

The Women of Genesis

Carroll Stuhlmueller C.P.

Have you ever, while watching a play, focused upon a minor player, for instance on one of the extras? These unimportant people try so hard! They keenly respond to each cue, flashing their eyes and arching their eyebrows, waving their arms and hands. Their hearts and souls beat with the rhythm of the drama. Yet the audience generally overlooks them. Without these extras in the play, the score would turn flat and lose its contact with the real world. Such are the women in Genesis, silent actors, always reacting, seldom the initiators (except for Rebekah in Genesis 27, where she shows what women are capable of achieving), yet essential to the narrative.

A Women's Theology

Do these women, silent actors or minor interlocutors, tell their own *feminine* biblical theology? Is such a theology legitimate and authentic? How can it be different, some may ask, from just plain biblical theology? People pose these same questions to challenge black theology or liberation theology or, if you wish, an American or a Cameroonian or any other African theology.

No one objects to four different gospel theologies and still another Pauline theology. Each stresses its own insights by careful selection and arrangement of material, so as to delineate different sets of lights and shadows, of colors and contours, in the portrait of Jesus. Each is writing with the special religious needs and cultural background of the Church that it is addressing—according to the Vatican II Constitution on Divine Revelation (no. 19).

The *full* truth about Jesus, according to what we read at the end of John's Gospel, defies any single, comprehensive, all-inclusive book or portrait (John 21:25). If Moses wore a veil over his face when addressing Israel, because of God's glory resplendent upon it (Exod 34:29-35), likewise each evangelist places a veil over the face of Jesus and refracts only a part of its human color and speech.

One of the ways by which the glory is filtered, in some way softened for us to gaze upon it, is by God's image being shared differently with men and women (Gen 1:27). Woman and man each communicates unique aspects of the mystery of God's redemptive presence in the Bible—for us here, in the Book of Genesis.

Likewise, artists and poets from different cultural and political experiences create the hundred and one statues and murals of Jesus, Mary, and the saints. The Peruvian artist Edilberto Miride sculpts and paints a Peruvian Jesus, who reaches out and walks

towards us with large, extended hands and feet. The hands shout for help against hunger and harassment; the feet run from injustice toward peace. The red smudge and spasm of open mouth convulse with Jesus' agony in the soil of Peru.

I have been crucified with Christ. . . . Yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me. (Gal 2:19-20)

Jesus is no longer simply a Palestinian inhabitant. Jesus blends into the cry of pain in Peru, or into African soil within the silent, suffering black people of the way of the cross within the archbishop's chapel at Bamenda, Cameroon.

Whether we read the Gospels from the distinctive theological and cultural expressions of Mark or John, or from the works of artists in Peru and Cameroon, we find the same Jesus, but with different views of faith shining from the multifaceted, divine person of the Word made flesh. We have a similar rewarding experience, theologically and pastorally, in reading Genesis for the woman's presence. The search in this article is indeed through a man's eyes; a woman's eyes will see still other views and write a different article about woman's presence in Genesis.

Women at Crucial Moments: Genesis 10 and 11

All of chapter 10 and the second part of chapter 11 quickly and symbolically span world history as well as world geography from the end of the great flood to the appearance of Abram and Sarai. Later their names are changed to Abraham and Sarah (Gen 17:5, 15).

Genesis 10-11 twists our tongue with names like Arpachshad, Peleg, Hazarmaveth, Reu, and Sarug. All but the third are ancestors in a line that leads to Terah, the father of Nahor and Abraham (11:26). Each stands symbolically for a city or an extended family or tribe, just as in later history Abraham's grandson Jacob represents all Israel (Isa 2:3,5; Hos 12:3), and every believer is an offspring of Abraham and Sarah (Gal 3:29; 4:28-31).

Not a single woman is named in this sweep through world history. It would seem that men alone, by some asexual, solitary means, begot and raised children!

Women enter the story of salvation silently and passively, never for their own sake, always in relation to their husbands or fathers. Yet the sacred tradition tucks a profound theological truth in between the words:

Abram and Nahor took wives, . . . Sarai [and] Milcah. . . . Sarai was barren; she had no children. Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot, the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and brought them out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to go to the land of Canaan. (Gen 11:29-31)

In this passage of Genesis, women, to our surprise, are signaling from afar a key aspect

of biblical theology. In fact, as women, once sterile yet by God's power begetting the promised offspring, they become key types of disciples across the entire Bible. Paul expressed it this way:

God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something, so that no human being might boast before God. (I Cor 1:27-29)

In Genesis, women typify what is one of the most common motifs of salvation in the Gospels: "Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" (Matt 19:30).

From Prehistory to Salvation History

As we move from chapters 10 and 11 into chapter 12 of Genesis, we migrate from the wide range of world prehistory, a time before recorded events and detailed accounts, into the arena of history. Yet the Bible is never interested solely in history but in its theological features important for salvation and worship. God directs Abraham and Sarah to settle in the land of Canaan. This land becomes the land of promise and as such looms with prominence in world salvation:

"Go forth from the land of your kinfolk and from your ancestral house to a land that I will show you. [There] I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you. . . . All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you." (Gen 12:1-3)

In obedience, "Abram took his wife Sarai [and] his brother's son Lot [and] set out for the land of Canaan" (12:5).

Is it coincidental, we ask, that women remain in bleak non-presence until the Bible moves dramatically into salvation history? Hardly! What counts is not generation after generation but rather generations that lead to a family of God's chosen people, bearers of blessing to all the world. God declares to those of us with ears to hear (Matt 13:16-17), that woman's presence marks the beginning of salvation in the Hebrew Scriptures as well as at the beginning of the Gospel (Luke 1:2). We become the children of Abraham and Sarah, whom God raises up from stones, that is, from distant, seemingly lifeless material (Matt 3:9).

Offspring to Abraham and Sarah seemed just as impossible as raising up heirs from stones. "Sarai," we are informed in a single, short verse, "was barren; she had no child" (Gen 11:30). The couple agonized over this sorrow, as we read repeatedly in Genesis 15:3; 16:1-2; 17:15-16; 18:9-15. Sarah becomes pregnant only in Genesis 21:1, at the advanced age of ninety (Gen 17:17). Here begins the long biblical tradition, that the promised life was a very special gift from God, beyond human hopes and human ability.

When all seems lost, God inspires us to be men and women like Abraham and Sarah, "hoping against hope... for what we do not see, [waiting] with [patient] endurance"

(Rom 8:18, 25).

The prophecy of Isaiah in chapter 54 contains a long poem of life beyond seeming annihilation, the reward promised to Israel's and our own "patient endurance." The poem absorbs strength from the example of Abraham and Sarah, as we read in another poem:

Look to Abraham, your father,
and to Sarah, who gave you birth...
Yes, the lord shall comfort Zion
and have pity on her ruins. (Isa 51:2-3)

Sarah symbolizes those many moments when God transforms the ruins of what is humanly impossible into an achievement divinely possible. Faith breaks through the barrenness of human helplessness. While men *seem* to be the main actors, women actually communicate the message of faith and hope at the heart of Genesis.

Woman: Wife and/or Sister. Genesis 12, 20, 26

The phrases *patient endurance* and *hoping against hope* sustain us from giving up on the Bible, as we read three disconcerting chapters in Genesis. The patriarch states to a foreign ruler that his beautiful wife is actually his sister and then gives this cowardly and greedy reason to his wife: "that it may go well with me on your account and my life may be spared for your sake" (Gen 12:13; 20:2,11; 26:7).

In all three cases, the woman silently acquiesces (in the culture of the time there was no way that she could defend herself), and she witnesses the moral flabbiness of the man. In the third incident, the pagan king confronts the patriarch: "How could you do this to us? . . . you would have thus brought guilt upon us" (Gen 26:10). We meet the paradox of the patriarchs, the source of salvation to the world, being instructed by the world about basic morality in marriage!

The woman in these incidents is not only protected by God but also becomes the means of proclaiming to the world that God does not tolerate for long the serious injustices inflicted by culture and politics upon defenseless people.

Woman: Schemer and Leader. Genesis 16, 21 and 27

In reading Genesis for the woman's presence, we come upon a portrait of woman, strong and decisive, scheming and plotting, not so much to defend herself as to further the promises of salvation. These vignettes show woman in strong contrast to man, who often appears weak, indecisive, and sinful.

There is no space here to develop the portrait of such stalwart women as Hagar, the mother of Ishmael and of the Arab nations (Gen 16; 21:9-21), and Rebekah, the mother who secures the birthright for Jacob against the twin son Esau (Gen 27). These women are by no means perfect. Sarah stirs with mad jealousy against Hagar, mother of Abraham's first son, and Hagar in turn snubs the barren Sarah. Rebekah has Jacob dress to feel like Esau to the blind Isaac. Yet these faults pale in comparison with those of the men.

Women show up as strong, energetic, and determined persons— qualities that are generally submerged and lost within the story that centers on men. The same contrast shows up as we put Mary side by side with Zechariah in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel. The question comes to mind: How would the Old Testament account have to be re-written, had it been told from a woman's perspective?

Conclusion: So Sarah Laughed

When the visitors announced that Sarah in her advanced age would conceive and bear a healthy son, the text adds: "So Sarah laughed" (Gen 18:12). More than once Sarah must have had the last laugh against Abraham and their descendants. She must smile in heaven, as she looks down to see that her helplessness announces that the last will be first, that her barrenness becomes the symbol of divine fertility in peopling the kingdom of God, that her honor and dignity are preserved against the dishonorable, moral weakness of men.

Smiles turn into sour humor in the face of tragedy and injustice. Yet such humor sustains us over difficult times and preserves our hopes against all odds. Reading Genesis for the woman's presence enables us to perceive what Jesus and Paul announce as essential to salvation.