

Review of Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan and Tina Pippin, eds., *Mother Goose, Mother Jones, Mommie Dearest: Biblical Mothers and Their Children*. Semeia Studies 61. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009.

Richard Walsh, Methodist University

This volume opens a conversation about mother-children relationships in Biblical Studies. As the essayists find mother-children stories in the patriarchal biblical texts, the implication is that the reason for the previous absence of such a conversation lies, at least partly, with dominant Biblical Studies. The essayists, however, do not directly challenge patriarchy in the academy. Instead, they address the patriarchy that they find in the biblical texts and in the reception and interpretation of these texts by “believers”. The underlying question of the volume is thus what biblical representations of mothers have to do with current expectations placed on mothers (see Alison Jaspers’ response).

While the essayists’ tones vary from the sermonic to the politically active, they all agree on an agenda of liberating contemporary women from oppression and violence. Again, the essayists imply that the culprit is more ecclesial than academic (the one sustained critique of the academy is Madeline McClenney-Sadler’s complaint that the academy has not granted her “annunciations” evidentiary or warranting value). In fact, the volume presents its academic interpretations as potentially redemptive. Many of the essayists buttress this stance with reports of their engagement in religious or political activism for women.

Academically, the essayists all challenge the assumption that a single model of motherhood exists. Instead, the editors depict a spectrum of motherhood models ranging from Mother Goose through Mother Jones to Mommie Dearest, and the essayists reiterate these metaphors. Given the volume’s activist tenor, Mother Jones is the preferred model (see Brenda Wallace). Given the patriarchal nemesis, Mother Goose (or a June Cleaver model) comes under critique most often. While this threatens to create its own good-bad mother binary, Tina Pippin and Wil Gafney, in particular, offer essays deconstructing this possibility. Nonetheless, the volume’s two respondents (Jaspers; Tat-siong Benny Liew) both worry that the volume’s notion of motherhood remains too biological (but see Pippin; Margaret Aymer). In his response, Tat-siong Benny Liew also indicts the essayists for failing to broach motherhood’s overarching cultural constructs of nationalism, gender, and sexual orientation (but see Brian Britt).

Beyond the rejection of an essentialist conception of motherhood, the essayists work differently toward liberation. McClenney-Sadler argues that the texts and their culture were not as patriarchal as scholars have assumed. By contrast, the rest of the essayists assume that the biblical texts are patriarchal, but reject such patriarchy in favor of modern liberalism. Some essayists find strong biblical mothers who acted decisively for their interests and/or those of their children (Britt; Mignon R. Jacobs; Andrew M. Mbuvi; Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder; Brenda Wallace). Others are worried that even the so-called “strong women” actually reinforce patriarchy (Wil Gafney; Frank M. Yamada; Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan). Finally, Tina Pippin and Margaret Aymer worry about the destructive “paternalism” lurking in the maternal images of Matthew’s Jesus and of Paul.

The editors arrange the essays in a roughly canonical order, but one might think of them in terms of their underlying approach. While using many hermeneutical approaches (e.g., from womanist to structuralist), most of the essayists engage in expositional or intertextual forays. The clearest exception is a historical essay on reception history (Linda S. Schearing).

The expositional essays exegete a biblical passage in order to expound its current (ir)relevance. The approach is not unlike *The Interpreter's Bible* format or the old distinction between "what it meant" and "what it means".¹ Thus McClenney-Sadler asserts that Lev. 18 assumes a bilateral (not a patrilineal) society, that it places mother's rights second only to YHWH's, and that it calls current "believing" mothers to prevent father-daughter incest. She provides an example of the latter from her ministry. For Gafney, Ruth and Orpah were victims of rape marriage. Naomi may have been complicit in this, and she certainly later "sexploited" Ruth to achieve her own social security. Gafney contemporizes these notions with news items about rapes of African women. For Jacobs, Bathsheba, once object of David's desire, becomes the model of a proactive mother who saves her son's life and masterminds his ascension to the throne. Like Mother Goose, Bathsheba is a source of wisdom. David becomes an ineffective, distracted, impotent ruler. Kirk-Duggan argues that the idealized wife and mother of Prov. 31 is a harmful paradigm, ensnaring contemporary mothers in guilt and self-denial. In fact, she finds the model unrealistic because it is riven by implications that the model is divine or male (31:17), rather than a real woman.

Mbuvi asserts that the Mother Goose caricature of the Virgin Mary enforces the submission of African women. To counteract this oppression, he argues that the widowed Mary became the public face of her family because her eldest son, Jesus, shirked his family responsibilities. Here, Mark 3:31-35 becomes Mary's attempt to force Jesus to assume his family responsibilities. For Mbuvi, contemporary women in Africa should also act decisively against traditional, oppressive authorities. For Crowder, the Canaanite woman of Matt. 15:21-28 left her daughter behind and "worked", which Crowder defines as acts challenging authority on behalf of healthy lives. Following the Canaanite's example, African American women who work do not need to fear that they wreak havoc on their children. Wallace depicts the widow of Luke 18:1-8, like Mother Jones, as an archetypal mother of justice. Wallace analyzes the biblical story structurally to delineate a hermeneutic of the marginalized that moves from prayer to "reversal", which she defines as actions that do not make sense to the dominant. Wallace ends her essay with a model prayer for contemporary mothers of justice. Finally, Aymer argues that Paul uses maternal imagery for himself (1 Cor. 3:2; Gal. 4:19; 1 Thess. 2:7) or spins "nurse(ry) stories" invoking the image of the ideal Roman mother (or nurse) as the one responsible for children's moral formation. Recognizing that Paul is not championing actual mothers and that he also uses problematic master-slave imagery, she wonders whom we serve when we imagine Paul and biblical mothers as June Cleaver.

Linda S. Schearing's essay is an analysis of reception history. She examines the nineteenth-century use of Gen. 3:16a to reject the use of anaesthesia to relieve childbirth pains. The introduction of the breathing method to relieve pain in childbirth in the twentieth century faced similar objections. In both cases, Schearing points out that medical workers were more likely to advocate "God's mandated pain" than academically trained theologians. She also points to the oppressive problems inherent in instructing mothers in labor to associate either their pain or their pleasure with piety.

The intertextual essays read biblical texts comparatively alongside modern texts. Britt reads Ruth with J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. In both, he finds vulnerable young women who take shelter under powerful men in order to avoid becoming sacrificial victims. Both young women are self-determining agents acting in the context of larger social conflicts. For Britt, unless one sees this larger context, these strong maternal role models only confirm patriarchy. Yamada finds the paradigm of the virtuous mother and wayward son in both the Samson story and *The Simpsons*. Both are subversive in form. The Samson story undoes the pattern of the judges, and *The Simpsons* parodies the sitcom. Nonetheless, both use their strong mother models to support patriarchal culture. Roncace and Whitehead examine biblical conception stories (e.g., in Gen. 4 and in the barren mother story type).

¹ The distinction is Krister Stendhal's. See his "Biblical Theology, Contemporary", in *The Interpreter's Bible Dictionary* (vol. 1; ed. G. A. Buttrick; Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 418-432.

They highlight God's sexual involvement and the human father's relative absence. They move from these stories to sexual elements in medieval mystics' desire for God and in recent evangelical romances. They criticize the last, in particular, for reinforcing traditional roles of wife and mother as they proffer fantasies of safe sexual escapes. Finally, Pippin compares the overprotective mothers of Alfred Hitchcock (*The Birds*) with the image of Jesus in drag as mother hen in Matt. 23:37-39. The connection allows her to find in the gospel hen an image of an apocalyptic deity that offers a costly safety under the guise of compassion. For Pippin, this paternalistic construction of the divine is nothing short of horror.

If one has read this book, as Jasper suggests, as dealing with what biblical representations of mothers have to do with current expectations placed on mothers, one is left with a sense of disappointment. The biblical tradition's influence seems largely deleterious. Even strong, self-determining biblical women support patriarchy. One wonders, then, why we are still reading this abusive text. Here the volume's sermonic (or activist) tone and the editors' liberating agenda come together. In short, these essayists still read the biblical texts in order to liberate "believers" from patriarchal violence (of course, we might include among "believers" those of us in the academy who still think in patriarchal terms, either consciously or unconsciously). For them, walking away is not an option.