

Surrogate Motherhood

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“Surrogate” motherhood dates back at least as far as Genesis, that is to say, to the earliest generations of recognizably human families. There Abraham’s long-barren wife, Sarah, sends her husband to “lie with” the slave girl Hagar, in the hopes that through her she can “found a family.” Jacob’s wife, Rachel, makes a similar arrangement with her slave girl, Billah, “so that she may bear sons to be laid upon my knees.” Despite the intense and bitter controversy surrounding contemporary cases of surrogate parenting, there is nothing particularly novel about the practice of one woman bearing a child for another.

But in the late twentieth century two dimensions to this practice *are* new. First, medical advances now allow for cases of what has been called “high tech” or “full-fledged” surrogacy, in which the surrogate is implanted with both sperm and egg drawn from an infertile couple; the genetic material for the fetus is contributed entirely by the receiving couple, with the surrogate “loaning” her womb to carry the fetus to birth. Second, recent years have seen the advent of commercial or contract surrogacy, childbearing for a fee. Contract surrogacy emerged in the mid 1970s; by the end of 1986 some 500 children had been born of such arrangements. The most famous, of course, is *Baby M*, the object of the landmark custody case that ensued when surrogate mother Mary Beth Whitehead refused to relinquish the child she had conceived and carried to term in a surrogacy contract for William Stern. *Baby M*’s custody battle riveted public attention for months,