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Mary a Woman: Sex and Situation in the Incarnation

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MARY A WOMAN:
SEX AND SITUATION IN THE INCARNATION

“Mary a Woman”

BY: SARAH MARIE KEOUGH

SEATTLE PACIFIC SEMINARY

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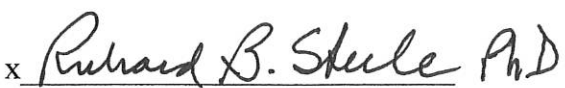
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Introduction

One cannot mention the Virgin Mary without conjuring myriad associations to her name. She is cast as both the holy virgin mother and a victim of divine rape, the paradigm of virtue and a symbol of impossibility. She is an image of liberation for some, and oppression for others. The Virgin is a dilemma—one that, for some, seems insurmountable.

Though the doctrine of the virgin birth remains essential to many Christian faith communities, some reject this confession, arguing that the virgin mother is a pernicious construct of patriarchy. The virgin birth paradox is not only condemned as an impossible standard for women to model, but an oppressive ossification of gender norms and relations. In this interpretation, the incarnation is a patriarchal performance in which a masculinized God forces himself upon a passive, victimized Mary, who then non-consensually conceives and bears a divine Son. Her value is determined through an unfeasible identity created in this moment—the virgin miraculously turned mother—and her worth is understood in terms of her relationship to the male being she has borne. The conception of a male Christ-child further deifies the man and subjugates the woman such that Mary must not only care for the child she carries, but bow to him, as well. Maleness is divinized through Mary's oppression, and she is considered holy only as the virtuous virgin who submits to the male violence forced upon her.

The problem is augmented when Mary is deployed in service of the colonial encounter. Liberation theologians Marcella Althaus-Reid and Delores S. Williams in particular analyze how Mary's image advances ideologies of colonialism and slavery. For them, affirmation of the virgin birth doctrine tends to determine Mary's value not by that

which Mary embodies through her own agency—her “is-ness”¹—but rather through her confinement to a set of colonialistic, phallogocentric theological norms. Inasmuch as Mary is used for these purposes, she cannot represent women, and in fact, Althaus-Reid and Williams question whether Mary can be considered a real woman at all if she does not represent the interests of the most oppressed.

The question then, is whether the person of Mary and doctrinal affirmation of the virgin birth can be sustained in light of these critiques. Can Mary be liberative for women if she is affirmed as the virgin who conceived a divine male Savior? Can women find salvation and liberation through Christ if his maleness is avowed? Further, does Mary’s embodiment as the virgin mother construct an impossible standard for women to emulate, and can she be upheld as a figure for women to model if she contributes to the colonial oppression of the most marginalized women?

It is my contention that reading the incarnation in terms of its historical moment allows for a theologically liberative reinterpretation of this biblical narrative. Recognizing God’s action in the context of Mary’s political, social, and cultural situation reveals God’s desire to redefine notions of maleness and femaleness, masculinity and femininity, as well as the roles traditionally ascribed to certain bodies. Interpreting the incarnation through Mary’s historical situation also resolves dilemmas of conquest and colonization, for Mary herself was subject to these realities as a poor Jewish woman from Galilee. Rather than upholding the hegemonic discourse of an androcentric, militaristic cultural paradigm, the incarnation dethrones this by utterly transforming the signifiers attached to male and female bodies, as well as foregrounding the marginalized for the

¹ For more on the ontological and theological formulation of one’s “is-ness,” see Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1.

revelation of God's purposes. To advance this interpretive shift, I will explore the works of Marcella Althaus-Reid and Delores S. Williams to illuminate the problem, then, utilizing the theoretical lens of Judith Butler, construct a liberative response that considers Mary's role not as passive, but as participatory, the conception of Christ not as God's assertion of control, but as God's willingness to commune and tabernacle with humanity. I will show how God's decision to tabernacle Christ within a male body, but subject to and dependent upon Mary's female body for survival, dethrones the signifier of patriarchy and divests privilege for the sake of the marginalized. Finally, I will show how the virgin birth, rather than limiting women to sex-specific roles, instead expands notions of both femaleness and maleness to allow for a multiplicity of roles and experiences. As the doctrine of the virgin birth is affirmed in these ways, it allows us to interpret the incarnation as God's act of resistance to oppression, a move that Christ's followers should emulate as an act of Christian discipleship and faithfulness.

The Appropriation of Mary

Mary's story begins with the angel's pronouncement upon her, that she had found favor with God and would conceive God's Son. When she questions the veracity of this due to her status as a virgin, the angel assures her that the conception would be a work of the Holy Spirit. "Behold," Mary responds, "the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word." Some view this encounter as a patriarchal performance, for Mary is presented as hopelessly subject to God's actions upon her—she is the object of a male subject, a passive recipient of male agency, a victim of divine rape. Inasmuch as she is interpreted in this manner, her acquiescence to the angel's decree represents the plight of women to submit always, never resisting the will of the man. Her personhood is defined only by that which the man desires and expects from her, and she is never given the freedom of her own embodiment apart from the constriction of patriarchy.

The appropriation of Mary in service of the colonial encounter complicates matters further. Writing from a Latin American perspective, Marcella Althaus-Reid's work emerges from a framework of intense political subjugation and sexual violence. Within her context, political dictators have historically cited apparitions of the Virgin Mary to justify tyranny, conquest, and genocide. Mary has not only been used as validation of colonialism, but has also been credited as a participant in the oppressive events themselves—one text says, "'she killed [the Indians] with a stick' . . . since they saw that happening they said that the Holy Mary was a good Chief."² Military conquest and violence are not only defended by the Virgin, but are considered a component of the Virgin's regime and an element of religious practice.

² Franklin Pease, *Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala* (1980): LVI-LVII, quoted in Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*. (London: Routledge, 2000), 59.

In these colonial texts, Mary's identity is captured by the sexual qualification of "virgin." Her name is not always used when political dictators cite her as justification for their militancy—simply referencing "the Virgin" is enough to recall her image. As her name is lost and her selfhood defined in terms of sexual "purity," opposition to her military regime, subsequently, becomes articulated in terms of sexual deviance. When a group of women called Mothers of *Plaza de Mayo* organized against oppressive Argentinian authorities in the 1970s, they were labeled as "madwomen" and "prostitutes," and were instructed by male ecclesial authorities to pray to the Virgin, who would presumably aid them in assuming their proper role of domesticity and submission to political and patriarchal authority.³ For Althaus-Reid, the Virgin Mary thus holds a "hegemonic phallus which . . . may conceptually correspond to a male penis,"⁴ for she is used by male authorities to uphold oppressive tyrannies maintained through patriarchy.

The use of the Virgin for these purposes positions her as a tool of both political and sexual oppression. As Mary is upheld as the paragon of virtue and political power, all must bow to her authority in order to be considered properly religious and wholly respectable. For women in Latin America, this requires them not only to submit to the Virgin's politics, but also to embody the virtues that she represents. Althaus-Reid argues that the Virgin is thus a tool of sexual repression and political subjugation, and is also an affront to women who have been victims of sexual violence. The Virgin prevents women from affirming a desire for sexual pleasure, and simultaneously demonizes women who have been raped, suffered the realities of child marriage, or forced into prostitution. The Virgin does not represent the realities of women in the Latin American context, and is a

³ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 51.

⁴ *Ibid.* 62.

harmful tool of hegemony that must be dismantled. Althaus-Reid articulates this dismantling as an “indecenting,” which involves a recognition that the Mary of Christian discourse exists only within the illusion of religious myth and symbolism, and that her image has been constructed to serve a patriarchal and colonial agenda. Because her identity as the Virgin drives this ideological framework, indecenting requires repudiation of Mary as virgin, as well as affirming a more fluid understanding of Mary’s identity. The Mary of tradition cannot, in Althaus-Reid’s mind, encompass the realities of what it means to be a real woman, and thus liberation from the social and political strictures that Mary’s image perpetuates requires a refusal of her symbol.

Writing from a womanist perspective, Delores S. Williams expresses similar concerns with Mary in terms of colonial encounter. Within the Western framework, the Virgin Mary historically was maintained as the ideal picture of proper womanhood. Depicted as a white European aristocrat, Mary embodied justification for the oppression of African people—protection of the white woman and salvation for the “savage” was cited as defense for the conquest and enslavement of dark bodies. Williams notes that when black leaders of racial uplift in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries upheld this idyllic Victorian “Virgin Mary taste,”⁵ they inadvertently perpetuated the very system of white supremacy that had systematically oppressed and violated their people. For the poor black woman in particular, this notion of the ideal woman denied a realistic iteration of her experience, and upheld an impossible and oppressive image of womanhood that she could never achieve.

⁵ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013), 110.

Mary's virginity becomes particularly problematic when considering the ways in which black women were abused by white slavemasters. Williams expresses concern that because Mary does not explicitly provide consent in the virgin birth, her assumption of the role of surrogate mother recalls slave experiences of abuse and rape. Furthermore, the fact that Joseph was not included in the conversation between the angel and Mary regarding Jesus' conception "amounts to a breakdown in the portrayal of family."⁶ The black family was a source of survival, a sign that black life endures and God is present despite captivity and persecution. Joseph's absence, therefore, is unsettling for Williams, and reinforces a narrative of bondage and exploitation under white supremacy.

Williams believes, thus, that black women must "contend with the way the social appropriation of the Virgin Mary has contributed to the advancement of white supremacy."⁷ The characteristics of the Virgin may speak to the social location of white women, but fail to represent accurately the reality of black women's lives. Williams indicates that the redemption of Mary's image can begin by reframing one's interpretation of the incarnation. She states that "*both* Mary and Jesus are active in the work of redemption...the work of redemption is possible because they both experience the incarnation."⁸ Viewing the incarnation in terms of a mutual agency mitigates the harmful theology of Mary as the surrogate mother divested of choice. Williams insists that women of color must also resist the urge to image themselves upon a white woman ideal, which requires a deconstruction of the traditional Virgin Mary archetype, or, instead, an identification with a different model. She asserts that the biblical character of Hagar presents a more accurate portrayal of the black woman's experience, for whereas

⁶ Ibid. 160.

⁷ Ibid. 159.

⁸ Ibid. 162.

the traditional image of Mary remains ensconced in the havens of Victorian mansions and white haute society, Hagar represents a black woman's sojourn to the wilderness in pursuit of her freedom. Hagar epitomizes endurance, strength, risk-taking, and making a way out of no way, thus, while Mary may not provide black women with a biblical rendition of their lived experience, Hagar certainly does.

Althaus-Reid's and Williams' analysis of Mary are centered around these primary critiques— the extent to which Mary can be considered a “real woman,” and the likelihood that her symbol can be redeemed for the liberation of oppressed people groups. When Mary is described only in relation to male performance, she lacks a selfhood outside of that which has been inscribed upon her and thus cannot be liberative for women. Additionally, to the extent that her image has been used as a form of political and social subjugation, she represents conquest, tyranny, and military oppression. Althaus-Reid is thus correct in that Mary must be indecented, but the work of indecenting is perhaps a broader effort than what she has indicated. The harm in Mary's symbol emerges not from Mary in and of herself, but rather, the ways in which Mary has been used in service of social and political domination. Can Althaus-Reid's notion of indecenting, then, be used to strip those specific meanings that have been ascribed to Mary in myriad sociopolitical contexts for the sustainment of those in power? It is clear that Mary has been appropriated by those in dominant social locations to promulgate particular theological, social, and political hegemonies, and scholars have worked within those constructions to subvert the harmful work that Mary's figure has done in those contexts. In Althaus-Reid's context, the oppressor has articulated female sexuality in terms of unwelcome political resistance, and Althaus-Reid's response is one of sexual

liberation and fluidity, which includes renunciation of virginity. For Williams, the oppressor has fractured the black family, promoted an ideal of Victorian white normativity, and exploited black women as surrogate mothers, thus she exhorts women of color to reshape the incarnational narrative and reject the construct of Mary in favor of Hagar. Both question Mary's ability to respond to the lives of real women in their contexts, and have raised a critical concern—if Mary cannot represent the most marginalized woman, then she must not be considered a real woman, and cannot retain value in the salvific moment. If this is so, then what must be done to the symbol of Mary to find liberation from her, or for her?

By the Power of the Holy Spirit

Before these questions are undertaken, a theological framework must be established for the task. To begin, a discussion on the Holy Spirit and the ways in which the Spirit, in trinitarian relation, speaks to human relatedness will prove useful. Dialogues about the Trinity tend to emphasize the Father or the Son as the starting point of theological reflection, which panders inevitably toward a patriarchal interpretation. The incarnation story has been interpreted as God's action or phallic performance upon Mary, and Mary's passive compliance to God's activity. This interpretation has led to her appropriation by patriarchal tyrants who believe that they, too, are at liberty to use Mary's body for retainment of oppressive power. It is for this reason that liberationists such as Althaus-Reid and Williams assert that rejection of Mary is necessary, and if not rejection, then a radical reimagining of her role within Christian tradition.

Sarah Coakley's analysis of the Trinity is useful in reimagining the incarnation, for she deviates from traditional interpretations that begin with the Father or Son and instead emphasizes the Spirit as the conduit for understanding trinitarian, and subsequently human, relations. Through the power of the Spirit, Christ incarnate transgresses "the ontological twoness of the transcendent God and the created world," bringing God and God's creation into relationship with one another.⁹ This action not only functions as a transgression of difference, but the action itself becomes embodied in the character of Christ. Christ, fully divine and fully human, personifies the transgression that Coakley names, for in Christ those elements perceived as utterly disparate from one another are drawn into oneness. The incarnation is thus an interruption of normative

⁹ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 55.

relatedness—or a “purgation”¹⁰— that dismantles categorical opposition and inextricably binds together those identities that were once perceived as unnegotiable. The incarnational interruption carries significant implications for the ways in which gender might be understood. Given that human beings are “destined to be restored”¹¹ to the trinitarian life, one can translate the transcendence of ontological twoness as a fundamental reorienting of relatedness. The Spirit brings together that which was previously irreconcilable into unity, wholeness, and new life.

The Spirit calls, invites, and draws into oneness, and Mary’s story begins here. The interpretive function of the incarnation has been to categorize God in terms of a male performance that Mary lacks and to which she is thus subject. The Spirit, however, transcends notions of gendered categorization, for as the Spirit draws and perichoretically weaves together those ontological identifications that were once thought perennially distinct, humankind is forever and unalterably transformed into this likeness. No longer can social attributes be described as natural or fundamental to a particular body, more valuable or worthy, because the most profound difference—between God and God’s creation—has been transcended. If the character of the Spirit is for such a purpose as this, then Mary’s interaction with the Spirit must be interpreted by the terms the Spirit sets. The Spirit calls God’s people to encounter difference with love, to transgress the boundaries that inevitably sow oppressive hierarchies. The incarnational moment enacts this divine movement such that it is not limited to human performance, but is physically embodied. Through the power of the Spirit and in the body of Christ, divinity and humanity are bound together, such that one cannot be extricated from the other.

¹⁰ Ibid. 58.

¹¹ Ibid. 56.

Eboni Marshall Turman's formulation of the hypostatic union will prove useful to solidify this theological framework. She views the incarnational moment as a "renunciation of the privilege of difference,"¹² and explains Christ's identity in terms of *kata sarka*, "according to the flesh," and *en sarki*, "in the flesh." Whereas *kata sarka* describes the limitations imposed by sociopolitical strictures and boundaries, *en sarki* is the movement that allows one to break through those boundaries to fully embody one's is-ness. It is "an inconceivable act of God that substantiates personhood even given the *kata sarka* narratives and images that have been constructed as a refutation of godliness."¹³ In the incarnation, Christ negotiates the *kata sarka* and *en sarki* through his coincident embodiment of divine and human life. Through the Spirit's empowerment, Christ responds to the *kata sarka* of human expectation, reasoning, and imposition by living into the fullness of what God intended for humanity from the beginning—his is-ness flourishes as he resists that which has been spoken over humanity by the sinful structures humans have created, and instead reveals a new reality in which humanity is able to repudiate those structures and enter into divine life through him.

Mary's womb is the birthplace of this reality, the font in which humanity is baptized for the mediation of *kata sarka* and *en sarki* embodiment. God's activity not only occurs within her body, but also substantiates the conditions by which Mary herself is freed and empowered to embody her own is-ness. *En sarki* is her movement against the limitations of *kata sarka* through the Holy Spirit's empowerment, and thus the incarnational moment is one of transgression. Her is-ness is not limited to the confines of her sociopolitical context, and is not defined by the hegemony of patriarchy. The

¹² Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation*, 51.

¹³ *Ibid.* 159.

systemic constructs of the powerful have been subverted and supplanted by a new reality, one in which the limitations prescribed by these hegemonies are renounced and dismantled through embodied resistance to their boundaries.

Mary has been subjected to a double bind of *kata sarka*, for she has not only been defined by the hegemonies of her time, but has been appropriated over generations for the sake of upholding sexist, racist, and colonialist agendas. As theologians have worked out of these appropriations to construct emancipatory responses, Mary has become amorphous—she does not retain inherent is-ness, but rather is defined through her arrogation and subsequent responsive projects. Direct resistance to these harmful formulations is necessary, but for those who hold the virgin birth as essential to their faith formation, affirming interpretations that renounce Mary is a difficult endeavor. Further, understanding Mary only in terms of her appropriation disallows us from understanding the fullness of the incarnational moment, and how God might be using that moment to subvert the very constructs for which Mary has been wrongfully appropriated. Using the terms that Althaus-Reid has set, Mary thus must be indecented, and this requires an extraction from the ways in which she has been culturally appropriated for the upholding of hegemonic constructions. Indecenting Mary will allow us to understand the ways in which the Spirit frees her for *en sarki*, and subsequently, will reveal God's intention for humanity to negotiate the realities of *kata sarka* and *en sarki* existence. To fathom this, we must first understand Mary's situation. Who was Mary, really? How did society define her? How did her body limit her to certain categorical constructions, and how were these formulations maintained and upheld?

A return to Mary's historical moment is necessary, for one cannot fully comprehend Mary's significance if one does not acknowledge the realities of her situation. Gazing upon icons of the Virgin reveals the ways in which her image has been appropriated for the sake of particular social and political agendas, and it is this that must be indecent. She is depicted as light-skinned, aristocratic, dainty, and fair. She is clean, dressed in fine clothes, a soft smile brightening her countenance as she welcomes children to her lap, sits with angels on clouds, or reads the Holy Book. She represents colonial power, patriarchal enterprise, and religious supremacy. These images fail to represent the real Mary, who was a poor young girl from Galilee living through great political strife and social oppression. Under Roman rule, thousands of Jews suffered the burning of their cities, enslavement, and crucifixion. Judaism itself, being couched in the greater narrative of patriarchy, regulated the activities of individuals in familial units, social communities, and temple worship according to sex-specific performances.¹⁴ Mary is thus situated within a context of multiple oppressions—under Roman imperialism her people are subjugated, and under Judaic religious prescriptions her identity as woman is depreciated.

Mary's context creates a situation in which woman's identity is birthed not from an inherent is-ness, but from the constrictions that were imposed upon her. Woman was understood in contrast to man—it is only as boundaries of exclusion were drawn that woman was created. How, then, has the construction of "man" historically been limned? How has man been constructed in various religious and sociopolitical contexts, which then, through exclusion, creates iterations of woman that continue to inscribe particular

¹⁴ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), 206.

images and signifiers upon Mary's body? The question of how Mary has been appropriated over time for the upholding of hegemonic constructions is perhaps too ambitious a project to embark upon here, but an examination of man in Mary's specific context, as well as the implications of Christ's maleness in relationship to Mary's femaleness, is necessary to shape our movement forward.

The Male Christ

French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir says of Mary, “For the first time in human history the mother kneels before her son; she freely accepts her inferiority. This is the supreme masculine victory, consummated in the cult of the Virgin—it is the rehabilitation of woman through the accomplishment of her defeat.”¹⁵ Her words reflect the sentiment of liberationists who argue that the depiction of a male Savior does nothing but reinscribe oppression onto a theological claim that is purposed for human liberation. The effect of the hypostatic union is to draw humanity into divine life, such that all people, through the power of the Holy Spirit, are empowered to pursue relationships with God and humankind in the freedom of for-otherness. The problem, however, is that Christ’s maleness suggests that this notion of freedom is found through the man, and to the extent that freedom is established through patriarchy, women are never truly free. If Christ’s maleness is a mere reflection of the religious and sociopolitical hegemony of the ancient world, then those who continue to retain the creedal confession of a male Savior are indeed indicted. It is our responsibility to justify the affirmation of this doctrine, and thus it is necessary to find a liberative path forward in response to liberationists’ critiques. To begin the task of considering the meaning of Jesus’ maleness and whether female liberation is possible through this affirmation, an examination of the ways in which male and female identity were constructed in Jesus’ and Mary’s time is needed.

An analysis of male-female relatedness requires attention to societal beliefs regarding sexuality and childbearing and the function of these activities within the larger community. In the Graeco-Roman world, women were viewed as “failed males” who

¹⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 204.

lacked the “precious vital heat”¹⁶ men procured in the womb. Male children were more desirable than female children, as sons were required for advancement of the genealogic line. Men were expected to steward the “vital heat” that produced children carefully, for frequent sex was thought to decrease fertility. Talmudic law¹⁷ expected men to practice self-control, both in the frequency of sexual activity and his control of orgasm during sex. His performance during sex was believed to produce certain kinds of children—self-control over ejaculation determined whether a male or female child was produced, and engaging in “unnatural” sexual relations could result in children who had birth deformities or lacked beauty.¹⁸

Jewish scholar Michael L. Satlow reads these eugenic sex laws as a mechanism by which the dominion of masculinity is established.¹⁹ Self-control was the measure of masculinity, and it was male self-control of orgasm that produced male bodies—the Talmud states, “It is within the power of man to increase the number of ‘sons and sons’ sons’ . . . by [containing] themselves during intercourse in order that their wives should emit their semen first.”²⁰ Failure to adequately perform during sex was met with the constant threat of producing or ontologically becoming a woman. The female body was a

¹⁶ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Woman, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 10.

¹⁷ The Talmud is a record of oral tradition that was transmitted for centuries prior to its compilation in approximately 300-500 C.E. Because of this, it is difficult to determine accurately the provenance of its precepts. Additionally, the Talmud invites myriad interpretations, and one must be careful when utilizing the Talmud to account for the possibility of scholarly error. Jewish feminist scholar Judith Romney Wegner notes, however, that despite potential for misinterpretation, rabbinic edicts regarding sexuality often emerged when the “social system needed to reinforce claims on woman’s reproductive function.” [Judith Romney Wegner, *Chattel or Person: The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), vi.] Brown’s and Satlow’s research on masculinity and eugenic sex laws provides further evidence of the prevalence of this ideology in the ancient world.

¹⁸ Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993) 110.

¹⁹ Michael L. Satlow, “‘Try To Be A Man,’: The Rabbinic Construction of Masculinity,” *Harvard Theological Review* 89 (2009).

²⁰ b.Nidd. 31b.

mark of failure, for it signified her genitor's lack of self-control—she was created because he failed to perform according to the signifier wrought by his physicality. The cultural discourse around intercourse thus perpetuates a binary in which the “true man” embodies self-control, and that which is deemed opposite of this through exclusion—impulsivity, impetuosity, wantonness—is the “failed male,” the “lack,”—woman.

This construct holds significant ideological implications, and it would thus prove beneficial to provide a theoretical framework for conceptualizing the historical moment through philosopher Judith Butler's conception of the phallus. Butler describes the phallus as a dominating framework that requires particular bodies to perform certain functions to perpetuate and sustain itself. Biology does not necessarily secure one's position in the paradigm, for the phallus is undergirded through specific performances of one's body in addition to the physical signifier. Butler clarifies, “The phallus *symbolizes* the penis; and insofar as it symbolizes the penis, retains the penis as that which it symbolizes, it *is* not the penis. To be the object of symbolization is precisely not to be that which symbolizes.”²¹ The phallus is the illusion that allows the penis to function as power, to control the categorizations and functioning of those outside of its boundaries. It is the conceptual imaginary that perpetuates an ideal of normativity while necessarily excluding all other embodiments. Alternative embodiments not only become “other” but “lesser,” and the ancient historical interpretation of sex and reproduction profoundly exemplifies this. The performance of masculinity—defined by one's ability to practice self-control—is what made the “true man,” while femininity was (and continues to be) its categorical opposition. It is the body itself upon which this discourse was imprinted—the expectation was that the male body would function in terms of self-control, while the

²¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 83.

female body was expected to be incapable of such. Because the male body was the locus of masculinity's inscription, maleness only required performance to retain the power of the phallus. The female body, conversely, could never function as the phallus—she could attempt to attain the power of the phallus through masculine performance, but her body perpetually located her outside of it.

In this ancient discourse, sex is a vie for power. Sex is a means by which man's exercise of self-control secured his inclusion in the phallic paradigm, while a woman could riposte his performance through her own exercise of that which had been deemed masculine. Her performance, however, did not secure her, for though her exhibition of self-control signified power, the discourse itself limited her. If the male lacked self-control and the woman exercised it, she accrued power, but the female body, though it could *perform* the function of the phallus, could never fully *embody* such. It was only through exhibiting masculine self-control that she was able to reproduce a body in her likeness, but even this was failure, for her self-control merely produced another version of the failed male, who then, in her adulthood, was required to duplicate her mother's process of restraint in order to exercise a power that could not be retained.

Sex and reproduction had significant implications in worship and religious responsibility, practices which, again, fell under the purview of the phallus. Failure to produce children was a legal infraction for men, resulting in the determination of women's value for her procreative function. Man was charged with regulating and restricting the sexuality of his wives and daughters, and was given permission to divorce his wives when their failure to produce children resulted in his infraction of the law. The Midrash and Hebrew scriptures do provide teachings in which barren women are blessed

with children through persistent prayer, though it is important to note that even in these texts, childbearing was still upheld as the most important religious gesture, and it is this function of the female body that was valued for fulfillment of an androcentric law.

Reproduction was not only upheld as a woman's most valuable religious purpose, but her procreative function also threatened her life if she failed to perform religious rites assigned to her. The Mishnah states that if she did not abide by the laws of menstrual separation, provide the dough offering, or kindle the lamp for Sabbath, she was at risk of death in childbirth. The Talmud states further that these laws are in place because Eve caused Adam's death:

Adam, the First [of men] was the life-blood of the world, as is written, *A flow would well up from the ground, and the Lord God formed Adam* (Gen. 2:6-7), but Eve was the cause of his death; therefore womanhood was given the law of the menstrual flow . . . Adam the First was pure dough for the world, as is written, *Dust of the earth* . . . but Eve was the cause of his death; therefore womanhood was given the law of *hallah* . . . Adam the First was the lamp of the world, as is said, *The soul of man is the lamp of God* (Prov 20:27), but Eve was the cause of his death; therefore womanhood was given the law of lighting the candle.²²

The Talmudic text positions women as the object of the male subject. The religious function of Eve's daughters was to repeatedly perform penance to man, and her

²² y.Shabb 2:6 8b, quoted in Rabbi Getsel Ellinson, *Women & the Mitzvot Vol 1: Serving the Creator* (Israel: Ahva Press, 1986), 144.

punishment for failure was death in childbearing—the very performance by which men determined her societal and religious value.

Mary's *kata sarka* is thus one of political turbulence and religious and social oppression. Her people suffer under the regime of Roman rule, and her status as a woman creates a further social oppression within her religious community. The boundaries of maleness and femaleness delineated through religious rites and social norms impose particular standards of performance upon her—she is expected to fulfill certain functions, but these functions are generated through a patriarchal assumption. Her function is simultaneously responsive to and defined by maleness, and thus her fulfillment of the performance limits her is-ness.

The meaning of maleness in Mary's context raises concerns regarding the narrative function of Christ incarnate in a male body. In her analysis of Christ as a male savior, Rosemary Radford Ruether states, "Today a Christology which elevates Jesus' maleness to ontologically necessary significance suggests that Jesus' humanity does not represent women at all. Incarnation solely into the male sex does not include women and so women are not redeemed."²³ Ruether proposes that liberation for women cannot be found by emphasizing Jesus' maleness—indeed, Jesus' maleness must be subverted by affirming his feminine qualities, and it is Jesus' ministry to the poor more than his biological sex that must be foregrounded. Jacquelyn Grant responds to Jesus' maleness by proposing that "the significance of Christ is not his maleness, but his humanity."²⁴ Grant's sentiment is similar to Ruether's—it is Jesus' life, death and resurrection that

²³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Liberation of Christology from Patriarchy." *Religion and Intellectual Life* 2, no. 3 (1985): 119.

²⁴ Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 220.

must be emphasized moreso than his male body. These theologians join a number of liberationists who believe that emphasis on Jesus' maleness simply reinforces the androcentric nature of Christian doctrine, and excludes women from theological discourse and participation in the wider narrative of redemption.

Given the construction of maleness in ancient Judaism, the question of whether a male Christ can prove liberative for women is indeed pertinent. Rather than being redemptive, Christ's maleness seems to reinscribe oppressive realities upon Mary's, and woman's, situation. If Christ is male, then how is God's performance upon Mary *not* a project of patriarchy? Can it not be said that God's performance is the great masculine endeavor, the affirmation that God is male? It is here that we must remember the charge to center the Holy Spirit in our understanding of trinitarian relations. The conception of Christ is an initiation of the Spirit, whose performative function is a transgression of boundaries, or in Turman's understanding, a "renunciation of the privilege of difference."²⁵ Foregrounding the Spirit in the act of incarnation challenges the notion of God's performance as an act of patriarchy, for the Spirit's work establishes a paradigm in which no person can assert themselves over and above another for the instantiation and understanding of their identity. Rather, the Spirit inextricably weaves human beings together for the sake of oneness, such that we can only understand ourselves in relationship with the other—in the spirit of the South African word *ubuntu*, "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours."²⁶

If the nature of the Spirit is to enact this renunciation of the privilege of difference, and if the Spirit's work is to draw humanity into trinitarian relationship that

²⁵ Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation*, 51.

²⁶ Desmond Tutu. *No Future Without Forgiveness*. (New York: Random House, 1999), 34.

transgresses ontological twoness and enables unity, oneness, and for-otherness, then this frees the incarnational moment from its interpretation as a performance of patriarchy or a practice of violence. The Spirit, who supplants notions of immutable difference, cannot be said to embody or enact a performance rooted in sexual hierarchy, for this is fundamentally against the nature of the Spirit. What is the purpose, then, of Christ incarnate in a male body? If the Spirit's purpose is to initiate the renunciation of the privilege of difference, how does Christ enact this determination?

Christ's male body has presented a considerable hurdle to liberationists, who describe his maleness as a hindrance to women's freedom. To recall Beauvoir's words, Mary's conception of the male Christ figure seems to submit the woman to her son, which solidifies the hegemony of the phallus. Liberationists have argued that this provides justification for abandoning the confessions of the virgin birth and the male Christ altogether, while those seeking to retain their creedal confessions have sought resolution by suggesting that what matters is not Christ's maleness, but his humanity. The former interpretation unsettles theologians who seek to honor the text, while the latter is too simplistic—if *kata sarka* and *en sarki* are realized through one's particularities, then Christ's male body is not irrelevant to the venture. Another conclusion drawn is that first-century Jews required a male Savior in order for the dominant culture to accept him—a patriarchal context requires a male to substantiate the work of the gospel. This too is unsatisfying, for the gospel message is a radical uprooting of societal norms, and this uprooting should not require normativity as the mechanism for accomplishment of its task. Scripture records Jesus conversing with Samaritans and eating with tax collectors. He calls his followers to turn the other cheek rather than demand eye for an eye, and

comes as a babe in a manger rather than a king on a steed. If Christ's performance is one of subversion, what could be *more* subversive than a female Christ incarnate? And yet, the sacred texts affirm Christ as male. Why is this so?

The task, then, is to pave another way for interpreting Christ's maleness, such that our affirmation of this doctrine does not uphold the hegemony of the phallus, but rather subverts this structure through the prioritization of the Spirit's divine purpose. As the doctrine of the virgin birth is vital to this construction, I will now reconsider this doctrine in light of its historical moment to discover its liberative function.

Liberative Function of the Virgin Birth

The concerns regarding Mary as a “real woman” and Christ’s male body converge in the virgin birth, thus it is through this doctrine that critiques must be addressed in order to consider whether the confession might be retained. The virgin birth has been criticized on four particular levels. The first is in regards to God’s patriarchal performance upon Mary, which is resolved through prioritization of the Holy Spirit, whose nature is to transcend ontological twoness and enact a renunciation of the privilege of difference. The second concerns Christ as a male child—does his maleness merely affirm an oppressive structure of patriarchy, or can his maleness be interpreted another way? The third concerns the absence of sex in the production of the Christ-child—does the absence of sex in the act of conception reiterate the impossibility of Mary’s identity? Related to this, the fourth criticism concerns Mary’s status as a “real woman” in light of her dual identity as the virgin mother—can Mary be present to the interests of real women, particularly when her image is used to oppress the most marginalized women? It is these latter concerns that will be addressed presently.

The work of the Spirit in the incarnation is to sweep divinity and humanity into oneness in Christ, such that these ontological states of being are irreducible apart from one another. The work requires difference, for the Spirit draws those identities previously understood as categorical oppositions into oneness, such that one can no longer be understood without the other. Exclusion is transformed into necessity—though God does not need, God chooses relationship with God’s creation, and chooses to be known through union with humanity. The nature of the Divine is to refuse the independence wrought through power, and choose instead to bind God’s self to humanity such that

God's very identity is understood through God's choice to commune with God's people. As humanity is drawn into God's life through Christ, those actions that Christ performs in his human body become holy. As Christ walks, eats, drinks, communes, works, sleeps, these movements are sanctified, and human participation in these activities become entryways into the divine life that God shares with humankind. The renunciation of the privilege of difference is this movement into unity—God chooses to be known in relationship with God's creation, and humankind cannot be understood apart from God's participation in human life.

The incarnation is the moment in which the ontological identities of divinity and humanity are drawn into oneness, but the question of whether Christ's maleness enables him to transgress the boundaries of bodies and sexual difference remains. It is here that the doctrine of the virgin birth and Mary's participation in the divine encounter becomes essential, for it is Christ's maleness in relation to Mary's femaleness that enacts the renunciation of the privilege of difference through the conjoint performance of their bodies. The incarnation cannot be understood only through a confession of the hypostatic union, but must also consider the ways in which the Spirit's work carries significant implications for embodied difference.

In Mary's context, sexual intercourse carries particular meaning around the performance of bodies and the ontological and physical consequences of this performance. Self-control signifies power, and the reproductive result of the sexual encounter determines the strength of the performance. Mary's *kata sarka* imposes a particular kind of performance upon her—her worth increases through reproduction of a male child, but the male body is produced through the genitor's exercise of self-control.

If the result of copulation is a male child, she has succeeded in performing the most valuable function that society has ascribed to her. The male child, however, is the result of male's ability to control his orgasm during sex, and the female's subsequent inability to exhibit this same aptitude. The male child, then, is simultaneously her accomplishment and her defeat—her value as bearer of the male child is marked by her failure to exhibit the esteemed characteristic of masculine self-control.

It is to this situation that the incarnation presents a strong transgression. In a context where the creation of a male body can be attributed to the male procreator's self-control, a virgin is found to be pregnant by the power of the Spirit rather than the power of the male. By producing the Christ-child without the aid of a male body, God bypasses a hegemonic cultural paradigm that insists upon masculine self-control during sex as the determining agent for producing male bodies. Mary's virginity implies that Jesus' maleness could not have been said to be a result of a man's self-control and woman's lack of it. The "hot substance of the spirit,"²⁷ the virility of man, did not contribute to the formation of the Word in human flesh. The conception of Christ without sex is the Spirit's renunciation of domination, a resistance to the vie for power through one's bodily performance upon another.

The male Christ is created without the male body, and thus it is not the exertion of masculine self-control that determines maleness, nor is it a woman's failure that produces such. The affirmation of a male Christ, then, requires affirmation of a body that is never properly masculine, and thus never properly male in this context. This is more fully affirmed when considering the implications of the Christ-child's conception in Mary's body. As God tabernacles Christ within Mary, the male body becomes dependent upon

²⁷ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 17.

and subject to a woman's agency. God divests power in order to foreground Mary, and utilizes a signifier of power—the male body—as the means of divestiture. Through this act, the meaning of the male body may be redefined and reimagined—in Coakley's words, gender is “not...eradicating” but “transformed.”²⁸ As Christ becomes subject to Mary's life, power is reimagined through their partnership, and power bulwarked through stabilized gender norms is dismantled. Althaus-Reid describes the Word as the Highest Phallus—if that is so, then this Word submits himself to Mary's care and agency; it is her voice that declares praise of the Most High.

The incarnation thus reimagines sex and sex-specific roles, and subverts and destabilizes the power of masculinity in this historical situation. Mary is not a passive recipient of male seed, nor is she participating in a battle for control. She assumes agency, but her agency is displayed through her willing participation and mutual love and submission with and to the Divine. When the male Christ makes his life dependent upon and vulnerable to Mary, he redefines the meaning of maleness, for his power as the Word is detached from notions of virility, self-control, and social dominance. The power of the Spirit makes it possible for man to be conceived without the power affirmed by the world—the power of the Spirit manifests in the conception of the Word as powerless, dependent upon humanity, dependent upon woman. In this way, power is renegotiated and reinterpreted through divine intervention as the boy Jesus becomes inextricably bound and woven into Mary's life. What man declared weak is now declared strong, and the roles of both man and woman must be reinterpreted through this reality made present in Mary.

²⁸ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 55.

Mary's *kata sarka* presents her with another choice—the exertion of self-control for production of a body in her likeness and the assumption of masculine performance for her self-aggrandizement. By partnering with the Spirit in the act of Christ's conception, however, Mary participates in the subversion of this hegemonic structure. There is no moment in which Mary strives to be the phallus, no moment in which the phallus is equated with the notion of male virility, no moment in which Mary protests the Spirit's movement in her life as an intrusion. As the human Word is formed in Mary's womb by the power of the Spirit, all notions of power obtained through sex are dismantled.

God's power is not absent from the situation, but the salient matter is that God's power is used for the sake of mutual self-giving, for-otherness, and “irreducible threeness.”²⁹ Through the conception of Christ, the power of the Spirit displays itself not as an oppressive power, but a power that chooses to make itself dependent upon and subject to the life of another. The conception of Christ must be viewed in terms of divine love and mutuality—the love of God for humanity, and humanity's love of God through the persons of Mary and Christ. This love is perfectly displayed through the reciprocal capitulation to the will of the other, and in this moment power is not demonstrated through the metric of the phallus; rather, power becomes submission, a mutuality in which one's will aligns in perfect harmony with the will of another. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Being free means ‘being-free-for-the-other’; freedom is found “only by being in relation with the other.”³⁰ God in Christ comes to commune with humanity in total love, total freedom, and total capitulation, and Mary responds with rejoicing. In this moment of incarnation, God's life becomes dependent upon Mary's in

²⁹ Ibid. 56.

³⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 63.

the same way that Mary's is dependent upon God's. Christ's male body is formed without the aid of the phallus, without the "vital heat" of the male, and culminates in the ejaculatory moment of Mary's Magnificat, in which the song of praise is sowed into the world.

My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on 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 for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;

he has brought down the mighty from their thrones

and exalted those of humble estate;

he has filled the hungry with good things,

and the rich he has sent away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

as he spoke to our fathers,

to Abraham and to his offspring forever.³¹

³¹ Luke 1:46-55.

It is not only Christ's maleness that is redefined through this moment, but Mary's femaleness as well. The hegemonic order declared woman an exhibition of failure and weakness—she embodied a performance of defeat. In the incarnation, however, Mary partners with the Spirit to carve an interstice in *kata sarka* such that, together, they make a way out of no way. The Magnificat is a declaration of Mary's *en sarki*, her claim to relationship with the Creator outside of the conditions that man has imposed upon her. In this moment, Mary belies societal expectations and becomes teacher, prophet, and shepherd. She proclaims what the Lord has done, and affirms God as one who consistently uses God's power for the sake of the marginalized. She asserts that though the narrative of her societal context declares her "other" and "less than," future generations would call her blessed. She does not seek man for approval of her pronouncements, for Mary's relationship with God falls outside the boundaries that man has delineated. Her is-ness is evidenced through her declaration, and the transgression of sex-specific roles heralds a multiplicity of expressions of "woman."

This leads to resolution of the question posed by some liberationists—can Mary be considered a "true woman" if Christ's conception occurs not through the physical act of sex, but through a mystical, supernatural copulative engagement? Can she truly be a model for women if she simultaneously embodies paradoxical identities of virgin and mother? Can real women relate to her? The critique of the virgin birth as an expression of white supremacy is also relevant here. If Mary, a poor, socially and politically oppressed woman from Galilee, is affirmed as God's surrogate mother, does this not provide biblical justification for white slavemasters' use of black women for such ends? If this is

so, does the virgin birth perpetuate ideologies of slave and master, thus nullifying the liberative good news of the gospel message?

The virgin birth has indeed been used to promulgate harmful messages regarding “true womanhood,” as well as for the advancement of white supremacist agendas. Tina Beattie’s interpretation of the virgin birth provides a way forward here. Beattie finds the middle-space of the virgin/mother binary liberating, and uses these categorical oppositions to reveal a destabilizing, disruptive location in which anything becomes possible. She believes that Mary welcomes her followers into “a space of radical otherness in relation to the present order,”³² which inspires divine imagination and allows for variegated expressions of human relationship. The virgin birth paradox, then, rather than perpetuating an impossible standard for women, provides a prophetic turn for our conceptions of human relatedness. The paradox does not prescribe violence, but frames reproduction in terms of freedom and choice. It calls for a radical reimagining of our response to the questions, “What is woman? What is mother?”

Technological and social advancement have provided myriad opportunities for women to assume the role of mother outside of sexual congress. Adoption, in vitro fertilization, and surrogacy create new formulations of motherhood and family, ones rooted in choice and a profound for-otherness that exceeds biological and genealogical expectation. Mary’s partnership with the Spirit in the act of conception affirms her as a surrogate mother who carries the Son of God, she is impregnated with a holy seed that is not derived from Joseph her betrothed, and her son is adopted into Joseph’s genealogical line. Mary transgresses all notions of traditional motherhood, and thus is a prophetic

³² Tina Beattie, “Queen of Heaven,” in *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, ed. Gerard Loughlin (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 295.

embodiment toward an eschatological reality in which “family” carries far greater implications than a biological claim or a propagation of ancestral lineage. Though Mary’s *kata sarka* determines her as “woman” through her betrothal to a Jewish man and her subsequent conception of children through his sexual advance, her partnership with the Spirit resists these assumptions. Her worth is not determined by her spouse, or by her reproductive value in relation to him. Her partnership in the divine encounter with the Spirit affirms Mary’s agency—her access to God is not dependent upon her husband, her father, or her priest, and her participation in God’s work is determined by her and God alone.

Two questions arise from this formulation: what is the role of Joseph in this holy encounter? And does the incarnation liberate Mary from the strictures of man, but continue to perpetuate the notion that woman’s identity is determined by her child-bearing capacity? Resolution to these questions will be found through understanding the ways in which Mary’s partnership with the Spirit and relationship with the Messiah reorient human relationships, which will be undertaken in the next section.

Relationship Reoriented

White feminist theologian Mary Daly states,

“The image of Mary as Virgin, moreover, has an (unintended) aspect of pointing toward independence for women. This aspect of the symbol is of course generally unnoticed by theologians... What is more interesting and more to the point here is the fact that [they see] the virgin birth doctrine *as significant only in relation to Christ*... even what would seem to be the most nonrelational aspect of the symbol of Mary, the idea of her virginity, is comprehended by male theologians only in a relational way, having significance only as tied to the male savior and the male God.”³³

Theologians such as Daly and Marianne Katoppo have found liberation in the virgin birth through the ways in which this doctrine provides independence from man. These interpretations view Mary’s virginity not only as God’s affirmation of her autonomy, but also as an indictment against a patriarchal society that uses women for their childbearing capacities. The incarnation is God’s expression that man is not needed for reproduction, and that God will fulfill God’s purposes outside of the oppressive strictures man has imposed upon woman.

In her critique of the incarnation, however, Williams questions Joseph’s absence in the incarnational moment. For her, this hearkens back to slave narratives in which

³³ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 84-85.

black slaves were powerless against the volition of the slavemaster. Williams asserts that the nonrelational component of the virgin birth is harmful, for Joseph's absence is yet another iteration of violence upon the black body. His absence in this moment removes his agency, and God becomes the violent Master who uses Mary as an unconsenting surrogate mother.

These critiques respond to the ways in which the incarnation has been appropriated in service of patriarchy and white supremacy. Daly critiques the androcentric nature of virgin birth interpretations, and believes that Mary's empowerment emerges from total independence from man. Her analysis, however, does little to make sense of the inherently relational aspect of birthing a male child. In a context where the survival of the black family is essential, Williams critiques the ways in which the virgin birth "amounts to a breakdown in the portrayal of family,"³⁴ and asserts that this doctrine reinforces ideologies of white supremacy. Her critique complicates the ability to retain the doctrine of the virgin birth if its confession reinscribes exploitative realities onto black and brown bodies. In light of these varied interpretations, it is useful to once again return to the historical situation to understand the Spirit's work in Mary and Joseph's context, and to consider the ways in which the incarnation speaks to human relatedness. This will respond to Daly's and Williams' critiques by illuminating Joseph's role in the incarnational moment and underscoring the Spirit's nature toward subversion of hegemonic constructions.

To reiterate, the Spirit's role in the incarnational moment is to transcend ontological twoness, to transgress the boundaries established through difference and hierarchy. The renunciation of the privilege of difference occurs not only through the

³⁴ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 160.

hybridity of humanity and divinity in Christ, but also through the embodied relationship between Christ and Mary. The virgin birth is thus not a declaration of independence, but rather a fundamental transformation of relatedness. God's relationship with humankind is transformed through God's human embodiment, and man's relationship to woman is transformed through Christ's relationship with Mary. The renunciation of the privilege of difference cannot occur outside of relatedness, and thus independence cannot be the terms by which identity is understood.

What is Joseph's role, then, in the incarnation? Scripture states, "This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly."³⁵ The text positions Mary as the one who initially delivers the news of her pregnancy—the angel of the Lord has not yet visited, and upon hearing Mary's pronouncement, Joseph's plan is to divorce her in a manner that would shield her from public exposure. After the angel's visitation, however, Joseph agrees to wed Mary despite the ways in which this moment radically alters his life. The angel affirms Mary's declaration, and thus reorients Joseph toward a new kind of encounter—one in which his future wife has been confirmed as a messenger of God, and in which his performance as Mary's husband will no longer be predicated on the terms established by his community, but rather by those that the Spirit has bidden.

Rather than speaking in terms of Mary's independence, then, it can be said that through the incarnation, Mary's is-ness is outside of Joseph's purview. Her decision to partner with the Spirit is not bound to Joseph's approval or determined through his

³⁵ Matthew 1:18-19.

initiative. Her *en sarki* is evidenced both through her claim to relationship with God outside of male agency, as well as her decision to declare God's will to her betrothed. Mary's confidence in God is exhibited through her willingness to declare the work of the Spirit, for though she risked conviction of adultery and punishment by death, she was faithful to declare the Word that was pronounced. She has been made God's emissary, and approaches this calling with boldness. Joseph is not absent from the situation, but rather submits to that which the Spirit has bidden Mary to do, and stands with her despite the societal implications. For the fulfillment of God's work and in radical for-otherness, he divests the privilege of divorce that is allowed by his religious context, and subsequently orients himself toward a new understanding of God's movement in the world.

To further understand the significance of the reorientation of relationship, it is once again important to consider the realities of the situation, and particularly the ways in which notions of male and female performativity regulated Joseph's and Mary's lives. For men, self-control was not only to be exercised during sex, but was considered essential for Torah study. This discipline was "the masculine activity *par excellence*" due to the "quality of self-restraint" it required.³⁶ Whether women were permitted to study Torah is unclear—one Mishnah says, "If anyone teaches his daughter Torah it is as though he taught her lasciviousness,"³⁷ while another says "one may...teach his sons and his daughters Scripture."³⁸ A woman's ability to study Torah, however, was correlated with her ability to exercise a performativity that was not deemed natural to her body—the

³⁶ Satlow, "Try to Be a Man," 27.

³⁷ m.Sot. 3:4.

³⁸ m.Ned 4:3.

study of Torah was a male practice, and her practice of this was not universally accepted or considered natural.

The Spirit transgresses this norm by situating Christ, the one whom Torah reveals, within Mary's body. Maleness, then, is redefined, for it was Torah study in which a relationship with God was cultivated, and it was men who were given the role of revealing God's will to the community through this study. The incarnation shows that relationship with God is no longer limited to examination of words on a page, but has been redefined as a deep and intimate knowing of the One sheltered in Mary's womb—the One who, based upon the manner of conception, could never be considered truly "male." It is this Word harbored within a woman's body that man must be diligent to know. Though tradition understood woman as "*constitutionally* incapable of keeping the commandments,"³⁹ woman is now the one who provides sanctuary for the Word within her body. Mary's femaleness was understood as a barrier to God, and yet the Spirit resists this assumption by making God proximal to Mary through the One tabernacled in her womb and entrusted to her care. To know God is to know the Word Jesus, the one dependent upon Mary for life—it is he whom Joseph must worship.

Reframing Joseph's role in this way provides a response to the claim that the incarnation ossifies sex-specific roles. Mary's role as bride in this society was subsumption into Joseph's life. She was to be defined by his will and acquiesce to his desires. As Mary becomes bound to Christ, however, Mary's partnership with God necessitates a transformation of her relationship with Joseph. Rather than absorbing Mary into his life, Joseph's life is now absorbed into Mary's through the God-child within her. The shifting of familial roles is described aptly by Graham Ward, who states, "The baby

³⁹ Eugene F. Rogers, *Sexuality and the Christian Body* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 54.

boy is husband and bridegroom, spouse and prefigured lover of the mother who gives him birth, whose own body swells to contain the future Church. The bridal chamber is the womb which the bridegroom will impregnate with his seed while also being the womb from which he emerges.”⁴⁰ In Christ, the divine coalesces with humanity such that one cannot be extricated from the other—Christ is fully God and fully man, he is completely divine and yet completely a child of Mary. Mary’s role is re-conceptualized as she becomes the mother of God and yet remains God’s child as well, a child of the very child who cleaves to her from within the womb. The father is not a father of blood, but rather of Spirit, and the Spirit’s contribution of seed was not tangible but divine, a seed that indeed produced male flesh, but made that flesh dependent upon a woman to sustain his life.

Mary’s womb becomes the bridal chamber in which God and humanity are wed, and by which the Church and its members are thusly birthed. Joseph, then, is birthed from Christ but also from Mary, and is bound to their lives and wills in the same way that they are bound to his. Joseph is father but not Father, and though he is father he is also child, birthed from Christ who is birthed from Mary. The child Christ is adopted into Joseph’s line just as Joseph himself is adopted into Christ’s divine life.

Scripture records the people responding to the scandal of Jesus’ (non)paternity by asking, “Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary?”⁴¹ Ruether notes that referencing Jesus in this way was not standard— to call him the the son of his mother rather than his

⁴⁰ Graham Ward, “Bodies: The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ,” in *Radical Orthodoxy*, ed. John Milbank et al. (London: Routledge, 1999), 164-165.

⁴¹ Mark 6:1-3.

father was to designate Jesus as an illegitimate child.⁴² Despite this scandal, Jesus remains in the genealogic line of Joseph, evidencing Joseph's capitulation to the will of God and his willingness to give his life to Mary and Jesus. Jesus is the illegitimate son born of the illegitimate mother, and it is to this pair that Joseph finds himself subject through the incarnation, subsumed into their life at God's direction. In Mary, humanity finds itself swept into the divine life of Christ, and Joseph, as Mary's betrothed, is not only brought into this life but adopts it into his own.

The apogee of this theological reimagining is that though Mary is Joseph's wife, she does not cease to fulfill the roles that Christ has made possible for her. She not only shelters the Word within her womb, she travels with and ministers to the Word as he reveals himself to the world. She is mother and wife, disciple and prophet. Her performance of these roles challenges presumptive notions of man and woman, husband and wife. Through this holy family, gender roles are reconfigured and a new normal is wrought.

As relationships are reoriented, notions of an essential expression of manhood and womanhood are subverted. Given this reality, it becomes necessary to question the meaning of "woman" altogether. Bodily performance in the incarnation transgresses categorical constructions that delineate manhood and womanhood, and the implication is a profound reconceptualization of the ways in which these categories are understood. Eliminating masculine performance during sex and religious practice, as well as the subjection of the male Christ to Mary's agency, reveals the ways in which the signifier of

⁴² Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 28.

masculinity is dethroned through the performances of male bodies in the incarnational moment. What is being said, then, about Mary as woman?

Mary's *en sarki* is realized as she claims that which the Spirit has spoken over her and with her—her is-ness is practiced not simply as she walks with Jesus and cares for him, but confronts and challenges him as well. The wedding at Cana exemplifies Mary's agency, the confidence to speak when her situation would deny her this privilege. "They have no more wine," she says, and when Jesus retorts that his hour has not yet come, she does not relent, but rather directs the servants to listen to the Son's direction. Her desire is for God's will to be done, and for those in God's presence to engage in a divine encounter with the Messiah. Her performance is not shadowed by fear or determined by the phallus. Through her partnership with the Spirit, it is not only the One who would save the world who is birthed, but also possibility for those whose social conditions limit them to particular performances.

Though Jesus initially rebuffs Mary's instruction, he eventually yields to her. In his acquiescence, he submits to the words of the marginalized, recognizing that Mary's experience speaks differently than his. The wine has run out, and it is the servants—the lowliest—who would likely bear the consequence of this embarrassment. Jesus' deference to Mary is a divestment of his privilege, and a rejection of the notion that he alone can decide the conditions upon which he exercises his power. His power is exercised in community, and with capitulation to the marginalized in his midst.

Jesus' words as he hangs upon the cross perhaps signal the most profound gesture toward God's positioning of the categories of woman and mother. He gestures to the disciple he loves and says to Mary, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here

is your mother.” On the cross, Jesus calls Mary woman, and when death is imminent, he names her the mother of another and instructs the disciple to acknowledge her as such.⁴³ Butler’s resistance of categorizations is due to the fact that in their assumption, all other identifications are either deemed “lesser” or become subject to erasure. This we have seen in Mary’s portrayal as the virgin mother—as she is understood only within the confines of these identifiers, other characteristics are either lost or made inferior. Christ’s naming of Mary as woman and mother, however, calls the boundaries of those categories into question. Mary does not fit within the confines of that which society has called woman, and it is the work of the Spirit that has enabled this reality. Despite this, however, the work of Christ is not to eradicate the construct altogether, but rather to radically transform the terms by which it is set. As Christ calls Mary woman and mother, redemption is found in these categories, for it is God in Christ who makes the claim. Not only this, but the destabilizing middle-space named by Beattie is evident as the meaning of these terms is renegotiated through Mary’s performance of the roles. Redemption is found not in the stabilization of these categories but in their subversion, for Jesus’ identifications of Mary are based not on fixedness but fluidity. He calls her woman, though her life has assumed the characteristics society has defined as masculine. He calls her mother, but only to acknowledge her the mother of another and not his own. Sex is not required for motherhood, nor does sex presume motherhood—this too is now subject to the reorienting work of the Spirit. In Mary, woman and mother are reimagined, and this reimagining is made possible and affirmed in Messianic utterance.

Maleness and femaleness, then—and what is today understood as gender—has become a space of radical destabilization and fluidity. Mary’s subversion is that she both

⁴³ John 19:26-27.

performs into and against the prescriptions of her situatedness. She holds in tension the categorical oppositions that should not be possible in her historical moment, and her lived experience—the projects and roles that Mary assumes—are reflective of the kind of freedom found in Christ through his union with us. Mary is mother and also virgin, she is devoted to Joseph and also devoted to God. She is a child of God and also a caretaker of God. She is wife and wanderer, minister and mother, pilgrim and prophet. In the midst of these performances she is woman, and is affirmed as such by the God who chose to dwell and grow within her. In Christ, woman can no longer be defined by the lack of the phallus—the lack of the power wrought by hegemony. Rather, through Christ's union with Mary, the many and varied roles of woman have been affirmed and dignified, such that woman does not encompass only one of Mary's performances—particularly that of virgin or mother—but all of them. In this way Mary is not a myth of a woman; rather, she is the substantive synecdoche of all women. She has not been removed from historical experience, but rather precedes the myriad of women's experiences. She has not been made to “become” the phallus in the assumption of her roles, and is not said to “have” the phallus as she performs them. Instead, Mary subverts the phallus, for the incarnation has renegotiated power such that power becomes transformative freedom for the other.

This for-otherness paves the way for an assumption of many roles. Through the power of the Spirit, Mary and Christ together have declared an alternate reality, a reality in which categorizations of power have been dismantled. In the incarnation the fruit of union has grasped its eschatological moment, and has been redefined such that the life that is formed between humanity and God results not from sex, but from desire, from mutual self-giving and participation in the life of the other. The incarnational moment

sweeps all of humanity into these acts of self-giving and participation, and the implications are many. Desire does not manifest as control, and control cannot be measured by its fruit. The mutual self-giving between God and humanity permeates into the rest of that shared life, such that God's desire for creature and creature's desire for God results in many kinds of fruits, multiplicities of roles, and varied performances in diverse situations. The result of this—the renunciation of the privilege of difference—is an eschatological movement into relatedness that does not deny the realities of difference, but refuses the assumption of power based upon those differences. It is the misuse of power based on phenotypical and biological difference that God resists through the incarnational moment, and it is this resistance to which God's people are called.

Resistance and *En Sarki*

The renunciation of the privilege of difference is birthed in the incarnation, and it is this reality in which God's people must participate. Fundamentally, *en sarki* is life that emerges from resistance to categorical constructions that distribute privilege and power to particular bodies while denying these to others. It is the moment in which the Spirit partners with the oppressed to carve a path of defiance, a performance that dethrones signifiers through embodied resistance to the meanings ascribed to them. *En sarki* is continued movement against those structures that oppress, destroy, exclude, and efface—it is an unremitting utterance of God's work in the world through opposing the principalities and powers that continue to subjugate the most marginalized.

En sarki thus requires the negotiation of difference, for it is mutuality and relationality that motivate the Spirit's work. The Spirit empowers the marginalized to embrace performances that society has deemed unnatural to them, and calls the privileged to divest their power for the sake of the oppressed. It is through the performances of these embodied lives that bodily signifiers are transformed, and God's desire for God's people to live in harmony, mutuality, and reciprocity is realized. If *en sarki* might be considered in these terms, then *en sarki* is resistance, and thus Mary's *en sarki* refuses her appropriation in the service of patriarchy and colonialism. Though her image might be used for these ends, acknowledging the real woman Mary is to confess that her resistance to categorical construction based on her femaleness also implies resistance to the ways in which the powerful would use her body for the sake of imperial conquest. It is her female body that has been used to justify or facilitate the oppression of particular people groups, and thus the emancipation of her body resists the colonial encounter.

En sarki is made present through Mary's womb, for here the male body is baptized into new life, one in which the signifier of masculinity is deposed, equity established, and hegemony dethroned. This baptism provides the entryway for relationship with the other—as Mary, Jesus, and Joseph freely give themselves to one another, their communion becomes a transformative, prescriptive, and prophetic act of radical for-otherness. It is a movement enacted by the Spirit that draws them into a new understanding of human relatedness, one founded upon a power that is based not upon self-interest or individuality, but mutuality and love, not on the retainment of political power, but the relinquishment of power for the sake of the marginalized. One cannot know and love God without knowing and loving the other, and what God has accomplished through the other.

Through his continued interactions with the powerful and the oppressed, Jesus enacts a perichoretic dance between the exercise of power and the divesture of it. In the baptismal encounter of incarnation, the privilege of difference has been renounced through the reification of the divine and the human in one body, and the transgression of those performances considered inherent to male and female bodies. This baptism, however, is not a moment, but a movement—Jesus' societal situation has not changed, and thus his performance must be one of persistent resistance to those influences that continue to reject the reality that the Spirit has made present. This resistance requires constant prophetic proclamation and unceasing embodied opposition to the powers of the world. Through his life, Jesus invites both the powerful and the powerless to enter into this reality, to divest power or to claim it according to the Spirit's call.

Hegemony requires oppression and death to sustain itself, and thus, as Jesus challenges religious and political authorities by encountering and uplifting those that the powerful have subjugated for their own glorification, the powerful conspire to kill him. Death, however, is not the final word, for as death itself is swept into the divine life of God, this too becomes an unexpected birthplace of possibility. It is not death that must be prescribed for liberation, but the certainty of death must be recognized. It is through death, however, that the Spirit enacts resurrection—through death, new life emerges.

The resistance of God, then, is not simply a dethronement of signifiers and a transformation of the performances ascribed to certain bodies. God's resistance brings with it the reality of death, the acknowledgment that the subversion of the powers of the world comes with a price. Despite this, God's people are called to resistance through participation in one body, one communion in which the Spirit binds together those whom the hegemony of the phallus would deem perpetually disparate. The enactment of the renunciation of the privilege of difference in the incarnation requires those who affirm this reality toward radical for-otherness, continual divestiture of power for the sake of the marginalized, and a claiming of is-ness apart from the categorical constructions perpetuated through exclusionary discourse. It is baptism into newness of life that embraces possibility despite the oppression of hegemony, and it is through the power of the Spirit that the prophetic utterance upon those who enter this reality is resurrection life.

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