Beth M. Stovell, ed.

Making Sense of Motherhood: Biblical and Theological Perspectives


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The essays in this volume on biblical and theological perspectives regarding the theme of motherhood all attest to the importance of embodied experience to serve as resource for, as the title suggests, Making Sense of Motherhood. In essay upon essay the authors demonstrate the various ways in which specifically located, existential experience reveals new dimensions of biblical as well as theological reflection on motherhood. I myself can attest to the importance of embodied experience in changing the way I write on the theme of motherhood. So quite some time before the birth of my daughter, I showed in my doctoral dissertation and in a subsequent monograph how the image of nursing has been used to describe God’s gracious provision of food in a number of biblical and rabbinic texts (God Who Provides: Biblical Images of Divine Nourishment, Abingdon, 2004). However, after nursing my daughter for an extended period of time, I came to realize that I, in my theological reflection on this theme, now might have highlighted different dimensions of this intriguing metaphor of divine nourishment. From experience, I thus learned that nursing is difficult, hard work but perhaps even more rewarding than I had imagined. Likewise, the contributors show how the diverse, existential, embodied experience of mothers in a variety of locations have the potential to offer rich theological perspectives as well as a more complex, multifaceted understanding of motherhood.
Making Sense of Motherhood consists of three parts that deal, respectively, with images of motherhood in the Hebrew Bible in part 1, New Testament depictions of motherhood in part 2, followed by expressions of motherhood in Christian theology and spirituality in part 3.

In the first section, Shana Sheinfeld in chapter 1 focuses on the notion of “subversive mothers” such as Lot’s daughters and Tamar in the Hebrew Bible as well as in the midrash. In chapter 2 Anthony Rees focuses on Moses, who is portrayed as a reluctant and overburdened nursing mother in Num 11. In chapter 3 Beth Stovell demonstrates how the metaphor of God as a mother in labor extends into the New Testament in terms of the birthing spirit in John 3 that not only demonstrates the continuity between the Testaments but also offers a great example of the ever-fresh expression of this traditional metaphor in new interpretative contexts.

In the second section, on the New Testament, Ruth Sheridan shows in chapter 4 how the complex emotions associated with giving birth, such as anxiety, suffering, and joy in the woman in labor parable in John 16:20–22, serves as a powerful way to speak about Jesus’s death and resurrection as well as the disciples’ sorrow and joy. In chapter 5 Erin Heim draws upon the adoption language utilized in Rom 8:12–25 as a catalyst to consider the complex, mixed emotions involved with the adoption process that includes the adoptee, the birth mother, the adoptive parents. In chapter 6 Alicia Meyers focuses on milk and nursing metaphors in the New Testament (Heb 5:12–14 and 1 Pet 2:1–3) in their Greco-Roman context, contemplating the implications of this metaphor that is associated with education. In chapter 7 Louise Gosbell outlines the ancient practice of infanticide and considers how this practice draws our attention to contemporary ethical dilemmas such as postbirth abortion and genetical screening.

In the final section, which focuses on Christian theology and spirituality, Cristina Gomez develops in chapter 8 a theology of motherhood that involves notions such as taking up the cross of Christ, dying with Christ, and living in the resurrection of Christ, which she brings into conversation with the experience of new mothers. In chapter 9 Rebecca Lindsay draws upon the work of Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Sarah Coakley, Janet Martin Soskice, and Anita Monroe as she considers the complex relationship between ministry and mothering. In chapter 10 Claudia Herrera highlights Mary as a significant symbol in Mujerista spirituality among Latina women, contemplating Mary’s journey toward Bethlehem and Calgary as important for Latina spirituality. In chapter 11 Sarah Massa brings into conversation Walter Brueggeman’s well-known schema for interpreting psalms (orientation, disorientation, and reorientation) with the experience of new mothers. In chapter 12 Patricia Smith engages with Brueggemann’s understanding of covenantal
theology when contemplating the experience of parents mourning the loss of children as they move into adulthood.

Overall I have great appreciation for this rich volume that demonstrates once again the value of interdisciplinary engagement. Drawing from a variety of theological disciplines, *Making Sense of Motherhood* constitutes a rich conversation on motherhood that invites the reader to join in the process of making sense of motherhood.

A couple of further points are worth mentioning. In the first instance, quite a few of the contributors come from the Australian context, which is a feat in itself as it brings to our attention voices and perspectives that we might not ordinarily have heard before. One example of such new insight is the reference to “whingeing” that, according to Rees, is a unique Australian expression used for small children nagging especially in the context of “what is or isn’t for dinner” or the “length of a car journey!” (16). This very much local perspective offers quite an interesting way to view Moses’s portrayal in Num 11 in terms of a fed-up, overburdened nursing mother. In this regard, Wipf & Stock should be commended for creating space for such collections of essays that represent a variety of different theological disciplines that also draw contributors from a variety of geographical locations.

Second, one of the strongest aspects of this book is the candid portrayal of various dimensions of motherhood that moves beyond the often idealized and romanticized image of motherhood that has dominated the public discourse and that instead seeks to wrestle with complex life experiences. This ranges from contemplating finding God’s presence amidst the chaos of motherhood that quite often seeks to juggle what Massa calls “motherwork” with “paid work” (167), to considering as Heim has done the complexities associated with adoption. I found particular touching the reference to Virginia Wolf’s story “A Haunted House” in Heim’s essay that refers to women who “each exist on the periphery of the other’s world, yet they occupy a communal space” in order to describe the complex and ambiguous relationships between individuals joined together by adoption (67).

Also the essay by Gosbell raises important ethical questions as it brings into conversation the ancient practice of infanticide, which indeed might horrify contemporary readers, with current ethical dilemmas such as raised by the possibility of postbirth abortion and genetical screening. Both ancient and contemporary practices of infanticide expose society’s preoccupation with health and perfection, in addition to raising pertinent questions of who counts and why.
Finally, one point of concern with this book, which for the most part shows great sensitivity with regard to the complexity of mothering, is that it could have done more to communicate that “mothering” comes in different forms. The book cannot quite escape gendered assumptions regarding motherhood and thus falls short in taking into consideration that today there are many gay families, blended families, and families where single fathers serve as the primary caregivers. In this regard, I have always appreciated the work of Sara Ruddick, who calls her husband her “co-mother.” So Ruddick’s book, Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace, works with a broad definition of mothering, maintaining that both men and women are qualified to “mother” ([New York: Ballantine, 1989], 40–51). Also in my South African context one finds a growing phenomenon of what is called, Gogos, that is, grandmothers of AIDS orphans who are left to raise their grandchildren after their children have succumbed to this disease that has created havoc all over Africa.

Nevertheless, echoing the words of Lynn Cohick, who wrote the foreword to this book, I would say that what makes this book worthwhile is the way these authors “write with bold vulnerability and appropriate candor. They make space for the reader to walk alongside their experiences and allow readers to think about their own experiences in fresh ways” (xv).