

THE WOMAN: A BIBLICAL THEME

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It is common experience to read a passage and realise that an allusion has more meaning to the writer and his immediate readers than the mere lexical content might suggest. One is left to ponder the prehistory of a term, a phrase, an axiom. Words gather—and lose—meaning through use, and it is the same with a literary image. What would a term like “woman” mean to a first century Christian? In certain contexts, what associations would the word arouse in him, or would the writer intend to arouse? To ask this is to presume a common heritage, of which both writer and reader are products, and in which a word has gathered a loading of *entre nous* meaning. The Jewish heritage must be understood as something alive and growing, encompassing both oral and written tradition. Access to the oral tradition would doubtless reveal a continuous and complex development in the theological import of a theme, but the bible is almost the only part of the record which has endured and tracing a theme through its pages is largely a conjectural exercise linking biblical references with a sufficient number of common traits to arouse suspicion that similarity is not mere coincidence. The suspicion is all the stronger when such traits are found to be present beyond the needs of the context, or when their part in a sequence of thought betrays more than simple dictionary meaning. Linking the biblical references in chronological order, one may expect a certain growth in imagery and doctrinal content of the theme, but at the same time allow for variation from the main stream of tradition, such that a passage may witness to a form of the theme which has hived off from the main tradition at a much earlier period. The earliest references may have a direct sense in no way related to the later theology of the theme, except that elements have been taken up by later writers in senses suiting their own purpose, and so early *dicta* can acquire an extrinsic, posthumous sense within the growing tradition (obvious parallels are messianic texts and Pauline citations of O.T.). At the other end of the time scale, a deliberate allusion to the now established thematic tradition must be presumed to evoke all or most of the theological import which has gathered around the theme. This, of course, has utmost value in the exegesis of N.T. passages containing O.T. thematic material.

FIRST STRAND: MOTHER IN STRUGGLE

A number of early biblical texts associate a woman with the promise of Israel. Gen. 3:15 mentions “the Woman”, her struggle with the Serpent, a struggle which extends to their respective progeny, the victorious outcome for the seed of the

Woman. The sign of Ahaz, in Is. 7:14, is the *almah* with child who is to give birth to Emmanuel—whatever the direct sense of the text, it was to take on messianic significance. Mic. 5:2-3, indicating Bethlehem as the birthplace of the one who is to rule over Israel, continues

“Therefore (Yahweh) shall give them up until the time when she who is in travail has brought forth; then the rest of his brethren shall return to the people of Israel”.

The Mother of the Messiah is established as part of the messianic hope and one notes the thematic elements of the *time*, the *child-birth*, the *other children* and the overall idea of present suffering and happy outcome.

The analogy of childbirth to describe the present sorrow and future joy of Israel is not uncommon, e.g., Mic. 4:9-10; Is. 26:17; 66:7 ff.; Jer. 4:31; 6:24; 13:21, etc. Such analogical use may simply indicate a vivid stereotype, unrelated to our theme except in image, but neither is it incompatible, and such a stereotype would hardly be unaffected by the doctrinal overtones of the thematic imagery. In turn it would facilitate the identification of the Mother with Israel. The suspicion is aroused that something more than analogy is intended when the one to be born is specified as a male child, as in Is. 66:7, cf. 9:6-7.

In the Hodayot of Qumran, col. III, the Teacher of Righteousness readily compares his sufferings with those of a woman in labour, but the analogy curiously develops into actuality:

“She labours in her pains who bears the Man.

For amid the throes of death she shall bring forth a man-child, and amid the pains of hell there shall spring from her child-bearing crucible a Marvellous Mighty Counsellor; and the Man shall be delivered from out of the throes” (Vermes 1965:157).

The hymn continues in like strain; the birth of the messianic figure is associated with the birth of others, there is great conflict, during which

“Thou has raised me up to everlasting height” (ibid. 158),
and
“the torrents of Satan shall reach to all sides of the world” (ibid. 159).

Paul also applies this figure to himself, if a little incongruously, describing himself as being in the pains of childbirth in relation to the Galatian Christians

“until Christ be formed in you” (Gal. 4:19).

On a broader scale, he is able to see the sufferings of the whole of creation as far from futile, in fact one great act of giving birth, when the sons of God will be revealed (Rom. 8:18-25).

That the Johannine school had access to the same tradition is clearly shown in Rev. 12. It is not a novelty to point out the close similarity to the Qumran hymn above and to other witnesses of the tradition, with its mention of “the Woman” who is mother of the Messiah, the struggle at childbirth, the flight into the desert, the victory over the Dragon (identified with the ancient serpent of Gen. 3:15, cf. Rev. 12:9), the latter’s continuing persecution of the Woman (even pouring out water from his mouth in pursuit of her, 12:15) and her other children. Scholarly opinion is divided on the identification of the Woman (for review, see Feuillet 1964:257 ff.)—is it Mary or the Church? The distinction is not relevant, since in this type of literature various levels of understanding can be intended at the same time: the Woman is the historical mother of Jesus, and is also the corporate mother, Israel/Church. From the analogous use above, the reference may even extend to ecclesial leaders like the Teacher of Righteousness and Paul, who bear a major share of the labour pains of the messianic community as it fulfils its destiny. Curiously, the male child on being born “was caught up to God and to his throne” (Rev. 12:5). No mention of earthly ministry or saving death! In the words of Feuillet (1964:263): “the messianic birth of the Apocalypse refers directly not to the birth of Christ at Bethlehem, but to the mystery of Eastern morning: the pains of childbirth correspond to Calvary”. The word “caught up” reflects the triumphant euphemism, “raised up”, in the Fourth Gospel, which encompasses the whole upward movement of Death, Resurrection and Ascension (e.g., Jn. 3:14; 12:32-34; cf. Rom. 1:4).

In the Fourth Gospel, the analogy of childbirth is used by Jesus to describe the disciples’ present sorrow and future joy (Jn. 16:20-22), but there is hint of something more than analogy in the mention of *hē gynē* and of *anthropos* who “is born into the world”, details which seem to go beyond the demands of similitude. This is “the hour” (Jn. 13:1; 17:1; cf. 16:21), the time of struggle with the Ruler of this world (Jn. 14:30). Earlier, at Cana (Jn. 2:1-11), the theme is more explicit. There is the pointed and unexpected title “Woman”, the reference to “my hour” (which will also be Mary’s), the miracle signifying and foreshadowing the passing of the old order into the new messianic order, and the climax when the disciples, like “other children”, see Jesus’ glory and come to faith. The motifs of Cana are recalled at Calvary, the hour when Mother and Son are joined in struggle

with the Ruler of this world: again there is the title "Woman" and at that moment she becomes the mother of "other children" in the person of the Beloved Disciple (Jn. 19:25-27). This is the Johannine nativity scene. Taking a cue from the consistent role of women and the prevailing symbolism in the Fourth Gospel, I hope to return to a detailed study of John's development of the Woman theme in a future article.

G. R. H. Wright, discussing an iconostasis in the collection of Henri Pharaon (Beirut) showing the Virgin and Child beneath a palm tree, has drawn my attention to the Koranic version of the Nativity (Surah 19:16-34). Muhammed purports to give the pure revelation, by contrast to the perverted version held by contemporary Christians (Koran, Surah 19:34; cf. 3:78). It is likely that he did have access to a primitive tradition, possibly mediated by Jewish Christianity,¹ which was at variance with that told in Matthew and Luke. Wright underlines the importance of Arabia as a "repository for Semitic folk tales . . . a borderland always in touch with the heartland, but removed where the winds of change did not blow in their main currents" (pers. comm.). Besides some fanciful details reminiscent of the story of Hagar (Gen. 16:6-16; 21:8-21) and of the Flight into Egypt (Pseudo-Matthew, ch. 20) and a predictable stress on the creatureliness of Jesus, Muhammed describes the Nativity in these terms (trans. Arberry 1953:132):

"So she conceived him, and withdrew with him to a distant place.

And the birthpangs surprised her by the trunk of the palm-tree.

She cried: Would I have died ere this, and become a thing forgotten" (19:22-23).

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1. In his tone of but-we-have-the-true story, Muhammed parallels the smug, derogatory attitude of the Jewish Christians to the canonical Gospels. A Jewish Christian polemic, embedded in a 11th C Moslem polemic by Abd al-Jabbar (Pines 1966:25), reads: "Know . . . that these Christian sects are the most ignorant people in the world with regard to Christ, his history and *that of his mother* and that everyone among the authors of these Gospels learnt whatever he has written only a long time after Christ and after the death of his companions from people who lacked knowledge and were ill-informed" (italics mine). Discussing this document, Mancini (1970:99) relates, probably on the basis of a personal communication with his friend and confrere: "According to Testa, who is still studying the question, it is already recognised that the Christianity known to Mohammed derived from the Judaeo-Christians and that many teachings in the Qoran are to be traced back to the latter."

This he evidently felt was a major correction of the accepted Christian version, and incidentally it brings the actual nativity account into conformity with the O.T. tradition. The effect of this tradition on the Koranic presentation of Mary is suggested by the story of her own birth, when her mother prays to the Lord:

"I have named her Mary, and commended her to Thee with her seed, to protect them from the accursed Satan" (3:36, trans. Arberry 1953:127).

SECOND STRAND: VIRGIN-BRIDE

A parallel theme takes its point of departure from the prophecy of Hosea. Describing Israel as the unfaithful bride of Yahweh, he looks forward to the time when the impossible will happen and she will be restored under the power and mercy of her Husband (Hos. 2:14 ff.). Even more daringly, Jeremiah sees Israel's incurable wound cured (Jer. 30:12-15), pardon found in the desert (31:2) and virginity restored (31:4; cff. Is. 62:5), building up to the promise of the new covenant with the appeal (31:21-22 in J.B.):

"Come home, virgin of Israel . . .

For Yahweh is creating something new on earth:
the Woman sets out to find her Husband again."

With the marriage covenant restored (Ezek. 16:59-63), the bride is assured of many children (Is. 54:60-62). The LXX translation of *almah* in Is. 7:14 by *parthenos* may have been influenced by this stream of thought. The figure readily passed over to the N.T. and was applied to the Church as the Bride of Christ (e.g., Eph. 5:21-33; 2 Cor. II:2; Jn. 3:29-30; Rev. 19:7-9; 21:2, 9; 22:17).

It is just possible that the synoptic accounts of the nativity stressed the virginity of Mary in the light of this second tradition. Matthew simply states the fact of the virginal birth of Jesus (1:18-25, incidentally quoting Is. 7:14), but the subsequent events in Bethlehem may be his version of the struggle-with-Evil and the flight-into-desert motifs of the first tradition. Luke seems to suggest a parallel between the overshadowing of Mary by the Holy Spirit (1:35) and the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Church at Pentecost (Ac. 2:1 ff.), and consequently may regard Mary as a personification of the Church, as John did, but in terms of the virgin-bride theme. If this is so, it would be inappropriate to dwell on the struggle of childbirth in the context of stressing Mary's virginity. In fact Muhammed did (Koran 19:16-23), and he overcame the apparent contradiction of the virgin-mother by appeal to the omnipotence of Allah: "that is easy for me" (19:21), which is like Luke's "for with God nothing will

be impossible" (1:37; cf. Hos., Jer. supra). The inappropriateness arises not as a question of possibility, but from a sense of delicacy and from the incongruity of mixed imagery (i.e., Mary as mother and bride of her son). Evidently, to Muhammed (and/or his source?), the suppression of one element for the emphasis on another is a typical perversion of the tradition by "the party of those who torture the Scriptures with their tongues" (= Christians, 3:78).

POST-BIBLICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Raphael Patai (1967) has drawn attention to the long persistence of the cult of Canaanite goddesses, Asherah and Astarte-Anath, in the first Jerusalem temple for 236 of its 370 years existence. It is only to be expected that elements of such cult would have had a bearing on the thematic development traced above. He further claims that the cult of a female deity, despite orthodox monotheism, re-appeared in features of later Judaism, such as the Talmudists' Shekinah and the Kabbalists' Matronit. The assertion that such elements were not merely mystical but truly divine persons would not convince all. There is also the question of the weight to be given to popular religion as against the strictly orthodox. However there is much to be said for the observation that the emergence of a female principle in a religion dominated by a God of masculine traits met deep-felt psychological needs of the cultists. Nor is it insignificant that the ancient goddesses and the female figures in later Judaism shared the same contradictory traits—mother and virgin, loving and warlike—traits worth considering against the two parallel strains in the biblical theme of woman. The clearest expression of the female principle in later Judaism (whether envisaged as a divine person or a creature)—and in the Jewish continuum, the term of the thematic development traced above—is the Matronit: "the central link between the Above and the Below . . . the person through whom man can most easily grasp the ineffable mystery of the deity, and who most fully identifies herself with the interests, the joys and the woes, of Israel" (Patai 1967:186).

The Christian heritage is itself a living growing thing and has continued to develop these themes in theological and devotional reflection on the Church, Mary and the Spiritual Life. Mystics, such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross (Cayre II, 1940:438f, 809f, 825f) transferred the image of the Bride of Christ from the Church to the individual soul, drawing heavily on the extravagant language of the Song of Songs for this purpose. Just as there are times when the believer sees himself as one *with* the Church in her bridal relationship to Christ, so too

there are times when he looks at his relationship to the Church and calls her Mother. Nor is it surprising that Catholic sentiment about Mary should in some sort converge with sentiment about the Church, and that the crystallisation of such sentiment should have paralleled so closely the peculiarly Jewish figure, the Matronit.

This has been no more than an attempt to trace a line of thought in the Hebrew-Christian continuum, with the purpose of showing that the interested branches of Christian theology may have more to draw from their biblical *loci*, not as isolated proof-texts but as links in a chain, each bearing more than the weight of its own words, and even more daringly from research into Comparative Religions.

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