

To What Have I Been Likened? The Infertile Body in Time and Tradition

Liesl Coffin Behr

And gazing towards the heaven, she [Anna] saw a sparrow's nest in the laurel, and made a lamentation in herself, saying: Alas! Who begot me? And what womb produced me? Because I have become a curse in the presence of the sons of Israel, and I have been reproached, and they have driven me in derision out of the temple of the Lord. Alas! To what have I been likened? I am not like the fowls of the heaven, because even the fowls of the heaven are productive before You, O Lord. Alas! To what have I been likened? I am not like the beasts of the earth, because even the beasts of the earth are productive before You, O Lord. Alas! To what have I been likened? I am not like these waters, because even these waters are productive before You, O Lord. Alas! To what have I been likened? I am not like this earth, because even the earth brings forth its fruits in season, and blesses You, O Lord.
—Protoevangelium of James¹

The infertile body is arguably the biblical body *par excellence*. It is the infertile female body that propels salvation history. From Abraham and Sarah to the coming of Christ through the Virgin Mary, the barren body is inhabited by deep metaphorical meaning. Though fertility and birth are pervasive in Orthodox liturgy and theology through the iconography and hymnography of the Theotokos, the more nuanced significance of the infertile woman and the emptiness she embodies is generally obfuscated.

Considering the extent to which both the Hebrew scriptures and the late antique world of patristic thought grappled with the significance of infertility and non-procreation generally, the lack of theological attention to the state of infertility obscures profound aspects of Christian thought and theology, for it is this anomalous body that interrogates the nature of nature and the order of the cosmos. It unearths a deep and directing spiritual question: what are we when we are not “natural,” when—like Anna, the mother of the Theotokos—we do not participate in the cosmic order, nor follow nature’s course?

The biblical story of infertility begins in Genesis 12, when we meet Abraham for the first time. Though we do not learn of Sarah’s barrenness right away, this starting point of the patriarchal narratives, in which we follow the origin story of the Hebrew nation is, paradoxically, the beginning of the story of human infertility. In its decisive break from the first chapters of Genesis—which lay out a universal history and cosmic narrative of human origins—the Abrahamic story, with all its twists and tensions, opens the “idea with which Judaism starts . . . the wonder of creation and the ability of man to do the will of God.”² Here is the foundational irony of human existence: Abraham and Sarah, called to do the will of God by

¹ Protoevangelium of James 3, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, v. 8, trans. Alexander Walker, ed. Alexander Roberts, Hames Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, rev. Kevin Knight, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0847.htm>.

² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955), 378.

founding a great nation, are unable to produce offspring. In the words of Robert Alter:

The Creation story repeatedly highlights the injunction to be fruitful and multiply, while the Patriarchal Tales, in the very process of frequently echoing this language of fertility from the opening chapters, make clear that procreation, far from being an automatic biological process, is fraught with dangers, is constantly under the threat of being deflected or cut off. . . . Genesis begins with the making of heaven and earth and all life, and ends with the image of a mummy—Joseph’s—in a coffin.³

Embedded within the very structure of the Genesis narrative is the realization that mankind’s effort to build a nation, a Kingdom, the injunction to be “co-creators” with God, coincides with the discovery of mankind’s impotence. The curse of infertility is the curse of post-lapsarian humanity—creation cut off from full communion with God, yet still called to fulfill the divine plan. Framed this way, the prominence in popular consciousness of infertility as a curse, and a specifically female curse, gains nuance and complexity; regarded through the larger lens of biblical theodicy it symbolizes the primordial distance between God and creation that can only be bridged by God.

In the late Bronze Age, the idea of nature as an independent force, operating by its own laws and properties as understood today, was yet inchoate. Every act of nature could be interpreted as an act of God. In such a worldview, the infertile body was not the body in which nature malfunctioned, but the body overlooked by God. It was this state of forgottenness that

was a curse, for it was a marker of the chasm between God and his creation, and carried devastating social consequences. In most cases of biblical infertility, there is no indication of punitive intention towards the infertile women. The exceptional pregnancies of the barren women—Sarah, Hannah, Anna—are not moments of individual conversion or repentance but rather decisive actions on the part of God, divine interventions into human history in which he “blows the breath of life” (Gen. 2:7) and forges forth in his will and promise despite the state of human brokenness.⁴

These foundational stories of God and His people set the tone for the Abrahamic understanding of God’s relationship with the natural world of his creation. Yet a specifically Christian idea of the body and its meaning developed in an altogether different metaphysical structure: that of late antiquity. The operative framework for nature and the body in the late Greco-Roman world, Neoplatonism, diverged in important ways from the biblical vision of the Bronze Age. Nature and the body were understood not as the locus of mystery, matter waiting to be enlivened by God, but as manifestations of the unruly and recalcitrant aspects of being—counterparts to the eternal qualities of the soul.

Dualistic ways of thinking, in which the soul belongs to the eternal and unchanging cosmic order and the body to the natural order, persisted well into the patristic era. Unlike the Hebrew Scriptures, which eschewed attempts to systematize the workings of nature, patristic speculation on nature and its order focused precisely on such a systematization: one in which soul was superior to body, and certain bodies were superior to others for their

³ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, v. 1 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 8–9.

⁴ Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 44–49.



relative nearness to the qualities of the soul. In this hierarchical categorization of bodies, the male body (preferably virginal), with its superior strength and “heat,” crowned the hierarchy. The female body, understood not only as ontologically *different* but as ontologically *inferior* because it was an underdeveloped male body, was furthest from reflecting the qualities of the soul due to its supposed weakness, dampness, and lack of vital heat. In other words, the closer the body was to “the natural” and its associated metaphors, the further it was from God.⁵

The influence of Platonism is evident in the writing of Saint Paul, but it is altered by his understanding of the incarnation. His account of the natural body’s potential for transformation was a dramatic shift from the ancient

model, in which the situation of the body was static and determined. Through a radically new vision of “the flesh,” the body took on a dynamic role in salvation and could now be raised to the level of the soul and work in unison with it. Even so, the Platonist metaphorical imaging of the body remained consistent: the body must be transformed to image the divine and ideas about human biology inherited from this tradition, with its spiritual and hierarchical implications remaining largely the same.⁶ Thus transformation is imaged in such a way that the *spiritual* paradigm shifts (union rather than existential separation of soul and body), while the *natural* paradigm remains stable (the body must strive to attain the qualities of the soul). The female body, along with all bodies, was granted new possibilities

While praying in a garden, St. Anna is visited by an angel who announces her conception of the Theotokos. Mosaic from Chora Church, Istanbul, 14th c.

⁵ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 9–10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 47–49.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 144–46.

for transformation and ascendancy. Contrary to the gendered tropes so familiar today, however, the “ascendant road” was understood as primarily non-procreative, and depended on a woman’s capacity to overcome the physical and associated moral weakness attributed to the particulars of her female biology. Foremost in achieving this path was the embrace of celibacy, either through consecrated virginity or widowhood. It was precisely this status that permitted Christian women to attain the kind of spiritual esteem that had previously been the exclusive domain of men.⁷

Infertility in the Roman world was a social curse, for it left a woman in a state of great social and economic precarity. Within the burgeoning Christian tradition as well as certain strains of Judaism at the time, however, it paradoxically approached the kind of body that reflected the soul—the body that was not preoccupied with the things of this world (the bonds of family, the building up of the city) and did not exemplify the lowly aspects of female physical nature. It was a mysterious body, likened in certain contexts to the neuter or virginal body. As the body that does not participate in the natural, it was at times envisioned as a prelapsarian or eschatological body. Take, for instance, this midrash from the patristic era imagining Hannah’s plea to God:

Master of the universe, there is a host above, and there is a host below. The host above do not eat, nor drink, nor procreate, nor die, but they live forever; and the host below eat, drink, procreate, and die. Now I do not know of what host I am, whether I am of the one above or the one below. If I am of the host above, I should not be eating, nor drinking, nor possibly bearing

children, nor dying, for I should live forever, just as the host above live forever. But if I am of the host below, then not only should I be eating and drinking, but I should be bearing children and eventually dying, even as the host below eat, and drink, and procreate, and die.⁸

Communicated so poignantly in this passage, as in Anna’s lament, is the infertile woman’s deep sense of dislocation. She is neither/nor. But in this, her body carries spiritual significance. It is a locus of spiritual hope and possibility, a body that points to the beyond.

In the early modern era, the idea of a body that points to the beyond was replaced by a body that looks back at itself to understand its meaning and essence. In the words of historian Thomas Laqueur: “The old model, in which men and women were arrayed according to their degree of metaphysical perfection, their vital heat, along an axis where telos was male, gave way by the late eighteenth century to a new model of difference, of biological divergence. An anatomy and physiology of incommensurability replaced a metaphysics of hierarchy in the presentation of woman next to man.”⁹ That is to say, with the birth of modern science, there began a search to find a biologically-based essence within the natural person. This paradigm shift, which still dominates today’s worldview, brings with it fundamental questions and consequences for Orthodox Christian anthropology, in particular as it pertains to women and their bodies.

Somewhat ironically, the Orthodox Church, in its encounter with modernity and in an attempt to defend “tradition,” has increasingly adopted the modern model of the body, while supposedly approaching the question

⁸ *Pesikta Rabbati* 43.4, trans. William G. Braude (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 757, quoted in Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 134.

⁹ Thomas Laqueur, “Orgasm, Generation, and the Politics of Reproductive Biology,” *Representations* 14 (Spring 1986): 3.

¹⁰ Thomas Hopko, “Women and the Priesthood: Reflections on the Debate—1983,” in *Women and the Priesthood*, ed. Thomas Hopko, 2nd ed. (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1999), 243.

of men and women with a premodern mind. Though a few contemporary priests and theologians proudly uphold the premodern hierarchy of sex, most have been uncomfortable with this schema, and have adopted in its place a complementarian philosophy, one that has been debated at great length in the context of women's ordination. To defend these sexually dimorphic ontologies from the overarching patristic emphasis on a "neuter" soul, the reflection of a God who transcends sexual distinction in each and every human being, certain theologians have suggested that sexual distinction is present in the Trinity and reflected in its mode of relations, with females modeling the Spirit and males the Son. Father Thomas Hopko, who has had a profound influence on contemporary church life and thought, was a leading proponent of this argument. He writes, "The key to the vocation of women as women, in my view, is theologically and mystically discovered in the person of the Holy Spirit, whose divinity is identical to that of the Father and the Son, but whose unique form of divine existence is different from that of the two other divine hypostases."¹⁰

While Hopko denies that this introduces sexual differentiation into God himself, many scholars are not convinced. Patrologist Nonna Verna Harrison writes: "Attempts to link men with Christ and women with the Holy Spirit . . . begin by assigning some modes of activity to men and others to women and then look for the paradigm of these differences within the life of the Trinity itself. The result is to suggest an inappropriate framework within the Godhead, though the Orthodox believe that all three of the Persons act together in all the divine energies or activities, which proceed from the Father,

through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. Thus, attempts of both feminists and their opponents to introduce such gender-based limitations and divisions into the eternal existence of the divine hypostases ultimately result in heresy."¹¹ Despite being built on such shaky theological grounds, modern complementarian theologies of the "spiritual significance" of gender flourish within the Orthodox Church as justification of status quo gender roles, while the inheritance of ontological subordination is largely ignored.¹² The assumption persists that men and women have different functions in the Church as a natural result of sexual dimorphism corresponding to a model established by and in God for our sexed bodies, a model supposedly found within the Trinity and reflected in the natural order.

Nowhere is this idea of female spirituality captured more clearly today than in the popular Orthodox literature on motherhood, pregnancy, and birth. Orthodox author Laura S. Jansson's book *Fertile Ground* draws on feminist birthing philosophies and pagan traditions to draw out an "Orthodox Christian" spirituality of birthing. She argues for the importance of non-medicalized birth, as modern medicine threatens to anesthetize the spiritual potential of the birthing experience. "The dynamis of pregnancy and birth-giving consists in the very nature of our womanhood, which contains the seed of life," she writes. One has to wonder what implications she imagines for female monastics. She goes on to defend the primacy of birthing for womanhood by extending the power of this biological experience to those who will never experience it—the childless and those who have less-than-"natural" births: "While labor is a *prime outlet* for

¹¹ Nonna Verna Harrison, "Orthodox Arguments Against the Ordination of Women as Priests," in *Women and the Priesthood*, 172–73.

¹² Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, *Woman, Women, and the Priesthood in the Trinitarian Theology of Elisabeth Behr-Sigel* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).

¹³ Laura S. Jansson, *Fertile Ground: A Pilgrimage through Pregnancy* (Ches-terton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2019), 72.

womanly dynamis, each of us manifests this mysterious force in our own particular way, whether our baby is born under operating room lights or in a mountain stream, whether we are mother to many nations or unable to conceive.”¹³ One detects more Freud than Fathers in such a statement.

Perhaps struggling to find Christian sources to support this reading of birthing, Jansson turns to ancient Aztec traditions, which treat birthing as an initiation rite, akin to the trials of a victorious warrior: “My beloved maiden, brave woman . . . thou hast labored, thou hast become an eagle warrior . . . thou hast returned from battle. . . . Now our lord hath placed thee upon the eagle warrior reed mat. . . . My beloved maiden, brave woman: be welcome.”¹⁴ At another point, Jansson reimagines the Magnificat as nature praising the beauty of the pregnant woman: “It’s as if nature is showering us with compliments: ‘Look how young and fecund you are! Your body is full of genius. You have received favor from the Almighty; blessed are you among women.’”¹⁵ To spiritualize the importance of birth pain, however, she is obliged to turn away from Mary, whose birth-giving, as our hymns remind us (but she does not), was painless. Instead, she likens birthing with Christ’s suffering on the Cross, his death and resurrection: “We are signs not in the cheaper sense of being just copy-cats; in a deeply mysterious way, by giving birth we actually ‘partake of Christ’s sufferings’ (1 Peter 4:13). . . . Each contraction of labor has a deep-rooted saving purpose, not just for a woman and her baby but for the world, mystically raising up every person who is homeless, lonely, imprisoned, and hungry. The birthing stool, like a little cross, is a throne of hard-won glory.”¹⁶ The

birthing woman is now the “initiated,” the favored one of God, she who is saving the world.

Another recent work that brings woman’s biological and spiritual uniqueness through motherhood to the forefront is Carrie Frederick Frost’s *Maternal Body*. The main thesis of her book is that the body—and the experience of the body—are good *in general*. To make this argument, she offers the example of the Marian body, in what can be seen as a corrective to Neoplatonic dualism. In contrast to Jansson, Frost’s reading of motherhood focuses not so much on female spiritual becoming through biological experience, but rather on human becoming through female biological specificity. She rightly takes on the problem of impurity imputed to women in the prayers for churcing and miscarriage and calls for much-needed corrections. But rather than a critique of the premodern paradigm that is largely responsible for the presence of such derogatory language in Christian texts, she turns to Mary’s motherhood and the rich biological metaphors found in maternal imagery to elevate a vision of the female body as uniquely designed for and dedicated to life-giving. One comes away from the book with the impression that, in order to have the deepest experience of the incarnate God, all humanity should become female and bear children—a reversal, in a way, of patristic thought. Frost focuses on the biology of motherhood, analyzing conception, gestation, birth, and breastfeeding as acts of spiritual embodiment unique to mothers, so that these biological markers constitute not just one unique incarnational expression among many, but set mothers apart. She states: “It is simply the case that motherhood—in whatever biological or adoptive state

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 133–34.

it comes—inevitably entails an elemental embodiment, giving mothers a *singular incarnational reality*.¹⁷ Like Jansson, Frost reflexively extends the potency of the *biological* experience of motherhood to adoptive mothers, who, one might point out, experience a distinctively non-biological path towards motherhood, charged with its own challenges and beauties.

Returning to our scriptural and liturgical tradition, returning to the patriarchal narratives and to Anna, the “ancestor of God,” we observe that rather than being celebrated as “victorious warriors” or objects of “nature’s compliments,” the women who carry out God’s promise are humiliated, ostracized, and disempowered. At the Divine Liturgy for the Presentation of the Mother of God, the feast at which we also commemorate Joachim and Anna, we read: “A woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked!’ But he said, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!’” (Luke 11:27–28). While certainly not to be interpreted as denigrating his mother’s body or her care in nurturing him, Jesus turns us away from idolizing her specific corporeal role and points those who would follow him toward a universal example of obedience, exemplified in Mary’s all-embracing and decisive “yes” rather than her female body.

Likewise, the hymnography and traditions around the body of Mary—of her who gave Jesus flesh—do not appear particularly “fleshy.” Her body is (for the most part) imaged in accordance with the spiritualizing, and by consequence somewhat masculinizing, Platonic metaphors of the day. She is the “vessel,” “the gate of heaven,” who gave birth “without

defilement” (that is to say, without intercourse, alteration to her genital anatomy, or pain). These metaphors emphasize her transcendent and eternal qualities—flesh redeemed by and through God. If we look at the theology of Mary in this light, we understand Mary as anything but a fertility figure: “Virginity is alien to motherhood and motherhood is utterly foreign to virgins, but in you, Theotokos, both are found.”¹⁸ Rather than following the course of nature, she, as Theotokos and new Eve, restores all of creation to right relationship with God. Thus, her fertility might actually be better understood as a kind of infertility: in virginally bearing one and only one child, she preserves the undivided, virginal person as the ultimate dwelling place of God, and at the same time she participates in the process of nature in such a way that her miraculous bearing of Christ defies and suspends nature, restoring it to God.¹⁹

Also deserving of much more consideration than can be given here is the “last of the matriarchs,” Mother Zion. The shifting imagery surrounding her body, sometimes fertile and sometimes infertile, bereft, or widowed, points to the one who, rather than fulfilling the “plan of nature,” waits to be filled by God alone: an image of *kenosis*. We evoke Mother Zion at the entombment of Christ on Holy Friday, when we declare at Vespers: “Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in travail! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her that is married, says the Lord.” (Isa. 54:1) Here, once again, it is in the barren woman that God’s promise finds its ultimate fulfillment.

What, then, is the infertile body in this modern anthropology, in which

¹⁷ Carrie Frederick Frost, *Maternal Body: A Theology of Incarnation from the Christian East* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2019), 86. Emphasis mine.

¹⁸ Irmos from the feast of the Nativity of the Mother of God.

biology and soul must align, in which nature's serendipity—rather than its tensions—is the ultimate expression of God? It is no longer the expression of promise and covenant as seen in Genesis, nor is it the eternal or transcendent or kenotic figure of the late antique world, for this is no longer the body-soul trajectory: the person is no longer asked to empty herself but to fulfill herself, to *accomplish* herself biologically. In this anthropology, the infertile body is unable to fulfill its natural ends and is hopelessly distanced from its telos. It is a body stuck in a new dualism for its failure to perform as a unity. The shame of infertility can no longer be relegated to the realm of the social or genealogical, for it has become ontological and existential. Perhaps *this* underlies the sentiment expressed by Orthodox author Nicole Roccas and echoed almost universally by infertile women: "Just showing up at church—unpregnant belly and all—and standing there in our own skin, week after week, year after year, broadcasting our childlessness for all to see, is the hardest struggle of all. . . . Whatever it is, there's something about church that makes us feel even more barren than anywhere else on the face of the Earth."²⁰ A place where women are valued because they *incarnate*, and not because they *are* incarnate, is indeed a hostile environment for the infertile. It is undoubtedly this same metaphysics that underlies the distinctive anti-medical bias towards

infertility found in the church, and that drives the underlying assumption of much pastoral advice and unsolicited folk wisdom offered up to infertile women: that her infertility will be cured once she relaxes, finds peace, goes on a pilgrimage, or adopts. The implication is that her infertility is the psychosomatic expression of her spiritual disjointedness and can be healed through a restored mind-body connection. To the infertile woman, experiencing a deep personal and social tragedy, are imputed spiritual defects to be overcome.

The possibility of union with one and the same God is the promise of the gospel to every body, whether that body achieves its so-called "nature" or not. Every body will experience itself at times as life-giving and at others as hopelessly barren. These dualities are universal and embedded deeply in the biblical narrative, and cannot be ascribed to psychophysiological structures derived from Trinitarian or naturalistic models. Through Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection, God takes up all such experience in himself. How these experiences are lived out in different bodies and different lives is profound and mysterious. Yet it is with this hope that, when a barren woman—along with the ancestor of God, Anna—cries out and asks, "To what have I been likened?" we may respond to her unequivocally: "To the image and likeness of God." ✱

¹⁹ Mary B. Cunningham, *Gateway of Life: Orthodox Thinking on the Mother of God* (Yonkers: SVS Press, 2015), 91–109.

²⁰ Nicole M. Roccas, *Under the Laurel Tree: Grieving Infertility with Saints Joachim and Anna* (Ches-terton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2019), 63. Roccas's book inspired the idea of using Anna's lament from the Protoevangelium to explore infertility and shame, albeit from a different angle.



Liesl Coffin Behr holds a B.A. in English from the University of California, Los Angeles. She studied French at the Sorbonne, as well as philosophy and theology at the Catholic Institute and Saint Sergius Theological Institute in Paris.