

# Re-centralizing the Woman: From Eve to Mary to Us

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## Introduction

Centuries of patriarchal readings have managed to cloud textual elements that are key to a proper understanding of the woman and her decisive role in salvation history. This paper will be an attempt to look at the biblical text and re-centralize the woman with respect to her relationship with God, His commitment to her and the fulfillment of His promises through Mary. The culmination of this history in Mary's experience offers us the fertile ground from which we shall attempt to glean relevant insights for women today.

### 1. God's commitment to the woman.

After her annunciation, Mary did not regard what had happened to her as an isolated private spiritual experience or a personal achievement but framed her conception as the fulfillment of the promise made to the patriarchs. This is shown in the closing of her song, the *Magnificat*:

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,<sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his seed [*mine*] forever. (Luk 1:54-55 NRSV)

Similarly, angel Gabriel presented this miraculous conception as the fulfillment of the promise given to King David in 2 Samuel 7.<sup>1</sup> The angel said to Mary:

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<sup>1</sup> The angel's wording seems to be borrowed from the Davidic promise that Nathan had announced to King David which is found in 2 Samuel 7:12-16:

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your *seed* [mine] after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.<sup>13</sup> He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. (NRSV)

In the *Magnificat* Mary seems to have *identified* the promise given to David about his "seed", whose fulfillment Gabriel had announced to her, with the promise given to Abraham about his "seed". It appears that, by Mary's time,

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> 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 ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” (Luk 1:30-33 NRSV)

You will have noted by now, that the promises understood to be fulfilled in Mary’s conception were promises about the seed of *fathers*, Abraham and David. Not much is said about mothers here. However, the Bible is not silent about the mothers of kings. When one reads the books of 1 and 2 Kings, one will note that the mothers of Judean kings—not Israelite kings—are given a unique focus in being mentioned.

Recent scholarship has shown that “the frequent mentioning of these mothers highlights the crystallising hope that the Messiah would be a future kingly offspring of the *woman*, a seed sown in Genesis 3:15.”<sup>2</sup> The frequency with which the author of 1 and 2 Kings mentions the Judean mothers “animates the hope that one of David’s offspring would be the serpent-crushing offspring of the woman. The true Judean line is marked by kings whose mothers’ names are given, literarily marking them as offspring of the woman.”<sup>3</sup> This way, scripture itself links the messianic promise for a Davidic king to the prophecy of the woman’s seed found in Genesis. In other words, the messiah *must* be identified as the anticipated offspring of the woman in order to be recognized as the messiah. “Offspring of the woman” is the primary textual messianic ascription preceding titles such as “son of Abraham” or “son of David”.

Why is this argument important? It is important because it shows how the promises about Abraham’s seed and David’s seed are *not* the beginning of the story. These promises are understood to be reiterations, or rather, elaborations on another promise much earlier than these: the promise about the seed of the woman. God’s initial commitment to save the world through His messiah was not a promise to fathers, Abraham and David, but primarily a commitment towards the woman, the mother. God sets out to mend the damages inflicted on Eve by the

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the promises given to Abraham were expected to be fulfilled through the royal line of David—they had become “messianic”. It was considered one and the same promise.

<sup>2</sup> Jesse Scheumann, “Mothers of Offspring in 1-2 Kings: A Messianic Hope in David’s Line?,” *Tyndale Bull.* 64, no. 2 (2013): 164.

<sup>3</sup> (Scheumann 2013), 176-177.

serpent and under this foundational commitment He enters into covenant with the aforementioned men.

God's initial plan is found in the third chapter of Genesis, after Eve and Adam had disobeyed God in the garden.<sup>4</sup> God curses the serpent for deceiving Eve, but in that curse a glimpse of hope stands out that will set history in motion:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel. (Gen 3:15)

It is important to see in these words that, although there is a rift now between God and the woman, there is no enmity between them. God's curse to the serpent—note that the woman is *not* cursed—reveals God's allegiance. He is on the woman's side and He declares that she will be given victory over her enemies through her "seed", *zera* (זֶרַע). Indirectly, the curse on the woman's enemy is a promise, a vow, a commitment of God to the woman. God binds Himself, through her "seed", to make up for the damages incurred at the serpent's attack, but as the disguised promise reveals, the victorious seed cannot exist apart from the woman and her physiology. The woman and *mothering* are the necessary components to salvation history.

Childbearing is an important theme, not only in the book of Genesis, but throughout the scriptures. Not only is it a necessary element to the fulfillment of the promise of God for the coming deliverer but it is additionally important for us as it is a unique physiological function *exclusive* to the woman. It is precisely this distinctiveness that is divinely endorsed.

The ability for childbearing is a glorified gift in the book of Genesis since it serves God's initial purposes for humanity "to be fruitful and multiply" and even after the fall, albeit with the consequences of pain and suffering, this unique female characteristic remains essential to God's purposes: the birthing of the coming "seed". Adam names the woman Eve before the expulsion from the garden for she is "the mother of all living," perhaps because he recognizes this special and eschatological role she is about to play in salvation history.

Later, we shall see that the "birthing" function is reinterpreted by the scriptures as going beyond the physical realm, but let us not dismiss the physical too quickly. It is the tangible

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<sup>4</sup> The first one to make the connection between Mary and Eve explicit was Justin Martyr (ca. 100-ca. 165). "While both were virgins, the latter [Eve] disobeyed God and conceived sin and death at hearing the serpent's word, and the former obeyed God and conceived life at hearing the angel's word." Tim Perry, *Mary for Evangelicals: Toward an Understanding of the Mother of Our Lord* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 129.

female body, flesh and blood and bones that is needed and more specifically, the body of a young unmarried woman in Palestine, two millennia ago.

Now that we have shown how salvation history begins with God's commitment to the woman in restoring the damages of the fall that is later expressed as a promise to the patriarchs, and having demonstrated the necessity of the female body in God's plans for salvation, it would be useful to reflect a bit on how the fulfillment of these in Mary's body is relevant for women today.

Mary's story must be set free to speak to the contemporary woman. We need to rescue Mary from the status of an antiquated relic. Often, the veneration of someone effectually removes them from the human sphere where they can be an attainable example to be imitated. Not in every detail, of course, but many aspects of Mary and her story can inspire and guide today's woman. I will mention a few that I find helpful which we can discuss further later.

## 2. The Female Body.

As scripture shows, salvation history cannot be brought about *apart* from the female body. The messiah, as the seed of the woman, chose *not* to exist apart from the woman's physiology. She is the mother of all living, not in any platonic understanding, but in a very tangible, messy, embarrassing, bloody, painful way. The election of the female body as an agent of salvation has elevated it to the stature of an eminent place, a holy place, a venerable place. This is one of the most crucial messages to be heeded by us women.

Today, the female body may be one of the most problematic areas of our times. For almost every woman I know, the female body that was deemed by God as desired, precious and most adequate for our world's life and salvation, is the one thing most of them find inadequate, undesirable, never completely accepted for what it is.

The female body is the third most profitable business in the world today. It is kidnapped, sold and disposed of. It is beaten, raped and starved. It is manipulated, airbrushed and almost forbidden to step out in public without the necessary products that will make it less embarrassing. Of course one can use products simply to accentuate beauty, but the statistics are staggering. I couldn't get to the European figures but currently, 80 percent of women in the U.S. are dissatisfied with their appearance, and more than 10 million are suffering from eating

disorders.<sup>5</sup> I am sure the state in Europe is analogous. How can we attend to this physical temple but at the same time without limiting the essence of our being to our physical bodies? Most importantly, how can we maintain the human body as the locus of salvation when it is this same body that often fails us with cancer, with handicaps, turning against us as our enemy, as the place where faith is mostly endangered and often lost?

### 3. Assessing humans.

Another crucial element of Mary's story is the fact that it is only through retrospect that we are now able to recognize the indescribable significance and the divine presence in this low class pregnant teenager. Had we been her contemporaries, we may have too easily condemned her or overlooked her importance. What does this say about us and our way of viewing the woman, the world in general?

Mary's story is a challenge to our modern capitalistic ways of assessing people and success. On a world scale, humanity is often divided among insignificant disposable labor force and those who run it. On the one hand we have the eminent Herods of this world, and on the other, the masses subject to the censuses and other interests of the world's economic and political powers. There is no other place where this world's values and criteria of success are more ridiculed than in the *Magnificat*:

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.<sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.  
(Luk 1:51 NRSV)

Mary's song stands in the old tradition of the *Song of Hannah* in the book of Samuel (1 Sam 2:1-10), another politically challenging song that inverts the world's values and follows another miraculous birth. Mikhail Bakhtin would call this literary technique of value inversion, a *carnavalesque*. So, "value inversion" is the distinctive of Mary and of any woman catalyst of salvation in our world. It is about penetrating the husk of reality and seeing the core, the essence. It is about ceasing to locate capital in the wrong places. We are not reading reality in the insecurity and fear of preserving the only value system we have been taught, in the manner of Herod. One is tempted to do so in a world of economic terrors, but this way of being is toxic and

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<sup>5</sup> Carly Coker Ross, MD, "Why Do Women Hate Their Bodies?" Cited on July 7, 2014, Internet: <http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2012/06/02/why-do-women-hate-their-bodies/>

murderous and barren. On the contrary, we read reality in the same way as we read the nativity: knowing what Herod does not know. We can *begin* with that knowledge as we read everyone around us: the pierced and tattooed teenager, the beggar in the street, the prostitute on the sidewalk, all carriers of divine life in their bodies.

#### 4. Birthing expanded

Mary's experience of the *miraculous* birth, as opposed to a natural birth, is also important because it lifts "birthing" outside the conventional category of the fertile married woman and opens possibilities of "birthing" beyond the restrictions of the laws of nature.<sup>6</sup> God was not restricted to the human norms or the proper conditions for birthing, but through this unique birthing of Mary, He demonstrates the availability of divine generative energy outside socially or biologically constricted limits. The categories of the single woman, the infertile woman, the childless widow, etc. would not be God's *secondary* choice as agents of birthing the new cosmos, but a *primary* choice (see e.g. Matthew's genealogy).

The metaphor of the unlikely birth is present throughout scripture, especially in the book of Isaiah: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive" (Isa 7:14), the barren woman will have more children than the married one (54:1), the eunuch will have his name carried over and remembered more than if he were to bear sons and daughters (56:4-5), the desert will turn into a fertile flower garden (35:1), the servant of the Lord, in giving his life to death, will paradoxically have many descendants (53:10). In the context of these unlikely but divine "impregnations" we see an element of the "value inversion" we spoke of earlier, but also, we find the redefinition of "birthing", or its expansion if you will. If we are all sons and daughters of the living God, not metaphorically but *actually*, through the death of the Messiah, then there is no force of nature, lack, weakness or handicap able to overcome any woman's ability to be an agent of life. Birthing goes beyond what our physical body can achieve.

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<sup>6</sup> The New Testament witness on Mary's virginity is not universal. The emphasis is absent in Paul, Mark and John. See (Perry 2006).

## 5. Ethics beyond the law

Lastly, there seems to be a distinctive form of ethics portrayed in the annunciation that we can learn from. An ethical response on behalf of Mary meant the loss of propriety. It casts her into a state of dangerous openness to hostile interpretations. Mary's call was an ethical call that seemed to rival social norms and community expectations. The confusion between sin and impropriety is evident in the text and in Joseph's dilemmas about Mary's presumed unfaithfulness. Mary's dangerous obedience seems to anticipate the nature of her son's ministry evident in incidents such as healing on the Sabbath. In the manner of his mother's obedience, Jesus performs a paradoxical life-giving *apparent* "breaking" of the law.

We now enter an important ethical sphere worthy of exploration where the socially unacceptable is radically distinguished from the sinful. The reverse can also be true. Sometimes following the socially acceptable, the proper, even the religiously lawful, is the sinful thing to do. In Mary's case true ethical response comes at a high cost: the loss of social acceptance, even the risk of death.

Ethical action may appear as violation of the law and obedience to God may challenge and threaten the authorities. Mary consented to carry in her womb the greatest religious and political threat in Herod's time. What does this mean for the woman of today? Numerous things. It means things such as taking over rescuing victims of human trafficking where the government fails to do so. It means challenging narrow and convenient definitions such as "illegal immigrant" and exposing unethical treatment of humans in the hands of the authorities, to name a few. It may also mean challenging one's own religious authorities when necessary.

Sometimes, in order to participate in the salvation of our communities we may risk strong criticism or even rejection from our own communities. Mary did not flinch at these ethical demands nor did she prefer to stick with the more convenient ethical model of the church going, uninvolved, submissive, risk-free and private way of being "righteous" (contra Joseph's first choice). Inconvenience and discomfort were, in fact, the signs of divine intervention and commission in her life. Mary's story makes the category of "inconvenient ethics" the standard against which our own ethics are measured.

## Conclusion

In Mary's role and experience we have seen the long-awaited culmination of God's commitment to the woman that her enemy would be defeated. Even though we are now looking back to this climactic moment in history, the story is not completed. The narrative is handed down to us and now we are the authors who will add the next chapters in the history of God's recreation of the world with women as His agents.

We are confident that God has committed Himself to the woman from the very beginning and *through* her fall. Her enemy will not have the last word for God has chosen sides. Since the foundations of the world God was and is on our side. "Be it unto us according to Your word."