

Mother Zion — Mother Church

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The prophet Isaiah was a visionary prophet (Isaiah 1:1; 2:1; 13:1). Hence he received his message by the eye rather than the ear. That vision, couched as it is mainly in poetry rather than prose, is meant to appeal more to our imagination than our intellect. Its content is conveyed by way of imagery. Therefore, we must get the picture if we are to understand the message of Isaiah. We must see as Isaiah saw and envisage what he envisaged. Meditation on the imagery of Isaiah gives access to the vision which these prophecies communicate.

In this essay I would like to consider one image from the book of Isaiah (one which is taken up again by Paul in Galatians), and show how it works. The image is of Jerusalem as a mother. I do this for three reasons. First, I would like to show why Luther in his Large Catechism describes the church as ‘the mother who begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God’ (Third Article; Hebart: 119) and why he describes Christians as children whom the Holy Spirit ‘places on the bosom of the church’, when he brings us to Christ (Hebart: 117).

Secondly, the church is at present under attack from the feminist movement for its supposed and actual misogyny and sexism. There is much that is faddish and plain wrong-headed in this. Yet we can also learn something from the feminists, as from all our critics. While we must resist any attempt to feminise the Trinity, we do need to re-emphasise our spiritual ‘femininity’ as believers as well as the ‘femininity’ of the church as the bride of Christ and the mother of all believers.

Thirdly, the image of the church as mother corrects false impressions about its nature, and debunks misleading expectations about its proper role in the world. These tend to run in one of two opposite directions. Some Christians are openly ashamed of the church’s failure to perform well as an institution in the modern world, and so savagely criticise what is wrong in her. Other Christians proudly champion the victory of the true church over the powers of evil, and her rule over the world. The church as loser and the church as ruler — both of these are powerful depictions which capture the imagination of many people. They can, I believe, be best displaced by a far more powerful vision — the vision of the church as a nursing mother, an archetypal image that speaks to all human beings of all times and places.

Some may use this to confirm the traditional stereotypes about the supposed role of women in our society. But I believe that the book of Isaiah does not allow this. While it is unlikely that a woman wrote Second Isaiah (see Wheeler Stone), we do hear the ‘voice’ of a woman articulating such unique womanly experiences as childbirth, nursing an infant, and, sad to say, rape. In this way God not only affirms the experience of woman but also enriches us all by using it to communicate his word to us.

The depiction of Zion as a woman and mother was not unique to Isaiah or even to the Old Testament. Scholars have shown that the pagan semitic countries which surrounded Israel commonly depicted their capital cities as goddesses (Fitzgerald 1972, 1975). As a goddess, each city was married to the patron god who ruled that city. On their coins that god was depicted wearing the city with its walls as a crown on his head. Since he was the husband of the city, the city was regarded as a daughter of the chief god in the pantheon. As goddesses, cities were therefore called ‘maiden’ or ‘queen’ or ‘mistress’ or ‘mother’ or ‘daughter’.

Very early in the monarchy, the Israelite poets picked up this pagan imagery, purged it of its paganism, and reapplied it to Jerusalem. Thus, even though Zion was not a goddess, she was chosen by the Lord

to be his consort. The poets called her 'daughter Zion' or 'maiden Zion' or 'maiden daughter Zion', all terms of divine affection and endearment. She was envisaged as the mother of her citizens. They were called her 'sons', while her satellite towns were regarded as her 'daughters'. Since she lived with the Lord in his palace, she was his queen and was involved with him in his government.

Humanly speaking, this poetic convention was the seed for the vision of Zion's misery and glory as is given in the book of Isaiah.

In what follows I shall sketch how the book of Isaiah envisions mother Zion. First of all, we have three images of her past and present humiliation. After them come five visions of her glory which more than match the horror of her humiliation.

Three Images of Zion's Humiliation

1. Mother Zion as a Prostitute

The book of Isaiah begins in 1:21-23 with the picture of Zion as a reckless prostitute. Faithless to her divine husband, she engages in a quest for fulfilment and excitement with her idolatrous lovers. She sells herself to murderers, corrupt lovers who rip off the under-privileged and pervert the course of justice with bribery. But that palls after a while. According to 57:6-13, she becomes quite perverted in her search for self-fulfilment. The harlot becomes a sorceress. Weird cults attract her with their promise of occult knowledge and power. She becomes involved in sacred sex through fertility rites (see Ackerman). These encounters engender a whole brood of children as rebellious and duplicitous and sexually perverted as she is. As if that were not enough, she practises child sacrifice to gain supernatural power for herself, takes up sorcery to exercise evil power over others, and conjures up the spirits of the dead for fortune telling. Even though it is all a hopeless quest, an exercise in illusion which quite wears her out, she is so hooked on it that she always finds the energy to keep on pursuing her perverse fantasies of power. As a result of all this, her divine husband instigates a formal separation from her. He withdraws his presence from her and abandons her to her own perversity.

2. Mother Zion as a Ravaged Victim

Disaster strikes. There is war, and Zion is defeated by her cruel enemies. After defeat in battle she is utterly humiliated. In one fell swoop her home is sacked, and her family is butchered. She becomes a childless widow with no-one to protect her. Publicly stripped of her finery and robes which indicate her high status, she is treated as a prisoner of war (2:24-26). She is made to wear sackcloth with a rope around her waist. The perfumed beauty becomes a malodorous slave. Her well-dressed hair is shaved; she is branded and put in chains. Then, to top off her catalogue of horrors, the soldiers drug her, rape her, and leave her trampled and lying on the ground in her drunken stupor (51:17-23). Unclean, uncircumcised brutes enter her and defile her sexually (52:1). She is as ravaged and desolate as Tamar was, after she had been raped by her brother Amnon (54:1; cf 2 Sam 13:20). Everything is lost - her husband, her home, her children, her status, and her pride. And there is no-one left to comfort her in her despair and to treat her with some dignity in her humiliation.

3. Mother Zion as a Woman in Mourning

Imagine Zion in sackcloth and covered in dust. As she sits on the ground she cries out and voices her complaint. Here are some of the terms she uses to describe how she feels:

afflicted and ravaged (51:21; 54:1,11; 62:4)

bereaved and widowed (49:21; 54:4)

barren and infertile (49:21; 54:1)

storm-tossed and disconsolate (54:11)

despised and hated (60:14,15)

rejected and forsaken (49:21; 54:6,7; 60:15; 62:4)

In her bitterness she complains that it is all the Lord's fault (49:14):

*The LORD has forsaken me,
the LORD has forgotten me.*

She believes that he has divorced her and sold off her children into slavery (50:1). He was angry with her, because she wasn't good enough for him (54:4-10). Her shame is unbearable. She has nothing to hope for any more.

Five Visions of Zion's Glorification

1. Zion's Repopulation: Isaiah 49:18-23

This vision comes in response to Zion's lament. She is told to lift up her downcast eyes, to look around and see how her sons return to her. Even though her land is now empty and devoid of population, Zion will not have sufficient space for all her many children to settle in. They will demand more space from her. And she, when she witnesses their coming, will wonder where they all come from. She had lost her husband and all her children. She was left all alone without any sexual partner. And yet she has all these children. She didn't give birth to any of them, nor did she raise any of them as foster children. And yet they are all hers, miraculously conceived and wonderfully reared, given to her fully grown. All the hard work of child-bearing and child rearing has been done for her. These children are her jewellery, the bridal dowry which the Lord swears to give her. They are signs of her social status and pledges of his commitment to her. He has fathered and raised them to give to her to comfort her. They are her badge of distinction and her mark of status.

The Lord outdoes even this. He promises that the pagan nations and their rulers would be engaged by him to be foster fathers and nurse-maids for all her children. They would care for Zion's children and present them to her fully grown. They wouldn't just acknowledge these as Zion's children; they would themselves come and pay homage to Zion by bowing down before her.

This vision is taken up again and developed still further in Isaiah 60:1- 16. There the Lord commands mother Zion to rise and reflect the Lord's presence which would dawn on her, like the light of the rising sun in a world covered with darkness. When the radiance of his presence shines out from her into the world, the nations will be attracted to Zion. They bring back her children and their offerings in festal procession to worship the Lord in Zion. Foreigners will rebuild her walls, while their kings will attend to Zion's needs and build her up as a place of worship for all people. The sons of those who humiliated Zion so savagely will bow down at her feet, submit to her, and acknowledge her as the city of the Lord. Zion will be the pride and joy of all people. The gentile nations and their kings will give of themselves to nourish Zion, just like a mother who nurses a baby at her breast.

So Zion will be repopulated by her children. The tables will be turned. Just as the gentiles once robbed her of her children and humiliated her, now they will restore her children to her and honour her as the city of the Lord, the place of his presence.

2. Zion's Reinvestiture: Isaiah 52:1,2

Zion had been humiliated by being stripped of her clothes and jewellery, just as her rival, lady Babylon, was humiliated and shunned by the Lord (47:1-3). These had indicated her high rank and exalted status. They were her badges of distinction as wife and mother and queen. She had been left lying on the ground, shorn of her hair and dressed in sackcloth. A nobody! A person without influence and power! A victim of male cruelty! Now, in contrast to her humiliation, she is told in 52:1 ,2 to dress up once again:

*Awake, awake, O Zion,
clothe yourself with strength.
Put on your garments of splendor,
O Jerusalem, the holy city.
The uncircumcised and defiled
will not enter you again.
Shake off your dust;
rise up, sit enthroned, O Jerusalem.
Free yourself from the chains of your neck,
O captive daughter of Zion.*

The Lord tells her to shake off the dust from her rags and to loose the chains from her neck, because he has a new set of clothes for her to wear. In the previous chapter Zion had urged the Lord to awake and put on his strength, like a soldier who puts on his armour for battle (51:9). Now the Lord tells Zion to put on her strength. But her strength is not found in armour but in festal robes.

She wears these robes in her worship. They are her royal robes which show that she is holy and so belongs to the Lord. They give her strength and status. They protect her from violation by unclean rapists. She is also commanded to assume her royal throne, once she has put on her robes and shaken off her garb as a slave. She reigns as queen once again. The Lord has covered her shame by dressing her up as his holy consort. She receives her strength and status from his acceptance of her and her relationship with him.

3. Zion's Reconstruction: Isaiah 54:1-8

Since barrenness and the lack of a male heir were a cause of public disgrace in the ancient world, a woman would rejoice when she gave birth to a male child, and lament if she were barren or a widow without a male heir to protect her. The birth of male children resulted in the extension of her home to accommodate the growth of the household. In Isaiah 54:1-3 Zion is commanded to rejoice, even though she is barren and has never been in labour, because she will have more children than any married woman. In anticipation of this growth she is told to enlarge her tent in all directions, because her descendants would reach out beyond her land and spread out all over the face of the earth. This would come about because her husband was the Lord of all the earth. He would take her back as his wife and rebuild her home. She would be rebuilt with precious stones which would show how much he valued her and desired others to admire her. He would teach her sons, so that they would live at peace and learn righteousness from him. With him as her husband she would be safe from tyranny, terror and warfare.

4. Zion's Vindication: Isaiah 62:1-6

Just as Zion was publicly disgraced through her abandonment by the Lord, so she would be publicly vindicated by his restoration of her as his wife. Two things would happen to her. First, the Lord would give Zion and her land new names. When a king was crowned in Israel, he was given a new throne-name to signify his changed status and his role as king. Similarly, the Lord would give Zion a new name. That name would indicate her status as his wife and his attitude to her. She would be called Hephzibah, which means ‘My delight in her’. She would no longer be a deserted wife, shamed by her husband, but God would rejoice and delight in her as his dear wife. What a strange reversal! Zion had been called to rejoice in the Lord in her worship of him. But now he promises to vindicate her by rejoicing in her. He glorifies her by glorying in her. And his delight in her is shown by the name that he uses to address her.

Besides giving a new name to Zion, the Lord promises to make her his royal crown. Crowns were much more than mere symbols of kingship in the ancient world; they conveyed divine status and power. Normally, they bore the emblems of the deity who had appointed the king as his regent. The king received his crown from the god at his coronation. Crowns were also given to a groom and a bride at their wedding to show that they had together been given dominion over the earth by the Lord. Here in Isaiah we have a remarkable reversal of imagery. The Lord does not give his crown to Zion as his consort and queen. Rather he makes Zion a beautiful crown which he presents to her sons. All that he gives to Zion he also offers through Zion to her children. Through Zion he shares his love and joy and glory with her children. They share her royal status and reign with her. His kingship is revealed through them.

5. Zion’s Maternal Role: Isaiah 66:7-14^a

The portrayal of Zion as mother culminates in a clear vision of her maternal role in Isaiah 66. This vision falls in three parts: two riddles about Zion and her children, a call to rejoice with Mother Zion, and God’s promise of comfort through Mother Zion.

The vision begins with two riddles. The first is about a woman who gives birth to a son without any labour pains. That woman is Zion. She receives her sons without undergoing the normal process of conception and birth. The second riddle is about the possible birth of a land and its people in a single day. The answer is that the Lord who controls conception and birth can perform this miracle as well.

The second part of the vision is a call to all those who love Zion and mourn over her humiliation. They are invited to rejoice with her and for her in anticipation of the maternal nurture which they will receive from her. The reason for their joy is quite simple. She will once again become their *alma mater*, the mother who nurtures her children. They will find satisfaction in the milk that comes from her breasts. Yet her breasts are more than mere dispensers of nourishment. They are her pride and glory. They offer comfort and delight to those whom she embraces and loves.

The last part of the vision is a divine oracle addressed to those who love Zion. The Lord promises them that he will flood Zion with his peace and the glory of the nations. With such divine and human resources at her disposal Zion will then be the bountiful mother of her children. She will nurse them at her breasts, play with them on her lap, and carry them on her hip. She will be like a doting, affectionate mother who can’t bear to be parted from her children. After this comes one last surprising twist to the vision (66:13). God will use Zion to comfort his people. In fact, Zion has been created to provide divine nurture and comfort. That is her unique role. Those who receive divine comfort find it in Zion and only through her. As a result of this mothering by God they will rejoice and flourish like grass in a fertile field.

So the portrayal of Zion as Mother culminates in the vision of her as the mother who nurses and nourishes her children. That vision is closely associated with the vision of Zion as the shrine for the worship of the nations rather than the capital of a world empire. The context also shows that this vision

will be fulfilled in heavenly Jerusalem which the Lord will create with a new heaven and new earth. Through Mother Zion the Lord then leads the peoples of the earth from the glory of imperial power to the glory of liturgical nurture.

Conclusion

The prophecies of Zion in Isaiah find their fulfilment in the church of God. Like Zion, the church has two paradoxical aspects to her. She is both earthly and heavenly, oppressed and free, humiliated and glorious, sinful and holy. She is the city set on a hill, the city of the heavenly King. She is the temple of the living God where the gentiles join God's people in divine worship. She is the pride and joy of her divine Lord. The Triune God has created her to be the mother of the faithful. Through her and in her he comforts and cares for them.

This image of the church as mother reappears in four places in the New Testament. First and most obviously in Galatians 4:21-31 Paul quotes Isaiah 54:1 as he contrasts the enslaved descendants of Hagar with the free descendants of Sarah. While Hagar corresponds to earthly Jerusalem, Sarah represents heavenly Jerusalem. Whereas the children of Hagar are born according to the flesh, the children of Sarah are born according to the Spirit. We then are all citizens of heavenly Jerusalem. And the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother' (Galatians 4:26).

Secondly, in Revelation 12 a celestial woman gives birth to a royal son who is to rule all the nations with an iron sceptre. When the evil dragon seeks to devour that child, God removes him into the heavenly world and casts the dragon down to earth. After the dragon unsuccessfully attacks the woman, who manages to elude him, he turns on her children and makes war on them. The woman in this vision is the church and her children are its members. The dragon is Satan, and he is implacably hostile to her because of her association with Christ.

Thirdly, in 1 Peter 2:2,3 Christians who have been given new birth through the word of God are regarded as newborn babes. Peter urges them to crave the pure milk of the word, so that they will grow up in their salvation. That milk is given to them by Christ in the temple of the living God.

Lastly, in Luke 11:27,28 Jesus may allude to Isaiah 66:11,12. He contrasts the blessedness of his own mother who bore him in her womb and nursed him at her breasts, with the blessedness of his disciples. They have been given life by the hearing of his word and are nourished by keeping it. As Luther reminds us in the Large Catechism, this happens in the church. She begets and nourishes every Christian through the preaching of the word of God and the administration of the sacraments.

Mother Zion - Mother Church! As with Zion there is much that is sinful, inadequate and even corrupt about the church as a human institution. But it is not for us to criticise and condemn her. Rather we should mourn for her devastation and long for her vindication, because she is holy and divine. We have no reason to be ashamed of her and to dissociate ourselves from her, because God does not disown her, and he is not too proud to be identified with her. She is our mother. We then have good reason to love her dearly and to be proud of her. We rejoice in her, because we owe our spiritual existence to her and receive our spiritual nourishment from her.

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