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We Don't Have the Virgin Mary, but ...

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Editor's Note: For several years Waterloo Lutheran Seminary has hosted a series of Abrahamic Faiths Forums at which representatives of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious traditions offer presentations on selected topics. The topic of the forum held on November 3, 2010 was "Mary" and of course this topic posed special challenges for the speaker representing the Jewish tradition. The following paper is based on the presentation given by Bob Chodos of Temple Shalom in Waterloo at the Abrahamic Faiths Forum held at WLS that day. It is an intriguing and thought provoking paper, and I am grateful that Bob has agreed to have it published in Consensus.

– Tim Hegedus

I would like to begin with a scene from the movie *Séraphine*, which tells the story of the early-twentieth-century French painter *Séraphine de Senlis*.¹ *Séraphine* was self-taught, self-motivated – self-everything, really – and the main sources of inspiration for her art were nature and her Catholic spirituality. When we first meet her in the movie she is a middle-aged housekeeper in a rooming house in Senlis. Among the people staying in the house is an influential German art connoisseur named Wilhelm Uhde, who eventually discovers and is amazed by her artistic work. But before that happens we see *Séraphine* and Wilhelm chatting as she cleans his room and serves him tea. One of their conversations is about religion. Now in real life, although this doesn't figure in the movie, Wilhelm Uhde was Jewish. *Séraphine* asks him about his religious beliefs, and Wilhelm says that he is not religious at all, that religion doesn't play any part in his life. "But what about the Virgin Mary?" she asks. "Don't you even have the Virgin Mary?"

Wilhelm's wordless but eloquent reply neatly encapsulates where we Jews stand: we don't have the Virgin Mary. Period. So on one level, that should be the end of my presentation. End of story. Well, not quite end of story.

First of all, there is a large part of me that wishes we did have the Virgin Mary. Mary is a marvellous, multifaceted character and the most fully realized feminine object of veneration that we have in our Abrahamic extended family. Now I'm not going to scandalize my Christian friends by referring to Mary as a goddess, and I recognize that even the most reverent Catholic teachings about Mary place her a notch below the divine. And I acknowledge Mary Malone's caveat that intensified devotion to the Virgin Mary has never translated into improved status and respect for flesh-and-blood Christian women – in fact,

it's often been the reverse.² Nevertheless, Mary in the Catholic and Orthodox Christian traditions is the source of considerable spiritual riches – riches that, I think, only a female figure standing near the heart of the tradition can provide.

So, I asked myself, does my own tradition have these riches? And if so, where are they to be found? We clearly have no one figure who brings together all the roles played by Mary in the Christian tradition. But as I thought about this, it occurred to me that by looking at different women in the Hebrew Bible, we see exemplars of a number of these roles, which the women in question fulfil with verve and flair. I would like to look at four such roles: mother of sorrows, the woman who receives an annunciation, the woman who prays, and the mother of the messiah.

Mother of sorrows

Our mother of sorrows is Rachel imeinu, the matriarch Rachel. When we first meet her in chapter 29 of the book of Genesis, Rachel is young, beautiful, spirited and self-reliant, but sorrow is soon to enter her life and never leaves it. Catholic tradition identifies seven sorrows of Mary; one can enumerate seven sorrows of Rachel as well: her displacement from the marriage bed by her sister Leah; her barrenness; her estrangement from Leah in Jacob's household; her early death in childbirth; Jacob's refusal to accept the name, Ben-Oni or son of my sorrow, that she gives her last son, whom he names Benjamin instead; the disappearance and presumed death of her son Joseph; and the exile of her descendants. It is this last that moves her to unconsolable wailing as she makes a dramatic reappearance in the book of Jeremiah: "A voice in Ramah is heard, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children, she refuses to be comforted for her children, for they are not" (Jeremiah 31:16).³

But Rachel's sorrow goes beyond these specific occurrences; in an eloquent essay, Tamar Frankiel describes it as "soul-hunger." This soul-hunger is so intense, she writes, and yet Rachel is "so connected to the realities of earthly life, that she always felt the human world's lack of connection to something beyond the mundane. She could not be satisfied unless earth and heaven were truly connected."⁴

Perhaps it is because of her soul-hunger, her refusal to accept the disconnect between the human and the divine, that Rachel's voice is heard in heaven. Ramah, where the bitter weeping is heard, is the name of a place near which Rachel is buried, but it also means "height," and our great medieval commentator Rashi interprets the verse to mean "a voice is heard on high." God pays attention to Rachel's weeping.

And this is why Rachel's Tomb, over the centuries, has been an important Jewish pilgrimage site, where prayers are said for the childless, for the ill, for those who need help

in various ways. This is not to say that Rachel is an intercessor. Characterizing her in that way would be as scandalous in Jewish terms as characterizing Mary as a goddess would be in Christian terms. An Orthodox Jewish website devoted to Rachel's Tomb explains that "it is forbidden to pray to anyone other than God Himself The reason that prayers offered at Rachel's Tomb are more efficacious is because we connect with the merit of Rachel's life. Mother Rachel was great in deeds and in faith, by offering prayers at her tomb we associate ourselves with the goodness that was part of her life and so, our tradition says, God especially listens to our prayers there."⁵

So we don't pray to Rachel; we pray with Rachel. Either way, she lends her voice to those in need.

Receiving an annunciation

There are a number of annunciation scenes in the Hebrew Bible; perhaps the best known is the one in Genesis where three angels are sent to Abraham to tell him that his wife Sarah is going to bear a son. Both Abraham and Sarah are in their nineties. For Sarah to bear a child is as improbable as it would be for, well, a virgin. The angels speak to Abraham, but Sarah is in the tent, listening. Now think of any woman in her eighties or nineties whom you know. Imagine that someone comes to her claiming to bear a message from God that she will give birth to a child. When you picture her response, it's probably not that different from Sarah's: she laughs inwardly. Of course God is aware of her skepticism, and she is embarrassed. But in the end her laughter provides the name of her child: Yitzchak, from the Hebrew word for laughter, or Isaac.

Much closer to Mary's acceptance of her annunciation is the response of a woman we know only as eshet Manoach, Manoach's wife, whose story is told in chapter 13 of the book of Judges. It is not uncommon in the Hebrew Bible for a woman to have no name other than through her association with a male authority figure: wife of, daughter of. But this apparently subordinate status does not necessarily indicate that the woman is less important in the story or spiritually inferior. Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in the story of Manoach and his wife.⁶

Manoach's wife is barren, and an angel appears to her and tells her she will bear a son. The angel instructs her to avoid alcohol – perhaps the first recorded instance of this warning being issued to a woman about to become pregnant – and unclean foods. Furthermore, her child is to be a nazir, a Nazirite, and he too is never to touch alcohol, nor is he to cut his hair. This special child will begin to free the Israelites from their Philistine oppressors.

Manoach's wife tells her husband about her annunciation, and he wants to see for himself. So he asks God to send the angel a second time, and once again the angel appears to Manoach's wife while she is in the field. This time she runs to get her husband and brings him back with her to speak to the angel. Manoach asks the angel to repeat what he has already told Manoach's wife and, still not quite sure whom he is talking to, offers the angel a meal. The angel suggests he offer a sacrifice to God instead. When Manoach does this, as the offering is burning on the altar, the angel ascends to heaven in the flame. Finally Manoach gets it – sort of. He realizes that he has seen a divine being, but since no one can see God and live, he is afraid that he and his wife will die. His wife gently reminds him that if God wanted to kill them, telling them they were going to have a baby was hardly the way to do it.

In accepting her annunciation, Manoach's wife is faithful, level-headed and perceptive. Unfortunately, she is less successful than Mary in passing her good qualities on to her son, who takes after his erratic father instead. Nevertheless, this son, Samson, does become an effective freedom fighter, as the angel promises. One could speculate about why of all characters in the Hebrew Bible, Samson is one who merits annunciation by an angel – but I will leave that speculation to you.

The woman who prays

Mary's prayer, the Magnificat (Luke 1:47-53), provides important insights into her character. In the words of Pope Paul VI, she reveals herself to be "a woman who did not hesitate to proclaim that God vindicates the humble and the oppressed, and removes the powerful people of this world from their privileged positions."⁷

At the time Mary composed the Magnificat, prayer was already in the process of replacing animal sacrifice as a method of approaching God in the Jewish world. However, this was not so at the time of our own exemplar of the woman who prays, Hannah, who lived a millennium or so earlier. The right to pray was not easily granted to Hannah; she had to take it for herself.

The story of Hannah, told in the first two chapters of the book of 1 Samuel, is the haftarah or prophetic portion for the first day of Rosh Hashanah, our new year's day. For almost 30 years it has been my privilege to chant this haftarah in front of a congregation, and every year as I chant it, I become totally absorbed in the story, especially the central part in which Hannah, who like Rachel is a loved but barren wife in a polygamous household in which her rival wife has children, goes into the sanctuary at Shiloh to pray. She vows that if she is granted a son, he will be dedicated to God. The text tells us that "she was speaking in her heart; only her lips moved, and her voice was not heard" (1 Samuel 1:13).

If you have been in a traditional Jewish service during the amidah, or central petitionary prayer, you will have seen this mode of prayer. But to Eli the high priest, in charge of the sanctuary, Hannah at prayer is an unfamiliar and baffling sight. He takes her for a drunkard, confronting her and ordering, "Take away your wine from you." Despite the power differential between the ordinary woman and the high priest, Hannah stands her ground: "Hannah answered and said, 'No, my lord, I am a woman of troubled spirit, and no wine nor liquor have I drunk, and I was pouring out my soul before God'" (1 Samuel 1:14-15). To his credit, Eli recognizes Hannah's sincerity, and sends her off with the hope that her prayer will be answered. It is. She becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son, Samuel, whom she dedicates to God as promised and who grows up to become a prophet and leader of his people.

After Samuel is born Hannah prays again, this time with words that are recorded in chapter 2 of 1 Samuel. The similarities between the Song of Hannah and Mary's Magnificat are striking; perhaps the Magnificat was part of a genre of women's prayer that already had centuries of tradition behind it. We will leave Hannah with some of her own words:

Adonai makes poor and makes rich,
Brings low, and also lifts high,
Raises the poor from the dust,
Lifts the needy from the dunghill
To make them sit with princes
And inherit the seat of honour.
(1 Samuel 2:7-8)

Mother of the messiah

Unlike Christians, Jews do not recognize any historical figure as the messiah, the anointed one or redeemer. Throughout Jewish history there have been figures who have claimed that title or had it claimed for them – most recently Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, in the 1990s – but none has gained general acceptance. The Jewish consensus is that our redeemer is still to come.

But we do have a generally recognized messianic line, the line of David, so women who are progenitors of the line of David can be considered mothers of the messiah. Writing within this tradition, the evangelist Matthew begins his Gospel with a genealogy that traces Jesus' lineage back to Abraham through David (Matthew 1:1-16). It is, essentially, a male genealogy, father to son. But five women are mentioned, of whom Mary is the fifth and last.

The other four, all characters from the Hebrew Bible, are an interesting lot: Tamar, who posed as a prostitute to tempt Judah into accepting his responsibility (Genesis 38); Rahab, who was a prostitute and helped the spies sent by Joshua in their mission to scout out the

city of Jericho (Joshua 2); Ruth, the Moabite woman who won her position in the messianic line by placing herself at Boaz's feet on the threshing floor as he lay sleeping (Ruth 3); and Bathsheba, the bathing beauty who proved irresistible to King David (2 Samuel 11).

A few years ago I took a look at the female progenitors of the Jewish messiah in a presentation to the Waterloo Unitarian congregation that I entitled "Sex and the Four Pillars of Redemption." I modified Matthew's list slightly. Rahab has many good qualities, and her vocation as a prostitute makes her a good candidate for the list, but nowhere does the Hebrew Bible identify her as the mother of Boaz, which is how she is referred to in Matthew, or of any of the other figures in the line of David. This is Matthew's own midrash on her story. So I deleted Rahab, but I added another woman for whom there is a much better textual case.

In Genesis, after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot's daughters – as with Manoach's wife, we don't know them by any other names – take refuge with their father in a cave as fire and brimstone rain down (Genesis 19:30-38). Since their mother has suffered a terrible fate which you may remember, they quite reasonably conclude that the three of them are the only human beings left on the planet. Concerned with continuing the human race, the daughters get Lot drunk and have sex with him on successive nights. Each one gets pregnant and gives birth to a son whose descendants become one of the nations bordering Israel. In the case of the older daughter, who is the ringleader in the scheme, this nation is Moab, from which Ruth, who is David's great-grandmother, will eventually spring. So Lot's elder daughter replaced Rahab in my list.

I should also note that Bathsheba's inclusion in the list depends on a particular interpretation of her story. We know that Bathsheba is taking a bath and catches David's eye as he takes his evening walk on the roof (2 Samuel 11:2). What we don't know is whether she just happened to be bathing while the king was walking, or whether she deliberately timed her bath so that she would be seen. Was she just an object of the king's lust, or an active participant in the drama? The text doesn't tell us. But the feminist scholar Lillian Klein, basing her argument on both internal and external clues, makes what I consider a persuasive case for Bathsheba as an active participant.⁸ Bathsheba knows exactly what she is doing, and she has good reasons for doing it.

These refinements leave us with four stories, all of which relate to the genealogy of the House of David, and therefore to the genealogy of our redeemer. A sexual encounter is at the core of each of these stories, and in each encounter, a woman takes an active, or even a leading, role. In my presentation, I suggested that the four stories by no means create our whole structure of redemption, but they do provide the underpinnings of that structure – four pillars around which the structure can be built. The pillar that Lot's daughters provide us with is life, Tamar's pillar is responsibility, Ruth's is inclusion and Bathsheba's is peace.

While sex is what most people think of when David and Bathsheba are mentioned, there is also a strong anti-military undertone to the story, and Bathsheba eventually gives birth to a son, Solomon, whose name in Hebrew, Shlomo, means peace, and who when he succeeds David on the throne presides over an era of peace that is unparalleled in the story of the Israelite monarchy.

I am not going to put forward any theories as to why our redemption proceeds by way of stories such as these. And I will leave it to my Christian friends to explain what Matthew's intent is in placing Mary in the line of these women. Given that we don't have the Virgin Mary, I think I've taken this far enough.

Endnotes

¹ *S raphine*, directed by Martin Provost (Paris: TS Productions/Climax Films, 2008).

² See Mary T. Malone, *Who Is My Mother?: Rediscovering the Mother of Jesus* (Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown, 1984).

³ All biblical translations are the author's own.

⁴ Tamar Frankiel, "Our Mother of Sorrows," in Gail Twersky Reimer and Judith A. Kates (eds.), *Beginning Anew: A Woman's Companion to the High Holy Days* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 210.

⁵ Committee for Rachel's Tomb, "Prayers for Those in Need," retrieved January 2, 2011, from <http://www.rachelstomb.org/prayers.html>

⁶ This story and the impact of the annunciation on the life of their son Samson are perceptively interpreted in David Grossman, *Lion's Honey: The Myth of Samson*, translated by Stuart Schoffman (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006).

⁷ Apostolic Exhortation of His Holiness Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus*, for the Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary (February 2, 1974), para. 37, retrieved January 2, 2011, from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19740202_marialis-cultus_en.html

⁸ Lillian R. Klein, *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 55-71.