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CHRISTIANITY AND FEMINISM

Exodus 16: 4–15 John 6: 30–40

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May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

A feminist will find much to be suspicious of in Christianity: in its scriptures and in its traditions. This is not surprising from the Christian's point of view: Christianity, as much as any other human tradition or institution, is mired in original sin, and it is thus bound to replicate invidious forms of subjugation and domination. These find their way right into the heart of scripture, moreover. God is repeatedly portrayed as a King, whom the people must fear and obey; and as a husband, to whom the bride Israel must submit (and the latter leads in turn to the worrying characterisation of sin in terms of Israel's harlotry). These metaphors rest on the assumption that it is the part of the woman to submit and obey, and on the dark side, that the epitome of human sin is female unfaithfulness.

That the Bible is shot through with these problematic dynamics is not in question. And as I have hinted, this is only to be expected, if the only language the Bible has is a human language which embeds the structures of human sin. Just as the Bible can't jump outside human language, so it can't jump outside sin. The question is, however, whether scripture encodes another (deeper) logic, which enables these structures to be brought critically into question. To be a Christian feminist is to believe just this.

I have chosen the manna story, as further commented on in John's Gospel, as a scriptural locus which is neither obviously sexist, nor obviously anti-sexist. I have done so because an insidious sexism arguably needs more urgent debunking than overt forms of sexism, which invite their own riposte; and because, on the other hand, texts which celebrate women, or which characterise God in female terms, are only able to counterbalance those which do not (indeed, if that, given their relative rarity)—rather than getting at the deeper, structural problem. So this is what I want to attempt.

In the manna story we do not have God as King, but God as Provider. This is potentially promising from a feminist point of view, insofar as God is portrayed in a nurturing female role. But look at how it is developed. 'I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law or not.' (Exodus 6.4) God has all the agency, the power to bless or to withhold blessing. Israel is the passive partner, given no initiative, who must submit to God's law if she is to fare well. Her recalcitrance (which is seen later in the story, when she stores part of the manna in disobedience to Moses' instructions) is something for God to curb, by bringing her into conformity with an unforgiving law.

You might be expecting me now to turn to the New Testament commentary to offer liberation from this enslaving relationship, as that which characterises the Old Testament as *Old* Testament. You would be wrong. To do so would be precisely to replicate the problematic enslavement in the relation between the two Testaments—the Old being subordinated to the New—and potentially also in the relation between the peoples of those texts, Jews being superseded by Christians. Christian supersessionism, which relegates certain texts (and peoples) to its dark past, should be inimical to the Christian feminist, because it embodies the same logic of domination and subjugation that the feminist deplors in the more obvious male/female context. In any case (returning to our texts), the enslaving relationship is arguably intensified rather than mitigated in John’s portrayal of Jesus as the one who has ‘come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me’ (John 6.38). Here, the relationship of authority and obedience, agency and passivity, is translated into the Godhead. Things couldn’t be more disastrous from a feminist point of view.

Now we are really in need of a solution, and I will turn again to the Exodus story to ask whether it can come to our aid. It potentially invites us, first, to redirect our gaze from human dependence on God, to human dependence on the resources within the wilderness—and thus to creaturely interdependence. The story is, amongst other things, about fruitful negotiation of life in the wilderness. We are, as finite creatures, dependent on one another for our flourishing; and fruitful living involves learning about the best ways of inhabiting our environment, in ways which respect our own finitude, the finitude of our neighbours, and the finitude of the natural resources around us. Finitude entails endangerment. Our agency is not unlimited, and it must be enacted considerately. Thus (as the story continues) the Israelites learn that if they store part of the manna they’ve collected for the next day, it will go off. ‘Obeying God’ is about learning to respond to these contingencies.

But there is more to the story than appropriate response to one’s environment. The manna is presented as being a gift of God; a miracle: ‘It is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat’ (Exodus 16.15). This is highlighted by the fact that the Israelites gather twice as much manna on the sixth day, and as we discover later in the story, they are instructed by Moses to store what is left over for the seventh day, the Sabbath, when there will be none to be gathered. The daily pattern is interrupted by this special rule, and the normal rule that manna stored goes off is also interrupted. The story is not just a blanket endorsement of natural creaturely relations of interdependence. It does not leave them as they are but critically reconstitutes them. Specifically, the miraculous nature of the manna cuts against the grain of human competitiveness: ‘And the people of Israel ... gathered, some more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, he that gathered much had nothing over, and he that gathered little had no lack (Exodus 16.17–18). The manna challenges, further, the human propensity to hoard (since it breeds worms and becomes foul). Finally, by interrupting a routine geared to survival, the lack of gathering on the Sabbath recalls human beings to the fact that they are more than their labour.

The recognition that the manna is a gift of God, and by extension that all is received from the hand of God, need not, on this account, be a lesson in subjugation to the all-powerful God; but can act as a critical recontextualisation of inter-creaturely relations, warding off the unequal distribution of wealth, the exploitation of human labourers, and even the exploitation of the natural world. Of course, these corrupt human ways will continue, and appealing to our indebtedness for everything to the creator is not going to prevent some from their ravaging of others. But what the manna story might also teach us is that God, as the one who gives and defines the law, is also the one who safeguards the identities of those who are exploited by others. God is not caught up in these creaturely power-struggles, and is thus free to be wholly there for her creatures. It is not a matter of divine agency over against creaturely passivity, but about divine gift and creaturely response. God is the liberating context of human freedom. The murmuring of the Israelites is a sign that they have not recognised this, and can only think in competitive and combative terms, Moses and Aaron being the ones to blame. Moses' direction of their murmurings back to God is an attempt to undercut this human vying by placing it in the context of a God who turns vying into compassion.

It is in this context that we might start to make sense of Jesus' claim to be the bread of life. Without pausing over this metaphor, we might jump to a picture of Jesus as the one who feeds, other humans beings as those who are fed; Jesus as the active nurturer, other humans as the passive receivers. But Jesus is the bread: the most passive object in the exchange between feeder, fed and food. He is the one consumed. In Jesus God becomes the most passive of creatures, and names this the place of life. In doing so God overturns and subverts our notions of passivity and activity, and our pitting of one against the other. The bread of life is an oxymoron: passive bread is juxtaposed with active life. God transcends our human competitiveness, with its death-dealing results, and reconstitutes it from within. We are invited, as a consequence, into new relationship with our environment (in its human and non-human elements). It is no longer something we must simply seek to dominate and control if we wish to survive. It is a living environment which is to be inhabited, given and received, and in relation to which we are to be transformed.

Jesus as life-giving bread invites us, first, to recognise the presence of God in our material environment. It is not just inert, waiting to receive our imprint (for example, in our cutting down of rainforests, or in our carbon footprint). Jesus invites us, second, to recognise the presence of God in our fellow human beings. In what ways have we turned them into inert material for our own use (in the context of feminism, one might think of exploitative forms of advertising, or worse, porn)? And third, Jesus calls us to recognise the presence of God in ourselves, helping us to discover where we are subject to enslaving forms of passivity (such as addiction or being the victim of bullying), and in finding God there too will be empowered to reconceive our identities in God as greater than this enslavement. Human passivity in relation to God frees human beings from enslaving forms of passivity in relation each other.

Every time we celebrate the Eucharist we are reminded of our tendency to immobilise our environment, witnessing to the death of Jesus as we consume him in the form of bread and wine. But this very act is also our potential liberation from such abuse, as we are drawn into new life-giving relations by that same death. The manna in the wilderness calls us to this kind of liberation in our daily lives.