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Narrating Motherhood in the Hebrew Scriptures

Old Testament theology, like many of its sister disciplines, is an area of study, which brings with it a problematic history. Moving through various approaches, from systematic to narrative, Old Testament theology has often excluded voices, which have traditionally been viewed as “Other.” Thankfully, the budding narrative approach, which seeks to trace the development of the character called God in the Hebrew Scriptures, may create space for more voices to enter into the conversation. Divorced from many of the troubling consequences of the earlier phases of Old Testament theology, this approach allows for a more in-depth exploration of topics often ignored, such as Motherhood. In examining the Divine Character’s behavior toward mothers—both literal and figurative—throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, specifically Eve, Hagar, Sarah, and finally Esther as the figurative Mother, we are able to trace the development of the Divine Character’s relationship to Motherhood...and in doing this, we can potentially uncover the role this character called God plays in the conception of what it means to be woman in the Hebrew Scriptures.

While the use of a narrative approach—an approach which considers a developing Divine Character rather than a fixed one—is relatively new within the overall history of Old Testament theology, perhaps one its most exciting advantages is that it may make room for a greater diversity of voices to enter into the conversation. As more voices are heard within the discipline, more topics can be examined. For example, a narrative approach allows us to use a feminist lens to investigate the concept of Motherhood in the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly the Divine Character’s attitude toward it. In observing the development of the Divine

Character's behavior towards mothers like Eve, Hagar, Sarah, (and even Esther as a figurative Mother), we can begin to more thoroughly construct an understanding of this Divine Character's potentially shifting relationship to Motherhood as a whole. Having done that, it is then possible to reveal the role this character plays in the conception and development of what it means to be woman in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Before tracing the development of the Divine Character, a clarification must first be made regarding the naming of God—not within the narrative, but as this character is discussed outside of the text. Fran Porter writes,

“These ways of thinking about God, as either possessing both feminine and masculine characteristics or as having a feminine dimension, are attempts at understanding God through the lens of humanity, which is both female and male. But this lens is one which sees women and men in dualistic relationship, that is, that identifies men with certain masculine characteristics... and values these over women and feminine-identified characteristics...These views of God mirror at divine level a human patriarchal gendered division.”¹

Especially for the purpose of analyzing the Divine Character's relationship to mothers and women in general, the use of gender-neutral pronouns, such as *they*, *them*, and *their*, to refer to the God character is most appropriate.

In exploring the Divine Character's relationship to individual mothers in the Hebrew Scriptures as a way of tracing God's role in the crafting of Motherhood as a whole within the

¹ Fran Porter, *It Will Not Be Taken Away from Her: A Feminist Engagement with Women's Christian Experience* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 2004), 46.

text, Eve is the logical starting point, as she is both the first woman and the first mother in the story. Even before Eve becomes a *biological* mother, her name suggests that she represents Motherhood. The English translation of her naming in the *NRSV* says, “The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living.”² According to a medieval commentator known as Rashi, the English translation of this name loses many “life” associations and may gain unwarranted ties to the concept of “evil.” The Hebrew name for the first woman and mother in the Torah is Chavah. In his discussion of the phrase found in Genesis 3:20—“the mother of all life”—Rashi says that “the name Chavah is a derivative of the Hebrew word *chayah*, meaning ‘living one.’”³ With this in mind, Sara Esther Crispe suggests, “Chavah embodies both the essence of life itself and the creative ability to grant that life to others.” Eve’s name, then, according to Crispe, represents “the ability of a mother—to take something from the state of potential, develop it, and bring it to actualization through her creative abilities....Chavah is not only the mother of life but also represents the experience of life.”⁴ This understanding of Eve’s name adds a rich strength to her role in the Divine Character’s creation; however, Fran Porter also notes that “viewing women primarily as child-bearers and mothers restricts all women in their human potential.”⁵ While the naming of Eve is certainly important in understanding the creation and development of the Mother figure and Motherhood in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is

² *NRSV*, Gen. 3:20.

³ Sara Esther Crispe, “Chavah: Mother of All Life,” *Jewish Traditions and Mitzvah Observances*, February 10, 2006, https://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/335943/jewish/Chavah-Mother-of-All-Life.htm.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Fran Porter, *It Will Not Be Taken Away From Her: A Feminist Engagement with Women’s Christian Experience* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 2004), 92.

equally important to recognize that the Divine Character does not bestow this name upon her; Adam names her. God's absence in this moment may suggest, moving forward in the plot, that it is not the Divine Character who seeks to align Motherhood with being woman, but man who forces this merging.

After considering the Divine Character's role in the first woman's naming as it relates to the concept of being Mother, an analysis of God's creation of biological motherhood, more specifically, their crafting of the act of child-bearing, provides insight into the Divine Character's attitude(s) toward Eve and their initial relationship to motherhood. As God prepares to exile the first man and woman from the Garden of Eden in the narrative, God says to the woman, "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children."⁶ This moment, when God reveals the pain of childbirth to Eve, often causes readers and scholars alike to interpret the pain that comes with giving birth as a punishment from God—Eve disobeys God by eating fruit from the tree of knowledge, so God punishes her by making childbirth a painful experience.⁷ When this passage is interpreted as punishment, three suggestions are made regarding the Divine Character, particularly as the Divine Character relates to women and mothers. First, God appears to be a vindictive character who treats Eve harshly. Second, the Divine Character is presented as excessive and unreasonable in their extension of the punishment to all women—again, this piece is not explicitly found in the text itself, but in the popular interpretation of it. Third, if God intends to punish all women for Eve's

⁶ *NRSV*, Gen. 3:16.

⁷ Nicola Hoggard Creegan, "Women, Status Of," in *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, ed. Joel B. Green, 842-845, (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2011).

disobedience by making *childbirth* painful, an assumption must be made that God conflates the concepts of “woman” and “mother” in this passage.

This is one very popular interpretation of Eve’s story; however, there may be room for an alternative interpretation, which presents the Divine Character in a more nuanced light and undercuts the suggestion that God’s initial attitude towards Motherhood is vengeful. Stacia Guzzo suggests the following possibility: what is meant by “pain” in this passage is actually “sorrow.” This completely changes the context of the interaction between the God and Eve. Perhaps, this passage does not feature a *vindictive* God, but a God who *wishes to warn* this soon-to-be mother about what is to come now that she has eaten and “knows.” Guzzo writes, “Childbirth would bring about sorrow—perhaps, seen in the larger context, because none of Eve’s offspring would ever have the same experience of God and of the land that she and Adam experienced prior to their disobedience.”⁸ In this interpretation, the Divine Character is almost sorrowful *with* Eve; and the extension of the situation to future generations of mothers is set in a new context, as well. Instead of displaying an excessive conflation of “mother” and “woman,” the Divine Character recognizes that for those who do give birth to children in the future, it will be hard for the mothers to watch their children suffer. This alternative interpretation of God’s first utterance of motherhood depicts the Divine Character as deeply empathic towards Eve and potentially all future mothers.

The rest of Eve’s story post-exile features very little interaction between Eve and the Divine Character. In fact, Eve is rarely mentioned after being banished from the Garden. The

⁸ Stacia Guzzo, “The ‘Curse of Eve’—Is Pain Our Punishment? Part I,” *Feminism and Religion*, February 07, 2012, <https://feminismandreligion.com/2012/02/07/the-curse-of-eve-is-pain-our-punishment-part-i>.

only direct interactions between God and Eve throughout the rest of the story occur in relation to her child-bearing. This is where we begin to see a development in the Divine Character's attitude towards Eve. Aside from her role as child-bearer, God seems fairly *uninterested* in her. Upon conceiving her first child, Eve says, "I have produced a man with the help of the Lord."⁹ Eve's dialogue here suggests that the Divine Character has played some role in the conception of Cain, but despite having another son, Abel, and becoming a mother of two boys, there is no direct interaction between God and Eve until after Cain kills Abel. The Divine Character's looming absence throughout the majority of Eve's motherhood may reveal more about them (God) than do their brief moments of imminence during the conceptions and births of her children. Paula Nicolson notes that despite "the prominence of motherhood as a social institution, and the almost universal expectation that women will become mothers, the everyday reality of mothering is frequently invisible."¹⁰ Eve is the first example of a mother in the Hebrew Scriptures whose life is seemingly invisible to the Divine Character outside of her child-bearing, which suggests that God may only value her for her fertility. After Eden, the narrative crafts a portrait of a God who views and uses Eve as merely an incubator.

The only other mention of God in relation to Eve in the narrative—when Eve gives birth to her third son, Seth, and says, "God has appointed for me another child instead of Abel because Cain killed him"¹¹—does potentially depict the Divine Character as someone who cares for her. After losing a child, especially knowing he suffered at his end, Eve is ostensibly in pain.

⁹ NRSV, Gen. 4:1.

¹⁰ Paula Nicolson, "Motherhood and Women's Lives," in *Introducing Women's Studies*, ed. Victoria Robinson and Diane Robinson, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), 376.

¹¹ NRSV, Gen. 4:25.

Only then does God intervene in any way. On one hand, it seems appropriate to characterize God as retroactive and insensitive at best. On the other hand, this moment may harken back to God's words to Eve before they banished her from the Garden. Eve's experience of motherhood can certainly be characterized by pain and loss, and both may be at the hand of the Divine Character in some ways; however, Eve credits God with the conception of her third son, Seth, who she sees as a replacement for Abel after he is murdered. This may be God's way of providing comfort. Yet, the question cannot be ignored: where was God when Abel was still alive? In the grand scheme of the narrative, the Divine Character does not appear to be incredibly involved in Eve's life as a woman, especially post-exile, or even as a daily mother raising her children; however, the Divine Character is often directly involved in the birth of Eve's children. In the beginning of the overarching plot of the Hebrew Scriptures, it is reasonable to conclude that the Divine Character is most concerned with the beginning stages of motherhood in which new life is produced. The question as the plot progresses, then, is whether or not the Divine Character values mothers for anything *beyond* fertility.

The story of Hagar, especially the first half of her story in Genesis 16, before she births Ishmael, sheds light on the development of the Divine Character's relationship to motherhood as God crafts the ideal mother to be self-sacrificial. Unable to conceive a child of her own, Sarai gives Hagar, her handmaid, to her husband, Abram, so that Hagar may conceive a child on her behalf. Though the exact interaction between Sarai and Hagar following Hagar's conception of a child is unclear, tensions between the two women are heightened. As a result, Genesis 16:6 says, "Sarai dealt harshly with [Hagar], and [Hagar] ran away from her." Here, Theodore Hiebert

notes, “*Dealt harshly* translates the same verb used for the Egyptians’ ‘oppression’ of the Israelites” in Genesis 15:13 and in Exodus 1:11.¹²

After running away from Sarai, Hagar’s first encounter with the Divine in the wilderness appears less direct than that of Eve’s encounters with the Divine Character earlier in the Book of Genesis. Instead of featuring the Divine Character themselves, the narrator presents the reader with a divine *mediator* to talk to Hagar. Genesis 16:7 says, “The angel of the LORD found [Hagar] by a spring of water in the wilderness.” The divine mediator, the angel of the Lord, asks Hagar where she is going, and Hagar responds, “I am running away from my mistress Sarai.”¹³ Instead of consoling her, the divine mediator says, “Return to your mistress, and submit to her.”¹⁴ As an extension of the Divine Character, the messenger’s brief command translates as a cold response from the Lord, furthering the idea that this Divine Character has little concern for a mother’s life beyond bearing children.

Furthermore, there is an added suggestion in this passage that to be mother is to sacrifice oneself. In Hagar’s case, the sacrifice is her submission to Sarai. Her only reward for this sacrifice is a multiplicity of descendants. Hagar is told, “I will so greatly multiply our offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.”¹⁵ While this is more divine involvement than is seen in Eve’s story, once again, this reward is not focused on *Hagar* as an individual Self; it’s focused on her offspring. In offering this multitude of descendants as a consolation prize for

¹² Theodore Herbert, “Genesis,” in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, ed. Walter J. Harrelson, 1st ed., 12 vols., The New Interpreter’s Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 33.

¹³ *NRSV*, Gen. 16:8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, v. 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, v. 10.

the suffering Hagar must endure as Sarai's handmaid, the Divine Character reveals their expectation that Hagar, as a mother, lives for the world rather than for herself. The reward is one which she will never get to see, and the implication is made by the Divine Character that *this is Motherhood*.

After offering this (communal) consolation prize, the angel tells Hagar about her son's life, revealing the candor of the Divine Character. The angel says, "Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the LORD has given heed to your affliction."¹⁶ Hiebert suggests, that the name chosen by the Divine Character, "*Ishmael*, meaning 'God hears,' indicates that God has recognized and responded to Hagar's plight."¹⁷ The angel continues, saying, "[Ishmael] shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin."¹⁸ This discussion of the difficulties of Ishmael's life to his mother echoes the words spoken by the Divine Character to Eve earlier in the Book of Genesis. Once again, the divine presence offers only harsh reality to this expecting mother.

However, just when the reader is crafting a depiction of the Divine Character as harsh, cold, unfair, and potentially apathetic towards Hagar's real plight, Hagar subverts this understanding by moving past the mediator and boldly naming the Divine Character "El-roi,"

¹⁶ Ibid., v. 11.

¹⁷ Theodore Herbert, "Genesis," in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, ed. Walter J. Harrelson, 1st ed., 12 vols., The New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 34.

¹⁸ NRSV, Gen. 16:12.

which means “God who sees.”¹⁹ This suggests that there has been a direct interaction between Hagar and the Divine Character, and if Hagar’s naming of the Divine Character implies that God has seen *her*, as opposed to merely Ishmael’s future, the name, then, suggests that this encounter has been comforting in some way to Hagar. Similar to the honesty with which the Divine Character speaks to Eve when preparing her for the world to come, perhaps the Lord’s candor regarding Ishmael’s future hardships can be interpreted as an attempt to prepare Hagar. Perhaps the Divine Character has, in fact, seen Hagar and her plight. While Hagar’s shock in response to seeing God and still being “alive”²⁰ may demonstrate that Hagar has previously understood the Divine Character as dangerous in some way, her naming of the desert well, which translates to “the Well of the Living One who sees me,” indicates that Hagar feels like she, *herself*, has been seen by God.²¹ Additionally, Hagar’s courage in naming the Divine Character suggests that she understands their relationship as equal after this encounter. In discussing the possibility of a female discourse, Gilbert and Gubar suggest that women must “achieve a command over language...through strategies of unnamings and renamings” because, as Derrida asserts, names indicate place.²² Extending this in a literal sense to Hagar’s act of naming reveals her belief that she has room within this relationship to hold some level of power. By naming the Divine Character, Hagar validates her felt value within their relationship.

¹⁹ Theodore Herbert, “Genesis,” in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, ed. Walter J. Harrelson, 1st ed., 12 vols., The New Interpreter’s Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 34.

²⁰ *NRSV*, Gen 16:13.

²¹ Theodore Herbert, “Genesis,” in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, ed. Walter J. Harrelson, 1st ed., 12 vols., The New Interpreter’s Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 34.

²² Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, “Sexual Linguistics: Women’s Sentence, Men’s Sentencing,” in *No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 1, *The War of the Words* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988), 237.

Hagar's feeling seen and valued, combined with the candor of the divine mediator may suggest some level of concern for Hagar in her motherhood after child-birth; however, at this point in the narrative, the text has provided no evidence of personal value attributed to Hagar as an individual in the world beyond the signifier of "mother." Furthermore, in examining the Divine Character's relationship to motherhood in the first half of Hagar's story following the conception of Ishmael, but prior to his birth, God's attitude towards motherhood appears to be more explicitly sacrificial than in Eve's story. Overall, the first half of Hagar's story appears to mark a preliminary shift from motherhood to Motherhood.

The second half of Hagar's story, which continues in Genesis 21, following the birth of Ishmael displays the Divine Character's new interest and involvement in the life of a mother after childbirth; however, this concern for her life is undercut by God's choice to reward Ishmael rather than Hagar herself, which ultimately belittles Hagar as an individually valued Self outside of her role as mother and beyond her association to her male son. Hagar's second direct encounter with the Divine Character in the wilderness occurs after (the newly named) Sarah becomes angered watching Ishmael and her son, Isaac, play together. As a result, Sarah instructs Abraham to "cast out"²³ Hagar and Ishmael, which God encourages. Genesis 21:14-16 says,

"And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off...[and] said, 'Do not let me look on the death of this child.' ...She lifted up her voice and wept."

²³ NRSV, Gen 21:10.

In this passage, Hagar cries out, presumably to God, suggesting some level of trust in the Divine Character. After she asks for divine intervention, the narrator states that God does not respond to *her* cry, but hears “the voice of the boy.”²⁴ Once again, this is an example of the Divine Character treating a mother like she is invisible after childbirth until hearing the voice of the male son. After God hears the voice of the boy, Genesis 21:7-18 continues the narrative saying,

“the angel of God called to Hagar...[and] said to her, ‘What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and...I will make a great nation of him.’ Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.”

Similar to the shift in divine voice during Hagar’s first divine encounter, this pericope features a change in divine presence from mediator to God, themselves. While not *all* dialogue shared is direct, by the end of the section, there is direct behavior toward this mother on the part of the Divine Character. However, once again, they treat Hagar as a mere extension of her son rather than an individual valued beyond the limited role of mother. Hagar is told to lift up her son and God will make a great nation of him. Despite the direct interaction, Hagar’s salvation becomes her child’s salvation, the world’s salvation. She is not even merely “mother” in search of water for her thirsty son; she is Mother, sacrificing her Self for a great nation, a reward she will never be able to see. The end of Hagar’s story is not even her own—God stays with the boy, and Hagar disappears from the narrative altogether.

This disappearance of the individual mother in the eyes of the Divine Character for the sake of the greater community continues to develop and becomes more prevalent as the plot progresses. Though their contexts may have pitted these women against each other, Hagar and

²⁴ Ibid., v. 7.

Sarah have similar stories and similar relationships to the Divine Character in that God values each mother as a vessel built to produce a great nation. Like Eve, neither woman is valued beyond her child-bearing abilities. Together, their sacrifices form a picture of idealized Motherhood as the Divine Character has encouraged. Sarai waits her entire life to have a child, and in that waiting, is subjected to deep shame as she is unable to fulfill her societal duty as woman, a duty that the Divine Character may have reinforced in Eve's story. Once the Divine Character finally does allow Sarai to conceive, they change her name to Sarah, elevating value and status—*for her child-bearing*. When God tells Abram that they will bless her and she will one day give rise to the nations,²⁵ as if all of this sacrifice should be worth the end result, the Divine Character crafts motherhood as something inherently sacrificial; and like with Hagar, all of the “benefits” of this sacrificial life are not for Sarah. The compensation prize is never for the mother, but for the greater community, recalling the meaning of the name of the first mother in the story—Eve or Chavah—the mother of life, the experience of life. As the plot moves forward, the difference in the Divine Character's relationship to these individual mothers is that this character appears to see, hear, and acknowledge each mother less than the one prior; and as they do this, they reinforce each mother as a mere extension of her son. Each mother seemingly disappears once her son is able to interact with God. There is a pattern of fading value that becomes stronger as the overall plot progresses.

Throughout the overarching narrative of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Divine Character reinforces the concept of the ideal Mother—mainly that she is self-sacrificial as she lives entirely for that which is beyond her Self (usually a community)—until idealized Motherhood

²⁵ Gen. 17:15-16.

becomes the definition of ideal Woman; yet, this Divine Character does not appear to value these same qualities in “Woman,” which they expect in “Mother.” The Divine Character expects Sarai, who is Woman, to live into Mother—their idealized Motherhood—before becoming a biological mother. The lengthy narrative almost crafts a picture of a God who demands that this woman prove she can live into Motherhood in order to become a biological mother; this conflation seeks to minimize women in the biblical text, particularly when only the biological mothers are noticed. Women who construct themselves and Mothers, but do not have children, are almost entirely ignored by the Divine Character. For example, God is almost completely, if not completely, absent from the Book of Esther,²⁶ which features a strong woman who is made to be hero by essentially constructing herself as a representative of Mother for her community. In conflating Woman and Mother while only *acknowledging* Mother during a period of *biological* importance, the Divine Character neglects every woman in the text, biologically involved in motherhood or not. As the Divine Character pays less attention to mothers engaging in this larger Motherhood, which God reinforces throughout the progression of the plot, it becomes clear that the Divine Character only values “Woman” when “Woman” translates to “Mother” and “Mother” only lasts so long after child-birth. Ultimately, as the overarching plot progresses, the Divine Character’s interest and involvement in Motherhood after child-birth decreases until it disappears almost entirely.

²⁶ Joyce G. Baldwin, *Esther: An Introduction and Commentary*, (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 36.