

# עָקַר

## Introduction

Grammatical Type: adjective.

Occurrences: Total 12x OT, 0x Sir, 2x Qum (4Q179 2.7; 4Q509 283.1), 0x inscr.

Text doubtful: none.

Qere/Ketiv: none.

עקרה is the only word preserved on the fragment 4Q509 283.1.

## 1. Root and Comparative Material

**A.1** עקר appears in RH (Jastrow 1108ab) similar to its usage in BH. עָקַר is used for an impotent male (Bekh 44b) and עֲקָרוֹת for women without children (GnRab 39). RH also attests a vb עקר “to make infertile” (GnRab 45), nithp “to be made barren”, pass part עָקוּר (describing Isaac as impotent in bYeb 64a).

**A.2** Samaritan Hebrew has adj m *āqār* “impotent” and f *āqrā* “infertile” (HAL 828a).

**A.3** JArm (Jastrow 1108b-9a; Levy 1963:687a-688a, 689a-b; Sokoloff 416-17) attests vb עקר “to make infertile”, being used for both genders, n f עקרה “infertility”, n f עקרו “infertility”, adj m עקר “impotent man” and f עקרה “infertile woman” (GnRab 472.4 ערירי). עקון describes barren sheep (GnRab 853.6).

**A.4** Syr (Payne Smith 425-26; Brocklemann 543b-44a) has the root *qr*. vb Pe “be infertile”, Aph “make infertile”, n f *aqrutā* “infertility”, adj m *aqrā* “impotent”, adj f *qrutā* “infertile”.

**A.5** Arb (Lane 1956:I.2109a-c, 2110b-c) has several words from the root *qr* “barren, infertile”: vb *aqara* “to be infertile, sterile,” n *aqāra* “barrenness”, n *uqrat* “infertility”, adj *āqir* “infertile woman”, and adj *uqaratu* “childless man”.

**A.6** Mand (Drower and Macuch 1963:33-34) has m *aqra* and f *aqarta* “infertile, impotent”.

**B.1** P. Schwally (1898:141-42) proposed that the basic meaning of עקר in Arb is “Grund, Grundstück, *fundus*”. Meanings that developed include “destroy utterly, uproot, hamstring, be infertile”. Syr עקר also has both meanings, “root”, i.e., the base of a plant and “descendant”. BH has עֶקֶר (BDB 785b) “descendant” (Lv 25.47) cognate of JArm עֶקֶר “offshoot of a root” (Dn 4.12,20,23) and “descendant” (frequently occurring in the Sefire inscriptions; Fitzmyer 21995:64), of Syr *ʿeqqārā* “root, stock, origin” (Payne Smith 426a), and of Socr *eqru* (HAL 828a) “root, descendant”. The gap between “land” and “uproot, hamstring” is too vast for accepting Schwally’s reconstruction. The two meanings of עקר, “infertile” and “descendant”, are better taken as homonyms.

## 2. Formal Characteristics

The forms are *qatal* (m) and *qatalā* (f). The f sg cstr עֶקֶרַת הַבַּיִת occurs in the phrase “the barren woman of the house”, i.e., the head wife who is childless (Ps 113.9; cf. BL 508k).

## 3. Syntagmatics

**A.1** This lexeme is primarily descriptive of human females; 11 of the 12 occurrences of עקר are for women. Only once does it describe a man (Dt 7.14); in that text both the f and m adjs are used elliptically to describe domesticated animals.

**A.2** As a substantive עקרה functions as subj of the vb ילד “to bear” (1Sm 2.5) and as a vocative after an impv (Is 54.1).

**A.3** In Jb 24.21 עקרה is the obj of the vb רעה, which is variously understood: רעה “to graze, strip”, i.e., either “to plunder” or “to have intercourse with”, רעה “to crush” (a by-form of רעע; Gordis 1978:270), or emended to הִסְרַע “to abuse” based on LXX and Tg (Dhorme 1984:390).

## 4. Versions

a. LXX: στειῖρος 11x; ἄγονος 1x (for עקר in Dt 7.14).

b. Peshitta: *ʿqrātā*, *ʿaqrā* (Ex 23.26; Dt 7.14; Jdg 13.2; Is 54.1); *ʿqar* (Dt 7.14).

c. Targum: עקרא TgO, TgPsJ, TgJ; עקרה TgNeo; in Dt 7.14 עקר and עקרא and TgPsJ גוברין עקריין ונשיין עקרון.

d. Vulgate: *sterilis* (11x; the two occurrences of this root in Dt 7:14 are rendered a single time).

A.1 In Jdg 13.2 Vg reads *habens uxorem sterilem*, thus condensing MT עקרה ולא ילדה ואשתו

## 5. Lexical/Semantic Field(s)

A.1 עקרה occurs in a list of two kinds of women: מְשַׁבֵּלָה “one who miscarries” and one who is infertile (Ex 23.26).

A.2 עקרה is parallel to אֶלְמָנָה “widow” (Jb 24.21) and שׁוֹמְמָה “one who is desolate” (Is 54.1). These two parallel terms refer to women who have lost their husbands, probably by death and separation respectively; such women obviously have less hope of having children than an infertile wife.

A.3 A sentence that underscores the force of עקרה follows this adj in several references: לא ילדה “she has not given birth” (Jdg 13.2,3 [יְלִדָּתָ]; Is 54.1), לא תלד “she can not bear” (Jb 24.21), and אין לה ולד “she has no child” (Gn 11.30).

A.4 In 1Sm 2.5 the pu’lal vb אמל “languish, be forlorn” expresses the emotions of one who is עקרה.

A.5 Antonyms of עקרה are אם בָּנִים “mother of [many] children” (Ps 113.9) and רַבַּת בָּנִים “[mother of] many children” (1Sm 2.5).

A.6 Several vbs occurring in the vicinity of עקרה express actions that are impossible for an infertile woman: הרה “conceive” (Gn 25.21; Jdg 13.3), פתח רחם “to open a womb” (Gn 29.31), ילד “to give birth” (Jdg 13.3; 1Sm 2.5), and חיל “to be in labour” (Is 54.1).

**A.7** Several terms in the context of עקרה express emotions opposite to those felt by one suffering from infertility: שמח “joyful” (Ps 113.9), רנן “to sing gleefully” (Is 54.1), פָּצַח רִנָּה “to break out into gleeful song” (Is 54.1), and צהל “to shout loudly” (Is 54.1).

**A.8** Although this adj is primarily used for humans, the m and f adj describe domesticated animals (בְּהֵמָה) elliptically in Dt 7.14.

**A.9** In 4Q179 2, where the decimated city (Jerusalem) is lamented under a variety of images of grieving women, עקרה occurs in a series of synonyms: עזובה and [אישה] “a woman forsaken by her husband”, אשה ער[י]ריה “a childless woman”, עצובה “a grieved woman”, מסככה “a woman shut up”, אשת מרורים “an embittered woman”, אבלות “women in mourning”, and משכלות “bereaved women”.

**A.10** The lack of a son to carry on a family’s heritage is also expressed by the phrase לוֹ בֶן “he has no son” (Nu 27.4; לוֹ בֶן אֵין לוֹ Nu 27.8; Dt 25.5) or בֶן אֵין לָהּ “she has no son” (2 Kgs 4.14).

**B.1** Caspi (1980:365-66) posits that עקרה stands for a woman who has endured many miscarriages, but the usages of מְשַׁבֵּלָה “one who miscarries”, being much wider than those of עקרה (Ex 23.26), argue against this position.

## 6. Exegesis

**A.1** This adj primarily describes a mature, married woman, who has not born any children. It does not necessarily mean that such a woman believed that she was incapable of ever having children (cf. Sarna 1989:87). In Dt 7.14 עקר is descriptive of a man, giving evidence that there was some recognition of male sterility in ancient Israel. Saydon (1955:39), however, argues that the only reason that עקר occurs in this text--since עקרה in BH is the term for female, not male, infertility--is for assonance. In contrast to עקרה, the vb שכל, “be bereaved, made childless”, though primarily used for females, includes males (e.g., Gn 42.36), animals (Gn 31.38), and even plants (MI 3.11).

**A.2** A sentence, לֹא יָלְדָה “she has not given birth” (Jdg 13.2, 3 [לֹא יָלְדָתָּ], Is 54.1, Jb 24.21 [לֹא תֵלֵד] or “she has no child” אֵין לָהּ וְלֹד (Gn 11.30), sometimes follows עקרה. Westermann (1985:319) holds that the sentence is for emphasis, not for defining the preceding term. The addition of this statement shows that “sterile” as describing absolute inability of having children is too strong for rendering עקר.

**A.3** The clause “[God] who provides a dwelling for an infertile wife” in Ps 113.9 indicates that an infertile wife lived in fear of being expelled from the household because she had not given her husband an heir. God makes such a head wife secure in the household by opening her womb (Allen 1983:99). As Pedersen says, “Motherhood is the patent of nobility of a woman; through it she acquires her place in life and a share in the family” (1964:1-2.71).

**A.4** In 2 Kgs 4.9-17 Elisha sought to honour the Shunammite woman, who had provided his servant Gehazi and himself a room. Since her husband was old and she had no son (אֵין לָהּ בֵן), Elisha promised her that she would soon bear a son. This passage stands out in two regards. First, the concern expressed is about the woman’s, rather than the man’s, lack of a son. Second, it is the prophet rather than the woman herself who was motivated to address her lack of a son.

**A.5** In Is 54.1 עקרה is applied metaphorically to describe Israel’s lack of increase during the exile.

**A.6** In the patriarchal era a wife who was infertile could provide her husband a handmaid to serve as a surrogate for bearing a child for her husband (Gn 16.1-4; 30.3). Van Seters (1968:406-7) cites a marriage contract from Calah (Neo-Assyrian 648 BCE), which relates a similar custom. That contract contains the stipulation that if the wife fails to bear her husband a son, he is to take a handmaid. The children from this union become the wife’s, and the wife is forbidden to mistreat the handmaid. The former provision was the case in Rachel’s and Leah’s having children by a handmaid (Gn 30.3-13); the latter provision contrasts markedly with Sarah’s treatment of Hagar (Gn 16; 21.8-14).

**A.7** The law of levirate marriage was designed to preserve the heritage of a man who died without a son. In such a case, a brother or other close relative of the deceased took his widow as a wife in order that she might bear a son to carry on the name of her deceased husband (Dt 25.5-10).

**B.1** For Ex 23.26 Durham (1987:315) postulates that a woman who miscarried had more frustrating sorrow than an infertile woman; however, there are no indications in the text to support this view.

## 7. Conclusion

**A.1** In Hebraic scripture עקרה is primarily used for female infertility. The emphasis lies on a woman's inability to conceive as suggested by the fact that מְשַׁבֵּלָה "one who miscarries" precedes עקרה in a categorization of women without children (Ex 23.26) and by the frequently appended phrase describing the woman as not having born a child (cf. 5.A.3). In BH עקר is used once for male infertility; and in that same text עקר and עקרה are used elliptically for domesticated animals. RH, JArm, Syr and Arb employ the root עקר for both genders, and they have a verbal form "to be or become barren". Lack of children caused a couple great distress. Nevertheless, they still had hope that God might intervene to enable the woman to conceive (Gn 25.21; Ps 113.9).

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