

Book review: The several themes of the Hannah's Children: The Women Quietly defying the Birth Dearth

The driving observation is that there is a birth dearth throughout the developed and even the developing world. Number of births has fallen below replacement level. But the authors, having large families themselves and coming from large families, wanted to look at the situation from the other side. They asked the question, what is it that leads women to have large families? Why do they have large families, and how do they manage life with such obligations. That's the substance of this book.

The biblical Hannah had been barren. She prayed to Jehovah to give her a child, promising that she would dedicate that child to Him. She bore Samuel, whom she gave to serve as a servant in the temple. God, in thanks for her faith, then gave her five more children.

The authors interviewed 55 women with families numbering from 5 to 15 children. They look for common threads and differences.

The women that they interviewed were black, white, Jewish, Asian and Hispanic... all across the spectrum. They were from all walks of life. However, they were disproportionately professionals and disproportionately from families of academics. This is particularly atypical in that the universities are the most secular of institutions in American society, and university professors, especially women, have remarkably low fertility. The authors are Catholic and Mormon(?), well versed in Jewish tradition as well. Many of their best quotes come from Jewish mothers.

This illustrates women's fundamental conflict. Most women interviewed did not have the energy or the talent to have everything. For these women, choosing one thing meant forgoing other priorities. Having a family means giving up a career, and vice versa. The book is full of the stories of women who were torn between them. In every case reported here, obviously, family won, or some accommodation was made so that the woman could pursue both her career and her family. This is more easily said than done. There were sacrifices in every case.

Economists, per these authors, get it wrong to think that the trade-off is mostly financial. They focus on the financial sacrifices that a woman makes. You wind up driving a cheaper, older and bigger car. Your house must likewise be bigger and perhaps farther from the city.

The authors report that the motives are mostly not financial. More than anything, it is a trade-off among lifestyle choices. A woman who devotes herself to a large family does not have time for as many leisure activities as her less encumbered friends. She does not have time to attend conferences. She does not have time to read and publish books to the same extent. She cannot maintain the same circle of friends. Devoting yourself to family means forgoing old friendships because there simply isn't time. The new friendships that develop will be family focused. People from the neighborhood, and strikingly frequently, people of a similar religious background.

The interviewees found it difficult to explain to friends that being that being a mother, raising a family was justification enough for a full life. They were put off, estranged by questions such as “Aren't you going to accomplish anything? What about your medical training? What about your law degree?”

This reviewer finds their own words stronger than any interpretation. Here they are. Quoted paragraphs are indented – offset with purple in Substack.

The authors write about two demographic transitions. The first, brought about by improved public health and medicine, was the trend to fewer births in light of decreased infant mortality.

The second demographic transition is characterized by cohabitation, divorce, and lower lifetime fertility associated with expressive individualism and self-regarding lifestyles in the West.

There is a strong political element. The authors write that in the 21st century “family behavior and composition becomes an excellent predictor of a state’s position on the Republican-Democrat continuum”

Financial incentives don’t seem to work long term. The authors write

In 2009, Hungary’s right-wing leader Viktor Orbán launched the most aggressive pro-natalist policies in modern history, including massive cash subsidies, income tax forgiveness, and even travel and housing benefits at certain birth parities. Hungarian fertility rates have risen from 1.2 to 1.6 in the decade since the program started. But this apparent gain is also likely a mirage of retiming.

...labor economists Betsy Stevenson and Justin Wolfers documented that subjective measures of women’s happiness have been declining since 1970, both absolutely, and also relative to men. This decline in relative well-being is found across various datasets, measures of subjective well-being, demographic groups, and industrialized countries.

With regard to happiness, the authors conclude that “children directly contribute to happiness for women but only indirectly for men through increasing the probability of a current partnership.”

This reviewer recalls other studies that found that children did not increase women’s happiness. No doubt happiness with children is related to the stability of the marriage.

The authors devote a lot of attention to the birth control pill. Here is one quote from an interviewee: “I’ve heard, it’s probably easier for me than for women who have been on [the Pill] because my body is doing what it’s supposed to be doing.”

The authors themselves go on:

Underactive sexual desire, a common problem reported by women using hormonal contraception, seems to be one of the reasons that women are trending away from the Pill, looking for more natural approaches.

And later in the book:

After its approval in 1960, almost half of married women under age thirty were using the Pill. The Pill enabled American women to pursue college degrees and professions without postponing marriage. The Pill also led to a decrease in marital fertility for two reasons: crowding out time, since women’s early adult years were increasingly spent on education and work, postponing childbearing; and increasing the opportunity costs of having kids — greater professional opportunity means higher incomes, status, and work satisfaction foregone in order to have a child.

Large family mothers recognize that kids are different and need to find their own way. The authors report no “helicopter parenting.” Parents are content to let kids find their own way. A few quotes:

I could care less if my kids are happy. That’s their job. You figure that out. Like you need to find out what makes you happy and you got to go out and find that. I’m happy to give you whatever tools you need. I’m happy to give you whatever instruction to help you out. But that’s, that’s on you.

One more thing that’s needed for children to be happy is to understand the concept of authority because nowadays children are taught that you have answers within yourself and to follow your own heart. And that doesn’t lead to happiness because feelings in your own heart are so changing and each person doesn’t have the wisdom to know the future, to know their own needs in the long run and what’s good for them.

So, then you end up with, if everybody only has one or two [children], the whole generation is used to being spoiled and having their own needs and interests being the center of their world.

One interviewee tells it like it is:

We talk about building community and it’s bullshit. Like that just doesn’t exist. And so that’s, you know, everyone’s out there on their own.

A parent gets little support from the community. There are baby-sitting cooperatives and such, but parents are pretty much on their own.

Surprisingly, the words “nanny,” “au pair” and “child care” do not appear in the book. “Grandmother” appears once, not in the context of helping out. With the exception of one husband who wound up through a long chain of circumstance being the one who stayed home, these mothers do it themselves.

This reviewer, father of three in the USA, three in Ukraine, notes that “Latin Ladies” were an essential part of Washington D.C. households, as are grandmothers in Ukraine. Grandmothers are the better bet. They know their culture and have a vested interest in carrying it on.

It is a rare moment in human history when other members of the community are so disinterested in society’s most essential function, perpetuating itself. But that’s the world these mothers are struggling against. Most of all, they need to find and support one another. Only a few of those interviewed said they were acquainted with similar families.

We are in these little individual boxes and it’s completely unnatural to be alone with a newborn for twelve hours a day. It’s psychologically torturous to not have the support. And I would say the vast majority of women that give birth in America don’t have adequate support, physically, emotionally, psychologically, and medically. No one’s coming for you. You’re literally alone. And it’s not normal, it’s not healthy. It’s not — that is not what we’re programmed for, psychologically. The human is not prepared for that. Nobody can be.

Two quotes on the topic of tradeoffs.

Each of these women had also talked about the loss side of the scale. Like Lauren, they mentioned the same types of costs and foregone goods: compromises at work, physical and emotional difficulties, being misunderstood by friends or family, financial strains. But like Lauren, they ranked the value of another child ahead of the value of what they were missing out on. The extraordinary value that my subjects placed on another child led them to push beyond comfort to obtain a pearl of great price.

Women with many children make choices about their families in a manner totally consistent with other human action. They simply have a scale of values tipped in favor of childbearing. What is arresting is that there is nothing mysterious, or set apart, about the role of religious motives. They are powerful incentives for human action. That’s not irrational. It’s about as rational as anything can be. But love is also a powerful motive. As is a conviction that a child will be a joy.

On the role of the state:

It is easier for policymakers to discourage fertility than to encourage it. The real resources to have a child never can come from the state.

The modern concept of marriage appears to focus on joy, happiness, pleasure. These mothers see something deeper:

We still have those times when we feel romantic but it's just not all that marriage is about, because marriage is not really supposed to be all about us and how we feel.

People think of [marriage] as a way to feel happy and fulfilled and valued by somebody. And all that is included in a biblical marriage, but your feelings aren't always focused on [yourself].

Aristotle said that "our character traits, whether good or bad, come from like actions." And character is constituted by our habitual actions — what we do repeatedly. "What we must learn to do, we must do to learn," Aristotle also said, pithily.

And nothing shapes our doings more than the domestic society: the first society we inhabit as children, and the family form to which we give ourselves as adults. The habits we learn in those circumstances in turn animate the political order and provide its character. Individualism and destructive forms of liberalism are personal habits before they are ideologies. In sum: it's not our political order that erodes our virtue, but our lack of virtue that warps the political order. As Aristotle put it, "The sources and springs of political rule come from the family."

The final paragraphs of the book are plea for religious faith:

Nations that crowd out the sacred functions of the Church will continue to reap a sterile harvest of disappointment.

Religious freedom as family policy would mean the government's taking a step back from providing human services directly, starting with education, and asking churches to become stronger by doing more. Our religious institutions are too weak. And they will remain weak, unable to inspire the heroic sacrifices we need, so long as states and nations do their work. The birth rate will not increase until more women give themselves over to the shift that Leah described, where "motherhood" becomes a "big tenet of who you are." Angela said, "[Children] need their mothers." The nation also needs its mothers. Policymakers and the social scientists who assist them should stop ignoring the role of the spirit and start inquiring where Hannah is. She is in the temple of the Lord of Hosts, where she has found in children and the service of God what she was seeking—the meaning of her everything. For the sake of Hannah's children, who are the future of the nation—set the temple free.

This reviewer's conclusion concurs with that of Edward Dutton, writing in "Woke Eugenics," that evolution will out. People who do not feel like having children, and those who are indifferent to raising children to have their own children, will simply die out. On the other hand, those who value children above all else, enough to put up with the hardships of bearing and raising children in this age, are the seed that will repopulate the earth.

The authors write briefly about the financial impact of the birth dearth. Entitlement programs such as Social Security and Medicare are underfunded already. Without more workers to contribute they will simply collapse. Private pensions are unsustainable. Those without children to support them may wind up destitute. Schools and universities will collapse as the number of students falls. The debt bubble will metastasize into hyperinflation as tax revenues decline and entitlement expenses escalate.

This reviewer notes that, on the bright side, today's concerns about a lack of arable land, housing and other resources will be moot. Fewer people means less demand. A paucity of skilled workers augments well for salaries. These women's babies will be in demand as they grow up.

In conclusion, this book is essential reading because it offers a unique, trenchant take on one of the dominant trends in today's society.