

The Church as Mother

"There is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, [and] nourish us at her breast....[A]way from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation."

Who do you suppose said this? You may be surprised. [John Calvin, *Institutes* 4.1.4]

Over the last few years, I have come to the conclusion that the evangelical church has been terribly negligent in her use of gender imagery not so much with reference to God, but with reference to herself. The majority of preachers and laypeople alike refer to the Church as "it." Most evangelicals acknowledge that the Church is the bride of Christ, but few explore the implications of this. Hardly anyone reverences her as the Mother of believers. Because of the vacuum created by this negligence, the feminist theologies rampant in our culture have been appropriated and modified by evangelicals to fill the void.

Christianity is essentially a personal (not to be confused with individual) religion. The Trinity, the Person of Christ, Creation, Fall, and Redemption are all dependent on the persons involved, and the covenantal relationships which they sustain to one another. This is especially true of redemption, and it is this aspect that I will focus on. In relationship to us, God is our Father, Christ is our Husband, and the Church is our Mother. These are not sexual relationships, but they do have to do with spiritual "reproduction."

The Church is the body of Christ the presence of Christ in the world. But even as we are united to Christ, becoming members of his body, Paul compares to the union of marriage, where the two become one flesh: "In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does for the church for we are members of his body" (Eph 5:28-30 followed by the quote of Gen 2:24). In 1 Corinthians 6:15-20, Paul further expands this idea by emphasizing that since believers are the body of Christ, they must not unite themselves to prostitutes, because they are already one in Spirit with the Lord (again quoting Genesis 2:24). This union is not a personal union (ie, we do not become one person with Jesus), but, to use Paul's contrast between the two becoming one "flesh" and our being one with Christ "in spirit," our union with Christ is the spiritual and archetypal marriage, of which all human marriages are a reflection.

This idea was first developed by the Old Testament prophets, most graphically in Ezekiel 16. Jerusalem is portrayed as the helpless and destitute infant whom Yahweh has mercy on, and with whom he enters into a marriage covenant. He made her beautiful and she bore him many sons and daughters (16:1-21). The image of the people of God as the bride of Yahweh is one of the most common themes in the prophetic writings (also see Isa 54:1-8, 55:4, 62:4; Jer 2:2, 3:6-25; Hos 2:1-3:5; 5:3-7--really the whole book; and dozens of other passages), yet unfortunately it is ignored in much of modern evangelicalism.

But if the bride of Christ language is ignored, the idea of the Church as the Mother of all believers is practically unheard of. Some "biblical feminists" even wish to make God both the Father and the Mother in the process of the new birth. This turns God into an androgynous being, and takes the Christian out of the Church, and turns everything into an individualistic "me and God" mentality. Yet God has ordained that in the work of redemption he is our Father, the Church is our Mother. This language, again, is rooted in the Old Testament prophets. The people of God (collectively) are the mother of the people of God (individually). All of the passages mentioned above refer to this image as well, but Isaiah 66:7-13 deals with the redemptive significance of this most vividly:

"Yet no sooner is Zion in labor than she gives birth to her children. Do I bring to the moment of birth and not give delivery?" says the Lord...."Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice greatly with her, all you who mourn over her. For you will nurse and be satisfied at her comforting breasts; you will drink deeply and delight in her overflowing abundance." For this is what the Lord says: 'I will extend peace to her...; you will nurse and be carried on her arm and dangled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem."

God's people are born of Zion, and are nursed at the breasts of Jerusalem. Therefore the redemption of Jerusalem brings peace to her children. In this passage we see maternal language used with respect to God: he comforts his people like a mother comforts her child. (So, yes, we may use feminine imagery regarding God, the distinction is that the Scripture never uses feminine address toward God. He is indeed like a mother, but we may not address him as "Mother.")

Paul picks up on this idea in his allegory of Hagar and Sarah in Galatians 4:21-31, where he declares that "the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother." This is the same heavenly Jerusalem spoken of in Hebrews 12:22, the city of the living God, and the abode of "the church of the firstborn, . . . the spirits of righteous men made perfect." In Revelation 12, the woman who gives birth to the son "who will rule the nations" also gives birth to many others, as is seen by the fact that "the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (Rev 12:17).

This last example refers us back to Matthew 12:46-50, and its parallels in Mark and Luke. Here, Jesus is told that his mother and brothers wish to see him, but he turns to his disciples and says, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." The connection between the woman of Revelation 12:17 and Matthew 12:50 is intentional. Those who obey God's commandments are the offspring of the woman--who is also the mother of Jesus. Who does Jesus call his mother? No one person, but the whole assembly of his disciples. The assembly of Christ's disciples, the Church, is called Mother by Christ, and because we are adopted as his brothers and sisters, we too are to see the Church as our Mother.

The soteriological necessity of the Motherhood of the church is seen in Romans 10:14-16, where Paul teaches that people cannot believe unless they hear the gospel, which must be preached, whether by oral or written means. Therefore, the Church, as the bride of Christ, is the womb in which the infertile unbeliever encounters the gospel, is impregnated by the Holy Spirit by the preaching of the Word. It is she who nurtures us, feeding us at her breasts with the pure milk of the

gospel, later giving us the solid food of sound doctrine and discipleship. She guides us with her long wisdom, taught to her by the Holy Spirit from the Word of God, over long ages of her history the very wisdom of God in Christ, to whom she submits. And her Divine human Bridegroom cares for her, leading her and loving her, teaching us through his Word and by His Spirit in the Church.

The early Church quickly caught on to the implication that if the Church is the Bride of Christ, then she is the Mother of the faithful. Cyprian said it so well in the third century: "You cannot have God for your Father unless you have the church for your Mother." John Calvin declared that "there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, [and] nourish us at her breast....[A]way from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation." God is our Father, the Church is our Mother. There is a whole realm of possibility for beautiful imagery and poetry in this, as we recover the faithful teaching of the Word of God.

Yes, language in the Church has been too masculine. We have ignored the truth that the Church is the bride of Christ, and the Mother of all believers. By eliminating the Mother from their doctrine of the new birth, evangelicals have forced women to try to find some new place for feminine language. Even worse, by denying the necessity of the visible Church in their soteriology, evangelicals have ignored their Mother--and now she is dying, being excluded by Fundamentalists and Feminists alike. The feminists have recognized a real problem. Evangelicals have ignored feminine imagery. Yes, God cares for us as a Mother cares for her children. Yet every feminine image of God found in the Bible is a simile--"God is like..." or "God cares for us as...". On the other hand, God says that he is our Father. Christ is our Bridegroom and our Brother. It is the Church who is our Mother, by whom we are nurtured, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

1. Feminine Motifs in Isaiah

a. The Bride Motif in Isaiah

John Schmitt has called attention to the careful use of gender in biblical imagery. Israel (the people) is the son of God, whereas Zion (the city) is his bride. Throughout Isaiah 40-66, Israel is in the masculine, while the Zion is in the feminine (Schmitt, 1991, 20). He claims that throughout Scripture it is technically incorrect to say that Israel is the bride of Yahweh. Rather, Zion (or Jerusalem, or Samaria) is the bride of Yahweh. This thesis is problematic because Jeremiah uses the feminine gender extensively for Israel, and calls Judah the faithless sister of Israel (Jer. 3:6-14). So while Schmitt is generally correct in his discussion, there is certainly more flexibility in the gender of Israel and Judah than Schmitt is willing to allow (Schmitt's agenda is to show that feminine imagery for God's people is relatively unimportant in Scripture compared to the masculine son imagery).

The bride image is first introduced in 1:21-26, where Zion, the once faithful city, is called a harlot, and the dwelling place of murderers. This image is taken up in 47:1-15 as a contrast is painted between the judgment of the Virgin Daughter of Babylon, and the salvation of Zion (46:13), the redemption of the holy city (48:1-22), concluding with the exaltation of the captive Daughter of Zion 52:2, in the context of God's sovereign deliverance 52:1-12. The servant of 52:13-53:12 is a curious figure in this context, especially because of vv8-10. Particularly the phrase, "he will see his offspring..." raises a question in light of the following

verses (54:1-8) which speak of the children of Zion, and also Yahweh as Zion's husband: who is the father of Zion's children? Yahweh, or the servant? The bride prepares for the wedding in 61:10-11, and Chapter 62 could be seen almost as a wedding song, leading up to the entrance of the groom in chapter 63, the one whose arm worked salvation (cf 59:15-20 where he is identified as Yahweh). It is this Yahweh, the Divine Warrior, who is explicitly identified as father in 63:15-19 and 64:8-12 (ultimately, of course, the ambiguity is resolved by the fact that the Servant is Yahweh in Jesus Christ).

b. The Mother Motif in Isaiah

The birth image is introduced in 13:8, as the anguish of labor is used as the picture of the anguish of the people of Babylon in the day of the Lord. This image is then put in the mouths of the people of Judah returning from exile in 26:17-18, as they reflect on their troubles: "As a woman with child and about to give birth writhes and cries out in her pain, so were we in your presence, O Yahweh. We were with child, we writhed in pain, but we gave birth to wind. We have not brought salvation to the earth; we have not given birth to people of the world." This startling statement declares that all of Judah's anguish and pain has been for naught. They were commanded to be a blessing to the nations to the people of the world, but they have miscarried, and have given birth to wind. As might have been expected, 26:19-21 follows this with the assertion that when Yahweh comes, "the earth will give birth to her dead." Similar usage of this motif is found in 33:11 ("you conceive chaff, you give birth to straw...") and 37:3. Simply put, Zion has not only failed in her commission to be a blessing to the nations, she has failed to give birth to a people for God at all. Later Isaiah tears into the "offspring of adulterers and prostitutes" as he declares God's judgment upon the bastards of Zion "sons of a sorceress" (57:3-13).

Nonetheless, the birth image gains a positive use as it is developed in Isaiah 40-66. Mother Zion discovers that even in the years of bereavement (the exile) God has protected her children, and given her more children, bringing them in the arms of the Gentiles. She has not done anything to deserve this, but God will bring her and her children home (49:19-21). Isaiah 54:1-8 declares that the barren woman will have more children than anyone else. While Zion is not named in this passage, there is no doubt that she is the referent here, as she is named to be the wife of Yahweh and the mother of his children. She who was desolate during the exile is now the joyous mother of many children. Her rejection is past, and now she receives the everlasting kindness and compassion of Yahweh, and the reproach of her widowhood is forgotten.

Connections to Isaiah 66:13 are seen in 42:14 where God declares that "like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant," as he marches out as the divine warrior to go before his people in triumph, as well as in 49:15 where Yahweh compares himself to a mother who cannot forget the baby at her breast. Nonetheless, these images are not on the same level, either in fulness of description or in completeness of identification, as the Mother Zion image. While it is important to recognize this feminine imagery, it should not obscure the primary references to Zion.

c. Development of the Motifs in Isaiah 66:7-13

Isaiah expands the mother image in this passage to include the birthing of multitudes and the nursing/comforting of her children, all in the context of Yahweh's sovereign power in salvation. In this passage however, he is portraying

life in the new creation rather than his previous focus on the exilic context. That still is in his mind, as evidenced by the language of sudden transition and comfort from the past, but the center of attention is the comfort and delight of the glory which shall be Zion's in the new heavens and new earth, which functions as the immediate context of Isaiah 65-66.

The figure of Zion as (rejected/restored) bride and mother fit naturally into the larger theme of Isaiah: namely, the purification of Zion by the Holy One of Israel. Yahweh desires to have a faithful bride; the only way he can have one is if he accomplishes her salvation. Hence he (as suffering servant and triumphant divine warrior--Isa 53/63-64) takes her as his bride and populates the world with their holy offspring.

2. Mother in the Old Testament

a. The Origin of the Mother Image

Mark Biddle states that most scholars have sought to find the origin of the mother/daughter/virgin/bride/harlot image either "in Hosea's polemic against Canaanite fertility religion or as a poetic representation of the covenant ideal," citing Hall and Ringren for the former and Greenberg for the latter (Biddle, 1991, 173). Criticizing feminist readings for missing the point and also ignoring the positive aspects which occur in the prophetic characterizations, he attempts to find the source of these motifs by looking at the cultural context of the prophets. Critically evaluating Fitzgerald's claim that the images are rooted in the West Semitic deification of cities, and Follis' suggestion that there is an Hellenistic root tracing back to the Homeric era (Follis, 1987, 182), he argues that while the differences between the Hebrew prophets and their cultural background must be fully recognized, they are clearly personifying Jerusalem/Zion, not simply as a flat, stereotyped "harlot" image, but fundamentally as a woman. When she acts faithfully she is praised; when she is faithless she is condemned. Biddle appears correct in his conclusion that "the personification of Jerusalem [is] a theological device, as well, allowing for dramatic development, but also setting Jerusalem in proper relation to her God" (Biddle, 1991, 187). Isaiah or one of his contemporaries may indeed be the originator of this particular use of the image, but it almost certainly has deeper roots in the general cultural background, at least to Moses' day (Num 11:12, cf below).

b. The Mother image in the canon of Isaiah's day

The richness of this imagery is developed by the later prophets, but little of this is present in the canon of Isaiah's day. Essentially Isaiah is theologizing about Genesis 2-3, both in the river of peace (which in Genesis 2 appears to be watering the nations from the holy land to the nations; now for Isaiah the river of peace streams in to the holy land from the nations), but especially in the revocation of the curse of Genesis 3:16. While the vocabulary is not identical, the ideas are inextricably intertwined. Young sees this passage as a prophecy of the coming of the Messiah, and the bringing in of the Gentiles. Overturning the curse on the woman, now the ideal woman (Zion) bears a son without the pains of childbirth. Another image which is developed (more so earlier in the book, but somewhat here as well) is the motif of the barren woman to whom God grants children (eg, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah).

Moses utilized this mother image when in exasperation he says to God, "What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me?"

Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their forefathers" (Num 11:11-12). God's response is instructive. Moses is to nurse the people, but God will give him 70 elders with a measure of his Spirit, who "will help you carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone" (Num 11:17). Moses alone is not the mother, but the spirit anointed leadership together is to nurse and carry the people. This is something distinct from the city imagery of Isaiah and the Psalms, but may inform the idea of spiritual motherhood which Isaiah is picturing. Just as Moses in the Exodus thinks of the people of Israel as recently born, so also in the new Exodus, the Restoration (whether Exilic or Messianic) Isaiah considers the people to be newborns, and develops the image in ways which Moses may never have imagined.

Psalm 87 may be another root, as it follows the same Mother Zion theme, and also includes the incoming of the Gentiles, indicating that one day even Egypt (Rahab), Babylon, Philistia, Tyre and Cush will be numbered among those who are born in Zion. Since we do not know when this Psalm was composed, however, Isaiah may or may not have known it.

c. Post Isianic Development of the Bride Mother Image

While Isaiah may have been one of the first to develop and apply the Bride or Mother images to Zion, many of his contemporaries were familiar with the same image. Hosea, Amos, and especially Micah developed these motifs, while later prophets in the southern kingdom, such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Malachi, utilize them in their arsenal of verbal pictures.

The whole book of Hosea is predicated upon the marriage picture, and while it is possible that Isaiah borrowed this motif from his contemporary in the northern kingdom, the stark contrast of the faithless wife in Hosea and the comforting mother which predominates in Isaiah make it more likely that they applied this motif in their own separate ways. Amos also utilized the basic image of Virgin Israel (5:2), but left it largely undeveloped. Micah, also prophesying from the northern kingdom, speaks of the birth pains of the Daughter of Zion, and how Israel will be abandoned until "she who is in labor gives birth" to the one who will be the peace of Israel, and he brings his brothers home (4:8-5:3).

Jeremiah 2:20-3:25 portrays Judah as the faithless wife, the adulteress who follows in the footsteps of her sister Israel. The agony of childbearing is utilized in 4:31, 6:24, 13:21, 22:23, and 30:6, in the context of the agony of God's judgment against his unfaithful city/nation. Chapter 31 develops the Isianic picture of the marriage between God and his people in the new covenant/last days, as Yahweh calls his wife back to himself and makes her faithful. Also using the image in throughout Lamentations, Jeremiah's mourning over the Daughter of Zion seems to have been a favorite text for intertestamental reflection on the motherhood of Zion.

Ezekiel 16 is perhaps the most famous of the bride/mother passages, as it casts the entirety of redemptive history into the picture of a marriage between God and Jerusalem, and is the most explicit in claiming that Zion actually bears Yahweh's children (16:20). Zephaniah 3:1-7 is an undeveloped, but clear parallel to the faithless city motif, while Zechariah echoes Isaiah's contrast between the Daughter of Babylon and the Daughter of Zion (2:7-13, cf. 8:2ff, where the faithful city is restored and the gentiles come flooding in). Malachi 2:10-16 blends a series of

complex images: Judah is judged for marrying the daughter of a foreign god; Yahweh chastises the practice of divorce because "he was seeking godly offspring"--intimating that they are the wife of his youth. So in close proximity Judah is viewed both as husband (of daughters of foreign gods) and wife (of Yahweh).

3. Mother in the New Testament

Zion gives birth to a male child, then she gives birth to a nation and nurses them with her abundant glory the glory of the nations giving them comfort as the New Jerusalem. What is this but a picture of the gospel?

In the synoptic gospels, Jesus' mother and brothers come to speak with him. When he is told of their presence, he replies, "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice"(Luke 8:21; cf Mt 12:46-50, Mk 3:31-35). In the context of Isaiah 58-59, 66 and Micah 4-5, in particular, this is a claim to Messianic identity, because he is claiming the true Zion as his mother, and the children of the faithful Jerusalem as his brothers leaving himself as the firstborn son who brings redemption to Zion. This language is taken over into Revelation 12:13-17, where the dragon pursues the woman who gave birth to the male child. When he fails he turns "against the rest of her offspring those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (12:17), echoing Jesus' statement about his mother and brothers.

More specific to Isaiah 66:7-13 are Jesus' words in John 16:19-24, about their mourning turning to joy: "A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you . . ." (16:21-22a). This reference to the disciples being like a mother about to give birth is especially poignant in light of the sudden birth of Pentecost. Without going into labor, the apostles bear 3,000 children in a day--or more specifically, Zion gives birth to 3,000 in a day--through the instrumentality of the apostles. Just as Moses, the Spirit endowed leader with his 70 elders, bore Israel in the wilderness, so also the Spirit endowed assembly bears the multitudes at Pentecost. The Spirit hovering in the upper room in Acts refers us back to the creation Spirit hovering over the waters at creation, revealing that this is indeed the new creation which Isaiah had spoken of.

The Spirit endowed leader is ultimately Christ, but in the New Testament Christ's elders may speak of themselves as birthing his people (Gal 4:19) and nursing (1 Cor 3:1-2) or comforting them as a mother (1 Thess 2:7). The connection is clearly in Paul's mind, because immediately after speaking of himself as a birthing mother in Galatians 4:19, he then turns to the allegory of the two women (4:21-31). It is here that Paul develops the mother Zion image most clearly. Quoting Isaiah 54:1, he demonstrates that the Jerusalem which is above is our mother (v26) and, in contrast to the slavery of the present city of Jerusalem, her freedom is the reason why we are born free according to the Spirit. There are two kinds of children, and their status depends upon the status of their mothers. If they are born according to the flesh, of the slave woman, under the law, then they are slaves and have no inheritance. If they are born according to the Spirit, of the free woman, under grace, then they are free and have the inheritance of God.

Hence we see with the vision of New Testament eyes that the fulfillment of the sudden birthing of Zion's children is found at Pentecost when Zion bore 3,000 children to God in a day, as the beginning of the incoming of the nations. While

these people were largely Jews, it was the beginning of the new creation, when the Son of Isaiah 66:7 began his reign and the children of 66:8-13 rejoiced to see the salvation of God. Nonetheless, the fulfillment is not yet full, because the glory of the nations has not yet fully come. The river of peace has started to flow, but it has not yet resulted in the fury of Yahweh which 66:14ff declares. Hence the message of Isaiah is still appropriate to our day: the purification of the nations must be completed before the purification of the heavens and the earth will come. Therefore the fact that God has restored and purified you does not mean that the end of all things has come. God has caused to bring forth--will he now shut the womb?

4. Conclusion

Finally, I must point out that this image has largely been lost in Christian theology over the last 200 years. We rarely think of spiritual birth as involving a mother as well as a father. Nicodemus should have known about being born again (John 3) it was stated explicitly or implicitly at least a dozen times by the prophets! God is our Father; Zion is our Mother. The unbeliever in worship is like an egg in the womb of the church. The Holy Spirit is like the sperm which comes and impregnates the egg with new life in regeneration through the preaching of the Word. This results in the new birth (conversion), which of course need not take nine months! The church then nurses her infants with the word and sacraments, comforting, encouraging, rebuking, training, and exhorting as the child grows up (sanctification) to maturity (glorification). This is simply an expansion of the discussion Calvin gives in his Institutes. It is noteworthy that the very first image Calvin uses for the church is that of mother (Calvin, 1960, IV.i.4., p1016).

I believe that it is arguable that one reason for the current rash of evangelical feminism is the abandonment of a biblical understanding of the church as bride and mother, which would demonstrate that feminine imagery is absolutely crucial to a proper understanding of Christian theology and worship. Even the current preoccupation with the language of body life in the church is misguided because of the neglect of this image. The body which Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, is most likely a feminine body of which Christ is the head (Eph 4) in the same respect as Ephesians 5:23 where the body is undeniably a feminine body--distinct from the physical body of our Lord. Christ is not the physical head of a torso, but is the spiritual head of his bride's body. 1 Corinthians 12 indicates that the parts of the body include head parts (ears, eyes, nose), indicating that it is a complete body which belongs to Christ. 1 Corinthians 6 follows the peculiar blend of images found often in the prophets were individual males commit adultery with prostitutes, and are found guilty collectively as a adulteress wife. Here, verse 17 ("But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in Spirit") points us to the larger question of union with Christ, a union of which marriage is a reflection (Eph 5, Col 3).

The question of bride/body language is still unresolved in my mind, but the indications are suggestive. At the least, the recovery of the bride/mother imagery would be a return to a biblical way of thinking about the church in her relationship with Christ, and would hopefully recapture one of the most fruitful biblical images for understanding the role of the church in salvation, and hence restore to the teaching of the church the feminine imagery which has been neglected for too long.

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