers who came to him with a story of pain and loss, accusing each other of lying (1 Kings 3:16-28). They lived in the same house, and had given birth at more or less the same time to baby boys. One of the mothers accidentally lay on her child in the night and killed him. Before the King, both claimed to be the mother of the living son. Solomon showed that the wisdom of God was in him, when he ordered the child to be cut in half so that the mothers could share the child. The real mother was aghast. She decided to stand aside, willing to surrender her child to the other mother in order to save his life. The mother who in reality already had lost her child was eager for the slaying to take place. Solomon decided that the mother who stood aside because she loved the child was actually the real mother.

4.3 Historical surrogacy: Sarah and Hagar

Kirkman and Kirkman (2002:136) point out that, historically speaking, surrogate motherhood has not been controversial, as is depicted in the Biblical story of Sarah and Hagar. Rather, it is surrogacy and its numerous possibilities in the context of reproductive technology that is such a great cause for public concern.

Reproductive technology makes it possible for a mother to carry a child for her daughter, a daughter to carry a child for her mother, and a sister to carry another sister's child. Surrogacy arrangements vary, and it is believed that many informal arrangements have taken place between those who want to become parents and those who are willing to aid them. Artificial insemination (AI) is a widely used method for surrogacy arrangements. It is not new and is certainly not high-tech, because it can be performed without medical assistance with the use of a plastic straw or even a simple turkey baster (Ciccarelli et al 2005:21). Artificial insemination as an assisted reproduction technique is also a relatively easy, painless procedure. In essence, the female is treated with hormone tablets to cause ovulation at a specific time after administration, while the male is asked for a sperm sample on Day 13 or 14 of her menstrual cycle, about two hours before the scheduled insemination takes place in the gynaecologist's consulting rooms. The semen is specially prepared by the laboratory to 'induce capacitation and acrosomal reaction within the sperm', which is then mechanically deposited into the uterine cavity using a syringe connected to a soft Teflon catheter (Van Zyl 2005:26).

The notion of surrogacy arrangements is clearly not altogether novel and has been documented from Biblical times (Edelman 2004:125). Genesis introduces Abram's wife, Sarai, as a barren woman without children of her own, who, in an ancient surrogacy move, asks her husband to sleep with her servant Hagar in the hope that she, Sarai, will acquire a child through such means. The child Ishmael is born from that union, but it is plain that she later regretted her arrangement between Hagar and her husband.

In the Biblical context, a name is much more than a label or designation that sets one person apart from another, since the meaning of a name somehow represented the nature of the person (Lockyer 1986:744). The change of a name can also be of great importance in the Bible. Abram's name was changed to Abraham in connection with his new calling to be a 'father of many nations' (Genesis 17:5) and Sarai's name was changed to Sarah, meaning princess (Genesis 17:15). God also told Abraham that his son is going to be called Isaac, reflecting the 'laugther' of his mother at his birth (Genesis 21:6). The names

Abram and Abraham, and Sarai and Sarah will, in the following text, be used intermittently, according to their different names at different times in their narrative.

Sarah (the social/commissioning mother) twice drove Ishmael and his biological mother away into the desert. The first occasion took place after her long-awaited son, Isaac, was born. The second occurred after an incident involving Ishmael and Isaac at, or after, a celebratory feast for the latter on the day he was weaned. The Bible says: 'Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking Isaac' (Genesis 21:9). Sarah is adamant that the son of the slave woman will not inherit with Isaac, 'the child of the miraculous laughter' (Genesis 21:10). Williams (in Russell 2006:188) says there is a real possibility that she may be replaced and left out of the family if Ishmael is to inherit first place as head of the patriarchal household. This is a marriage of three, and competition for power is a serious matter. Sarah's reality is that she has one son, while Abraham, her husband, has two. God sees Abraham's distress when it becomes plain that Sarah wants to separate the brothers Ishmael and Isaac, and He acknowledges his 'double sonship': there will be a double line of descendants, and there will be a double blessing (McKinlay 2005:161).

According to Washofsky (2000:239), Jewish tradition would seem to offer surrogacy precedents of the kind where the surrogate is the biological mother of the child. The stories of Sarah, Rachel and Leah show them offering their maidservants to their husbands. The children conceived from such a union are regarded as the legal offspring of the husband and his wife. However, Washofsky points out that, after bearing the children, the maidservants became the concubines of Abraham and Jacob, and then enjoyed a legal status common in ancient Near Eastern Society. Therefore, Washofsky stresses, the issue of surrogacy is seen as a 'new and unprecedented phenomenon' (2000:238) within the context of artificial insemination and in vitro fertilisation, better comparable with medical technique than with a social and legal arrangement.

Bailey (2002:37) maintains that the postmodern age has emphasised the idea that reading a text is influenced by the 'social location' of the readers. As far as the Biblical story of Sarah and Hagar is concerned, the status, culture and place in

history of women affect which of the two they identify with and what they make of it. She found in her study that Jewish women typically identify with Sarah, and that African-American women normally look to Hagar as their ancestor, although there is significant diversity in their reading of the text, and sharing social location does not necessarily lead to a similar interpretation of the text. Hagar is interpreted amidst the whole range of identities from victim to survivor, from the 'blessed mother and child' (Bailey 2002:43) to 'someone with a pathetic sense of herself' who 'does not even have the strength to define herself' (2002:41), and therefore goes back to her former abusive situation under the authority of Sarah.

McKinley (2005:159) makes it clear that, as a reader, she attempts to meet 'the Sarah and Hagar of the text', but, at the same time, Sarah and Hagar meet her, as a person with multiple interests in them, someone who tries to bring the ancient text into meaningful dialogue with her own postmodern world by interpreting and confronting it. She identifies with the task, quoting Teresa de Lauretis in explaining a feminist reading: 'to seek out contradictions, heterogeneity, ruptures in the fabric of representation so thinly stretched - if powerful - to contain excess, division, difference, resistance; to open up critical spaces in the seamless narrative space constructed by...dominant discourses' (McKinley 2005:160).

Mieke Bal (in Rulon-Miller 1998:68) feels that 'textual problems that generate confusion, gaps and silences inevitably provide rich opportunities for interpretation'. However, she maintains that traditional Biblical criticism often participates in the repression of women. Hagar's multiple identities include those of a 'homeless woman, an abused woman, and a surrogate mother for Abraham and Sarah (Rulon-Miller 1998:62). In her feminist reading, Rulon-Miller sees Hagar as a marginal female character, representative of the allure of Egypt's 'natural religion, fertility rites, cyclic thinking and sacred prostitution' (1998:64). The Israelites had difficulty in isolating them from the attractiveness of the Egyptian fertility and female cults. When God called Abraham to follow him, He also called him to choose monotheism, to choose faith, and to trust Him.

As mentioned earlier, Rabbinic Midrash Halakha deals with the legal portions in the Bible whereas Midrash Haggadah deals with the non-legal sections of the

Biblical text. Debate on Hagar and Sarah occurs primarily in texts that belong to the second category. Rabbinic literature, according to Reinhartz and Walfish (2006:105), is a genre that lies 'between pure commentary and original creative composition', and is often prompted by 'linguistic, theological, narrative or homiletic peculiarities, problems or issues' emerging from the Biblical text. An important characteristic of Midrash Haggadah is the belief that the text cannot be reduced to one single 'correct' meaning and instead is subject to multiple interpretations (called polysemy). The authors, however, point out that rabbinic Midrash tends to favour the Israelite matriarch when it comes to resolving the moral issues at stake in the story of Sarah and Hagar. Concerning the status between them, Sarah's position is clearly superior. One midrashic explanation by R. Simeon b. Yohai, from the 5th century, sees Hagar as the daughter of Pharaoh who gave her as slave to the household of Abraham, in acknowledgment of God's intervention on Sarah's behalf when she was taken into Pharaoh's household (Genesis 12:14-19). Other Midrashim propose Hagar's Egyptian origins as an unchanged idolater. While under Abraham's influence, she apparently honoured the God of Israel, but when banished to the desert she reverted to idol worship and immediately the water ran out. A Midrash from a 10th century collection of homilies on Genesis, *Aggadat Bereshit*, draws a crude comparison 'between Hagar and a blob of donkey fat that has accidentally fallen into rose oil' (Reinhartz & Walfish 2006:106), and understands her fertility as owing to her coming from a sexually promiscuous people, and not from God's blessing. Ezekiel 23:20 describes how Israel lusts after the Egyptians, and in drawing on that passage the connection between idolatry, sexual looseness and Hagar's luck in falling pregnant is made.

Rabbinic literature underscores fertility as a sign of status, and God is seen as the One who controls female fertility. Apparently there is a link between fertility and divine favour (Reinhartz & Walfish 2006:108). Sarah's eventual conception of Isaac is seen as a miracle. God has 'transformed her from a dry, barren, old woman to a goddess-like fertile mother' (2006:109) with enough milk to breastfeed other children in the market (Genesis 21:7).

God promises Abraham that he will be 'exceedingly fruitful' (Genesis 17:6) 'like the dust of the earth' (Genesis 13:16), and his descendants will be as countless as the stars in the heavens (Genesis 15:5). Set against the narrator's description, this creates spectacular tension: 'But Sarah was barren; she had no child' (Genesis 11:30) and 'Now Sarai, Abram's wife had borne him no children' (Genesis 16:1). Within the context of ancient patriarchy, Sarai's most important function is to bear a son, so to be the barren wife of the man destined to be the founding father of the chosen people of God must be truly awful. Sarah understands that it is Yahweh who closed her womb (Genesis 16:2) and it is also Yahweh who has accomplished her impregnation: 'The Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did for her as He had promised' (Genesis 21:1). God made the unbelievable happen. He brought 'laughter' to her. He echoed her incredible laughing into the promised child of laughter (Isaac), and 'made everyone who hears...laugh' (Genesis 21:6). Whether they are laughing with her or at her is not quite clear (McKinlay 2005:161).

Van Pelt Campbell (2006:282) does not interpret Sarai's surrogacy plan to deal with her infertility as immoral, but rather as a lack of faith in God. It was a devised plan that caused more problems in the end than it solved: both she and Hagar showed mutual disrespect that led to bitterness, conflict and separation. Van Pelt Campbell points out that even the use of a morally-accepted method of addressing infertility (and that could include adopting children from other countries, the use of frozen embryos and surrogate childbearing), should not be undertaken 'apart from faith in the Lord' (2006:282). Using her creative imagination, Jenny Diski writes in her novel *Only human: a comedy* (in McKinlay 2005:163) that Sarai discovered that 'playing God at his own game gave her all God's disadvantages. She could manipulate the world, but she could not participate in it. The world swelled with the life she had willed into being, and mocked her for being unable to indulge in her achievement with any of her senses but that of sight' (2000:180).

In all probability, it is precisely because Sarai assumes that infertility lies with her (and from the hand of God), not with Abram, that she proposes a fertility technique to her husband. After all, he is the one who received the promise of a great number of descendants from God, not she. The fertility strategy of offering her

handmaid to her husband is intended to help Sarah 'obtain children by [Hagar]' (Genesis 16:2) or to 'be built up through her'. Her actions can be interpreted as both generous and desperate. Reis (2000:78) points out that, in the cases of Sarah, Rachel and even Leah, they wanted their handmaids to bear children with their husbands in order for their own fertility to increase. Apparently, in sharing one's 'sexual marital prerogatives' as 'unselfish support of procreation' there is the benefit of gaining God's favour, and hopefully being blessed with a child of one's own (Reis 2000:78). In Leah's words, after she had borne her fifth son (Genesis 30:18): 'God has given me my hire (rent/pay), because I have given my maid to my husband: and she called his name Issachar (hired). Leah is 'paid' with a son of her own, not the son of her handmaid. Sarah, Rachel and Leah needed birthing mothers and it appears that these primary wives controlled the secondary wives' admission to their husbands' beds. Sarai clearly has authority in sexual matters: she proposes the fertility plan and dominates Hagar, who is never referred to as Abram's wife. Once pregnant, it appears that these handmaids lose their 'copulation privileges' (Reis 2000:79). It also seems that the matriarchs did not intend to adopt any of their handmaids' children. In Sarah's case, at least, she did not have many maternal feelings for them, otherwise she would not have banished Ishmael at the age of seventeen. The children of the handmaids were, like their mothers, regarded as property.

Wenham (1994:7) explains that, if it was a serious matter for a man in the ancient world to be childless, for a woman it was catastrophic, a sign of failure. It must have been a near unbearable condition. Polygamy was used as a way of overcoming childlessness, although wealthier wives preferred the practice of surrogate motherhood. In the case of a mistress allowing her husband to have sexual intercourse with her maid, she could feel that the child born was her own, and she could exert some control over it. If her husband had simply taken a second wife, the situation would have been less controllable. This practice is 'attested throughout the ancient Orient from the third to the first millennium BC, from Babylon to Egypt' (Wenham 1994:7). In the light of the social customs of the ancient Near East, Wenham regards Sarai's fertility proposal as 'the normal human response to the problem of childlessness in the ancient world'. However

God indicated in Genesis 15:4 that something ‘abnormal’, something out of the ordinary would happen, and that she should wait on Him (1994:7).

Sarah’s powerful authority over Hagar as a ‘woman of the dominant culture’ (McKinlay 2005:166) made it possible for her to present her slave to Abraham as a hopeful solution to their infertility dilemma. Hagar is given to Abraham because of the potential of her womb; she is intended as a birth mother. At the same time, Hagar is also a sexual gift. Voiceless in the matter, Hagar can merely offer a ‘look’ to Sarah after she became pregnant, which made her mistress feel wronged, jealous and hurt (Genesis 16:5). It also escalates the bad blood between them.

Abraham willingly fulfils his wife’s surrogacy plan with his seed, but is impotent when it comes to protecting his firstborn and his mother. It appears that power shifts continuously take place between Abraham, Sarah, Hagar and their sons. Hagar came from Egypt to serve Sarah, who apparently served the Pharaoh (Genesis 12). Abraham is trapped between reason and passion in either preserving or offering his sons, whether to the knife or the desert. Ultimately, the story of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar is about faith. Abraham realises that keeping the faith is an ironic taskmaster. Faith is a difficult endeavour, as it is not a reasonable act that fits neatly into life’s normalities and perceptions. Brueggemann (1982:618) points out that the narrative of the promised child moves around the question: ‘Is anything impossible for Yahweh’ (Genesis 18:14)? This question ‘contains the most radical assertion of ancestral faith’ and challenges the epistemology, world-view and definition of reality of Abraham and Sarah (1982:618), and indeed the believing community that continues the tradition of faith. The question of what is possible for God embodies also the substance of faith (whether God stands distinct from the structures of reality), and it asks about the kind of narrow methodology involved when interpretations tend to ‘contain, close and circumscribe’ (Brueggeman 1982:619) God, reality and possibilities. Brueggemann believes the question of Yahweh’s possibilities invites a new option, a gift, so to speak, where thinking ‘outside the conventional definitions of reality’ in terms of ‘asymmetry and disproportion’ shatters old understandings (1982:619). He quotes Ricoeur, who says of this ‘shattering’: ‘This is a turning point, because it

is again a destruction, but a destruction of what destroys, a deconstruction of the assurances of modern man' (1982:619).

In the end, Sarah and Hagar both tasted the wilderness, albeit in different ways. Sarah's barrenness drove her to a place of loneliness, despair and grief, even in the presence of God himself, armed with His promise, and even when in the arms of Abraham. Her barrenness, stark as the desert sand, made her hopeful, jealous, angry, cynical, brutal, fearful and possessive. Hagar, driven into the wilderness, at the same time by her own choice, by Sarah and by Abraham's order, eventually became 'an occupier of the wilderness, the biblical Other space' (McKinlay 2005:160). The wilderness in which both Sarah and Hagar live means that both live in a place for the dispatched and the excluded, yet both have God's promise of a divine and lasting blessing. McKinley quotes bell hooks, who maintains that this in itself makes it possible to experience the wilderness in a different way: it becomes a site of creativity and power, an inclusive space where it is possible to recover oneself; where it enables a radical perspective from which to see, create and imagine alternatives.

Father Abraham, the man born in Ur of Chaldea, believed there is only one God, and was willing to sacrifice his son because his faith upheld him. He was father to a multitude of nations, patriarch and spiritual ancestor of three monotheistic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, with about 15 million Jews, 2 billion Christians and 1,2 billion Muslims (Szulc 2001:96). But in the foreground of his narrative stand two mothers, Sarah and Hagar, who carried his seed in their wombs, and who, even today, draw us to their breasts and nurse us with the hope and anguish of their mother's milk, for indeed the promise has come true. Abraham's children are, figuratively speaking, as numerous as the stars in the heavens, they are seen as a blessing, and they themselves are blessed, but, as descendents of Ishmael and Isaac, they do not always see eye to eye (McKinlay 2005:159). The story of Sarah, Hagar and their children is also a story of struggle, not only against each other but against the patriarchal belief that their main source of identity lies in their ability to bear an heir to carry on the lineage of the family. They compete with each other to gain power in the validation of their motherhood through Abraham and God. Fertility is not the only vehicle for their female identity, but it is certainly a sign

of divine approval (Russell 2006:188). Sarah and Hagar look upon the children with both hope and anguish, because they have not only carried Abraham's seed as father, but have also left the seed of conflict and struggle as a legacy to their children (Russell 2006:185).

4.4 Stan and Sena: (story) makers of a family

From the Biblical story of surrogacy, the researcher introduces the surrogacy story of Stan and Sena. The following version of their narrative, a compilation of all the conversations, is written in an unconventional, weaving pattern, capturing the most important perspectives and experiences of their lives as a couple who have confronted and overcome infertility. The constructed description was influenced by a number of things, *inter alia*, the way in which they chose to share their story, the routes they took when reflecting, the conversation style of the researcher, and the relationship between them and the researcher. The account is based on three face-to-face conversations, some phone conversations and e-mail correspondence.

The researcher initially made contact with them when they were living overseas, and the first interview took place while they were on holiday in South Africa. However, she had to follow them to their next working destination in yet another country to converse further with them. The discussions and reflecting took place over an eighteen-month period. This included introducing them to the thoughts, suggestions and questions of the reflecting team. As with all the couples that took part in the research, those on the reflecting team did not personally meet the other members or any of the four couples. The only communication between them was via the researcher. The reflecting team was asked to write down their thoughts on each of these three conversations, including the questions they proposed the researcher should ask the co-researchers. They were encouraged to comment on the researcher's motives, line of thought and responses as well.

In addition to taping the conversations, the researcher took notes of the telephone exchanges, and kept a journal in which she wrote down her thoughts and experiences during the research process. She stayed within the parameters of narrative research, using an unstructured, open, informal conversational style.

Initially the researcher asked Stan and Sena to describe their experiences and difficulties in falling pregnant. Certain themes came to the fore, which were then developed further, for example, how the childlessness and attempts to fall pregnant strained their relationship, including creating sexual difficulties, and the different ways in which they, as individuals, experienced the reality of struggling to have children. Another theme was the perplexity of why they had to battle with infertility, and the way in which they related it to God's possible role in their dilemma. A strong theme was their mainly negative relationship with their surrogate, and their later feelings about the fact that they had chosen that route. All four of the co-researcher couples were, to some degree, interested in the story of the author, although it never came even close to dominating the conversations.

Stan, a private and introverted man, chose to be physically present at only the first interview, although now and then he would share his thoughts through his wife after receiving the reported conversation by e-mail. He also chose not to be present at the birth of the triplets, because 'it's another woman who lies there', as well as the fact that he does not like blood. At one point after the babies were born, he expressed his conviction that enough had been said and that they ought to leave the long and arduous journey to overcome their childlessness, behind them. All of that is in the past, he said. In fact, long before the research commenced they had already decided not to tell any new acquaintances that their children had been born from a surrogate, as 'people don't have to know and many don't understand'. For that reason, especially, I felt very privileged to be allowed into their lives. He admitted that he was sometimes plagued by the fact that they 'had to do what they did to get their children'.

The words in the account are Stan's and Sena's, and the comments of the reflecting team are their own as well. As researcher, I preferred to compose the printed text in a weaving pattern, using different columns for different voices. In doing so, I have tried not to privilege any one voice above another (Fox 1996:331). However, while the co-researchers were involved in the process as subjective hearers/participants/story tellers of research I have left out some parts of the conversations and included others in the following documented version. I did this for a number of reasons: I took into account what the co-researchers were

comfortable with, what I as subjective researcher, personally dealing with infertility, preferred to present, what we (me, Stan and Sena) thought the reader would be interested in, and what we felt needed to be heard because it is not often said. This version is one way in which all of us researchers could tell the story, and it is one way of presenting it. Stan and Sena were not prepared for me to talk to ‘their surrogate’. I respected that, but realised later that I did two things to compensate for the fact that I felt she hadn’t been allowed a personal voice. I sometimes inadvertently asked questions that would challenge Stan and Sena to reconsider their understanding of her behaviour, and I have covered in greater depth the role and position of Hagar (the surrogate) than I did for Sarah (the commissioning mother) earlier in this chapter.

This version is one of many ways in which the story could have been told. Although the researchers tried to tell a coherent narrative: the ‘true story’, the truth is that it is still in the making. When the ink that carries the voices of Stan and Sena dries up on the last page, keep in mind that theirs is a narrative ending without end (Trible 2006:54).

Sena – commissioning mom

All these years that we kept on trying...it became a lifestyle. And every time you learn to cope with it. We combined Stan’s annual leave with a visit to Cape Town to have an in vitro, and tried to have a holiday at the same time. I think I had thirteen in fifteen years.



Stan – commissioning dad

Well, your fertility technology is just racing on, so you never know what is going to happen.

Sena – commissioning mom

It all started a long, long time ago when I was 26, I think. For the first 2 years nothing happened, so of course the gynae said something must be wrong. So for a year they did biopsies and hormone tests on me and there was nothing wrong. And then they did the sperm test. They said, if you want to have children you will have to see a specialist. Stan wasn't that keen to start just yet.

Ilse – researcher

It's amazing how science has progressed.

Stan – commissioning dad

Yes. (*The babies start to wake up, crying in the next room*) Sorry, I'll just have to



check on them. We have 2 girls in there.

Sena – commissioning mom

All they had was GIFT then. GIFT and ZIFT. So either putting the egg and the sperm together and either taking out from the fallopian tubes and putting back, or taking out there and put it back vaginally. It was quite bad in those days - you know that you will have a full anaesthetic twice.

Ilse – researcher

(This is so technical. She is so very aware of the process of conception.)

Sena – commissioning mom

This is what happened to us. When they first started us they said, well, you should do about four and if you fail then you should just accept it, you're not going to have any kids.



Ilse – researcher

Nobody can say you
two give up easily.

Stan – commissioning dad

*(Comes back with two
babies. Hands one to Sena.)*

No, no not at all.

Ilse – researcher

They're gorgeous.
(And they're factory made!)

Sena – commissioning mom

And when we got to number
four, they said, now we've got
ICSI. Start counting again. And
that is how it went. They would
say: now we have a new
growth medium; now the
embryo can survive for five
days outside the body before
they have to put it back...

Ilse – researcher

It sounds like a science
project.

Sena – commissioning mom

The goal was to have children.
The emotional side was a lot worse than the physical side. In the beginning you're still full of hope. Towards the end it got harder.

Ilse – researcher

Hope propels you.

Sena – commissioning mom

So then we just carried on and on and on. I flew to South Africa again but, I said to the gynae, this time is going to be the last time. And he said, well, I got the surrogacy programme started, and I've got three surrogates waiting for couples to sign them up.

Stan – commissioning dad

It didn't take us long to decide.

Sena – commissioning mom

The gynae had them screened. Hepatitis, Aids, diabetes, any genetic stuff. They were all over thirty. Actually the



surrogates were all rather too old. With the first surrogate we had three IVFs, and with the one that was successful, also three. The third IVF with the second surrogate was successful.

Ilse – researcher

I can imagine that they have a lot of reasons why they are doing it.

Stan – commissioning dad

The main reason is money, contrary to what they might tell you. When it's family it's different, but when it's an external surrogate, it's money.

Sena – commissioning mom

Until our surrogate actually got pregnant, she would try to convince us how it was always on her mind to do something good for people. But the moment she got pregnant and even after the birth, there were the financial demands, my

stove is broken, my washing
machine is broken...

Stan – commissioning dad

Yes, that was besides the
contract we had. The huge
medical expenses; the lump
sum we gave her.

Sena – commissioning mom

There was that emotional, look-
what -I-have-done-for-you. I
suppose she thought she had
reason, because there were
three, you see.

Ilse – researcher

Well, lending out your
body for nine months,
going through all those
emotional highs and
lows. Can it really only
be the money...

Sena – commissioning mom

She was a nurse as well, and I
liked that. She's got three
children, and she has been



divorced three times. I don't think she gets any money from any of her husbands.

Ilse – researcher

How did you feel about not carrying them yourself? About seeing another woman growing with your babies?

Sena – commissioning mom

I sometimes think, I've missed out. But I came to it easy. I was sitting overseas while she was pregnant, I didn't have to look at her. It's been such a long road, in the end it didn't really matter.

Ilse – researcher

How would it have been more difficult if you were in South Africa?

Sena – commissioning mom

Because she would feel, and I would feel that we now have to forge a huge friendship. You



don't just make friends like
that.

Ilse – researcher

There's an emotional
story within this story.

Stan – commissioning dad

Yes, it's a financial
transaction.

Sena – commissioning mom

Life was just getting too
monotonous. Only him and me
on holiday and everywhere, for
twenty-two years. Sometimes I
think we would have gotten so
bored with each other that we
would have separated. We
really wanted children – we
wanted all the stages of life.
Not in the beginning, but in the
end, this struggle made us
actually stronger.

Ilse – researcher

You are now in a new life
pattern. Sena: before and
after the babies.



Sena – commissioning mom

I studied, I had two businesses, but it feels good to be a mother. I've waited for so long, I appreciate them. The girls keep me very busy. I have no desire to work now. They eat vegetables and fruit, no tea or coffee or sweets. We agree on the discipline. We are strict. Stan thinks I'm doing well with them. *(laugh)* We've changed so much. His heart wasn't in this at the start. He was against it, but he went ahead. Well, all he had to do was to give his sperm.

Ilse - researcher

Didn't he feel disempowered, with the gynae trying to get you pregnant? Last time, Stan said to me, he is not so sure that he would do it all over again.

Sena – commissioning mom

It was because, back then, he only got 2 hours sleep per night, and he saw the girls seldom because of his long



hours. It's much better now with the new job, he is absolutely mad about them. They're older now, and they speak. When he walks through the door, they go bananas, they scream: Dada, Dada, Dada!

Yes, he became worried, after the third or fourth time that the treatment was not working. And he went to a psychiatrist because he couldn't get it up, it's all in the brain, you know. Erectile dysfunction. All the men on fertility programmes get these problems. A Catch 22. You can't get your wife pregnant, and now you can't even satisfy your partner. He went through those cycles a few times. Even if the one person doesn't blame the other, he still blames himself.

Ilse – researcher

How do you see God's presence in all of this?

Sena – commissioning mom

At the end, when it started to look hopeless, I thought: is it because of something I did to God?... *(long silence)*...but there are no answers for these things. I even thought my life was too easy with Stan - money, holidays, jewellery, we were happy- it is just all too good. Everything was so easy, maybe now...The one thing that is not going to be is children, I thought.

Ilse – researcher

It would be interesting to one day tell your children how they came into this life.

Sena – commissioning mom

(laugh) I think it will be easier for us, than parents of adopted children. We wouldn't have to say somebody gave them away, because it's just that she carried them.

We don't even tell anybody now about the surrogacy. There's no reason to keep on telling the story, they just



assume it happened the usual way. Our friends and family knew about the in vitro's, but not the ones at work. From Stan's family, there was hardly any pressure – his brother and sister are childless.

Ilse – researcher

Would you say you and Stan experienced things differently?

Sena – commissioning mom

Yes, two years have passed, and it still worries him that we did what we had to do to have children. For me it doesn't matter. The children are here now.

He doesn't want to keep on talking about it any more. He says: that's finished now, that's history.

Ilse – researcher

What do your children mean to you? What have you discovered in yourself?

Sena – commissioning mom

Let me tell you a story. Last year before we went on holiday, there was a dove on our stoep. He ended up there because his wing was injured. I gave him food and water. Even as we went in and out of the house he wouldn't fly away. Then we had to leave for the holidays. I told the staff to leave him alone, because they always eat the birds. The gardener told me he flew away a week after we left. His wing healed. I felt like that dove.

Ilse – researcher

As you look into the future, what do you want for your children?

Sena – commissioning mom

I want them to be happy, I suppose. Just happy and healthy.

If we weren't successful I would have had to change my lifestyle. I never fitted in, not



with those with children and not with those without. Stan worked all the time. I couldn't work, I just tagged along. For fifteen years I was trying to get pregnant and going wherever my husband was going, whichever country, whichever city.

Falling pregnant is so easy for other women.

You know, the surrogate was supposed to say it's her own children, and she's going to give them up for adoption, because of the medical aid issues and because I was going to be present at the birth. But in the end everybody knew: she told all the sisters and the doctors she's a surrogate. And she's doing it for the love of it, that she's receiving no payment. She loved all the attention. They thought she was a saint, and that we exploit her.

I visited her every second day in the hospital in the month before the caesarean. She had to lie down. It's procedure



when it's triplets, they monitor all the time. She said the whole experience changed her, that it enriched her life. She even wondered if I wouldn't give her one of the babies, but her material wasn't used. She was only the incubator. We were so desperate, at one point we even tried donor sperm, but it didn't work. Our surrogate had two personalities. She was so lovey- dovey, but in the end it was all about the money. It left a bad taste in my mouth.

One of Stan's aunts (the one whose husband is a minister) at one stage said, we ought to accept that we can't have children. The Lord has something else in store for us. My father said the same: That we should leave it now. But when must you stop trying if you want it so badly?

We flew the children in from where we lived then for the baptism when they were nine months old. We wanted to consecrate them to God.

In this narrative of Stan and Sena, some voices were more articulate than others. Some were merely hinted at, or wondered about, such as God's perspective. Some were spoken for, like the surrogate, and some, like Stan, deliberately chose to stand in the background. Be that as it may, the 'multiple interactions of perspectives' (Fox 1996:351) made up a complex tale of desire, benevolence, hope, joy, desperation and loss. For Stan and Sena, the birth of the triplets ended a desperate, but courageous struggle to define themselves as full participants in the adult phases of life. This, however, brings new challenges: going from a situation of having no children, to a place of almost having too many. One member of the reflecting team, the psychologist, remarked that the same dedication and goal-orientated efforts that had previously been needed to achieve a pregnancy were now needed for planning the triplets' eating, sleeping and play schedule. Even something as simple as going to a restaurant would be stressful and tiring. He was interested in how the arrival of the children had changed the couple's identities and relationship.

The social worker on the reflecting team, who was involved in writing a manual on 'marriage preparation and marriage enrichment' for a government Department, confessed that, unfortunately, little attention had been given to the childless family in their manual. She commented that the childless family also goes through the stages of 'family life cycles', not directly, but indirectly through their friends', peers' or siblings' children. The only difference is that the family goes through these cycles without having children. It is sometimes assumed that because people have no children, they have fewer marital problems, as the family structure is less complicated. This overlooks the pain and stress that childlessness can bring.

The embryologist on the reflecting team was curious as to why Stan had had so little contact with his children during the first year of their lives. Was he trying to construct identities for them apart from the surrogate's presence in their lives?

I found the feedback of the reflecting team very helpful in formulating questions for Stan and Sena. It was also interesting to observe how different members of the team addressed and highlighted different aspects of their story. The team

consisted of a nurse, an embryologist, a social worker, a psychologist, a painter, a literary critic, a lesbian theologian, a gay business couple and a black biochemist.

4.5 Voices of nuance: Science's Lady Wisdom, Mother God and Alice, an IVF child.

To bring their ending to a place of no ending, three more voices are introduced to add further colour and shading to the contours of Stan and Sena's account: the voice of a scientist who proposes that Wisdom should be given her proper place in the worlds of biology and ethics, the voice of a female theologian who calls out to God and the Church to let her (God) be known by her motherliness, not only his fatherliness, and lastly, the voice of Alice Kirkman, 13 years old, who came into this world as an IVF baby, and places her experience in perspective.

First, then, scientist, Celia Deanne-Drummond (2001:xvi) argues for an attempt to start a genuine conversation between theology and science on the following grounds:

- Science does show a religious dimension, although it needs to be carefully theologically critiqued.
- Many of the methods of modern theology inadvertently draw on the insights of science, as science continually shapes culture, including all forms of knowledge.
- There are various forms of interconnection and informing between science and other forms of knowledge. The values of science both feed off and influence culture.
- More social-scientific research should be undertaken from the perspective of both science and theology in order to develop further points of interest.

In acknowledging these influences of science on theology and vice versa, creative conversation can take place, including careful listening in order to enhance mutual understanding and clearer vision, instead of the too frequent rejection and hostility that take place between the disciplines.

Deanne-Drummond proposes the Biblical tradition of Wisdom and the notion of Wisdom as discernment, according to Thomas Aquinas, to act as a resource for reflection (2001:88). Proverbs 8:22-36 says clearly that Wisdom was present even before the beginning of creation: 'Wisdom was inaugurated and ordained from everlasting, from the beginning, before the earth ever existed' (Proverbs 8:23). The idea of Wisdom is at the core of life and of human experience; it takes a plural perspective on the complex and diverse world and is seen as a female attribute of God. Proverbs 9 gives a description of how Wisdom has built her house with seven pillars, has set her table and has invited all who lack understanding to come eat of her food and drink her wine in order to attain insight and humility.

Wisdom in the Bible has a human, social and cosmic face. Human Wisdom acts in humbleness, being only too aware of its limitations. In its broadest sense it allows for both the goodness of the creation, and the particular human, social and environmental consequences of human action (2001:91). In other words, 'Wisdom is helpful in not denying reason or science their place, but it places them in a wider context of social justice, prudence and temperance' (Deanne-Drummond 2001:143). The cosmic face of Wisdom refers to understanding the human and naturalistic environment as a whole, and not dualistically. In terms of the cosmic face of Wisdom, in the New Testament the Logos or Christ are clustered together. When defining divine Wisdom in terms of the Christ, this also becomes a definition of the Church.

Thomas Aquinas argues that Wisdom as discernment in practical life is possible only through the gift of the Holy Spirit, since love (in the form of faith, hope and charity) is then added to counterbalance the failings of sin. His idea of practical wisdom, apparently in line with Aristotle's thinking on phronesis (to take counsel, to judge discoveries and to act), makes it possible to discern God's wisdom in different areas of life, and to act as co-creator with God in ordering the universe as a community. If the opposite of Wisdom is Folly, and if even the Wisdom of God is sometimes interpreted as Folly, wise choices in science are indeed crucially important. How far and on what terms should man and woman be allowed to become co-creators with God in engineering crops, animals and humans (Deanne-Drummond 2001:93)? It seems that Lady Wisdom could help to lead the way in

finding greater insight and good judgment when it comes to the challenges concerning biotechnology.

Second is the voice of Sallie McFague, theologian who experiments in a heuristic, imaginative way with the model of God as mother. She regards this particular model of 'the God who is on the side of life and its fulfilment' (1996:329) as one that stands alongside other pictures or imaginings of God in Scripture and tradition. However, she feels that modelling God in the image of a mother is particularly fitting for the time in which we are currently living. The imaginative picture of the relationship between (Mother) God and the world underscores the radical and intimate interrelatedness and interdependence of all life; the need for the just sharing of life's basic necessities; the intrinsic worth of all species; and the moving away from dualistic hierarchies (1996:329).

Using the metaphor of God as Mother means that the patriarchal model becomes de-centred, as subsequently do such dualisms as male/female, spirit/flesh, heterosexual/homosexual. The Mother model also serves to re-contextualise the paternal model. Paternal love from a mother or father is probably the most powerful and intimate way of giving love, it is a precious and vulnerable gift of your genes and nurturing to your child, a gift that s/he in turn can pass on to the next generation.

McFague investigates three basic features of the maternal model: giving life, nurturing the life after it has come into existence and fervently wishing for the created to grow and flourish. As far as the first feature is concerned, McFague says the model of God as Mother, physically in labour, evokes images of gestation, giving birth and nursing. To imagine coming forth from the womb of our mother ('being bodied forth from the divine being') is a powerful expression that we 'live and move and have our being' in God, and that we are interdependent and interrelated with the rest of the universe (McFague 1996:327). This strong image of God as Mother stands in contrast with the frequently-favoured Judeo-Christian image of God as an artistic intellectual who creates by the act of speaking the Word: a creator who stands slightly apart from his creation. Secondly, the model of Mother God expresses the most basic responsibility of parents, namely to feed

their young. Food imagery abounds in the Bible. However the focus is more often on a theology of receiving spiritual food from God, rather than seeing God as a parent who feeds all creatures. Lastly, the Mother God model, embodying the birth metaphor, blends well with the contemporary ecological context, where the earth's resources have to be managed well and distributed fairly. The Mother (parent) loves all her children equally, and becomes sad and angry when some dismiss the intrinsic worth of others, or try to grab the best for themselves. The universe is seen as 'bodied forth from the womb of God', so to damage the earth and its creatures is to injure the embodied God.

At the same time, McFague cautions against the pitfalls of simply establishing a 'new hierarchal dualism with a maternal model of God', or sentimentalising maternal imagery as if all mothers were, as a matter of course, loving and nurturing. Instead, it should be acknowledged that such maternal qualities are socially constructed. The third pitfall would be the failure to realise how utterly oppressive maternal language can be to all human beings when it relegates us always to the role of children. It poses particular problems for women, suggesting that only those who have mothered children are true or fulfilled women. This model of Mother God should therefore be seen as only one of many possible female and male models for speaking of God (McFague 1996:325).

The third voice invited to bring an open ending to the story of Stan and Sena is that of Alice Kirkman, who came into this world in 1988 as an IVF baby. Dubbed 'Alice in Wonderland' by Australian newspapers, she was conceived with her mother's egg and donor sperm, and gestated by her aunt. The researcher decided to include her voice as a representative of sorts for Stan and Sena's children, who, at the age of two, are far too young to realise how special they are, not only because they are triplets, but also because they were conceived with the intense medical procedures that constitute in vitro fertilisation, and were borne by a gestational surrogate mother.

At the time she was interviewed Alice was a normal 13 year old, who 'just happens to have been born by means of IVF surrogacy'. Asked what it is like to be born as a result of a sperm donation, her reply is that she has known this since she was

very young, and that it doesn't bother her. The man who was her mother's husband before her birth, Sev, discovered that he could not have children, and suggested taking the route of sperm donation. Alice regards Sev as her father, as he plays the role of father in her life and regards her as his daughter. Although she knows the identity of her biological father, they have no contact, in order to protect his privacy.

Asked whether children should be allowed to be born through IVF surrogacy, she replied that it is becoming more and more common, and that both conventional and unconventional families (same sex parents, single parents and IVF children) should be allowed to exist in peace.

In response to Dick, the school bully's taunts of 'test-tube kid, test-tube kid', she was initially hurt. (By the way, she has known Dick since their kindergarten years.) Then she realised that he did not even know that IVF does not mean 'test tube' but refers to an embryo cultivated in glass, and secondly, that (at her age) it's less embarrassing to know you've been conceived in a Petri dish than as a result of your parents having sex!

This chapter told and reflected upon the story of Stan and Sena, and placed an emphasis on the discourse of surrogacy. The next chapter introduces Hester and Florence and their experiences concerning secondary infertility and mutual embracement.

CHAPTER 5

HARVEST SONG OF HESTER AND FLORENCE: LOSING INFANTS, INHERITING A CHILD

In this chapter the following issues will be considered in the course of Hester's narrative: infertility in the African context, secondary infertility, mutual embracement, issues of death, and African feminist theology.

5.1 Telling a poem, reciting infertility

Hester's story of her 'childlessness' was told during three conversations, with Florence taking part in the last one. (The inverted commas are used ironically, since Hester gave birth to twins and has an adopted daughter. However, she has no living biological child and is therefore not regarded as a 'real' mother by her community.) The conversations were transcribed from an audiotape onto 60 pages of verbatim text, and then condensed into a four and a half page poem, using Hester and Florence's own words.

The researcher is indebted to the approach by social scientist Laurel Richardson (1992:126), who's interview with a woman called, Louisa May, resulted in its being written in poetic form. Richardson had a number of reasons for presenting the interview in poetic form. First, she wanted a diversion from the dull, dry sociological writing of paraphrasing, case studies or simply quoting the interviewees' words. Secondly, she argued that by presenting Louisa's language to shape the poem she de-centred herself as the expert sociologist, and reached a sensitive, ethical solution to the issues of 'authority/authorship/appropriation' whereby she felt she could use her 'skills and resources in the service of others less beneficially situated' (1992:131). She inevitably interpreted Louisa May's words, life and experiences, but presenting them in a certain pattern that meticulously reflected the speaker's tone, diction and meaning, and using only Louisa May's words, she tried to do so with subjective integrity. Thirdly, Richardson liked the idea of finding a union between the sociological and the poetic because this is an important part of how she prefers to express herself as a sociologist and an individual. What she found, in the end, was that in writing about

Louisa May, she also rewrote her own self. As a narrative researcher I could identify with Richardson's thinking, and in telling Hester and Florence's story, I was inspired to make use of poetic representation in the same way.

The poem uses Hester and Florence's own words and the researcher tried to convey the nature and mood by making use of poetic devices such as repetition, pauses, foregrounding of words and emotions, 'free verse' and dramatic progression. The fact that poetry by nature lends itself in greater measure to multiple and open readings than does conventional prose or traditional narrative research writing, and is a concise way of telling a story, influenced my decision to tell Hester and Florence's story in the form of a poem.

Todorov (1981:4) describes the aim of poetic representation as an attempt to 'name the text that was examined', (or, in this instance, to name the conversation/interview with Hester and Florence.) The act of 'naming' leads to a determination to make the text itself speak: 'It is a fidelity to the object, to the other, and consequently an effacement of the subject –as well as its drama, which is to be forever incapable of realising *the* meaning, but only a meaning, subject to historical and psychological contingencies' (1981:4).

It is a kind of interpretation, where interpreting 'for and in itself is impossible' (Todorov 1981:4) even if you want to remain faithful to the subject, and where projecting it but upon itself is inevitable. Todorov adds, that, when it comes to the process of reading, the reader will never read the text twice in the identical manner. The process of reading is an act of tracing the presented written text: the reader adds and suppresses, looks for what he wants to find or avoids what he does not want to find there.

In the same vein, Derrida (in Kearney 1994:125) says that deconstruction is at the same time extremely modest and extremely ambitious, ambitious, because it puts itself on the same level as literary texts (a form of literature, that can be read like other texts), and modest, because it admits that it is only one interpretation amongst others. In the following poetic representation/text of Hester's story, the philosophy of deconstruction teaches the reader to focus on the text as language,

as the production of meaning through difference and dissemination, and to investigate the covert philosophical and political presuppositions of how texts are usually read. However, Hester and her story, are not imprisoned in the language, as if deconstruction were a strategy of non-sense, or as if she did not exist beyond language. It is through the reference of language that the 'other' as well as the 'other of language' is searched out. 'Deconstruction gives pleasure in that it gives desire' (Kearney 1984:126). Hester's story functions as a 'search for presence and fulfilment'; it is a 'search for that which remains absent and other than oneself' (1984:126). Critchley (1999:3) points out that, deconstruction, beyond its literary and philosophical appropriations, brings ethical questions to the fore, as a third wave. He explains, in terms of the work of Derrida and Levinas that 'the pattern of reading produced in the deconstruction of texts, has an ethical structure', in fact that deconstruction 'is ethical' (1999:2), and points to the concepts of double reading and closure to substantiate it.

5.2 Hester's helplessness

Hester's multiple life stories are mainly lived out in Setswana, her mother tongue and Florence's. However, she speaks Afrikaans very well, and because I do not speak Setswana, the three conversations were conducted respectively in Afrikaans and English. Hester preferred to speak in Afrikaans, and Florence in English. However, I had to translate 'Hester's poem' from Afrikaans into English for the language requirements of the research text. Unfortunately, this means that Hester's words were, for the second time, repositioned away from her original thought processes and intended meanings: from Setswana to Afrikaans to English. Hester's battle to express herself adequately in Afrikaans and then to have it translated again in a language that she did not understand was only one of many ways in which her helplessness was brought to light. When discussing the poem with her I had to translate it back into Afrikaans so that she could reflect on it. Afrikaans is Hester's fourth language, Setswana, Sepedi and Sesotho being the first three. I have taken pains to ensure that Hester's exact words were used, and checked and re-checked it with her, regardless which language it was translated in.

Hester's helplessness shows itself in her near illiteracy, her low economic status, and her lack of any skills other than domestic capabilities, but mostly by her not being the mother of biological children. Two husbands have left her. Her first husband took another wife because Hester had failed to fall pregnant again after they lost their twins. The second husband left her after a seventeen-year marriage because she never conceived and couldn't give birth to his children. According to Hester both of these men remained childless. She categorically refuses to marry her current partner, not because she would be his second wife, but because she fears he would ultimately divorce her over the issue of children. Even though he claims it doesn't bother him, Hester feels that after *lebola* had been paid, there would inevitably be pressure from him and his family to become pregnant, despite the current assurances. Unfortunately he was not prepared to participate in the research. Like the voices of the other two men in Hester's life, his will not be heard in the telling of her story. It is a loss to this research that not one of her 'husbands' was prepared to become a co-researcher. That is why I invited Florence, Hester's adopted daughter, and her granddaughter Thandi, to join us.

5.3 Research narrative

After I had done some reading on the issue of infertility in the African community, I became interested in hearing a more detailed story from someone who had experienced the problem first hand. I also shared some of the literary information with a group of about forty black women working as volunteers in their communities, with whom I meet every second week. As community workers they address mainly HIV/AIDS-related issues when visiting households, but they encounter other social and religious concerns like poverty, employment and the will of God in people's lives. They told me that to be childless in the black community is a problematic position to be in. It is more or less guaranteed that someone without biological children will be taunted, marginalised, blamed and avoided. Some of the women in the group admitted that they themselves had personally taken part in such hurtful behaviour to childless women, but, interestingly, not childless men. To the question, why one would conduct oneself in such a negative way to a woman who dearly wants to become a mother, and is already suffering because of her childlessness, someone answered that it is a way of keeping her (and her infertility problem) at arms length.

It seems that there is little sympathy for the black childless couple in the African community, particularly for the female who is generally seen to be the cause of the problem. One woman in the group explained that if her brother and his wife proved to be childless, she and her other family members would automatically assume that the problem lay with his wife, and they would go as far as encouraging him to leave her and find a new wife. One of the other women in the same group had no children, and she shared with me (in private) that she was pointed at and pushed aside by other women in the community, including family members, even to some extent, by those in the volunteer group. She said she was lucky to have a good husband, who cared about her more than he cared about having children with her. Sometimes he even did the cooking. However, she occasionally wondered if he had a child or children with another woman.

This research on infertility would be the poorer if the story of a black couple were not included. The voices of black women have historically and culturally been silenced, and those from third world countries are often disadvantaged three-fold: by racism, sexism and class differences (Bons-Storm 1992:134). As far as the South African context is concerned, Sunette Pienaar (2003:60) mentions a number of disadvantages. In addition to the 'burden of triple oppression' carried by black women, the past apartheid policies disempowered them economically and socially, the patriarchal system permeates church and religion as well as family structure, and women are both physiologically and socially more vulnerable to contracting HIV/AIDS than are their male counterparts. Hester's willingness to tell her story on secondary infertility gave voice to her own painful experiences and to others in her community suffering the same fate. It also gave voice to Infertility itself, a taboo topic in the African context. Discussing the theme of infertility challenges not only the couple and their bedroom life, but also their parents' inherent personhood, which is thought of as unacceptable (Gabobonwe 2004:67).

I was contemplating a possible choice out of three black women I had approached to act as co-researchers, and was asking Hester, a friend's domestic worker for her opinion, when she reminded me that she had already told me that she too bore the burden of infertility. I vaguely remembered her sharing that story with me a

number of years ago when I first met her. Prompted by curiosity and courtesy I had asked her about her husband, children and family. But I had apparently not taken in what she said. She reminded me that her daughter, whom I have encountered during the three years Hester has been working for my friend, is not actually her 'blood child', but her brother's daughter and that she, Hester, had lost her own two babies in infancy. I was unsure whether I should include her in the research, rather than one of the other black women I had already approached. The three other potential co-researchers were at a greater physical and emotional distance from me, and my personal experience of infertility. I was not planning to share very much about my own situation, but I thought that including Hester, my friend's domestic worker, would potentially put me in an awkward position. With hindsight I now realise that this was only one of many instances when the power imbalances between Hester and me played out.

I wanted to give Hester an opportunity to share her story as a black woman suffering from infertility, and I genuinely wanted to understand more about it. We were two very different women, wanting the same thing: a biological child. Hester's willingness to take part in the research had an enlightening influence on our relationship, but also on my perception of myself as a white, South African woman who had lived a life filled with supreme advantages and benefits. Once more I realised that I had participated in patterns of privilege that use stereotypes of difference to sideline and oppress my black sisters (Russell 2006:196). One of the comments by the psychologist on the reflecting team was that I tend to speak to Hester in a paternalistic way, and that he did not believe she quite understood 'what the 'miesies' was busy with'. The concept of research, and the associated rationale are far removed from Hester's world. However, the fact that I 'wanted to hear her story about her children', and shared with her my own pain and hopes, empowered her to a great extent.

5.4 The story behind the poem

Hester is a Setswana speaking woman, 45 years old, attractive and slender. Her creativity is revealed in her love for sewing, and her colourful clothes, but in subtle ways as well, like arranging the Carrol Boyes bowls and containers on the kitchen counter. During the week she lives in a room on the property of her employer, but

she also owns a brick house in Rooifontein. She comes from a close-knit family of seven children. Hester and one of her sisters, Rosie, are childless. Although they never had the luxury of sophisticated medical examinations to at least ascertain the reason or extent of their infertility, their niece, fortunately, had the financial means to undergo IVF procedures to combat her childlessness.

Hester told me that as a teenager of about fifteen, she realised that some women can't have children and she was afraid that she might be one of them. Fortunately, at the age of nineteen she gave birth to her and Tommie's twins in the hospital at Hammanskraal. Although they were born prematurely at seven months, they were sent home shortly after the birth. The girl was called Nyane, meaning small, and the boy was called Moss, short for Moses.

The 'tiny one' died when she was only a week old, and Moss passed away at nine months. Just like that. He went to sleep, and never woke up. A few years later, Tommie left her for another woman, because she failed to conceive again. Hester told me that to this day Tommie lives nearby and she knows for a fact that he has never again fathered children. He once even suggested that the two of them get together again to see whether the Lord would grant them another child, but Hester says it's too late now.

On Good Friday every year for the last twenty-seven years, Hester and her mother visit the babies' graves. They arrive at seven in the morning carrying water, food, candles and matches. First they clean the area around the two graves, and then they have something to eat. For the rest of the day they speak to and 'question' the children on various matters. Hester assures them that she still loves them very much, and that her heart has broken many times over. She and her mother also ask them why they went away, why they just left their poor mother on her own. At the end of the day, and as the conclusion of this solemn ritual, mother and daughter light a candle for each of the two babies on their respective graves, and leave it burning as they depart. Hester says her father is also heartbroken over her loss and often wonders why it happened.

Then, seven years after the death of her twins, and while she was married to Samuel her second husband, another tragedy engulfed the family. One day her brother Piet had an argument with his wife because, as usual, she had used their food money to gamble at the casino. He was so angry that he hit her on the head with a brick. Bleeding and unconscious, she fell to the ground. Fearing the consequences of what he had done, Piet ran away and hanged himself in a room in his parents' house. The family discovered the dead woman in her house, with her daughter Florence trying to drink from her dead mother's breast. Florence's younger brother was asleep in the next room. The tragedy offered one compensation: Hester and Rosie, the two childless sisters had each inherited a child. Hester got the nine-month old Florence, and Rosie, got her two-year old brother. Ironically for Hester, Florence came into her life at the same age at which Moss had departed.

Florence, the inherited daughter, the substitute child, once again made a mother of Hester. And Florence the orphan, found in Hester a replacement for the mother she had lost. They love each other, but theirs is a bittersweet union. Members of the community continually remind them that they are not 'really' mother and daughter, and that their being together is only second best. 'Your parents are dead', they would say to Florence. 'And you can't have children', they would accuse Hester. 'So you are not a mother and child', they conclude firmly. It is indeed true that Hester never officially adopted Florence. It is, however, a matter of mutual embracement, resulting in them having a mother-daughter relationship.

History repeated itself, when Florence, at nineteen, gave birth to a girl. Hester said that, instead of concentrating on her schoolwork, Florence had started messing around with the neighbour and became pregnant. But, 'we loved each other very much', Florence assures her mother. When she fell pregnant, the man refused to accept that the baby was his, and shamelessly married someone else. Although Hester loves the little girl, and is proud that she is now a grandmother, she is worried about the extra financial burden and disappointed that Florence didn't use her opportunities to obtain a matric certificate. Hester knows from experience that being illiterate robs you of your potential and power. Florence no longer lives in Hester's house in Rooifontein, because she is afraid to be on her own. (Hester

herself goes there only once or twice a month, staying the rest of the time in her room in the city.) Florence has now joined her nieces living with their grandmother a few blocks away.

In Hester's narrative there is a dark, undercurrent of unspeakable grief and hurt. It is as if she were pregnant with a 'heaviness of pain and sadness', a 'something that doesn't want to come out', she says. It never releases its grip on her heart and it waits for her at the break of every day. If she is unfortunate enough to wake up during the night, she cannot sleep again, because this horrendous ache will not allow her to rest. Many, many times she has prayed that God will lift this burden from her, but it has lodged itself within her. 'The thing that doesn't want to come out' keeps her in a pregnant state of such pain that she is always close to tears. Part of her wounded state is that she cannot share her painful story openly in her community, and find understanding, care and empathy. Alone, she bears in her body the infection of childlessness, like a decomposed infant. Hester says she is both a poor woman because of her losses, and a blessed woman because she received children through other women: Florence from her sister-in-law, and Thandi, her granddaughter from Florence. She finds hope and strength in her faith, but cannot understand why God does not reverse her fate, or why He allowed the babies to desert her in the first place.

The poetic representation makes use of Hester and Florence's own words. Referring to Hester as 'i', instead of 'I', refers to her feelings of a non-person in the context of not having 'real' children.

5.5 Hester's poem: 'the thing that doesn't want to come out'

in Rooifontein my house stands empty
dirty alone
nobody there to care for
only me eating my money
even if your little house is nice
it's a trouble thing to be without a child



my heart is very sore very very sore
it makes me scream inside
sometimes i cry - oo hoooo - like a wolf
poor me *gaana ngwana*
i'm a poor woman
(my mother's heart also cries with me
my father always says why why why)

when i was nineteen the twins came too early
i took them home to Hammanskraal
Nyane lived one week she was very cold in the morning
he got to nine months Moss
i loved him
from then on this thing is heavy
this thing

this thing that doesn't want to come out
it is big trouble
it talks to me every day
it holds me dead tight

what shall i say?
we must have children we must
it's just how it is
the *Morena* was good he gave
Florence to me when she was a small *mosetsanyana*
a bad thing happened
her *ma* and *pa* had a fight
killed each other over the devil money
her *pa* said where's the money?
the casino swallowed it!
her *ma* said

she fell
he didn't meant to hit her that hard
hanged himself with the rope then

my empty *sesi* Rosie she got the little *moshimanyana*
we were so happy
now we had children
we didn't sign the adoption papers
always we cry together about the children we hold each other
why our young *sesie* Willemina has four children why?
and she's the youngest of all of us
we always cry me and Rosie

the *sangoma* threw the bones
if it sits like this it means so if it sits like that it means so
she said the time is not right the *muti* is working i must wait six months
the baby will come
but it didn't help she took my money

Samuel said i must sleep with his brother to make a new child
but no i didn't want to
it's better this way i didn't like that man
the family wasn't angry
you don't have to really

this world is not a place to stay in
it is too hard for me
Samuel left me we were together seventeen years
'uh huh you can't make children' he left me
it wasn't right to run off just like that

why must he go away after he promised me where can i run to?
it's a lot of trouble this thing
the *Morena* knows some can have children some not
we pray in the church holding hands in the air
going up and up
you have you have you have not
you have not you have you have not you have not
we think maybe if we say something else the *Morena* will give
the others throw their children away at the river
yes they put them in the dustbin
and the toilet did you know the toilet

i think who is going to look after me when i'm old?
the others don't want me to send their child
to the shop to make the tea
they say i must do it myself
i think many stories
i must buy the baby at the hospital
they have the ones there without mothers
(*i'm laughing at myself now but my heart stays sore*)

every day i ask the *Morena* all day every day
why don't you give me one?
only one please i'm asking you for one only
i can't hear him i don't know why
the *Morena* speaks to me but i don't understand
i'm old now it's too late

i mustn't feel like this
my heart pulls me down grabs me like a fist
it's not only me
too many women without children
all of us are pushed outside in this world
it doesn't help to cry every day

what will i do to become strong?
i have Florence she's my daughter i know
i have Florence she's my daughter

she wants to be a nurse but she didn't get matric
when her baby came we called her Thandi
Florence is crying because the father left her
married someone else but he is still the neighbour
she sees them together he and the other woman
she cries a lot Thandi cries too
that other woman swears at them
Thandi's nose is small like her father's

*Hester is my mother I love her too much
she taught me to cook
I'm shy and big boned I like to smile
my mother makes us chicken and pap
we are good friends she helps me
I want to get a job I didn't like school
the easy school maths told me not to take all the money
for the clothes in truworths
I must go back to grade 11
but now it is difficult
I want more babies*

Florence is my daughter i love her
and Thandi
these ones are my little children
there's this thing in me that does not want to come out

Florence is my daughter i love her
and Thandi and Moss and Nyane these ones are my little children
there's this heavy thing that i carry inside

it makes me pregnant with rivers of crying
from that time it speaks to me everyday
my heart is very very sick

i pray that God will take it away from me
will you pray with me that he will make me to get strong?
this world is full of trouble
(i can't help crying)

5.6 Secondary infertility

Hester suffers from what is known as secondary infertility. 'It is the inability to conceive a pregnancy or carry a pregnancy to term following the birth of one or more children' according to Simons (1995:2). It means that a woman has had at least one live child. Secondary infertility occurs among individuals and couples who previously had little or no problem in conceiving, as well as among those with recurring infertility difficulties. It is regarded not only as a medical diagnosis, but also as a social and emotional crisis. Secondary infertility, 'a condition defined as the inability to have another child after conceiving and giving birth at least once', also applies to those who have three or four children but, while still in their reproductive years, cannot conceive again and are thus unable to have the additional children they desire to complete their preferred family circle (Van Regenmorter & Van Regenmorter 2004:128).

Although it is even more common than primary infertility, it is a hidden form of infertility. Many couples suffering from secondary infertility assume they are fertile because they have created at least one child. They also tend to think that they do not know anyone else with the same problem, because people keep silent about it. Secondary infertility is an unrecognised loss, and consequently, there is little or no support from friends and family. There are two possible reasons for this. First, because there is at least one child, those around the couple feel that they should just get on with their lives and make the best of a less than perfect situation. In the next place, secondary infertility is an unfamiliar loss, and communities lack proper language to give adequate support. Unused to addressing such a difficult loss with acknowledgments, ceremonies, rituals and understanding, society prefers to

ignore it. Even pregnancy loss, which is often physically noticeable, does not elicit much support because it is regarded as a private and personal matter. Interestingly, those diagnosed with primary infertility normally experience greater empathy from their church, and social or other communities because they are the worst off on the continuum of childlessness. Those with primary infertility are often the first to react with anger if people suffering from secondary infertility 'make an issue' of their battle to have more children. Infertility always comes as a shock, because having children is typically taken for granted. During the past decades couples have become accustomed to the idea of reproductive choice as a process that can be controlled, as if the only questions were: How many children do I want? and: How would I prefer to space the siblings (Simons 1995:13)?

In patriarchal societies failure to produce a son, although one is the parent of a number of daughters would be tantamount to barrenness of a kind. In some African cultures a husband would say he has had no children until there was a male child (O'Donovan 1996:295). In societies for whom it is important to have a great brood of children, women who have only one or two children, because of secondary infertility, relegate themselves to the category of infertile women. While having no child is the least desirable position to be in, at the same time, 'having only one is like having none' (Gijssels, Mgalla & Wambura 2001:211).

In northern Tanzania custom forces a woman to leave her children behind if she divorces her husband. In cases where a woman has only one child, this arrangement is obviously heartbreaking. Should a woman with only one child, lose her husband because of death or divorce, her chances of marrying again would be slim, as she would be considered as practically childless, and incapable of producing off-spring (2001:212).

Secondary infertility has been described as a misunderstood pain. Those directly affected by secondary infertility and those merely taking note of it, find it difficult to understand. Parents tend to think they cannot be infertile if they have at least one child and often postpone seeking medical intervention. They feel guilty about wanting more children in case it implies that the one (or those) they have is not good enough, and they experience difficulty in explaining to their only child (or

children) that there will be no new brother or sister. They are in two worlds simultaneously: the infertile group and the parent club. They can count on little empathy, especially from those suffering from primary infertility. The general feeling is that they should be grateful for the child/children they have and just forget about wanting more, or 'just stop being so anxious' and they'll conceive again (Van Regenmorter & Van Regenmorter 2004:131).

5.7 Issues of death

In Chapters 7 and 8 the notion and stages of grief are discussed in considerable detail. This chapter pays attention to some of the issues surrounding death that Hester mentioned in her story. Hester has twice endured the heart breaking experience of seeing and holding the body of her dead child, and after nearly thirty years it remains extremely hard for her to believe or accept that her babies have died. To this day, she sometimes feels that she will discover them in their grandmother's arms as soon as she walks into the room where they died. Laetitia Slabber (1987:25) concurs, saying that she often experienced her deceased daughter's presence, but the child constantly eluded her. She felt that if she could only turn her head quickly enough in the direction of the presence, she would be able to see her. She was so real and so close, but always out of reach.

The dead occupy a different place. They demand attention and treatment in their need to be removed by burial or cremation to another place where their unusual nature can be accommodated, says Davies (2005:48). The experience of death's strangeness lies rooted in its stillness. The dead are too still for the comfort of the living, who, even when asleep, display signs of life. The inertness of death prompts beliefs that will make sense of it and rites for coping with it.

The Van Regenmorters (2004:119) says there are some common threads that weave themselves into the stories of people who have endured infant death. Feelings of emptiness, isolation and distance persist in grieving parents. Hester experiences a dual world, one space where children and happiness exists together, and another space where childlessness and suffering co-exist.

Spiritual doubt and confusion seem to be an inescapable response on the part of those looking for answers that could bring meaning and healing. The question: 'What is God trying to say to me?' unleashes a host of incomplete answers, but at the same time holds the immanent possibility of bringing some peace and acceptance. In one sense, death helps to explain life itself and give meaning to it. Most humans have a strong sense of discontent with life. They are aware that their existence is flawed and lacking in completeness (Davies 2005:9). Death is a way of being removed from life's misery and disappointments, sicknesses and flaws.

Parents burdened with infant death, feel a continuing sense of loss. Because babies are seen as symbols of new generations and regeneration, and elicit strong protective feelings from most adults, Death's collision with Life is at no time more tragic than when witnessed in the deceased body of an infant. Gabobonwe (2004:59) describes barrenness as a chronic grief. The future itself seems to be lost, with the family as a whole trapped between hope and failure. In the case of infant death there is the same feeling of loss concerning the future of the child. Hester, like many others in her position, 'keeps track' of her children, and thinks about how old they would have been at this or that stage, or what her life would have been like if they had still been alive. The parents' relationship with the child is interrupted and will not be played out through the years as had been planned and assumed. The child can never really be laid to rest because the momentum of the parents' love keeps him alive, and they take him with them on their life's journey (Stetson 1999:154).

Davies (2005:10) points out, that, for those left behind, the sense that life (how ever short) is a passage into death, and acts as a 'transcending journey' to a continuous life hereafter, helps to construct a process of 'moving from one level of knowing to another'. Ordinary life, when touched by death's irreversible shift, gives way to despair, but also to the prospect of embracing mystery and awe. This 'different knowing' that reaches into a mysterious realm beyond the familiar, where confident knowing is actually impossible, is suffused with a sense of hope. One of the possibilities of this mysterious, mystical realm that lies in the hereafter, beyond this painful and limited existence, is the hope that the dead can become 'new'. Hope holds out the expectation and anticipation that things are not as they seem,

and that in future, death will somehow, miraculously, benefit life. The irony is that death constructs a prime context in which human hope faces such a brutal crisis that it can completely dissolve and die. The paradox of death is that it brings a profound sense of loss of purpose, yet at the same time highlights the extraordinary nature of life.

Rituals for the dead are described as complex processes of mourning, composed of metaphors, symbols and actions (Imber-Black 2004:340). They are multi-functional: marking the loss of a member of the family, affirming the life of the person who has died and facilitating the expression of grief in ways that are consistent with the culture's values. Ritual speak in a symbolic way of the meaning of death and the enduring nature of life, and point to a way of making sense of the loss while also finding the strength to continue with life. The funeral rite itself serves to give an expressive platform for communal and individual lamentation, but at the same time holds the mourners close to the heart. Amidst the great sadness in an inconsolable mother's heart for her dead child, there are the sorrowful hearts and the physical touch of the others at the funeral to stop her from going mad with grief. Operating on multiple levels, mourning rituals facilitates the language of grief: anger, despair, hurt, shock, blame and confusion. This marks relationship change and enables an entire community to heal (Imber-Black 2004:341).

Hester and her mother's visit to the gravesite of Moss and Nyane every Good Friday, is an opportunity for wailing and lamentation, the counting of their very real losses. However, it is the unique capacity of ritual to hold contradictions that makes them enormously powerful to the 'life task of grieving and moving on' (Imber-Black 2004:356). In talking to the children, by expressing their love and concern for the babies they also reaffirm the hope that their lives are continuing in some mysterious way beyond the grave. The yearly ritual of going to the cemetery marks the passage of time, and allows for the expression of their pain and loss in an open and unrestricted way, designed to promote interpersonal connectedness with each other and the deceased (Van Gennep, in Imber-Black 2004:341). By sharing a meal and spending the whole day with the babies, from early in the morning till late afternoon, they affirm their loss and show respect to the deceased.

As Hester and her mother share news from their lives with the children, they transcend death, and hope re-manifests itself. Imber-Black says the dimensions of time (the day) and space (the graves) in the ritual draw the distinction between the 'time to mourn' and the 'time to re-enter life' (2004:356). The symbolic action of meeting the children and eating and speaking to them, connect Hester and her mother with the familiar (that which is now in the past, and never will be again) and provide a pathway to the unfamiliar (life without the children on this earth as well as the hopeful reunion when they join them in death).

5.7 Infertility in the African context

When referring to the 'African' context one should take care to keep 'the rich diversity of modes of being in Africa' in mind, and not fall into the trap of thinking Africa refers to a homogeneous society. The word 'Africa' points to 'a philosophical concept that describes the complexity and diversity of different cultural, local and contextual settings as related to a state of being and mind' (Louw 2007:13). Africa also embodies the 'spirit' or soul of its people's humanness, and refers to a hermeneutical paradigm that differs from the analytical approach stemming from Hellenism and Western thinking. Louw (2007:13) cautions against either a stigmatised description of Africa as backward, or a romanticised view of people living in perfect '*ubuntu* understanding' with each other. In a way, he says, Africa is not Africa anymore, despite its strong traditional beliefs. Even Africa has been influenced by technology, globalisation and commercialisation, embedded in the philosophical mode of postmodernism. Africa embodies different perspectives, while radical changes have taken place within the different African contexts in which people live. Colonialism, foreign religions, western technology and education, contact with west and east and various internal changes have challenged social and religious understandings (Kasenene 1994:138). Even if some cultural ideas are deeply entrenched, some are loosening and are more inclined to reconsider traditional meanings. This could hold some hope for greater societal acceptance and possible healing for a childless person like Hester.

As far as the African individual is concerned, being healthy means being in the right relationship with the environment. It signifies that the societal order and

systemic, spiritual and religious equilibrium are in harmony. Illness (including infertility) in this context is both a sociological phenomenon (as it affects the whole community) and a religious concept (Louw 2007:25). Without the positive integration of the sick person into the community, lacking the therapeutic role of the close relatives, and without the engagement of other channelling agents, like divine healers, order and harmony cannot be restored. Traditional healers are most often 'chosen' or 'elected' by a spirit associated with a shrine and a healing community (Lartey 1994:39). The healers make contact with the spiritual world and then, by way of diagnosis and rituals help to reinstate the damaged spiritual chain of protection occasioned by someone's wrong behaviour. It is understood that such wrong behaviour led to the anger of the ancestors and spiritual powers who subsequently wrought havoc on the person and the community.

Berinyuu (in Louw 2007:26) says illness immediately provokes suspicion. The question of what sin the person has committed, thereby bringing about misfortune or death, begs an answer. Illness is connected not so much to viruses or infections in the body, as to the question of who disturbed the societal order and why. The mystical query of 'why' rather than 'how' is important. The question is not so much what illness has assailed the person, as who sent the illness and for what reason. The heart of African traditional medicine is the restoration of harmonious relationships throughout the whole cosmos, through ritual, symbolic suggestion and both herbal and psychological therapeutic interventions (Lartey 1994:41). The cornerstone of African life is an integrated community that takes up the role of defining one's identity in all respects. The *ubuntu* principle of 'a person is a person through others' underscores that what you do and what happens to you has an impact on the rest (Motsei 2007:21). Being infertile in the traditional African context does not leave room for 'purely medical reasons' or 'unexplained causes'. It leads to an immediate reflection on someone's presumed faulty conduct. The community to which they belong takes seriously its right to scrutinise their life and hold them responsible.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, in most parts of Africa motherhood is seen as almost sacred, 'a religious duty', and a way to prove you are a 'full and faithful person'

(Oduyoye 1999:113). As if the pain of being childless were not enough, the childless state of infertility itself turns one into a shameful curse with the potential to alienate from community life those who desperately need support. Infertility is a curse to those afflicted by it, and it is believed that it blights the community itself, undermining the survival of the clan and preventing ancestors from being born again into earthly life (Mathekga 2001:37). A woman's body is *inter alia* seen as a vehicle for the reincarnation of her ancestors (Oduyoye 1999:105). O'Donovan (1996:295) points out that much of the emotional pain of childlessness in African life has to do with traditional values concerning children. Many of these values do not reflect Christian ideas, and, although some people might describe themselves as adhering to the Christian faith, they hold fast to traditional beliefs and practices that often seem to contradict Christian principles and ethics. However, given the African philosophical view of the integrated whole, such apparent contradictions are non-existent for someone like Hester.

Mercy Oduyoye (1999:105), herself a childless woman living in West Africa, reflects that her tribe, the Akan of Ghana, views the power of procreation as one of the seven signs of human wellness. Fruitfulness of plant, human and animal life is not only what one prays for, but also the focus in the here and now, necessary for a good quality of life on earth. The deep-rooted belief that children are one's security in old age underscores the social and psychological satisfaction of parenthood (Setsiba 2002:46). Infertility in a family member does not bode well, as it is thought of as bringing disharmony for the rest of the group in future. In addition, living in the preferred abundant fullness aptly points to the hopeful expectations of the life after this one. In some cultures, the eternal life is traditionally viewed as an endless continuation of the person's family line. Seen like this, the ability to have children takes on religious significance. Because the Bible speaks of children as a gift from God, the community assumes the opposite also to be true: childlessness demonstrates the curse of the Lord on such a couple. Even a husband and wife with strong Christian beliefs might become bitter and angry towards God because they are influenced by the community's interpretation of their situation (O'Donovan 1996:296).

Even if death could be seen as the bridge from here to a blissful eternity, within African tradition death remains the enemy of life. Death is not viewed as a benevolent carrier from this life to the next, but rather as a spiteful snatcher of life, that must always be resisted. Childlessness signifies death for the entire system. An infertile woman, despite her good qualities, may be described as 'the dead end of human life' (Setsiba 2002:46). Children perpetuate the life cycle in which the unborn, the young, the old and the dead are seen as united in a cycle of mortality-immortality. Births, weddings and funerals are regarded as important rites of passage demonstrating vital transitions in the reproductive cycle. From being a respected elder, one is promoted to the position of venerated ancestor: one's grave stands as an important symbol of the continuation of the family (Gijssels et al 2001:210). When fertility is structured within such a context, it is no wonder that dying without children is an unbearable prospect for many.

Children are regarded as a gift to the whole community, and, in a sense, parents are seen as mere custodians. A saying from the Asante people, who are a mother-centred clan, declares that a child belongs to the mother, but only until it is born when it becomes a community responsibility (Oduyoye 1996:129) Africans never escape moral responsibility for members of their extended families, which often includes financial responsibility. However, despite the understanding that every woman, whether or not she has biological (or womb) children, is to take up the role of mothering all other children in the community, practically speaking, it is not that simple and a childless woman's status is severely diminished.

One of the most painful markers of infertility is that an infertile woman 'does not have a child to send' (Oduyoye 1999:110). It is a widely understood cultural concept that underscores your place in the domestic cycle. Having a child to send, means that someone is dependant on you, you can ask services from this person and in the process enhance your status. The family will frantically try to find cures to ensure that all their members become parents, because it reflects badly on their wellness if they do not. That includes consulting traditional healers as Hester has done in her quest to become fertile. Mercy Oduyoye describes the unpleasant brew of herbs she was given to drink, and likens its taste to the 'bitterness that is expected to go with childlessness' (1999:111), bitterness that could be made

sweeter if there was more support, understanding and acceptance from the community.

In a study on the views of the black South African community on infertility (Mabasa 2000:62), this was found to be a severe stigma. The reported gender differences between male and female infertility were stigmas in themselves. The general belief was that it is more common in women than men, and, in fact, infertility should be seen as a woman's problem. The thinking in the African culture is that as long as a man is potent he is not sterile. The comparison is made between a woman taking in the seed that grows to a baby, and the fertile soil that germinates the seed of maize and develops root. Traditional healers would often confirm that the infertility problem lies with the woman in the infertile couple system, whether infertility tests had been carried out or not. In African patrilineal society, infertility is seen to be the women's fault and is thus not a problem of the couple (Mathekga 2001:37). This belief persists to some extent in most cultures, despite common sense and the fact that statistics indicate that 45 percent of all infertility is due to the male factor (Van Regenmorter & Van Regenmorter 2004:15). However, in matrilineal kinship structures, like that of the Macua people in Mozambique, the situation is reversed. There the men are regularly considered to be the cause of infertility, and the woman and her family often decide to divorce (Mabasa 2000:70).

A woman who cannot conceive is considered to cause 'loss' to her husband, since marriage means that the husband's family receives her productive and reproductive capacities. An infertile woman is thought to be deficient, and if she is returned to her family, the bridewealth (*lobola*) must be returned (Gijssels et al 2001:219). In the Ndebele and Shona societies marriage is structured according to the *lobola* system, literally meaning, 'child price', and this payment is supposed to ensure paternal immortality through a man's children, specifically sons (Mbuwayesango 1997:28). In the Ndebele system, *lobola* is paid only when the woman falls pregnant. In Shona society, a wife's status is significantly increased after bearing her first child by the practice of *kugadza mapfihwa*, when she is given her own cooking place. Prior to becoming a mother, she herself is regarded as a child who is told what to cook by her mother and mother-in-law.

Mabasa's (2000:70) study found that African men in patrilineal societies in South Africa were, as a matter of course, protected to such an extent that their infertility was kept secret. Instead, the guilt, blame and shame would be heaped on his wife or partner. Such a woman is usually laughed at and negatively labelled in the community. However, Mabasa feels that in 'protecting' the infertile men, their shame is actually worsened rather than lessened. Not being able to own up to their problem, or to speak about it, makes for a very lonely burden to carry. Some men even pretend that they do not want children. It is thought that an infertile man is not really a man and that if it is known that he cannot produce children, he will lose power over his wife, and his standing in society will be severely diminished. This is one of the reasons why his wife is willing to act as an accomplice in deflecting the blame away from him (Gijssels et al 2001:215).

One way of showing disrespect to an infertile woman (or an apparently infertile woman) is to address her by her first name until old age. Even if this is done without malice she is always reminded of her inadequate identity in the community. In some African traditions, if you have a child you are called by the name of that child (Mabasa 2000:68). Oduyoye (1999:113) explains that in the Akan culture of Ghana people are not simply called by their first names, for instance 'Mercy', but their names are always linked to those of other people, preferably their children. Instead of being called 'Mercy' she would be called (if she had a child with the name of Ade), 'Mama Ade'. Her husband would also forfeit his name, and be called 'Baba Ade' (father of Ade). Infertile women are also excluded from important social events and ceremonies. For instance, they are not permitted to take part in child-naming rituals, as names are chosen by women who are already mothers (Mbiti 1989:116). During a funeral procession to the cemetery a song is sung asking whether this person had children or not, which serves as a reminder that even in death the child issue cannot be avoided, no matter what else the person has achieved or stood for. Among the Asante group, burial rituals for childless persons are enacted in a way that attempts to ensure that they are not reincarnated. Furthermore, some do not name children after childless ancestors or call on the latter. As Oduyoye says, a childless person is in an inauspicious state, not to be encouraged and not to be celebrated (1999:113).

Like HIV/AIDS, the most hurtful aspect of infertility is the stigma associated with it, particularly in the African context. The silence surrounding it, and the subsequent misinterpretations that arise have much to do with deeply embedded cultural and religious understandings of what it means to be a sexual human being. As long as discriminatory language and powerful, exclusive metaphors are allowed to name, curse, blame and explain infertility, stigma will breed itself over and over again. Stigma, according to Goffman (1963:5), is 'an undesired differentness'. Such an individual possesses a trait that attracts attention, turning away those s/he meets despite any other positive attributes. Like the stigma surrounding the HIV/AIDS problem, that associated with childlessness did not arise in a social vacuum, and can only fully be understood in relation to power and domination, gender and social inequality (Ackermann 2006:228). Stigma not only pits male interests against female interests in the context of power, but often puts females in competition with each other to gain some of the residual power. It is a controlling instrument used by individuals and communities to retain the status quo of traditional views, despite the presence of other scientific, religious or social views. In the wake of the stigmatising process, the views of those afflicted by it, are scarcely heard. In fact, Goffman says, the 'normals' in society believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. The question of whether the stigma has been brought about by physical deformities, called the 'abominations of the body', or blemishes of character (addiction, imprisonment, unemployment) or the tribal stigma of race, nation and religion, does not matter. The 'normals' construct a stigma-theory. It amounts to an ideology used to explain the person's inferiority and to account for the danger the person represents. Specific stigma terms are used in daily discourse as a source of metaphor, and a wide range of additional imperfections are added on the basis of the original (Goffman 1963:5).

5.8 African feminist theology

Radford Ruether (2000:65) maintains that feminist theology serves as a remedial act to a theology distorted by patriarchy. It is an attempt to fashion a holistic theology whereby women will be regarded as full members of the human and Christian communities, and both men and women will be released from the ideas of sexist ideology and practice. Clearly theology's task should be the same for both genders, but because the Christian Church, for most of its two thousand-year

history, has kept women from the ordained ministry, the study of theology and the public roles of theologian and preacher, feminist theology has currently a very specific task and vocation to fulfil. If feminist theologians feel they speak from the margins, attempting to reconstruct and re-define male-dominated theological discourses, this applies in equal measure when it comes to African feminist theologians. As feminist theology in general has been discussed in Chapter 3, some of the aims and dreams of African feminist theology will be addressed in this chapter.

As a prominent African feminist theologian, Mercy Oduyoye of Ghana, is intimately involved in the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and EATWOT (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians), created in the 1970's as a networking forum for liberation theologians from Latin America, Africa and Asia. At that time the male liberation theologians at EATWOT demonstrated considerable resistance to feminist issues, arguing that feminism was a 'First World issue', a diversion from the 'class struggle' and alien to Third World cultures (Radford Ruether 2000:72). However, the feminists remained steadfast in their conviction that they needed to be heard as women expressing their experiences of oppression in the Church, unprompted in their self-articulation by powerful males in the Church hierarchy. As Third World theologians 'forming a sisterhood of resistance to all forms of oppression, but at the same time seeking creative partnership with the men of the association', they made it clear that neither First World women nor Third World men would be allowed to one-sidedly prescribe the meaning of feminism to them (Radford Ruether 2000:73). After the fall of Communism, the definition of 'Third World' was adapted to include theologians from Eastern Europe, the Middle East and the Pacific.

A number of distinctive issues reflect the similarities among Third World women, despite enormous differences in ecclesial, social, cultural and historical contexts. They received their Christianity mainly from Western European and North American missionaries, and have therefore been educated in those respective Catholic or Protestant cultures. Their ancestors became Christians by being diverted from their indigenous cultures and religions, by missionaries who negated their native beliefs as wicked and idolatrous. Issues of sexism and patriarchy

compound the similar problems of Third World women with socioeconomic and cultural colonialism, and its offshoots in the form of neocolonial dependency and exploitation. One of the biggest concerns is the suffering of women specific to their societies, in terms of exploitation and violence. Third World theologians question the ways in which male Christian theologians have appropriated certain aspects of indigenous culture into religion, and in the process have overlooked and justified the oppressive aspects of these cultures in terms of women's dignity and self-worth. Third World women theologians therefore choose to explore both their traditional, indigenous heritage and liberating Biblical traditions in search of positive, usable messages and descriptions for women's emancipation in their societies (Radford Ruether 2000:77).

Early Christian missionaries largely perceived Africa as a godless and irreligious continent, but the truth is that Africans are deeply religious and culturally creative (Hinga 1995:115). The Western world's polarisation of the spiritual and physical worlds collided with the African worldview of an intimate relationship between the two. The fact that Christianity overemphasised the physical causes of disease undermined the validity of the African cultural and cosmological outlooks. Christianity demanded that Africa abandon her traditional 'Africanness' (Hinga 1995:117), which led to an uneasy relationship between the two. Hinga writes about how some independent churches in Africa found ways of making Christianity their own. By blending the Christian message into their cultural and socio-political context they employ their own symbolism, cosmology and worldview to discover and praise the just and liberating God who was 'misrepresented and misused' by the interpretations of Western missionaries and imperialists (1995:123). Far from being an aberration of Christianity, a theology of correction serves to critique the Christian Church in Africa as a religion fostering oppression and subjugation of some people by others (Hinga 1995:123). There is a need to explore and correct both western, so-called 'superior species' oppression, and male sexist-related 'superior' oppression.

As a South African feminist theologian, Denise Ackermann, is adamant that a hermeneutic of healing must be at the heart of a feminist theology of praxis (1998:80). Meaningful healing resists the attempt to address merely the individual

pursuit of personal healing, but rather recognises the interlocking of social, political and religious forces and the challenge to bring healing on the multiple levels of people's lives.

The cry for healing is especially urgent when it comes to the needs of women and children in the African context. Ackermann (1998:84) argues that a feminist theology of healing praxis should start by admitting that the despairing quality of human suffering stands directly in relation to the resilient longing for human wholeness. Secondly, if stigma has the potential to breed silence, such a meaningful healing praxis must generate stories of hushed women living in various contexts. Furthermore, women from different cultures, religious traditions and social locations must take hands in a collaborative effort to listen to and support each other. Such an effort should create a platform from which questions of difference between and accountability to each other can be aired and translated into action. Fourthly, she sees a feminist theology of praxis as embodied practical theology, meaning that 'all perceived reality and all knowledge is mediated through our bodies' (Ackermann 1998:87). Our sense of self is, to a great extent, linked to our physical selves, which in turn determines our views of the social, physical and religious planes of our existence. The power to both love and harm begins in our bodies. Amazingly, others' narratives of hurt can evoke bodily pain in ourselves with such force that we are willing to use our bodies in becoming transformative agents of healing and justice along side those who are suffering. Acts of ethically imaginative praxis, for instance poetry, art, drama, ritual, ceremony and song, can bring creative and effective healing. They are daring ways to articulate, listen and respond to injury and disappointment. This hopefully and inventively dares wholeness and healing to come forth. With the aid of human agency in a shared commitment, hope and healing become more than a dare, and turn into the 'living out of hope'. Finally, Ackermann cautions that a feminist theology of praxis requires stamina because of the enormity of the task. The search for healing involves a certain kind of vulnerability, as honest self-reflection, and the courage to oppose unfairness and short sightedness are required (Ackermann 1998:89).

Fulata Moyo (2006:244), Malawian theologian, echoes the call for healing. She proposes a narrative theology of eschatological hope as healing in the context of



her painful story of loss as a wife who nursed her sick husband, and then, as a widow, tried to make sense of the multiple meanings of health. In her search for healing she became convinced that it is in sharing our stories from the heart that the journey towards healing can start: the act of telling is in itself therapeutic. Telling invites other's to add their voices and perspectives in a chorus that enriches all and contributes to creative theologies of life and wholeness, even in the face of loss and death. She comes to the conclusion that her husbands' death, despite fervent prayers demonstrating faith and trust, cannot be interpreted as God's betrayal of her and those who believed that He would grant physical healing. Additionally, she refuses to feel guilty about her husband's death, as if she had lacked sufficient faith in her pleas to God to spare his life. Instead, she comes to the conclusion that she ought to extend her concept of healing to include the possibility that God actually brought healing and wellness to her loved one by using illness to bring him into His eternal presence. This does not ever mean that death should be excused or welcomed. Rather, death should be opposed by life's powers of transformation. But there is hope in death, she realises. She describes 'eschatological hope as a midwife of new beginnings': hope encourages the search for new meanings within the complexities of life, including death (Moyo 2006:250). God as divine midwife enables birth to a vision of hope in us, and carries us on her back in the realisation of that hope.

If African theology is about reflecting what Christians in Africa understand God to be about, then women's theology ensures the inclusion of women's expression of faith in response to experiences. The main thrust of women's theology is to make a concerted effort to open the door for the voices of 'men and women, lay and ordained, teachers and preachers, poets and sculptors'. Secondly, this theology takes life as a whole into consideration: everything that makes for fullness of life and well-being, the possession of powers, attributes, and abilities that lead to a celebration of life (Oduyoye 2001:34). This particular theology also acknowledges that Africans live in a spiritual universe where religion and culture are mutually dependent (2001:23). African women's theology is constructed from its own context and reflects its own priorities and perspectives.

Biblical interpretation takes into account cultural hermeneutics, enabling women to look at the Bible through an African lens and reject interpretations that are harmful to women, the vulnerable and the voiceless (Oduyoye 2001:12). Cultural hermeneutics demands a delicate act: it implies the ability to critique traditional cultural practices, rather than blindly accepting tradition, norms and rituals as unchangeable. At the same time cultural elements that are 'life-affirming' and in tune with the gospel of fullness of life, like harmony and integrity, can be retained and developed.

Mary Getui (2001:184) adds her concern about the way in which many theologians hermeneutically (mis)use the Bible in a literalist approach, thereby ignoring adjustment and application for the African context. The remedy for such an imbalance would be to use the Bible with consistent critical and contextual discernment regarding the African situation. She argues for a vibrant and honest dialogue between African cultures and religions on the one hand and the Bible on the other. African women's theology bears the marks of poverty, exploitation, violence, colonisation and racism, all of which elicit a hermeneutic of liberation. The stories circulating in the women's theology are from the Bible, Africa's history and culture, and personal experiences, weaving theology, ethics and spirituality in a potent mix to reach a place where commitment, advocacy and transforming praxis is the logical progression (Getui 2001:16). It makes it personal and contextual, and therefore, powerful.

The 'Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians' (also known as the Circle), was initiated in 1989 by Mercy Oduyoye to encourage gender sensitive research and writing by women on African religions and culture. It also created a supportive space for African feminist theologians to develop creative practical theologies that grew out of their specific experiences and needs. Oduyoye, guilty of the ultimate failure of childlessness, raised her voice as an African theologian in the Circle to propose a theology of procreation that responds to the challenge and disgrace of barrenness. She laments the fact that Christianity apparently lacks stories from which the childless can draw strength (Oduyoye 1999:115). Or are these stories purposely ignored and undeveloped because the Church fails to appreciate the diverse ways in which men and women can live fruitful lives despite childlessness?

She answers: 'It is for the church to acknowledge and raises up the diversity of God's gifts and to celebrate all the ways of bringing forth life' (Oduyoye 1999:119). Such a theology and eschatology of procreation speaks to both those who reproduce themselves biologically and those who do not. Such a theology is gracious and mature enough to embrace different forms of fruitfulness, biological and beyond. It is a theology that teaches the church and traditional culture to understand and respect the unique 'state of life' of the childless that refuses to further blame and shame the infertile into a context of death.

Daisy Nwachuku (1994:81) concurs, emphasising the thought that in African traditional religion the seed of truth must be planted, that Jesus Christ can give healing to an infertile couple, without necessarily removing their barrenness. The strong belief in African religion, which supports the idea that God must be appeased and that he rewards the evil with punishment and curses (such as infertility), stands in the way of accepting God's healing, whether in body, soul or mind in less than perfect life circumstances. She points out that the Christian God (unseen and untouchable) contrasts sharply with the reality of symbols of ancestral gods where the infertile woman actually handles the objects of sacrifice as a point of contact. Healing services for infertile couples should therefore involve such symbols and rituals as the laying on of hands, anointing with oil, and bread and wine in using Holy Communion (Nwachuku 1994:82). The meaning of the water of baptism should be stressed: God cleanses us from sin, and invites us into the family of believers.

Oduyoye explains how her liberation, from the label of useless, shameful woman, which she received from her church and the African community, took place while she was visiting the island of Crete. She (once again) prayed to God, as Hannah did in the temple, to allow her to 'join in the command to increase and multiply', when He dealt with her directly: and 'God was saying a clear no to my offer' (Oduyoye 1999:118). But it was not the kind of refusal that indicated she was not worthy of becoming a mother. Her acceptance of God's answer through His grace, allowed her to feel free and fertile, sure that something precious would be born of this experience. She laid her life on the altar before God to consume what was not necessary for her journey, she says. Then she arose like Hannah, and, although

her promise did not include a child, she was nonetheless ‘pregnant with the expectation of great things to come to me from God’ (1999:118). She realised that children are God’s gift to creatures who need to survive through procreation. However, in Mercy’s life the creative command spells out to (1999:118):

Increase in humanity.
Multiply the likeness to God for which you have the potential.
Multiply the fullness of humanity that is found in Christ.
Fill the earth with the glory of God.
Increase in creativity.
Bring into being that which God can look upon and pronounce ‘good’,
even ‘very good’.

5.9 Hester imagining Hannah in the temple

Hester habitually looks for care and sanctuary amongst her Church community. She attends services three times a week and feels that the congregation as a whole is more understanding and supportive than those outside her religious circle. The pastor sometimes meets with those women of his flock who have reproductive difficulties, and together they pray and seek solace from God. Hester often used to pray in Church and beg God to grant her at least one child. Like Hannah in the temple, she speaks from her own painful experience of loss and despair. Hannah, who lived in the first Temple era, was the wife of Elkana, a Levite of the Kohathite branch of the priesthood (Lockyer 1986:458). She was heartbroken, ridiculed by Elkana’s second wife, Peninnah, who bore him several children. Although Hannah was childless, Elkana loved her and spoiled her with a double portion of sacrificial meat on the days of sacrifice. He was distressed by her grief and wanted to know whether he, as her husband, was perhaps worth more than ten sons. Provoked by Peninnah’s taunts she wept and refused to eat. In the familiar temple scene, Hannah (meaning, the gracious one), rose and prayed silently before the Lord, with only her lips moving. She vowed that if she were to give birth to a son, she would dedicate him to the Lord’s service. Lacking insight, Eli accused her of making a drunken spectacle of herself. But Hannah assured him that because of her great complaint and bitter provocation, she was pouring out her soul before the Lord. ‘I am a woman of sorrowful spirit’ (1 Samuel 1:15), she said. When God granted her prayer she was faithful to her word and sacrificed Samuel, after he

had been weaned, to the temple 'to remain there as long as he lives' (1 Samuel 1:21).

Leila Berner (2000:37) describes Hannah's prayer, as the first instance in the Jewish tradition of 'personal prayer'. Speaking in a direct and intimate way with God, Eli found this form of religious devotion so unusual that he mistook her pleading for intoxication. Berner points out that communication with God, is motivated by different social contexts, and the scope for religious expression should be broadened. In the light of women's very specific needs in the religious tradition, Berner, a Jewish feminist, argues that Jewish tradition, should rise to the challenge that feminism lays at its door. She proposes that adequate space within the tradition must be carved out to acknowledge and accommodate a uniquely female experience of the Divine. She further recommends that different forms and formats must be created and knitted into Jewish tradition in order to accommodate various modes of spiritual expression. The 'normative' tradition should be evaluated and reflected upon. Its language should be flexible enough to be redefined and reconstituted to become relevant to both male and female perceptions of reality, and both male and female experiences of spirituality and religious life (Berner 2000:42).

At the time when Hannah lived, men and women still worshipped together in the Temple, before the Talmudic era (4th to 6th centuries CE) when segregation was the norm. She set an example by speaking with God in her own way. She expressed herself to God by pouring out her heart and defended herself boldly against Eli. In her beautiful, thanksgiving psalm for her son Hannah declares: 'My heart exalts...my mouth is no longer silent, for it is opened widely before my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation' (1 Samuel 2:1). Instead of a great chorus of Jewish Hannahs imitating one of their spiritual mothers during the ensuing centuries, a silence has descended. Incredibly, speaking from the 21st century, Judith Plaskow advises that Jewish women and men need to listen to the great silence around women's voices in order to bring healing to the Jewish tradition. 'Hear the silence', she says. She predicts that, in confronting this silence, disturbing questions will come to the fore that might be the thrust for far-reaching change. 'What in the tradition is ours? What can we claim that has not also

wounded us? What would have been different had the great silence been filled (in Berner 2000:43)? These questions resonate with the aims and dreams of African feminist theologians.

5.10 Hester as the Other

'Hester as the Other, different, shunned to the periphery, existing on the margins of power'. That, of Hester's many identities, is prominent in the context of her story as the mother of an adopted daughter. She is the Other amongst those who have the ability to procreate. Especially within the African tradition, she is reminded of her incapacity by the unfair naming of her humanness in terms of a devalued identity. She is the Other also in terms of her own bodily self. In Serene Jones's words, 'the self is figured as having thwarted agency - thwarted capacity for self-creation. While the self may still possess the body, the body refuses to yield what the self desires' (2001:237). Her body denies her its natural inclination to bring forth new life; it declines to answer her call for motherhood and is experienced as a place where death dwells. She desperately wants to leave the barren desert behind, but, alas, she lives in the desert; she is the desert. In addition, she experiences herself as the Other who fell out of favour in the religious circle of God's presence, believing her unanswered prayers for 'only one child' proved Divine disregard.

In the context of researcher and co-researcher I also experience Hester as the Other. In nearly every respect, it seems that I stand in a powerful, privileged place in relation to her, as one of the members of the reflecting team remarked. I stopped myself in time from prescribing to Hester how to redefine her maternal self, her spiritual image, her identity as full human being. Hannah inspired both Hester and Mercy Oduyoye to pray and to seek understanding for their infertility in the Temple. Mercy chose a life-giving theology, which empowered her to become a Mother, Ma and Auntie to a worldwide brood, and at the same time to choose to 'come home to myself as a woman without biological progeny' (Oduyoye 1999:106).

I was tempted to recommend to Hester that she become another Mercy in her thinking and actions. In the process I would have reduced her experiences yet again and denied her power to construct her story in the way she prefers.

This chapter has emphasised secondary infertility and mutual embracement within the context of a traditional African worldview, and African feminist theology. The next chapter will introduce the narrative of Helga and James in terms of experiencing miscarriage and choosing childlessness.