



Flying Bumblebees, Christian Feminists, and Other Impossible Possibilities

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AND BUMBLEBEES CAN'T FLY EITHER! THIS CURT RESPONSE TO DAPHNE HAMPSON'S feminist critique of "Luther on the Self"¹ means to call attention to the high level of abstraction in Hampson's essay. Despite its claim to work from experience—differentiating the experience of women from that of men—the article defines both sets of experience so narrowly that much of the experience that human beings actually report is ignored in favor of the abstracted categories of experience from which Hampson works.

Women's experience is x ; men's experience is y . Since Christianity is based in y , it is not in touch with x . Since feminism is based in x , it is incompatible with y and thus with Christianity. And bumblebees can't fly—as similar abstract theory proverbially demonstrates.

But bumblebees do fly. And some of my best friends call themselves Christian feminists. Hampson would apparently suggest they have not yet seen the incompatibility of their choices, but then, curiously, it is Hampson, not Lutheran theology, who requires the destruction of the self they understand themselves to be—or even the selves *we* understand *ourselves* to be. Or is it impossible for a man to be a feminist? It is, if Hampson is correct that men's experience is y , women's experience is x , and feminism is based in x . But what if x and y are not as distinct as

¹Daphne Hampson, "Luther on the Self: A Feminist Critique," *Word & World* 8/4 (1988) 334-342. (Page numbers in parentheses in the text refer to this essay.)

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Hampson's definition requires? I don't want to make the absurd claim that there is no difference between male and female experience. Both research and poetry know otherwise. I do want to make the hopeful claim that men and women can and do share experience and even participate in that experience most characteristic of the other.

I. AN ARGUMENT FROM EXPERIENCE

I could merely testify to a mutuality of experience on the basis of my own experience. In fact, I do. Here, though, I will try to make the case from recorded experience—the human experience recorded in the Bible, particularly the book of Psalms.

Is this fair? That is, does it have anything to do with my assignment: to respond to Hampson from a Lutheran perspective? It is, after all, an argument from experience—though not merely my own—not a theological argument. I could say that, whether fair or not, an argument from experience is necessary because Hampson's dismissal of the category of revelation (342) makes any genuine theological dialogue with Christianity (as it understands itself) impossible. But I think it is also fair to the assignment for two reasons. First, the norming norm for all theology in the Lutheran tradition is the Bible. Thus, observations from the Bible are always inherently Lutheran—even those that might call into question a particular "Lutheran" point of view. Second, concerning the Psalms in particular, Luther himself argues for the importance of their honest portrayal of human experience. This is a point of no small significance. What makes scripture according to Luther? *Was Christum treibet!* Whatever pushes Christ is scripture. Yet, interestingly, in his *Preface to the Psalter*, though of course he finds Christ in the psalms (as he does everywhere), he spends much more time talking of how Christians can find themselves in this book:

A human heart is like a ship on a wild sea, driven by the storm winds from the four corners of the world. Here it is struck with fear and worry about impending disaster; there comes grief and sadness because of present evil. Here breathes a breeze of hope and of anticipated happiness; there blows security and joy in present surroundings. These storm winds teach us to speak with earnestness, to open the heart and pour out what lies at the bottom of it....What is the greatest thing in the Psalter but this earnest speaking amid these storm winds of every kind?...Hence it is that the Psalter is the book of all saints; and everyone, in whatever situation [they] may be, finds in that situation psalms and words that fit [their] case, that suit [them] as if they were put there just for [their] sake, so that [they] could not put it better [themselves], or find or wish for anything better.²

In brief, as Luther goes on to say, "take up the Psalter," for "you will find in it also yourself."³ Thus, if perhaps surprisingly, the honest search for experience is fully

²*Preface to the Psalter*, LW 35:255-256.

³*Ibid.*, 257.

in accord with Luther's view of the purpose of the Psalter. In this exercise, we follow his counsel.

II. THE BIBLE ON WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE

Before turning to the Psalter, it is important to recognize that the Bible often describes the type of women's experience identified by Hampson and other feminist interpreters. For now, one example must suffice. Hampson argues that women's religion is of the "once-born" type where life is lived in continuity and in close relationship with others. Men's religion, on the other hand, emphasizes discontinuity; it is a matter of death and rebirth, crucifixion and resurrection, a breaking and reconstructing of the self (340). So far as this is true, the conversion stories of Ruth and the prodigal son would appear to be stereotypically representative of the two types of religion. The rebellious prodigal (Luke 15:11-32) asserts himself, demands his rights, and goes his own way, breaking the family network. He sinks into a life of dissolution until in broken despair he humbly returns to the waiting father. Ruth, however, comes to Yahwism through her tie to Naomi and, through Naomi, to Naomi's God (Ruth 1:6-22). Conversion is a matter of traveling with another, of sharing Naomi's return to Israel, a story of loyalty rather than rebellion and rebirth.⁴

The existence of such stories somewhat relativizes the feminist hermeneutic of suspicion that claims the biblical material cannot be used in present discussions about gender because the texts were all written by men and reflect a society dominated by male institutions – even those texts that describe women's stories. There is obviously truth in this assertion, but when women recognize themselves in biblical narratives or in biblical psalms, as they often do, an absolute claim to the material's gender specificity is muted.

Reading the story of Ruth expectantly allows us, first, to recognize there *is* a different kind of conversion described there than that claimed to be typical, even necessary, in much of Christian tradition. The Bible tempers a simplistic male reading of conversion experience. Second, however, the notion that women's experience is only one of continuity will also be challenged. Though Ruth continues throughout the story to find life and meaning in her relationships with others, her conversion involves a wrenching shift from one relational circle to another, a discontinuity between life with her old family and life with her new one. Ruth's sister Orpah is unable or unwilling to make this move and returns instead to the safety of her primary family circle. But it is precisely this inability that prevents her from experiencing the new adventures, the promise of new life awaiting Ruth in Israel. The story is about loyalty and family circles, but it recognizes that relational existence is not merely continuous, that movement, often traumatic movement, from one primary group to another is required by the contingencies and opportu-

⁴Frederick J. Gaiser, "A Biblical Theology of Conversion," in *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. H. Newton Maloney and Samuel Southard (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1992) 93-107, esp. 104-105.

nities life presents. No life that is human, neither men's nor women's, is merely continuous or merely discontinuous. Life as we know it is less predictable, less stereotypical, and more interesting (though also more disturbing) than that defined by too-neat packages.

III. ON REFUSING TO BE COMFORTED

Turning now to the Psalter, we find early in Psalm 77 the intriguing words, "My soul refuses to be comforted" (Ps 77:2). What does this mean? Is this the strong male self refusing all outside aid and insisting only on its own resources? Or is it what Catherine Keller calls the dispersed or soluble female self, unable to accept comfort because it is nothing, because its pain is all it has to call its own?⁵

I have shown elsewhere that the term "my soul" (Hebrew נַפְשִׁי) refers in the Old Testament to what we would call the "self" – the addressable self, partaking of the exocentricity that defines human self-consciousness.⁶ This human self emerges or becomes known both in the "male" form of proud defiance and in the "female" form of loss or dispersal.⁷ But which form is operative in the soul that "refuses to be comforted"?

Intriguingly, the phrase occurs just twice more in the Old Testament, once describing the experience of a man, once that of a woman. Thinking his son Joseph had been murdered,

Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." (Gen 37:34-35)

Later, Jeremiah reports:

A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more. (Jer 31:15)

In both cases, the situation is one of the most traumatic a human can experience: the parental loss of a child. Jacob refuses the comfort of his family. The context suggests that Rachel refuses the comfort of God.⁸ Luther's own commentary on Psalm 77 misses the point: he claims the psalmist refuses "the emptiness of earthly consolation" because he knows true comfort can be found only in God.⁹ But

⁵Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).

⁶The soul (נַפְשִׁי) is the only one of the common Hebrew anthropological terms that can be seen as a distinct entity to the degree that it can be addressed: "Why are you cast down, O my soul?" (Ps 42:5); "Return, O my soul, to your rest" (Ps 116:7); "Awake, my soul!" (Ps 57:8). Cf. Frederick J. Gaiser, "The Emergence of the Self in the Old Testament: A Study in Biblical Wellness," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 14/1 (1992) 1-29, esp. 7.

⁷Ibid., 9-10.

⁸Note the reference to God's comfort in Jer 31:13.

⁹*First Lectures on the Psalms*, LW 11:19-20. Modern commentator A. A. Anderson shares Luther's understanding of this text: *The Book of Psalms*, vol. 2 (1972; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 557.

the biblical references are clear: human consolation is not empty, and divine consolation is not unavailable; but both are refused. This is genuine refusal; the phrase is not merely a figure of speech. The Hebrew term for refusal (יָסַר) regularly refers to a willful response, even hard-nosed rebellion (Isa 1:20). But how can one “refuse” comfort? It is given, whether asked for or not. It might work, whether we like it or not. In that sense, it is not unlike a word, which, in the Old Testament, Israel could also refuse (1 Sam 8:19; Zech 7:11). But how can one refuse to hear? The word is there, vibrating the eardrum without being invited. What is it that allows or requires us to shut out the other even when what the other offers is precisely what we need: life itself? Psalm 77 continues the account: “I am so troubled that I cannot speak” (v. 4). In other words, the invitation to reach out and touch someone is precisely unavailable to the psalmist. Speech, that most inherently human form of communication, is impossible. Sleep, too, eludes the pray-er: “You keep my eyelids from closing” (v. 4). The central things that make one human, that support and allow life, are disappearing here. The self is dissolving. Yet it is that very dissolving self that refuses comfort.

In the title of her book, Mary Louise Bringle asks whether despair is sickness or sin.¹⁰ Finally, though not simply, her answer is that it is a symptom of both. Sickness and sin seem to meet in Psalm 77. On the one hand, the psalmist describes classical symptoms of depression or despair. In the parallel cases of Jacob and Rachel, refusing comfort for the death of their children, the modern counselor might speak of post-traumatic stress. Yet the refusal of life and renewal is real. The psalmist holds on to the despair, both unable and unwilling to give it up. In a sermon on Isaiah 40 (“Comfort, comfort my people”), Gerhard von Rad speaks of modern sophisticated nihilists who will not accept comfort because they “are quite pleased with their desperation.”¹¹ While this is hardly the mood of Psalm 77, the result is not dissimilar: a refusal to accept comfort because of a distorted or disrupted sense of self, the meeting of sickness and sin.

Is this not also the meeting of women’s and men’s experience? The parallel examples of Jacob and Rachel suggest that it is. Who wrote Psalm 77? Who is the “I” in the lament psalms? The tradition reflected in the superscript relates the psalm to Asaph, a quintessential member of the male establishment. Social history seems to make certain that the psalms were written down by males. Psalm 77 culminates in a description of the exodus, an event of the public and political realm traditionally controlled by males. On the other hand, the story of Hannah (a narrated lament)¹² describes her experience of barrenness in terms that are remarkably similar to those of our psalm. Her trauma is shared only by women and comes from the realm of children and family for which women have been responsible

¹⁰Mary Louise Bringle, *Despair: Sickness or Sin? Hopelessness and Healing in the Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990).

¹¹Gerhard von Rad, *Predigten* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1972) 131 (translation mine).

¹²Frederick J. Gaiser, “Songs in the Story: A Study of the Songs of Lament and Praise in the Historical and Narrative Literature of the Old Testament and the Apocrypha” (Dr. theol. diss., University of Heidelberg, 1984) 202-216.

throughout the ages (1 Samuel 1). Hannah, too, is cut off from the life-giving communities of family and cultic assembly. She cannot eat; she cannot participate in the Shiloh festival; she weeps bitterly; her actions are grossly misunderstood by others who cannot empathize.

Paradoxically, Hannah's story flows into a song that verbally links her own quintessentially female experience to the public and political, messianic and "male" deliverance of Israel (1 Sam 2:1, 10). Asaph's psalm resolves his existential despair by moving toward communal experience and memory, a "female" networking that overcomes the terror of the isolated self (Ps 77:11-15). Those who wrote the Old Testament were able to imagine the words of distress depicted by the lament psalms in the mouths of both men and women. They were able to envision the deliverance of women in what Hampson would call "male" terms and the renewal of men in what Hampson would term "female" networking.¹³ As Luther suggested, both men and women have recognized themselves in these poems and narratives over the centuries.

IV. ON BEING MALE AND FEMALE—AND HUMAN

To say it again, I do not mean to deny that men are more like men and women more like women. Attempts to help us understand our maleness and femaleness are surely welcome. Attempts, however, to drive a wedge between the experience of men and women to such a degree that one can never understand or participate in the other run contrary both to experience itself (not only our own but that described in the Bible) and to the fundamental biblical dictum, "It is not good that the human should be alone" (Gen 2:18).

If Hampson has the audacity to ask whether it is moral to believe in a God who is other than the human, who exists in apposition to the self (341), might we not be allowed a similarly bold question: Is it moral to give oneself to a worldview (Hampson's separatist feminism) that, by its own definition, excludes the experience of half the human race? What would such a choice mean? How would it contribute to a whole and reconstructed world?¹⁴

I know bumblebees, though big and bulky, can fly. One of my most vivid early memories was being stung on the thumb by two of them when I was four years old. I know feminism and Christianity, though sometimes sparring partners, are not incompatible. Since the early '70s, this school and my own theological

¹³In his book critical of patriarchy, Erhard Gerstenberg agrees: "Despite all the role differentiation between the sexes, the Bible sees human nature as undivided" (*Jahwe – ein patriarchaler Gott?* [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1988] 161 [translation mine]). Gerstenberger (160) refers to Judith Ochshorn's *The Female Experience and the Nature of the Divine* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1981) in which she demonstrates that "female" characteristics (e.g., love, fertility) and "male" attributes (e.g., strength, brutality) were in no way distributed according to gender in the myths of the ancient Near East but were equally ascribed to both gods and goddesses.

¹⁴As Berkeley sociologist Ilene Philipson has pointed out, if the most to which women or other "minority" groups can aspire is "articulating our differences," they will simply doom themselves to further marginalization: "What's the Big I.D.? The Politics of the Authentic Self," *Tikkun* 6/6 (1991) 51-55.

perspective have been more challenged and enhanced by feminist issues than by anything else.

V. A THEOLOGICAL AFTERTHOUGHT

Back to the theological question: Does what I have done here have anything to do with a Lutheran reading of the world? One way to make the psalms our own is to recognize them, with Luther, as valid witnesses to human experience. Another way is more theological: to read them, with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as prayers of Christ. The Psalter then becomes our book because it is Christ's book and we are in Christ. "It can become our prayer only because it was his prayer."¹⁵

Bonhoeffer's perspective is representative of Lutheranism's fierce concentration on the second article; this perspective will always be profoundly interested in the human because it will always center in Jesus. Other theological perspectives will go after things spiritual and other-worldly, but Lutheranism will care about this world and the human race. It will therefore be interested in the Psalter and its report of human experience. If the experience reported there becomes ours through Jesus Christ, and if that experience is true and yet suggests mutuality between male and female rather than only division, then the most important thing about the incarnation will not be that the divine Logos became male, but that it became human. That seems to me to be a promising idea. ⊕

¹⁵Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1970) 21.