

2006

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Recommended Citation

Erickson, Karen L. (2006) "The Call to Prophetic Maternity and Matriarchal Irony," *Headwaters*: Vol. 23, 59-67.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/headwaters/vol23/iss1/8>

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The Call to Prophetic Maternity and Matriarchal Irony

In their physical bodies and in the realm of archetypes as well, women have long been seen as “that which encloses.” They are the vessels, deemed sacred in the best of times, that hold both life and the mysteries whereby life goes on replicating itself. To poets everywhere, women are “walled gardens” of delight and fecundity. But that very imagery seems typically to mean that someone else is going to have to maintain the walls in question. For the qualities that identify a woman as both sexually desirable and maternal — tenderness, softness, a yielding sweetness — seem also to have implied that she will not “have it in her” to keep her surrounding walls in good repair. It is as if, from the male point of view, we were boneless — as if we could at any moment *spill out* of enclosure if the walls are anything but high and strong. (Flinders 78-79)

In the biblical traditions of the Hebrew and Christian faiths, one formidable literary challenge is to portray the intersection of the divine and the profane, to represent divinity in narrative or poetic form. In those stories of promises made between God and the people of scripture, it is particularly challenging to identify the role of women, their understanding of irony and their interpretation of the divine voice. Some receive divine instruction towards a “prophetic maternity,” becoming mothers of children who will carry forward the narrative of covenant. Though childbirth located women in an unclean state, from this ritual exclusion arose the potential for further covenant, for continued relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Called to become mothers within the promises of the covenant, they are inscribed in an interpretative tradition heavily marked by patriarchal preference and the male prophetic figure. In her book *At the Root of This Longing: Reconciling a Spiritual Hunger and a Feminist Thirst*, Carol Lee Flinders argues persuasively that

where patriarchy might have “closed off the wellsprings of [women’s] own spirituality” (119), women need now to “reinhabit the sacred feminine,” for their own sake and for the sake of the world. She advocates containment or focus not as imprisonment but as temporary enclosure, through which transformation, magnification and emergence are possible. I am indebted to Flinders for her emphasis on enclosure and magnification, as well as for her call to consider the sacred identity of the feminine.

In order to examine the possibility of a distinctly matriarchal irony, I focus on two women, Sarah and Mary, whose instruction to bear children plants them firmly in the profane realm. Through a fruitful history of menstruation and childbirth, these unclean women gain metaphorical and theological resonances with prophets, patriarchs and the divine voice itself. Identification (the call to prophesy, the call to pro-create), magnification (resonance, harmony), and embodiment (fulfillment, pregnancy, fruitfulness, future generations, further narrative) are shared features of what we might consider “matriarchal call narratives.” As with the biblical prophets, sacred maternal work offers no guarantee of reward or success. Like Isaiah, women are asked to do what is impossible. Like Jonah, women may turn temporarily from their sacred task.

I. Identification

They said to him, “Where is Sarah your wife?” And he said, “She is in the tent.” The Lord said, “I will surely return to you in the spring, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, in the spring, and Sarah shall have a son.” But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. He said, “No, but you did laugh.” (Gen. 18:9-15)

My approach to the concept of identification is influenced by my reading in biblical prophecy. Prophetic writings often include a story in which the prophet hears the divine voice and comes to accept his charge to serve as intermediary between the divine and human spheres of understanding. In the convention of the call narrative, the prophet accepts his election as prophet, and the authority necessary to be a respected intermediary. Irony plays an important role in some of these calls,

notably Isaiah, Jonah and Samuel, underscoring both the power and limitation of the listener/speaker who inhabits the threshold between the divine and profane realms. “Paradoxical irony” is especially pertinent, for this is irony which maintains a balance between events and an observer’s state of mind, in which author and audience fuse, or oscillate between identification and detachment (N. Knox 627).

In Isaiah 6, for example, the prophet, seized by God’s word, is called to prophesy, but hears also that the word will not be heard. Isaiah is eager to “go and tell,” but the message puts in question the whole prophetic endeavor. The oracle of destruction is hidden from the people; what they “hear” is simply that they will not hear. With the intermediary of the prophet, the distance between the people and God becomes evident. Isaiah gets the authoritative gift of prophecy, and with it the irony of knowing the people will not hear; the people get the gift of irony, and perhaps a future recognition of having been victims of divine irony when they turn again to knowledge of Yahweh. This does not mean that language, prophecy and irony have no function or efficacy, but the “fruitfulness” of prophecy may be unexpected, and reveal itself through ambiguity. That which is barren and ignorant is the object of scorn, violent critique, impending destruction, but also is the seat of lyrical hope.

Sarah’s call, quoted above, comes into a story of beauty and barrenness. It is a good example of the paradoxical irony of divine conversation, as listeners identify the divine voice, almost fused in perception, but also profoundly detached through fear or derision. The angel and the Lord’s voices oscillate, merge, and separate in the story. Abraham’s encounter also fuses with Sarah’s, only to separate dramatically, especially in the interpretative traditions following the canonical formation of the text. Abraham becomes known as the great believer, one who follows God’s word without question, though he, too, at an earlier time questioned the same promise on much the same grounds as did Sarah, and he showed he could quibble with deity with the best of them over Lot and Sodom and Gomorrah.

Sarah’s call to prophetic maternity becomes overshadowed by her laughter, which silences her as symbol of her disbelief (much as Zechariah is silenced for his disbelief in Luke 1). Her laughter is also that which anchors her in the history of covenant. After her child’s birth, she exults: “God has made laughter for me; every one who hears will laugh over me.’ And she said, ‘Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age’” (Gen. 21:6-7). Her child Isaac embodies her laughter, and the impossibility that deity brought into her narrative (Jeansonne 23). Sarah’s call is overshadowed also by her violent treatment of Hagar, and yet this is where deity promotes Sarah most clearly, saying to Abraham, “Do as she tells you” (Trible “Hagar” 21). The divine directive is beyond comprehension in ordinary terms.

Mary, mother of Jesus, is often held up as a model of passive obedience. When we look closely at Mary's call to prophetic motherhood, echoes of Abraham, Sarah, Isaiah, Jonah and Luke's Zechari'ah begin to sound:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end." And Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no husband?" And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible. And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of Zechari'ah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ear, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with

his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever.” And Mary remained with her about three months, and returned to her home. (Luke 1:26-56)

Mary receives a second annunciation from Elizabeth, and benefits from a maternal fellowship Sarah did not enjoy. Mary confirms the angel’s words and then sings. Cautious and restrained with the angel, Elizabeth and Mary together voice their maternal prophetic promises. “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Mary exults that her “soul magnifies the Lord.”

II. Magnification

The acoustical properties of the divine and human voices, of the narrator’s voicing of the story, are primary examples of scriptural magnification. In Samuel’s story, the mystery of the divine voice resides not in its being imperceptible, but in Samuel’s and Eli’s lack of ability to identify it, to identify with it. Elijah, after a series of acoustical mysteries, hears the divine in a soft murmur. Divine discourse is continually portrayed as difficult to hear by the human ear, impossible to understand: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways. This is the very word of the LORD” (Is. 55:8). Sarah overhears the Lord from the door of her tent. Hagar and Ishmael, near death in the desert, are saved when their voices rise to God. The prophets exclaim, “Hear us, O Lord.” The voice itself can suggest the identification of and with the divine, for the relationship, the dialogue between humans and God.

In addition to an acoustical magnification, subsequent text can serve to magnify an earlier passage through the response of the biblical listeners, through their subsequent actions or speech. Biblical characters repeat one another with dramatic alterations, magnifying almost beyond recognition a former statement or promise. Sarah and Mary give birth, name their child, watch and in important ways facilitate the work to which the children have been called.

Texts echo other texts and offer to each other resonance, harmony, dissonance, as Elizabeth and Mary’s words and wombs speak to one another, as Sarah, Zechari’ah, Abraham and Mary all speak across the vast desert spaces between biblical eras. In the biblical writings, intertextual references, echoes, intimations and calls are important features, both theologically and literarily. When Hagar fears her son must die

in the desert, the angel says that God has heard the boy's cry: "Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well full of water; she went to it, filled her waterskin and gave the child a drink" (Gen. 21:19), and her story can be read closely with Abraham's (Jeansonne 51). The narrative segment finds an echo in the later passage in which "Abraham looked up, and there he saw a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. So he went and took the ram and offered it as a sacrifice instead of his son" (Gen. 22:13). Though Hagar is a slave, and remains in a subservient position to both Sarah and Abraham, she receives a divine promise, however desperate her current situation might be and unlikely fulfillment appears.

Isaiah too hears divine reassurance that God's word will not return fruitless (Is. 55:6-12), and this promise of a fruitful discourse, of words that will make something happen, lingers in the ear as Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, responds to Mary (Luke 1:39-45). Isaiah says, "Here am I! Send me!" as Mary says, "Here am I, I am the Lord's servant; as you have spoken, so be it." The resounding phrase of fruitfulness becomes a theme, a counterpoint to the themes of loss and barrenness. By quoting Hannah's response to her prophetic maternity, Mary's *magnificat* explicitly invites a textual "echo-location" in a tradition of biblical prophecy.

Textual magnification also operates in the resonant spaces of silence. Sarah is silenced beginning in Genesis 21, appearing only in the voice of the narrator "Sarah lived for a hundred and twenty-seven years, and died in Kiriatharba, which is Hebron, in Canaan. Abraham went in to mourn over Sarah and to weep for her" (Gen. 23:1-2) and in Abraham's haggling for land for her burial site. Is she silenced because of her laughing disbelief of the power of God to do the impossible, as tradition has often maintained? Or silenced because of her treatment of Hagar, or her overly zealous attachment to Isaac? (Trible "Genesis 22"). Or is her silence a space for resonance, an ambiguous but meaningful silence calling out to other silences and other sites of death without closure in the story of exile, exodus and the promises of God's relationship and of land, a promise of future generations? From Joseph to Moses, Jephthah's daughter to Jesus, Sarah to Mary, the figures in scripture recall one another's words, their responses to divine direction, and the inscrutable ways of divine intent.

III. Embodiment

Mary and Sarah enclose, if only temporarily, the sacred. They also situate the lineage, the story line and the family line. Pregnancy is a way station, a rest stop, as well as a struggle, and the time of embodied longing is brief. Though tradition can and often does limit the role of matriarchs in the biblical tradition to their role as vessel, as "enclosed space," to use Flinders' term, useful only as a temporary warehouse

for their divine masculine progeny, when compared with the prophets these mothers and their embodiment of the divine take on a different resonance. There is an irony to giving birth to and within the divine promise, just as there is irony in being granted the gift of prophecy. Ezekiel will eat the scroll and it will taste sweet, and yet still the people do not turn and remember their God. Isaac, the son of the covenant, to the exclusion of another son whose mother spoke with God, will be bound by his father and from there lost to his mother, if not to the subsequent narrative. Jesus will be bound by divine father and secular authority, accompanied by his mother who is again silent. She who says “Do whatever he tells you” at the wedding feast, ends her voiced role there. The body of Jesus appears, then disappears, reappears until finally departing in a final ascension.

In many Christian traditions, Mary, too, is assumed into heaven in a dramatic promotion or ultimate banishment from the story of the people. Elevating Mary took her out of the sacred grounding in community that her story first included. Though she remains a figure to whom many believers turn, therefore offering companionship to those in sacred loneliness, something essential in her story is lost when she becomes a single beacon, the only woman without sin, an antidote to Eve, all things the history of interpretation has done. Replacing Mary with her kinswoman Elizabeth allows Mary to resonate with Sarah, with Rebekah, and with the prophets who also heard strange calls to do what was impossible to do. Embodiment poses difficulties as well as offers opportunities for the biblical narrators, and for interpreters seeking the meeting places of the sacred and the profane. The palpable irony in the matriarchal stories, rich in resonance with the biblical prophets, helps keep the impossibility present and the promise of fruitfulness in its place of mystery.

Irony, more than many literary devices, invites the listener into the discourse of the speaker — in the case of sacred promises, into the mind of God. Abraham Heschel wrote that the prophet understands the pathos of God, the pathos of the middle. Israel Knox expresses a similar view of irony: “The prophet’s irony is a way of telling the truth, of closing the gap between the human and divine perspective, of lessening and modulating the controversy between God and the people” (329). Irony requires that we consider the relationship between speaker and listener, between the different perspectives involved in ironic discourse. Relationship is central to the story of divinity and the people of scripture, however fractured and impotent the relationship shows itself repeatedly to be.

Sarah’s fear and laughter and Mary’s pondering and rejoicing show they both understand the pathos of the middle, instructed to move beyond barrenness and virginity and yet powerless to protect either the fruit of their womb or their own place in the history of covenant. Dualistic thinking will not help us understand matriar-

chal irony or the feminine divine. Sarah is *both* laughter in the tent *and* denial from fear. She is embodied in the story and entombed, an agent of naming and silent. She is always ever laughing in joy and laughing in disbelief. Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children? *God said this*. Sarah's laughter is her way of saying "My soul magnifies the Lord." If Mary is a more diplomatic listener to the sacred than Sarah, and perhaps a better poet, she does have the benefit of centuries of tradition and a kinswoman who plays an essential part.

The tomb and the tent remind us of the irony of divine enclosure, that the women of scripture, in providing a space for transformation, magnification and emergence, both lose and preserve their place. The biblical prophets gave birth into human speech the ways and thoughts of God. Sarah and Mary give birth to figures of covenant and then become minor characters, truly overshadowed by the divine. They give way to their sons who will carry great loads of tradition on their backs, the wood for burning, the wood for a punishing cross. Their magnification is problematic, due to the patriarchal resistance to feminine reproductive potential and matriarchal prophetic understanding. And if the prophets embody temporarily the word of God, these women also embody the word of God in a particular restatement of the covenant, and, temporarily, a child who further embodies the promise and the word of God. The women thereby spill out of enclosure, but in so doing lose their narrative place. Where the prophets get a book, the matriarchs go unnamed as such until the post-canonical period where we first read of "the matriarchs" as a group. A collective magnification has yet to take place. The mothers are called into a narrative of promises to the fathers, and give birth to other fathers, but also to poetic celebration, to the laughter of clever naming, to an awareness of their role as vessels, in body and in narrative, of the divine covenant.

The "annunciations" to Sarah and Mary and their responses to the divine voice are consistent with the narrative function and theological potential of prophecy but carry a different pregnancy to term as they create character in a family narrative. They listen and act in the patriarchal tent, at times blessed by deity for their disobedience as co-creators of a prophetic history (Rebekah, Sarah with Hagar, Rachel), at others chastised (as were Isaiah, Jonah and Job). However blessed they may be, they remain largely beyond the promised land of authoritative discourse (in exile with Eve and other women written out of the biblical and exegetical traditions). By listening to Sarah's joyful naming as well as her laughter in disbelief, to Mary's silent pondering and her tradition-laden *magnificat*, we can explore the broad range of matriarchal power and limitation within a history of covenant, the irony of being called to profane procreation and the call for a model of prophecy embedded in a narrative opening up to allow the feminine divine to spill out, to magnify and to be fruitful.

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Note

I am grateful to the CSB/SJU sabbatical program which allowed me to research this material in 2000-01. I am also deeply indebted to the St. Benedict's *Studium*, which provided me with office space during the fall of 2000, and whose members graciously offered me collegial support and a first audience for this essay in its earliest draft. A version of this paper was also presented to the Midwest Conference on Christianity and Literature, "Intersections of the Sacred & Profane," March 23-24, 2001, at Wheaton College and the University of Illinois-Chicago.