

The Theological Voice of Kassiani

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¹ Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality* (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 45.

² Other women hymnographers include Theodosia, Thekla, and Palaiologina.

³ *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. Alexander P. Kazhdan and Alice-Mary Talbot (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1109.

⁴ Anna Silvas, "Kassia the Nun c. 810–865: An Appreciation," in *Byzantine Women: Varieties of Experience, 800–1200*, ed. Lynda Garland (London: Ashgate, 2006), 17.

⁵ It has been suggested that, "while recognized as a first rate hymnographer, Kassiani has been denied canonization" until recently. Antonia Tripolitis, *Kassia: The Legend, the Woman and Her Work* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), xi.

In his book *The Freedom of Morality*, Christos Yannaras cites the Hymn of the Nun Kassiani in his discussion of the "unsearchable immensity" in the sin of the human person and the immeasurable mercy of a personal God for the truly repentant human person.¹ Sung in the Orthodox Church at the Bridegroom Matins and the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts for Great and Holy Wednesday, the Hymn of the Nun Kassiani is a profound theological statement that conveys the kenotic love of Christ for his creation in spite of its "multitude of sins."

It is rare in Orthodox theological discussions for a woman to be quoted as an authority, so it is surprising, yet gratifying, to find Yannaras drawing on Kassiani. Though it is likely that many of her writings have been lost, extant material shows that Kassiani made significant contributions to the intellectual and spiritual ethos that form the Orthodox tradition. To become better acquainted with Kassiani, we will look at the details of her life, including two significant incidents that provide historical and theological context for her work, and at texts that convey her unique perspective through several recurring themes.

Of the four known women hymnographers of the Byzantine period, Kassiani (also known as Cassia, Kasia, and Ikasia) is the most famous.² She was

a child confessor, a defender of icons during the final wave of iconoclasm, and a prolific composer of hymnography and non-liturgical poetry.³ While the key dates of her biography are somewhat difficult to pin down, Anna Silvas has determined she was likely born around 810 and died around 865.⁴ On the liturgical calendar, she is commemorated on September 7.⁵

Coming from an aristocratic family, Kassiani enjoyed the advantage of an educational curriculum that featured Greek language, theology, and sacred music, as well as classical philosophy and literature. Much of what else we know about the young Kassiani can be traced to three extant letters written to her by her monastic mentor Theodore (759–826), abbot of the famous Stoudios Monastery in Constantinople.

These letters, which have been translated by Silvas, are estimated to have been written in the 820s. They respond to several issues, including Kassiani's desire for a monastic vocation and, as in this excerpt, her involvement with the iconoclastic persecutions: "Indeed, I hear of your noble deeds from Dorotheos, our spiritual child, who is imprisoned very near you. Do you know what it is you do? You participate with him in the struggle. . . ." In a subsequent letter, Theodore recognizes her willingness to endure persecution for her faith: "Indeed, you have

already chosen to suffer for Christ in this present persecution—as though it were not enough that you were beaten in the past—and again, you chafe because you are unable to endure your burning longing for the good confession. . . .”

Beyond Kassiani’s suffering for her faith, Theodore commends her ability to articulate her faith. In another letter he states:

Once more, your Decorum has expressed to us things so wise and understanding, that it is right for me to be astonished and give thanks to the Lord when I see such knowledge in a maiden lately sprung. While you have not surpassed those of old, of whose wisdom and education we in this generation, both men and women, fall far short—and immeasurably so—you have so with regard to those of the present, since the fair form of your discourse has far more beauty than a mere specious prettiness.

In writing “once more,” Theodore implies that her thought is consistently well formulated and marked by an exceptional articulation of faith. In these quotations, we see that a monk not known for flattery or ostentatious comments recognizes in Kassiani a person of devout faith and an incipient theologian. The respect that Theodore apparently had for this young woman may have been the basis for Kassiani’s future partnership with the Stoudios monastics, which led them to include her hymns in the new service books they were compiling.

In the eighth and ninth centuries, aristocratic Byzantine girls such as Kassiani were pushed to prime themselves at an early age for marriage at court by excelling in their education and by

maintaining their virtue. As a young woman, Kassiani appeared at a so-called “bride show.”⁶ Bride shows, organized by the dowager empresses, were staged to give appropriate candidates the opportunity to compete for marriage to the emperor. Kassiani was among several “finalists” who appeared before the iconoclastic emperor, Theophilos. Byzantine historians record the emperor approaching Kassiani and saying, “What a flood of terrible things came through a woman.” This provocative statement, seen as an allusion to the sin of Eve, seems to be a direct challenge to Kassiani, perhaps in view of her opposition to iconoclasm. Kassiani’s bold response, “But also through woman better things spring”—referring to the incarnation through the Virgin Mary—demonstrates her mind and character. By pointing to the dynamic between Eve and the Virgin, Kassiani’s reply prefigures a recurring theme of her hymnography. It is likely that Theophilos was not impressed with Kassiani’s “theology,” however. He married Theodora instead.

Some time after the bride show, Kassiani entered a monastery, fulfilling an earlier desire to pursue a monastic vocation. In 843, following the end of iconoclasm, Kassiani became the abbess of a convent on Xerolophos, a hill near the Stoudios community, which had established itself as a nexus of creativity for the liturgical arts in the ninth century. Not much is known about Kassiani’s monastery, but it is likely that the hymnography she composed there between 843 and 865 was originally chanted by choirs of nuns. She probably wrote a much larger body of work than the 49 hymns and 261 non-liturgical verses that are extant. Most surprising, however, is that at least 23 of her hymns were accepted by the Stoudios scriptorium and were

⁶ See Kurt Sherry, *Kassia the Nun in Context* (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2013), 120–131.

incorporated into what became the Triodion and the Menaion.

Hymnography composed by Kassiani may be familiar because it is still sung during the liturgical year in Orthodox parishes. For example, attributed to Kassiani in the Festal Menaion is the doxastikon for “Lord, I Call” sung at Vespers for the Nativity of our Lord, “When Augustus Ruled the Earth.” In the Lenten Triodion, the doxastikon for the Matins Aposticha sung on Great and Holy Tuesday, “The Woman who had Fallen into Many Sins,” and the irmoi for the first four canticles of the canon sung on Great and Holy Saturday, were also composed by Kassiani.

“When Augustus Ruled the Earth” is a stately hymn focused on the theology of the incarnation. “When you were made man of a pure virgin, the many gods of idolatry were destroyed.” Kassiani’s text stresses that the incarnation is the basis for the veneration of icons, by distinguishing between worship of matter and of the “God who was made man” from matter. Additional hymns for the Vespers of the Nativity, which have been translated by Antonia Tripolitiss, are extant but are not found in the Festal Menaion.

Of great beauty is Kassiani’s canon for Great and Holy Saturday. The irmos of the first canticle reads: “Of old you buried the pursuing tyrant beneath the waves of the sea. Now the children of those who were saved bury you beneath the earth, but like the maidens, let us sing to the Lord, for gloriously has he been glorified.” In this hymn, she not only proclaims the joy of the new Passover, the theme of Holy Saturday, but draws her community into the hymn, celebrating the new

Passover with Miriam and the other women who crossed the Red Sea.

Though this canon was known to have been written by Kassiani, it became associated with Kosmas (685–750), Bishop of Maiouma in Phoenicia. In the tenth century, Bishop Marcus of Hydrous in Italy composed five additional odes, to complete the nine-ode canon sung today. Tripolitiss states that, though texts of Kassiani’s tetraodion can be found in manuscript form on Mount Athos, the church’s hierarchy did not acknowledge Kassiani’s work after the ninth century, since it was considered improper for hymns composed by a woman to be included in liturgical books.⁷ The Triodion currently in use, however, attributes the canon to both Kassiani and Bishop Marcus.

While some believe that the Hymn of the Sinful Woman is autobiographical, it is fairly clear from what we know of Kassiani’s life that this is not accurate. Nevertheless, the voice of the composer can be heard clearly in the text.⁸ Kassiani places the sinful woman among the myrrhbearers, connecting the recurring themes of kenotic love and penitential tears. Beginning the text with “The woman who had fallen into many sins, O Lord,” she tenderly transforms the image of a *fallen woman* into a woman who *falls down in repentance*, weeping at the Savior’s feet. No longer hiding from God like Eve, this tearful woman perceives that God is before her and, in knowing that, cannot remain standing. Kassiani uses tears to show the woman’s self-emptying of sin. The hymn begs the Lord to “accept a fountain of tears,” giving us an image of renewal like the earth after rain—but a renewal that originates in God, who “gathered the waters of the sea into the clouds.”

⁷ According to Tripolitiss, the twelfth-century poet and dramatist Theodoros Prodromos wrote that the Tetraodion was composed by Kassiani, but church authorities “did not want to credit a woman for composing a hymn sung on one of the most important feasts.” Tripolitiss, *Kassia*, xii.

⁸ See my forthcoming article “More than One Story: Another Look at the Woman Who Anoints Jesus and the Hymn of Kassiani,” in *Encountering Women of Faith: St. Catherine’s Vision*, vol. 3, ed. Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press).

Reflecting on the kenotic love of God, Kassiani describes his creation of heaven and earth and his ineffable entrance into his creation. In Genesis, God *walked* in paradise; Kassiani contrasts Eve, who hid in fear from God, to a woman who weeps at the *feet* of the God-Man. In the plea, “do not despise your servant in your immeasurable mercy,” Kassiani connects Eve to this tearful woman, suggesting that the woman’s tender embrace and her anointing of Jesus is the culmination of a repentance that will free Eve, through the death and resurrection of the one who is anointed. Speaking in the first person, Kassiani does not separate herself from the sinful woman or from Eve, but gives voice to their words, so that they also speak for her, for all women, and in fact for all humanity, revealing this act to have a cosmic and eschatological character. In this moment, a woman, in asking her Savior to hear her wordless lament, captures for all of humanity the reality of an intimate relationship with the God who does not abandon those who yearn for him. She cries “Woe is me!” expressing the sorrow that fills the hearts of those who discover that in their nearness to God, they remain far away. Having emptied herself of the fear that trapped Eve, the tearful woman in Kassiani’s hymn sheds tears of love, which bring her to the transformative presence of the Savior. In spite of her many sins, she receives his “immeasurable mercy.”

Manuscripts from three different sources name Kassiani as the hymnographer for other, lesser known works in the Menaion, such as the doxastika for the Matins Praises honoring the Great Martyr Thekla (September 24), for the Vespers “Lord, I Call” honoring the Pious Pelagia (October 8), and for the Vespers “Lord, I Call,” honoring the Martyr Eudokia (March 1),



and a verse for the Praises honoring Great Martyr Barbara (December 4). In addition, Kassiani composed the doxastikon for the Vespers Aposticha which appears in the Triodion and is sung for Mary of Egypt. In these hymns, Kassiani reprises her signature themes of kenosis, Mary as the new Eve, and the renewal of creation through the watering of a penitent’s tears.⁹

These themes also appear in the hymn for Saint Barbara. Bringing to mind her dialogue about women with the iconoclastic emperor Theophilus, Kassiani honors the victory of Barbara over the Evil One. She bookends salvation history with Eve, who in the beginning was an instrument of sin, and Mary,

⁹ Tripolitis, *Kassia*, xi-xiii.

the new Eve, who provides flesh for the incarnate Word of the Father. Here is the hymn for St. Barbara as it appears in the December Menaion:

The evil one has been dishonored, defeated by a woman, because he held the First-Mother as an instrument of sin; for the Logos of the Father, simple and immutable, as only he is known, was made flesh of a Virgin and removed the curse of Eve and Adam, Christ deservedly crowned Barbara the Martyr, and through her gives to the world a means of atonement and great mercy.¹⁰

For Kassiani, Barbara's victory over the adversary of God liberates Eve and Adam, and all of creation, from sin and death. She engages in this fight because the "Logos of the Father" became incarnate, born of the woman Mary. Once again, for Kassiani, the act of one person, in this case Barbara, has a cosmic and eschatological affect, in which Christ grants the "whole world forgiveness and salvation." It is important to note that for Kassiani, this victory is not Barbara's personal triumph over sin and death, but a martyrdom that brings "mercy and forgiveness to

the entire creation." Kassiani's hymn conveys to us that this is why Barbara is crowned!

The nun Kassiani was a woman of the Church, who went beyond traditional expectations to contribute to the development of Orthodox liturgy. Growing up during the final phase of the struggle against iconoclasm, nurtured by the spiritual wisdom of Theodore the Studite, and later herself tonsured a monastic, Kassiani was immersed in the theology for her entire life. We can be grateful that her hymns, which convey a unique theological perspective, were not discarded. Focused primarily on incarnational theology, Kassiani's poetic texts touch the heart. Her emphasis on the kenotic love of Christ conveys a cosmic and eschatological vision which, according to Yannaras, expresses a personal experience that is the "encounter between freedom and love," and where, in spite of our "immeasurable sins," we find life as communion with God. Wider discussion of Kassiani's work could encourage twenty-first-century Orthodox women to develop theological voices and to engage, as did Kassiani, in the relevant and ongoing work of the Church in our time. ✱

¹⁰ Ibid., 13.



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