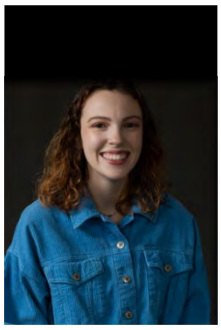

"Son, Why Have You Treated Me Like This?": A Marian View of Miscarriage

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Wheaton Writing 8 (2023), 25-33; https://doi.org/10.57076/hhvtvh26

THE CHURCH LOVES BABIES. Christ chose the form of a squalling, red-faced newborn baby as his preferred entry into human life. He drew small toddlers onto his lap. Nearly all churches have some ecumenical mark to celebrate a new baby: baptism, dedication, or simply showering mothers and fathers with meal trains. Like the liturgical season of Advent, pregnancy is a joyful season filled with longing and waiting. Yet the tragic reality is that around twenty percent of pregnancies end in miscarriage.[1] Subverted hopes, dreams, and longings are washed away in a torrent of blood and tears. The taboo of publicly acknowledging miscarriage leaves grieving families largely alone with questions, trauma, and deep pain. What do you do when there is no baby to celebrate?

Historically, the Church has entered this question well and comprehensively explored a theology of miscarriage. When it has, it has narrowly sought to address the question of who is at fault for the loss of the child. More recently, some theodicies of miscarriage, primarily from womanist and feminist theologians, have emerged to comfort grieving families and seek God amid this unimaginable suffering. Yet while these scholars have substantially enriched this desperately-understudied topic, one key tenet of a comprehensive theology of miscarriage continually seems missing. Mary, the Mother of God, offers an entry into and path through the grief and loss of women suffering from miscarriages in a uniquely empathetic way. I argue that she is an integral component of crafting a holistic theology of miscarriage to minister to grieving women and prepare the church to respond.[2]

Fault and Consequence: Historic Womb Theology

Early church debates were understandably concerned with ironing out key dogmas and did not turn dramatically turn towards questions of motherhood and families, only pausing to define Mary as *theotokos*, the mother of God.[3] This meant that miscarriage losses were not open for discussion, leaving gaps of care and

[1] Agnes Howard, "Where Neither Choice Nor Life Prevails," *Comment*, November 22, 2022, https://comment.org/where-neither-choice-nor-life-prevails/?utm_campaign=2022-11-24,%20Agnes%20Howard&utm_content=229907225&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter&hss_channel=tw-105196688/.

[2] For the scope of my paper, I will be focusing only on the grieving experience of mothers. However, there is also a real theological need to address the grief of fathers in miscarriage and craft a comprehensive miscarriage theology.

[3] In fact, Sally Cunneen notes that even in these discussions about motherhood pertaining to Mary, the discussions still Christ-centered, not about lived experiences of motherhood and womanhood. Cunneen claims that the decision she was "theotokos...defined Christ, not Mary; it guaranteed the unity of Christ's nature..." and it "stressed Mary's biological role." See Sally Cunneen, *In Search of Mary: The Woman and the Symbol* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 130.

unspoken inferences of shame and blame on families struggling with miscarriages.

In the few instances where reproductive topics were discussed, as when Augustine defined canon abortion theology, these discussions were principally shaped by men committed to celibacy, who lack both scientific backing and the embodied experiences of trauma and loss. These theological movements sought to affirm the *imago Dei* in all people, but unfortunately more often than not ended up vilifying mothers in their ideas of the sinful and senseless death of babies. Augustine did attempt to differentiate between "ensouled" and "unformed" fetuses; that is, early-term and late-term pregnancies. He thus suggested that mothers should not be shamed and faulted for unformed, very early-term abortions (the only terminology he had to discuss any kind of pregnancy loss, voluntary or involuntary).[4] However, he did not have the capacity to understand losses across all stages of the pregnancy process, and he also never addressed what happens to the lost babies in terms of their salvation, resurrection, and grace. These questions of blame, shame, and salvation are questions that sit at the heart of the Christian grief of miscarriage.

The Reformation provided one of the first key shifts in the theology of miscarriage. For the first time, the family became a focal point of faith. Because clergy could marry, preachers were interested in speaking about the "day-to-day faith of women" and wives.[5] Motherhood became a more important—even the highest—calling for a woman.[6] It is therefore in the Reformation that we find one of the first real attempts toward a theology of miscarriage.

Luther's wife suffered a miscarriage, alongside two other deaths of their young living children, and in turn, Luther writes "A Consolation for Women Whose Pregnancies Have Not Gone Well" in 1542 as a preface for a book on Psalm 29.[7] Luther notes that "it was not due to their carelessness or neglect that the birth of the child went off badly."[8] He reassures women that God is not angry at them, and her "deep longing to bring her child to be baptized will be accepted by God as an effective prayer."[9] This is in contrast to the Catholic view, which to this day remains ambiguous on the fate of unbaptized, miscarried babies.[10]

Luther's turn towards questions of individual blame and the salvatory fate of the child is a critical development in miscarriage theology. Breaking from previous discourse, Luther makes it clear that the woman is *not* at fault and the child *will* be saved. Yet, unfortunately, this short sermon ends here, leaving much unsaid about the pain after a miscarriage—the lingering trauma and grief, and the movements forward for families and churches in response to miscarriage.

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[4] Daniel A. Dombrowski, "St. Augustine, Abortion, and Libido Crudelis," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 49, no. 1 (January-March 1998): 154, https://doi.org/10.2307/2709708.

[5] Jennifer McNutt, "No Simple Story: How Women's Roles Changed in the Sixteenth Century," *Christian History* 131 (2019): 6-7.

[6] See Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2021) for a discussion of this turn in church history. Like any major turn, it had both valuable and harmful implications in the church and women's lives. I will cover here the benefits of this shift; alongside her helpful historical overview of this Protestant family-focused turn, Barr notes some of the more harmful effects that this had on women's leadership capacity and equality.

[7] McNutt, "No Simple Story," 6.

[8] Martin Luther, "Comfort for Women Who Have Had A Miscarriage," trans James Raun, *Luther's Works* 43 (1968).

[9] Ibid.

[10] Lynne McIntyre, et al, "'I Want to Bury It, Will You Join Me?': The Use of Ritual in Prenatal Loss among Women in Catalonia, Spain in the Early 21st Century," *Religions* 13: 336, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040336.

Additionally, this discourse still centers on a man's voice. While Luther certainly brings his own valuable experiences to learn from, there remains a gap in the firsthand perspective of a mother in learning to grieve.

Womb Theology Today: The Missing Mother

In the last twenty years, womanist and feminist theologians today have begun turning towards the need to address the trauma of miscarriage in the church community as a whole, not from simply individualistic responses. Trauma is an embodied experience, often defined as a wound that "leaves an imprint on the mind, brain, and body as a whole."[11] It must therefore be addressed in an embodied, holistic way; thus, feminist theologians have begun asking not just how to handle the guilt of miscarriage, but how to *respond* to it and move forward in grief and loss.

L. Serene Jones (2001) draws on psychological understandings of trauma and miscarriage as well as feminist theory to explore the key issues that require a theological response. First, a woman faces a loss of control and agency, coupled with intense guilt. Second, Jones identifies the grief of a "hope forever deferred."[12] The woman "grieves not only an immediate loss, but the loss of an entire lifetime, a lifetime lived vividly in the drama of her hoping."[13] The third traumatic experience is "the loss of bodily integrity," a "rupturing of the self...when one experiences the radical dissolution of the bodily borders that, in ordinary time, give the self a sense of internal coherence."[14] A woman's understanding of he own physical body dissolves and falls away with the baby and the blood.

Jones concludes by offering ways to respond to these theologically. One doctrine to "hold and shape the unique characteristics of this grieving" that she jests is "not very Reformed" is Mary.[15] However, she dismisses Mary as the best option because she thinks Mary only offers three avenues of interpretation: 1) as the mother of God, a "womb, productive ground"; 2) as the "choosing agent" of the Magnificat in liberation theology; and 3) as "the site of fragmenting discourses," a postmodern, symbolic option.[16] None of these Marys resonate with lived experiences of miscarriage, according to Jones. Each fails to address one of the three key trauma areas.

Instead, Jones offers Trinitarian doctrine as "an image that can hold [the] experience" of women grieving miscarriages.[17] She suggests that this image both reminds women that God's redemptive love extends to all people, including those suffering from reproductive loss, and also creates a point of empathy—a Godhead that takes death into Godself as Jesus bleeds on the cross.[18] Jones' Trinitarian theology has sparked other reflections on ritual and liturgy after miscarriage, particularly in the Protestant tradition.[19] Ritual is a key trauma

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[11] Y.K. Susanta, "Feminist trauma theology of miscarriage as an embodied experience," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78, vol. 1 (2022): 1, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7898.
[12] L. Serene Jones, "Hope Deferred: Theological Reflections on Reproductive Loss." *Modern Theology* 17, vol. 2 (April 2001): 233, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0025.00158.
[13] Jones, "Hope Deferred," 234.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Jones, "Hope Deferred," 239.
[16] Jones, "Hope Deferred," 238-239.
[17] Jones, "Hope Deferred," 240.
[18] Jones, "Hope Deferred," 242.
[19] For the length of this paper, I do not have time to unpack these, but two interesting theological explorations in this area are McIntyre et al. "'I Want to Bury It, Will You Join Me?': The Use of Ritual in Prenatal Loss among Women in Catalonia, Spain in the Early 21st Century," *Religions* 13: 336. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040336 and Eliana Ah-Rum Ku, "The Need for Lament in Liturgy to Deal with Women's Suffering Experience of Pregnancy Loss Based on the Image of a Lamenting God,"

response—it helps our body recognize, mark, and process deep issues.

Like Jones, psychologist and theologian Christy Bauman turns towards womanist theology and Trinitarian doctrine of a God who takes death into God's womb, so to speak, to make sense of her embodied experience as a woman suffering reproductive loss.[20] In her *Theology of the Womb*, Bauman discusses how it was too difficult to receive communion after a stillbirth, because "there were no tears, there was utter and overwhelming waiting ... that came every time a pastor or a priest broke bread. For my body had been broken and death was laid in my arms."[21] In her trauma, she could not take the broken body of Christ. I began wondering if Jones had dismissed Mary as a doctrinal locus for miscarriage too quickly—for who better to illustrate a reapproach to the Eucharist than Mary at the foot of the cross?

I began to believe that, across her text, Bauman was searching for a Marian answer. Bauman needed a doctrine that could envelop her experience with a womb that brought death. And, like Bauman, Mary had held the broken dead body of her child and wailed over it. I believe that Mary, a real woman with a real womb, offers a rich, robust theology of miscarriage.

A Marian Turn Towards Miscarriage

Jones' principal critique of examining Mary at the foot of the cross as the basis for a miscarriage theology is that Mary is not suffering from the loss of bodily integrity—the third trauma point—at that moment. Her "barrenness and her bodily disintegration are not at issue," as she is not losing a physical part of herself.[22] However, this ignores the Christian tradition that supports an understanding that Mary's life and body were mystically intertwined with that of her son. Catholic contemplative Caryll Houselander reflects that Mary "formed Christ of her own life, in herself; and now that she had brought him forth, she lived in Him. Quite literally, her life was in Christ. Therefore there could never be anything He suffered which she did not. He would suffer and she with Him."[23] Similarly, historic contemplative Pseudo-Maximus suggests that during Christ's crucifixion, "not only was the immaculate mother inseparable from him, but she shared his pain," continuing to suggest that perhaps she even "suffered more than him and endured sorrows of the heart."[24] Even as she cradles her newborn, Simeon hints at this theological idea of Mary's impending bodily disintegration, as "a sword will pierce [her] heart too."[25] Her own body will die by the same sword that kills her son.

These reflections illustrate how deeply the life of the *theotokos* was embedded in Christ; Mary must be suffering some loss of bodily integrity at this moment. Her body formed Jesus' and joined in his flesh; across his life, he therefore remains part of an externalization of her womb and body. As she watches her own flesh die on the cross, she must be losing some sense of bodily borders that Jones identifies. And without a doubt, she is suffering a loss of control and shattered, disillusioned hope for her life and his at that moment.

Mary's whole path is marked by the death of children. Even amid the glow of a new mother, Mary is asked to confront the death

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Korean Journal of Christian Studies no. 125: 89-119, doi:10.18708/kjcs.2022.7.125.1.89.

[20] Christy Angelle Bauman, *Theology of the Womb: Knowing God Through the Body of a Woman* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2019), 75.

[21] Bauman, *Theology of the Womb*, 68.

[22] Jones, "Hope Deferred," 239.

[23] Caryll Houselander, *The Reed of God*, (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2020), 61.

[24] Maximus the Confessor, *The Life of the Virgin*, trans. Stephen J. Shoemaker (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 101.

[25] Luke 2:35 (NIV).

that she has begotten. After Herod orders the death of all of the little boys in Bethlehem, Matthew inserts a lament from Jeremiah: "*A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning. Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.*"[26] I argue that Rachel does not merely represent the mothers of the babies; Mary is Rachel here too. She must feel the guilt and the weight that women who miscarry do, that they have brought death to someone undeserving. She may not feel the bodily separation of miscarriage yet, but her playmates' babies are being slaughtered as a direct result of Mary's womb. Mary knows what it is like to hold the guilt of birthing undeserved death.

Other instances of Mary in scripture both speak empathetically into the grief of miscarriage and begin to offer theological responses. When Mary loses the adolescent Jesus, Houselander notes that she "suffered the loss of God."[27] Quite literally, Mary does not know where God is after her child is lost. This is an integral and vulnerable experience for a grieving mother. Where is God amid missing, lost children? When Mary does find Jesus, she asks, "why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you" (Luke 3:48). Jesus asks why she has been looking—he has been in his father's house. This passage echoes strains of Luther's sermon. It acknowledges the grief and worry of miscarriage in the Marian anguish of a lost God, yet there is theological significance in the reality that the child is in his father's house now. In no way does this diminish the pain and fear of lost children, but perhaps it offers solace to a grieving mother wondering where her baby went.

Further, at the foot of the cross, as Mary is watching her flesh ripped away, Jesus offers another theological gift. "Here is your son," he tells her, gesturing to John. He teaches the community around her to become her family; yet this is not disconnected from Mary weeping at the foot of the cross. This passage offers two callings, both integrally paired in a Marian theology of miscarriage: there is a communal calling to surround and embrace grieving mothers as a family alongside the individual calling to wail and mourn.

A Burnt Womb at the Center: A Visual Marian Theology

As I consider what Marian theology offers in miscarriage, I cannot stop returning to an image of the Pietà that holds grief and resurrection all in one. In Fenwick Lawson's carved Pietà (1981) in the Durham Cathedral, Christ represents brutalized death; yet, one of his hands gestures up to Mary, the container of life.[28] This suggests a resurrection, placing her embodied womb at the center.[29] It is reminiscent of his verbal gesture on the cross—"here is your son." There is—and will be—a life that surrounds the grief of death. Meanwhile, Mary's hands stretch out to her dead son, palms stretched upwards as if seeking for answers from heaven. The crack in her wooden face draws us into her pain, coupled with a long, drawn expression. She mourns. There is no answer for her.

The most interesting parts of the sculpture are the burns across the Christ and Mary. In 1984, the statue was in a York church that caught fire.[30] Molten lead splashed Mary's brow and split her head further, and singed her knees. A screen

[26] Matthew 2:16-18 (NIV).
[27] Houselander, *Reed of God*, 97.
[28] See Appendix A.
[29] Anna Lawson, "Pieta by Fenwick Lawson: Unique Insights from his Daughter," *St. Cuthbert's Final Journey*, March 17, 2013, https://stcuthbertsfinaljourney.com/2013/03/17/pieta-by-fenwick-lawson-unique-insights-from-his-daughter/.
[30] Ibid.

protected most of her, but the Christ statue caught much of the debris and falling, burning lead. Both ended up burnt, but especially Jesus. Lawson noted that the burns were a "fantastic" dimension to the exploration of life and death that he could not have conceptualized.[31]

This image models the Marian miscarriage theology that I am suggesting. Here is a Mary whose body has been burned with her son's, who cradles her dead son in her arms. Here is the Mary who sobs, racked with guilt because she birthed death. Here is the Mary of hopes deferred. Here is the life at the center of death.

Bauman tells the story of going to church after another miscarriage and being pulled in by her friend Heather, who whispers "you are loved. You are loved. You are loved." She is "a strong and knowing mother who is not afraid to comfort my grief. She is not afraid to allow me to melt in her arms."[32] This is where Mary meets grieving mothers. In learning to stand with her at the foot of the cross, we begin to find the rituals and liturgy of burial, of cradling broken bodies of babies, of crying tears of baptism, back towards the table of the resurrection—the table that makes no sense in these moments.[33]

After a notably-absent Mary across her book, Bauman closes with a powerful image: "I often wonder what sound Mary hummed as she held Jesus when he was a newborn, and I wonder if she hummed that same song over him as she held his lifeless body after he was taken off the cross."[34] Mary is a key, missing component in our theology of wombs, particularly as Protestants. We need not fear, avoid, or dismiss her; instead, we should turn towards her embodied experience as a real woman with a womb who can enter the soul of the experience of miscarrying. Though Jones' trinitarian doctrine of miscarriage is beautiful, it lacks the capacity to do so. Mary is equipped to offer the empathy and compassion that grieving women need, understanding and raising their same questions as she loses God and asks, "why have you been treating me like this?"[35] And, all the while, Mary also offers a theological approach for the church that picks the broken body up together with the mother and hums over it, the familial community around the mother that performs little liturgies of grief and moving through pain in community.

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[31] Lawson, "Pieta by Fenwick Lawson."
[32] Bauman, *Theology of the Womb*, 87.
[33] Bauman speaks of the "baptism of tears," that, for her, serves as one theologically-informed trauma ritual that helps her process the grief of reproductive loss; cf. Bauman, *Theology of the Womb*, 75-77.
[34] Bauman, Theology of the Womb, 145.
[35] In speaking to my own mother, who has had three miscarriages, she echoed the powerful impact of recognizing Mary sharing questions of miscarriage. She said "one of the big questions I found myself wrestling with in miscarriage was, 'Is this little life meaningful? Did it matter?' It matters to me. I loved it deeply even though I barely knew it. I have to think as Jesus was on the Cross, that question might have dogged Mary too."; Jennifer Nichols, personal email to author, September 7, 2022.

Appendix A: Pietà (1981) by Fenwick Lawson

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