

Returning to the ‘Mother’s House’: A Feminist Look at Orpah

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THERE ARE NO shared understandings on the subject of sex roles and mothering, “even among women,” argues political scientist Susan Moller Okin. Especially among women. Feminists vie against “anti-feminists” over the dominance of men and the dependence of women, and feminists struggle among themselves, some lauding an androgynous society, others women’s unique nature.

Between the warring ideological fronts stand the women in the trenches who must combine work and love amid a virtual vacuum of models. The battle reached a climax for me when my role as mother in a public world not structured for and even hostile to children collided head on with my feminist hopes for equality. I looked for resources. One particular biblical image came to mind and would not let me go.

For centuries the intricately woven story of Ruth and Naomi has provided a compelling image of women caught between cultures. Recently a few feminists have lifted up the tale as a potentially liberating theological paradigm. In *Ruth and Naomi*, says biblical scholar Phyllis Trible, we find “women working out their own salvation with fear and trembling,” with Naomi bridging tradition and innovation and Ruth an exemplar of “radicality.” Other scholars like Renita Weems and Denise Lardner Carmody praise Ruth and Naomi for their remarkable friendship. They offer a model of religious bonding, remarks Carmody, that ought to serve “feminists of all persuasions a valuable lesson” in putting love first and differences second.

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But what of Orpah? Her story—my story and the story of many women caught between such clearly defined ideals of womanhood—is oddly untold. Theological tradition, the church and now feminist theology have admired and idealized Ruth’s decision to follow her late husband’s mother, while virtually ignoring the courage and conflicts of Orpah, the forgotten daughter, sister and friend who chooses to “return to her mother’s house” (Ruth 1:8). Granted, she “dies to the story,” as Trible notes, because she takes a course that does not follow the “dynamic of the tale.” She simply chooses another path.

As long as we continue to see Orpah as merely a “paradigm of the sane and reasonable,” acting in accordance with custom and “common sense,” Orpah is as good as dead. Rethinking her position might allow us to reconsider the struggles of many contemporary women whom both mainline congregations and feminist theologians have overlooked.

Feminist women who choose the path of motherhood can, in one sense, be understood as Orpahs who choose not to renounce the “mother’s house.” Without a doubt many white middle-class women have serious conflicts over family, vocation and identity. Over and over I read autobiographical notes in the prefaces of books by white feminist professional women that confess a certain shock upon becoming a mother. The tale is largely the same: “Until my children were born, I went along quite nicely,” writes Amy Rossiter in *From Private to Public: A Feminist Exploration of Early Mothering*. Sara Ruddick in *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* writes that she developed a commitment to equality between the sexes and particular ways of reasoning and “then I had children.” Sylvia Ann Hewlett in *A Lesser Life: The Myth of Women’s Liberation in America* says: “Up until

the time I had children, I was profoundly confident of my ability to find fulfillment in both love and work." Several interconnected problems rob these women of confidence: How can one be a mother and still retain one's affective, intellectual and professional personality? A mother and a feminist? How does the ideal of equality fare next to the reality of the delight mothers can take in relationship with their children? How can one satisfy the nurturing standards of the 1950s and the rigid standards of our fiercely competitive workplaces? Is there no alternative discourse of the mother? Are there alternative ideals of reason? Alternative modes of work and love?

The category of Orpah stretches beyond the white middle-class woman who struggles to integrate feminist theories of liberation with the "private" and deprecated values of home and family. What about the few white men who have turned to denied values of family, sharing the chores as well as reaping the benefits? What about the growing number of young single mothers who bear full economic and emotional responsibility for work and home? What about the older, divorced or widowed woman who lived for years in a traditional marriage in which her needs were secondary to husband and children and her skills unrewarded and now, while released from some of these restrictions, still has little real power in terms of financial means of support or social and political status? What about the Central American woman who wants to claim her motherhood as a resource to save herself, her family and her community? And the Akan and Ghanaian woman who embraces mothering as a religious duty but faces economic hardship in a world where Western materialist definitions of work do not include her immense unpaid labor?

SILENCE PREVAILS. Neither the mainline church nor feminist theology has listened to the inner discourse of the mother. Neither gives adequate consideration to new dilemmas of work and love confronting women. Motherhood may no longer be the main source of female identity, nor need it be. But 90 percent of women have children at some point in their lives. In *Feminist Mothers* Tuula Gordon quotes one "feminist mother" who describes her bind: "I have enjoyed motherhood; but sometimes I feel that I should not talk about it . . . There is a sense that in order to develop yourself you should not enjoy motherhood." While feminists dismiss the idealization of motherhood, they offer nothing in its place. Must raising children be something women hide or simply do on the side? Feminist theology has yet to incorporate the complicated yet positive aspects of motherhood. Many refine scholarship in theoretical realms "at the expense of the lives of the women who need to experience the fruits of research," as Carolyn Heilbrun contends in *Writing a Woman's Life*. Yet even Heilbrun's book lacks a chapter on motherhood. This leaves an impoverished choice—either a "total negation" of motherhood or "an acceptance . . . of its traditional representations." The latter is the choice of a "great mass of people,

women and men," says Julia Kristeva in her essay "Stabat Mater" in *The Kristeva Reader*. Feminists are mute. Conservative values fill the vacuum.

White mainline congregations have fared no better. Many have lost touch with the women in their midst who have felt the impact of the gender revolutions of the past two decades. On a typical Sunday morning many women come wanting nourishment and leave empty; they expect reverberating changes and find stagnation. Conservative churches clearly advocate a return to the "traditional" family. Mainline churches stand in the crossfire between the feminist revolution and conservative trends, but when all is said and done they pay little heed to the transformations of the former and to the hazardous retrenchments of

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the latter. The so-called Moral Majority claims the image of the Eden-home, while radical feminism claims the Exodus story. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues that a woman must either return home to save the family from decline or abandon the oppressive confines of home and church as hopelessly corrupt. Most women are caught somewhere in between.

The unspoken desires of women whose lives fail to follow the "dynamic of the tale" prescribed by the dominant visions of both traditional and feminist theology may find company in Orpah. Orpah's silence sheds light on the gaps in feminist and church conversations about the woman who chooses to "return to her mother's house."

The choices of today and the choices of the text are not as simple as they seem. Naomi and Ruth may deserve a less generous reading as faultless exemplars of selflessness and devotion and Orpah a more generous one. All three function as realistic examples of complicated responses to cultural upheaval. If Ruth and Naomi are the "women in culture, women against culture, and women transforming culture" that Trible dubs them, Orpah represents the woman caught between cultures.

Living outside the classical social mores that define the position of men and women, Ruth, Orpah and Naomi are no man's property. On the one hand, they are bereft of husband and children in a male-dominated culture which promises nothing without either. On the other hand, bereaved but not alone, they turn to each other and receive life more abundantly, recognizing their capacity for redefining self and society. Twice in this crucible of decision they join arms, lift up their voices and "weep" at the recognition of what they have *in each other*—a value that society never sees or sanctions—and at the knowledge of what they may lose again in choosing.

The three women practice a particular approach to moral and religious agency. They play option against option, reasoning in intimate conversational petition, decision, indecision, redecision. Naomi petitions Orpah twice, Ruth thrice. Significantly, Orpah chooses both paths, first one, then the other. She makes known her desire to go both ways in sincere awareness of the good that lies in both. She is unwilling to accept the choices that patriarchal structures impose upon her. Only with Naomi's second urging does she decide, perhaps with reluctance and acknowledgment of her loss.

Naomi refashions their choice in unique terms: she beseeches them to return to their "mother's house." The use of *mother's house* is strikingly unconventional. Elsewhere in Scripture (Gen. 38:11; Lev. 22:13; Num. 30:16; Deut. 22:21 and Judg. 19:2-3) the conventional advice to the widowed and displaced woman is to return to the father's house. Tribble believes this unusual reference emphasizes the opposition between mother and mother-in-law.

Tribble's reading skirts an important point. Naomi's words point beyond opposition to the unifying, solidifying power of the mother—whether mother or mother-in-law. These women envision a world in which paternity is not the central social relationship. Paternity constructs households and marital arrangements, not the whole of reality. Naomi's petition discloses the value and lure of the "mother's house." The request protests a system in which men control motherhood in order to maintain patriarchy; it points to what Barbara Katz Rothman in *Recreating Mothering* calls a "mother-based system" of kinship. In this transformed world, women are no longer "men's children coming through the bodies of women" but "the children of women" turning to the "mother's house."

The Hebrew verb *sub*, translated as both "return" and "turn back," appears 12 times in the first 17 verses of Ruth and, as commentator Edward F. Campbell observes, "carries the whole movement and tension of the episode." The text stresses particular questions: What in one's past does one reclaim? To what does one return? How does one return to the "mother's house" without losing the redefinition of self and society discovered in the wilderness? Following the compelling promises of feminist liberation theologies, the Orpahs of today want to make a life that is different from that of our mothers, yet that life may also be at odds with that of many our contemporaries.

NO TWO women in the Ruth narrative act in the same way. Nor is judgment about the adequacy and rightness of either choice proclaimed. Naomi "said no more" (Ruth 1:18). Her silence signifies a forced tolerance for the moral and religious ambiguity of the situation. Yet readers of this text have clung to Ruth as the right way; she follows the call of a new God. But Orpah is not just the opposite of Ruth. She has her own story to tell. She makes a most difficult decision to reclaim

something of her maternal past and to return to "the mother's house." While we don't know the rest of the story, Orpah has not chosen wrongly; she has chosen differently. The silence of God throughout allows us to ponder whether this God does not also go along with Orpah. She has encountered God and "turned back." God does bless Orpah: Naomi says to *both* daughters-in-law: "May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have with the dead and with me" (1:8b). The paths of righteousness are manifold.

If the Book of Ruth is to function truly as a "theological interpretation of feminism," then we must read it with its full cast of characters. Orpah's journey home helps us to reconsider the silent and silenced among us, the women who stand both on the threshold of the women's movement and on the threshold of traditional beliefs and practices. It's time to reconsider the Orpahs struggling within white mainline churches. Feminism must broaden its cast to include those who refuse to forsake the powerful engagement of mothering and its teachings. And if mainline churches want feminist mothers in their midst, they must listen to and support the woman who, while greatly tempted to move on, chooses a turning back of sorts. ■

Un-dividing Wall

It curves in rugged Pennsylvania stone
a cusp, new moon, above the grassy circle
at the center of the church Memorial Garden
a wall dividing life from solid, stony death.
Five feet tall of it, with flagstone brim
and seven plates of bronze to wear
the names and dates which represent
too much for any wall to bear.
Today's picnic for the Sunday school
has spilled across the lawns into this space
preserved for memories and ashes—dust to dust.
Huddled in sycamore shade and sipping punch,
parents watch with mixed response—some anxious,
others smiling, some seem shocked—as eight-
and nine- and ten-year-olds—defying death—
struggle to scramble up its rough-hewn face,
dance a moment of delight along the parapet,
then dare to leap down to the green below as if
some year-worn craggy granddaddy had beckoned
them to his lap and sat there chuckling
at their wriggling pranks, their shrieks
and whoops and giggles of pure joy. Walls are
for climbing too, I realized, and launching
off the top into tomorrow seeking flight
from memory into hope, then landing
with a thud where tears are swept away
by peals of lively ever-youthful laughter.

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