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A theology of daughterhood:
The challenges of modern biology to theology today

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Although there are many challenges of modern biology to theology today, perhaps the most striking change that has affected human life (*bios*) is the phenomenon of mass ageing that has occurred over the last century. For example, in 1917 just 24 people received 100th birthday messages from the monarch in the UK, whilst in 2011 there were 9,376. No longer do we expect to live for three score years and ten (Ps 90:10), but we soon will count ourselves unlucky if we do not reach one hundred. This phenomenon has led to the development of a whole field of modern biology: understanding longevity and characterising what has been termed 'successful ageing' (Baltes & Carstensen 1996). But beyond the study of mechanisms and determinants of longevity and health in later life, mass ageing has important social impacts that are inextricably linked to our understanding of a healthy or successful old age (sociobiology). Not least of these impacts is that of dependency and the need for care of aged populations. Although survival of so many people into their ninth and tenth decades of life has major implications for formal structures of care or support provided by a welfare state, the implications for so-called informal care are even greater. The generic term 'informal care' is an impersonal term for a web of personal relationships, one of the most important of which is that between elderly parents and their daughters. Indeed, since the year 2000, a woman is more likely to be caring for an elderly relative than for a child. In Scotland, 17% of those aged fifty to sixty-four years are carers, 60% of whom are women (Scottish Government 2015, 12). The social role of many women has clearly shifted from one of motherhood to that of daughterhood.

This shift in the social role of these women from motherhood to daughterhood is one that challenges our theological thinking in the twenty-first century. In terms of family relationships, we have well-developed paradigms for fatherhood, motherhood and sonship; but we lack a suitably developed theology of daughterhood. Fatherhood is strongly modelled biblically both in the Pentateuch and in the New Testament texts where Jesus relates to God (*Theos*) as 'Father' or '*Abba*'. Similarly, sonship is reciprocally portrayed in the same New Testament pericopes (e.g. the prodigal son) and in Paul's understanding of God's adoption of Jesus' followers as 'sons' (Gal 4:5). The Bible, as a male-dominated text, provides fewer examples of motherhood, though there are several examples in the Pentateuch, as well as the depiction of Mary in the New Testament and even of God as a mother hen (Matt 23:37). The latter was developed into the concept of 'Mother Church' by Ante-Nicene Fathers such as Tertullian and Cyprian, and has led to a special celebration of Motherhood on Mothering Sunday. When, however, we turn to seek for models of daughterhood for adult women, we will have difficulty in identifying any biblically-informed tradition. And in the absence of a model, women will tend to fall back on the available model of motherhood to frame their social role in a way which may frequently be inappropriate. A theology of daughterhood offers a new approach to meet one of the major challenges that modern biology presents.

In this essay I collate biblical and other data that might inform an initial formulation of a theology of daughterhood relevant to the situation to which modern biology has led. Although I set this in the context of the extensive scholarship on feminist and other gender-based theologies (e.g. Schüssler Fiorenza 1995), it is beyond the scope of this essay to survey this literature. From the discipline of biblical studies two texts are especially germane: Johanna Stiebert's *Fathers and Daughters in the Hebrew Bible* (2013) and Sharon Betsworth's socio-literary analysis of daughters in the Gospel of Mark (2010). Both these texts, however, are of limited assistance in that they focus on daughters as children, i.e. in a dependent relationship to a parent (usually the father). Stiebert brings out three main themes in her survey: the honour-shame value system; the significance and limitations of the Roman corpus in illuminating father-daughter relationships in

the Hebrew Bible; and the semantic range of 'patriarchy' found in Hebrew texts (208). The latter theme is particularly pertinent to the relationship between fathers and adult daughters; Stiebert concludes that there is, in fact, a variety of power relationships and that women are not 'invariably subordinated' (229).

Biblical texts on daughterhood

Despite the biblical focus on male family relationships and women as mothers, there are some textual resources that can inform a theology of daughterhood and provide a foundation on which we can build. The lemma '*daughter*' (Hebrew, Greek) is used 330 times in the Bible, including the Apocrypha, though four of these relate to a granddaughter relationship (daughter's daughter, Lev 18:10, 17). There are also nineteen instances of the lemma '*daughter-in-law*'. 'Daughter' is often used to identify someone in terms of her relationship to her father (e.g. Gen 11:29; 25:20; 26:34) or mother (e.g. Gen 30:21; 36:39; 2 Sam 17:25) or as a person to be acted upon (e.g. Lev 19:29; Deut 18:10) especially in terms of being given in marriage (e.g. Josh 15:16; 1 Sam 18:19). There is also a formulaic use in Hebrew poetry: 'daughter Zion' (Ps 9:14; Isa 1:8; etc) or similar constructions (e.g. 'daughter Babylon', Ps 137:8; 'daughter Gallim', Isa 10:30; 'daughter Sidon', Isa 23:12; 'daughter Judah', Lam 2:5) which are not directly concerned with a daughter's personal relationship with a parent. This leaves a few examples in which an adult woman has an active role with regards to a parent: Leah, Rachel, Achsah, Esther and Sarah. We might also include examples where the woman is a daughter-in-law: Tamar and Ruth. The relationship may be considered as identical to that with a natural parent, as in Tobit 10:12 where Sarah is entreated to 'honour your father-in-law and your mother-in-law, since from now on they are as much your parents as those who gave you birth.' It might also be possible to extend the role of 'daughter' to other biblical figures, such as Abishag's relationship with King David (1 Kgs 1:3–4), but this would beg the question of how to define the role of daughterhood: Abishag's role, for example, is described as 'being of use'. At this preliminary stage, however, it would be prudent to restrict inquiry to those women whose roles are defined by family relationship.

This, then, brings us to the fourth commandment. This includes both sons and daughters and provides a general context for child-parent relationships, but is not gender-specific. From this, one might go on to argue that gender-specific perspectives are no longer relevant insofar as there is neither male nor female in Christ (Gal 3:28), and that whatever is said about sonship applies equally to daughterhood. It might be possible to maintain this with regard to the relationship of humans as partakers in the divine, but it fails to recognize the fact that human relationships are gendered in creation (Gen 1:27). Hence, the gender-specific aspects of biblical daughter-parent relationships become of prime importance in constructing a theology of daughterhood.

Leah, Rachel and just relationships

The story of Leah, Rachel, Laban and Jacob (Gen 29:1–32:1) illustrates the attitude of parental possessiveness towards daughters (Gen 31:43) where this unequal relationship turns them into objects no different from Laban's other possessions. But Rachel's action in appropriating Laban's household gods, which act as the legal title (Speiser 1964, 250f.), restores equality of relationship and thus justice where people are restored to the status of human beings rather than things (Weil 1951, 87). Rachel is supported by Leah (Gen 31:14). Notably, this restoration is only possible, almost farcically, because Rachel is a woman and hides the household gods underneath herself during her period. Although later Levitical law would denote this space as unclean, here it is the domain of women, associated with the discharge of the life force, blood (*dam*), closely related to human being (man, *adam*) and dust (*adamah*).[1] In terms of right relationships, this pericope also warns against the instrumental use of the 'divine' to control others.

Achsah and advocacy

The story of Achsah, Othniel and Caleb[2] also starts from the point of daughters being possessions (Josh 15:1). It also describes the transfer of property from father to a daughter who is now married. It sets

out a paradigm of daughterhood in which one generation transfers material wealth to the next through family ties, but stresses that this is legitimate when the daughter is married. In this paradigm women are able to have a voice and act as advocates and so are not purely objects. The pericope also provides a contrast between ways of acquiring property. Othniel, as a man, acquires Kiriath-Sepher by force. Later in the narrative, a woman, Achsah, acquires it through advocacy and negotiation.

Esther – the adopted daughter

In the book of Esther, daughterhood is extended to those adopted as daughters: after she is orphaned, Esther is adopted by her cousin Mordecai (Esth 2:7). The relationship, however, is complicated by Esther's elevation to queen whereby she is able to order her adopted father what to do (Esth 4:17). Such inter-generational social mobility is not uncommon in Hebrew Bible narratives: here it is used by the adopted daughter to the advantage of her adopted father.

Sarah – from daughter-in-law to daughter

The principle of daughterhood being applied to those adopted as daughters seen in Esther is extended to those who are daughter-in-laws in the book of Tobit (Tob 11:17); but Sarah is also Tobit's first cousin once removed, a blood-tie not very different from that between Mordecai and Esther. Here, then, it can be argued, the social role of daughter is of greater importance in this tradition than exact kinship. Moreover, this role is not confined to a single relationship: when Sarah's parents-in-law die she moves back to her parents' home with her husband (Tob 14:12) to resume her original position as daughter.

Tamar takes control

The story of Tamar and Judah, her father-in-law, in Genesis 38 is a further example of a woman considered legally as a dependant, and thus in a weaker position, taking control and achieving justice (Alter
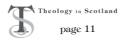
1981, 5–12). Here it is the specific issue of the control of female fertility which is at stake; the narrative indicates that future generations take precedence over prior generations, motherhood trumps daughterhood, as it were.

Ruth's choice

This is the most extensive, and perhaps best known, example of daughterhood in the Hebrew Bible, with an entire book dedicated to it. The background is similar to that of Tamar, involving the right of a widow to marry her dead husband's brother (Ruth 1:11). In this case, the narrative sets out the original obligations of Orpah and Ruth as widows, to their own parents. Orpah chooses one option, which is to return to her own land and culture and be a daughter in that context. Ruth chooses the other, which is to identify with the culture and beliefs of her husband and mother-in-law. Ruth's expression of daughterhood is wedded to alternative values of culture and faith: these define, in part, who she is and her way of being a daughter.

Summary of examples of daughterhood from the Hebrew Bible

Several facets of daughterhood emerge from these examples. Daughterhood is a social role not confined to those who are specifically daughters by birth, but may include members of the nuclear and extended family. There is an emphasis on justice and equal status between parents and daughters: parental possessiveness is to be avoided. Moreover, if there is an ultimate choice for a woman between her duty to her parents and to her children, even if as yet unborn, the latter should take precedence: only younger women can fulfil this essential task. Compared with sons, daughters are shown using skills of advocacy and negotiation. Over a lifetime, a woman may assume a daughterhood role in a number of different relationships. Finally, the cultural and belief values of the daughter impact on how daughterhood is expressed. These examples may provide helpful models for how daughters might relate to parents, but do not as yet amount to a worked-out theology of daughterhood.

Jesus and daughterhood

Although Jesus uses the poetic forms 'daughter of Zion' (Matt 21:5; John 12:15) and 'Daughters of Jerusalem' (Luke 23:28), there are only four occasions when he has an encounter with someone designated as a daughter: one of these, the woman he heals of her kyphosis, is referred to as a 'daughter of Abraham' by Jesus (Luke 13:16) to emphasise her inclusion within God's chosen people. The three other occasions are the healing of the daughter of the Canaanite (Matt 15:22) or Syrophoenician (Mark 7:26) woman possessed by a demon; the raising of the synagogue leader's daughter who had died (Matt 9:18ff.; Mark 5:22ff.; Luke 8:41ff.); and the healing of the woman with menorrhagia (Matt 9:20–22; Mark 5:25–34; Luke 8:43–48). The last of these pericopes is nested within the penultimate one; the first tells us little about daughterhood beyond a parent's duty of care and advocacy. Notably, the woman suffering from menorrhagia is designated as a 'daughter' by Jesus in all three Synoptic versions. The Greek text of Matthew's gospel has a particularly poetic, even hymnic, quality with features of metre, alliteration and assonance (Matt 9:22). The pericope displays literary craft: one daughter reaches out and touches Jesus, the other is touched by Jesus as he reaches out; the one who is pubertal will rise to bleed, the other will bleed no more. Hence, the lifelong changing nature of daughterhood is highlighted.[3] In addition, when Jesus addresses the woman as 'daughter', he emphasizes that she remains in relationship despite having a condition that must have isolated her from the community of Israel.

An ecclesial theology of daughterhood

If we contemplate the biblical paradigm of the Church as the Bride of Christ (Rev 19:7), we will conclude that the Church has a daughterhood relationship with God the Father. This provides a helpful dynamic with 'Mother Church' as an exemplar to a theology of daughterhood relevant to adult women today who also experience both roles within the family. This relationship is not straightforward since the Church is 'daughter-in-law' rather than daughter and thus the relationship with the Father is predicated on the relationship with
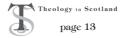
the Son. Robert Murray provides a useful survey of the Church as Bride in the early Syriac tradition (2006, 131ff.). Although he does not consider the symbolism of Church as daughter, he cites various sources that do so, the earliest being from the Acts of Judas Thomas which states, 'My Church is the daughter of light' (Murray 2006, 133). Murray also draws attention to Asenath as daughter of a priest being a type for the Church (135); Rachel also, though here more in her role as mother (135); and Ephrem's identification of the Church as daughter with the Daughter of Zion (141). The phrase 'daughter of light' may be taken as indicating that the Church inherits or reflects characteristics of its parent in this theological understanding, and this could translate to a theology of the relationship between adult women and their parents where they may inherit or reflect specific familial traits. The relationship is imbued, *a priori*, with much that is held in common.

A synthesis

There is limited, yet significant, scriptural material that may inform a theology of daughterhood. Early Syriac sources indicate that an ecclesial perspective would provide a degree of rootedness for such a theology. Here we are not working towards recognition of daughters as equal to sons in the Church community (Magness 2015), but rather modelling relationships between adult daughters and parents on biblical 'types' for the relationship between the Church and the Divine. This provides a direct parallel to a theology of motherhood celebrated on Mothering Sunday, where Mary provides the primary biblical 'type' for the Church. As has been reviewed, there is no single 'type' that predominates in the case of daughterhood, rather each 'type' reveals different facets.

As a background, we may consider the nameless woman named 'daughter' by Jesus. She is afflicted with 'an issue of blood' (Matt 9:20–22; Mark 5:25–34; Luke 8:43–48). The Church, as daughter, is wounded and in need of divine healing and will find this in Christ whose blood is poured out for her. This is a healing that is not available from worldly powers and experts, as typified by the physicians in the story. Here is an important counterbalance to any idealistic view of the

Church as daughter. Again, this woundedness is seen in Rachel, who, as a type for motherhood, weeps over her children; as a daughter she is in danger of being wounded by a patriarchal system. But Rachel brings about justice in the face of this human distortion of fatherhood. Thus for the Church as daughter, Rachel typifies her calling to challenge unjust power structures that involve turning people into possessions and using religion instrumentally to oppress the weak. Tamar, similarly, typifies an assertive challenge to injustice, even when this entails extreme risk. There is no such risk for Achsah, but she is also assertive in the face of injustice, typifying the path of advocacy and negotiation for the Church. From the point of view of this particular typology the Church may be *militant*, but not *military*.
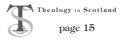
With Esther and Sarah we move beyond the foundational narratives of Genesis into the exilic and post-exilic world of Eastern lands. Both stories allude to well-known episodes in Israel's history; the tale of Sarah and Tobias provides, for example, an interesting comment on patriarchal authority depicted by Laban towards his daughters. In an analysis of roles played by Esther, Zucker (2012) describes her as a 'vamp, victim, and virtuous woman', but does not see her as a daughter. Certainly, Esther and Sarah do not act as 'types' for the Church as clearly as their pre-exilic counterparts who affirm their relationship with the true father of all as against that usurped by androcentric power. Although Mordecai may be complicit in Esther's institutional rape and Raguel puts his daughter through the trauma of seeing her bridegroom die on their wedding night on seven occasions (one can hardly imagine the horror of this), both are portrayed as more caring and protective figures than Laban, Judah or Caleb.

On the other hand, Ruth, who is pointedly not from Israel but belongs to the pre-exilic period,[4] is often considered a prototype for the love between daughter and mother (LaCocque 2004, 2). Thus, if we wish to consider Ruth as a 'type' for the Church, we will need to extend our ecclesial theology to include God as Mother as well as Father. Here there is considerable overlap with feminist theology, though the extent of this debate is well beyond the scope of this essay; on balance, there is a weight of biblical and ecclesial tradition that supports the envisioning of the Divine as Mother and Ruth may be especially helpful as a 'type' for the Church in contexts where there is

suspicion of and antipathy towards a male-dominated institution and its associated religious imagery. Moreover, it allows exploration of an understanding of the Church and powerlessness. The story of Ruth and Naomi is one of mutuality: Ruth is the agent providing for their material needs; Naomi represents a source of wisdom. This mutuality is recognized by the women of Bethlehem, for when Ruth gives birth to Obed they say, 'A son has been born to Naomi' (Ruth 4:17). Naomi, as mother (-in-law), is until this moment depicted as powerless in social terms, though not in religious terms: hence, we can cast a theology of daughterhood of the Church in terms of a correct 'grammar' (Phillips 2004, 19), avoiding traditional understandings of God's omnipotence. The inclusion of Mother God as well as Father God will also be useful when we come to apply this theology to adult daughter-parental relationships since mothers commonly outlive fathers and, therefore, are more likely to become dependent on their offspring.

What, then, can the story of Ruth and Naomi tell us about the relationship between daughter Church and Mother God? First, it provides an eschatological perspective since Naomi nurtures Ruth to ultimately wed her redeemer (*gaal*), a type for the way Mother God prepares the Church to be the Bride of Christ, her redeemer, in the *eschaton*. The Church, then, responds to a call to follow, to be guided and to be nourished: in short, her response to the call to discipleship. The development of Ruth's relationship to Boaz, moving from servanthood (Ruth 2:13), through daughterhood (3:10), to worthy woman (3:11), also mirrors that of the discipleship of the Church as servant (John 12:26), family (Mark 3:35), and worthy bride (2 Cor 11:2). Not only is the path of discipleship towards a person, but it is also towards a place, Bethlehem (Ruth 1:19). Here Ruth acts as a type for the largely Gentile Church traveling to the House of Bread, where Boaz, her redeemer and future husband, invites her to dip her morsel of bread into the wine (2:14). It is Ruth's faithfulness towards Naomi that initiates Boaz's gracefulness towards her (2:11), hence Ruth's faithful daughterhood is the foundation of the ensuing events. There is a further notable point in the story: to ensure Ruth's security Naomi has to give up her own security, the parcel of land owned by her late husband, which would have then passed to Ruth's late husband: it is in purchasing the land that Boaz redeems Ruth. Here we see the

sacrificial nature of Mother God on behalf of her daughter, the Church. The parcel of land is a type for the Creation which we have inherited stewardship over, freely given to us by God, and which is redeemed together with ourselves, the Church, by Christ.

An initial formulation of the theology of daughterhood can now be proposed. It is based on daughterhood representing the relationship between God and the Church. This is a theology of discipleship with its end in union with Christ its Redeemer. It is a faithful response to God's call, a call which may entail woundedness and vulnerability, but also a call to challenge unjust, androcentric power structures in this world – not by force, but by assertive advocacy and negotiation.

Conclusion: Applying a theology of daughterhood in the 21st century

Longevity is both a triumph and challenge of modern biology. In focusing on the Church, a theology of daughterhood is open to both women and men alike as they relate to their elders no longer as children, but as adult offspring. As we encounter God in the Other, we are encouraged to be faithful to God's call. Our parents may offer poor examples of parental behaviour, like Laban, leaving us wounded and vulnerable, or good examples, like Naomi. We are called not purely to accept what has been and remains unjust, but to advocate and negotiate for what is just here and now, both with our parents and on their behalf with social structures and institutions. In this we continue to rely on God's grace and care – here the picture of Mother God may be especially helpful – trusting that our ultimate spiritual destination is beyond the cares and imperfections of this world.

Modern biology has witnessed two major changes. Firstly, the development of new technologies (genomics, imaging, etc) has impacted on our knowledge of and ability to influence biopathological processes. Secondly, in partial consequence of this, there has been an accompanying phenomenon of mass human ageing with a vast increase in age-related conditions such as cognitive decline, sensory loss and frailty. These age-related conditions confront not only the scientific community, but society as a whole and, in particular, adult women who now often find themselves acting as carers for parents.

In proposing this preliminary formulation of a theology of daughterhood, I hope to initiate a discourse regarding the *spiritual* dimension of people's lives as they engage with these challenges. My hope is that such a discussion will lead to a more appropriate model of familial relationships than the ones currently developed. While the status of daughterhood has long been neglected in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, in light of the current challenges presented by modern biological development, this essay is a first step in addressing what has been, up until now, a largely neglected area.

Notes

[1] Editor's note: In the original essay the Hebrew text was used to bring out the closeness of the linguistic relationship between these terms.

[2] There are two versions, Josh 15:16–19 and Judg 1:12–15, which differ in the specific titles Caleb grants as property.

[3] Schüssler Fiorenza (1995, 124) notes that the life-changing nature of both miracles is inter-related through the sign of menstruation, but does not consider the changing roles women may have marked by menarche and menopause.

[4] Ruth, like Esther and Sarah, also parallels the Genesis narratives, particularly that of Tamar and Judah (Fisch 1982).

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