

## Women in the Songs of *Glory to God*

*This is one in a series of articles introducing Glory to God, the new Presbyterian hymnal.*

### Introduction

O sons and daughters, let us sing  
with heavenly hosts to Christ our King . . .

*(Glory to God #235)*

The words above open a medieval hymn calling all Christians to celebrate the mysteries of Christ's resurrection: *all* Christians, both male and female, sons and daughters. The mention of daughters is not some insertion by a later translator making a stab at political correctness. Rather, it is integral to the original Latin of *O filii et filiae*, attributed to the Franciscan Jean Tisserand, whose dedication to inclusiveness led him to found a monastic order for women in fifteenth-century France.

That women are included in hymns, medieval or modern, should be no surprise. In the ninth century BCE, the prophet Joel proclaimed, "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy" (Joel 2:28). Peter echoed these words on the day of Pentecost nearly two thousand years ago (Acts 2:17). In more recent centuries,

however, our hymnals have not always been as attuned to female voices and visions.

The 1990 hymnal took the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) further than ever before in incorporating the works of women: just more than sixty women are cited in the index of authors, and there are about twenty in the index of composers. These numbers contrast with the *Hymnbook* of 1955, which had less than fifty women credited with texts and only seven credited with tunes. Even today, the field of tune writing seems less welcoming to women's efforts. While *Glory to God* contains 853 selections, less than thirty female

**Just as Jesus used an example from the lives of women in a parable teaching vigilance to both male and female followers, he also used feminine imagery to explore the nature of God.**

composers are listed, whereas more than ninety women text writers appear.

Even so, the content of the new hymnal helps us to hear more fully how our daughters prophesy through what the Spirit has stirred them to create. The collection also includes more women as *subjects* and not simply *sources* of hymns. In what follows, we will explore how *Glory to God* educates us about biblical women, expands our repertoire of feminine imagery, and enriches our understanding of the community of faith as a family including both sons and daughters.

## Biblical Women

Hymns often rely on biblical texts for inspiration. Surprisingly few hymns, however, cite biblical characters, male or female, by name. Abraham, Moses, and Isaiah receive mention in *The Presbyterian Hymnal* 1990; John the Baptist appears during Advent, as do Mary and Joseph at Christmas; Peter, James, and John are referenced in one transfiguration text, “Swiftly Pass the Clouds of Glory” (#190). Beyond these examples, however, the texts in hymnals tend to focus more on general concepts than specific individuals. Such a tendency may reflect the fact that in order to be useful on more than one Sunday in the lectionary cycle, hymns need to avoid particular narratives and address more universal themes.

An early needs assessment conducted by the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song (PCOCS) determined that the next hymnal for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) should make more specific mention of our ancestors in the faith. The hymnal’s overarching framework invites such mention, unfolding the story of God’s gracious actions toward us. The committee’s theological vision statement, found in appendix 1 of *Glory to God* (p. 927), points out a further reason for such inclusion:

The rich narrative of salvation history—with the life stories of people like Abraham and

Sarah, Eli and Samuel, Boaz and Ruth, Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch—makes audible the manifold ways in which God engages people of different ages, nationalities, races, and genders.

In other words, attending to the array of personages from our past reminds us of the diversity of our extended family.

Of course, this family includes foremothers as well as forefathers, even if the former have often gone unacknowledged. *Glory to God* thus adds a hymn about God’s call “To Abraham and Sarah” (#51), supplementing the well-known twelfth-century text, “The God of Abraham Praise” (#49). One hymn (“In a Deep, Unbounded Darkness,” #850) carries the trajectory of inclusion beyond gender into ethnicity, referring to the God of Hagar, reminding us of the part of our family tree that branches from Sarah’s handmaid, the mother of Abraham’s son Ishmael. That text goes on to appeal to the God of Miryam, identifying the resourceful older sister without whom the baby Moses would not have survived past infancy to tell old Pharaoh to let God’s people go (#52). A hymn out of the southern camp meeting experience, “Brethren, We Have Met to Worship” (#396), also alludes to Moses’ sister. A text written for the tenth anniversary of the ordination of women in the Lutheran church, “For All the Faithful Women” (#324), offers praise for Miriam, acknowledging her further role in leading the celebration when the Hebrew people escaped from Egypt through the Red Sea. This hymn also honors Ruth for leaving her home to follow her faith.

Women from the New Testament receive even fuller treatment in *Glory to God* than these select examples from Hebrew Scripture. Mary the mother of Jesus, already named in a half dozen songs from *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (1990), figures in an additional half dozen in *Glory to God*. Two texts tell the story of the annunciation: “No Wind at the Window” (#101) and “To a Maid

Whose Name Was Mary" (#98, named for its first line, which was revised by the author in this edition; the earlier version in the 1990 hymnal was "To a Maid Engaged to Joseph"). Mary's canticle from Luke 1 is present in *Glory to God* in "My Soul Gives Glory to My God" (#99), and it is explored in the hymnal in two other versions as well: a chant from the Taizé community ("Sing Out, My Soul," #646) and a rousing folk carol with a strong social-justice bent ("My Soul Cries Out with a Joyful Shout," #100). "Mary and Joseph Came to the Temple" (#148) carries the narrative of Jesus' birth forward to his presentation before the Lord in the ritual of redemption of the first born, nam-

## Other hymns make a point of including both father and mother imagery for the one in whose image we are made, both male and female (Gen. 1:27).

ing both Simeon and Anna as prophetic witnesses who recognized that God's promised Messiah had arrived at last.

A few other New Testament women are mentioned by name in *Glory to God*: Martha, who labored in the kitchen while her sister Mary sat at Jesus' feet to study; Dorcas, servant to the sick and poor; and the other Mary, who discovered the open tomb ("For All the Faithful Women," #324). This "other Mary," Mary Magdalene, is also named in Easter texts such as "In the Darkness of the Morning" (#229), "Woman, Weeping in the Garden" (#241), and in more general texts such as "I Want to Be as Close to You" (#736) and "By All Your Saints Still Striving" (#325). The latter of these dubs her "apostle to the apostles" for her role in spreading the good news of Jesus' resurrection to grieving disciples.

Additional women are identified by their actions in the extensive section of *Glory to God* dedicated to the life of Jesus because the gospel writers did not preserve their names. Two hymns sing of the woman whose desperation led her to touch the hem of Jesus' garment in search of healing: "The Woman Hiding in the Crowd" (#178) and "Woman in the Night" (#161). The latter text incorporates references to many other important figures from Jesus' years of preaching, teaching, and healing: women on the road, who traveled with him in his itinerant ministry; the woman at the well, who was commissioned to spread the word of his work to others; the woman at the

feast, who anointed Jesus with costly ointment, despite the disapproval of onlookers. A popular praise and worship song from Korea speaks in the voice of this anointing woman: "To My Precious Lord" (#704). A further text identifies her as a "prophet," since her symbolic act prefigured Jesus' burial ("A Prophet-Woman Broke a Jar," #201). "Woman in

the Night" (#161) also alludes to those female followers of Jesus who were the last to remain at his death and the first to witness his resurrection: women in the dawn who are both the first to mourn and the first to sing.

*Glory to God's* expanded treatment of the life and ministry of Jesus also makes room for a number of hymns and songs focused on his parables. As a teacher and preacher, Jesus evidently had no problem expecting his male followers to identify with illustrations drawn from the lives of women: the story of the wise and foolish bridesmaids (Matt. 25) exhorts all believers to remain alert and ready for the second coming. This parable provides imagery for an Advent hymn from the late sixteenth century, carried forward in *Glory to God* from its late twentieth-century translation in *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (1990): "'Sleepers, Wake!' A

Voice Astounds Us” (#349). A further allusion to the same cautionary tale appears in the African American spiritual “Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning” (#350). A treatment of multiple parables, “What Is the World Like” (#771) calls us all, like the wise bridesmaids, to be ready for the light of Christ’s coming as we keep our lamps burning in anticipation of the new day.

## Feminine Imagery

Just as Jesus used an example from the lives of women in a parable teaching vigilance to both male and female followers, he also used feminine imagery to explore the nature of God. Summarizing the three stories of Jesus recounted in Luke 15, the hymn “A Woman and a Coin” (#173) illustrates how God seeks after and rejoices over the lost: like a woman over a coin, a shepherd over a sheep, a father over a prodigal son. A hymn from the Philippines, “When Twilight Comes” (#195), which was carried forward from the 1990 hymnal, develops the feminine image Jesus used in his lament over Jerusalem (Matt. 23:37; Luke 13:34), likening himself to a mother hen longing to collect wayward chicks beneath protecting wings.

The closing line of “When Twilight Comes” professes that as a single family we are embraced “by a mother’s love . . . in the blessed Trinity.” Additional hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs explore feminine images for the triune God. While such images may sound fresh or even strange to our ears, they are far from new. In Presbyterian hymnals since 1955, the seventeenth-century text “Sing Praise to God Who Reigns Above” (#645) asserts that “with a mother’s tender hand” God offers guidance and comfort to God’s people. A more recent text, “Mothering God, You Gave Me Birth” (#7), draws on images from the fourteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich. Additional late-twentieth-century texts “Womb of Life and Source of Being” (#3) and “Like a Mother Who Has Borne Us” (#44) allude to passages from Hebrew Scripture in which God cries out like a

woman in labor (Isa. 42:14), chides those unmindful of “the God who gave you birth” (Deut. 32:18), and feels compassion—literally, in the Hebrew, a yearning in the womb or inner parts—for God’s children (Jer. 31:20; Ps. 103:8). A sung version of Psalm 131 voices the assurance that “As a Child Rests” (#474), so do we rest in God.

“Like a Mother Who Has Borne Us” (#44) continues in its second stanza to liken God to a father who teaches us. Other hymns make a point of including both father and mother imagery for the one in whose image we are made, both male and female (Gen. 1:27). “Bring Many Names” (#760) reverses traditional gender expectations, singing of “strong mother God” and “warm father God.” “Sign Us with Ashes” (#433) remains more conventional in its imagery, with references to the one who shields with a father’s favor and soothes with a mother’s kindness.

But it is not just in mothering imagery that a feminine aspect of God is rendered in Scripture or in hymns. Proverbs, for example, personifies wisdom as female: she who cries out to the people that they might learn righteousness (8:1), stands at God’s side in creation as a master worker (8:30), and invites all to a feast of bread and wine (9:5). Honoring the connection between images in the Old Testament and images in the new, the hymn “Come and Seek the Ways of Wisdom” (#174) connects wisdom’s voice to the Word made flesh. Still, to call holy wisdom “she” is no more to attribute literal femaleness to the godhead than to speak of the Almighty as “lord” or “king” is to ascribe literal maleness. As “A Statement on Language” by the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song clearly states: “The God who meets us so graciously and intimately in salvation history is at the same time one who is wholly other and beyond gender” (appendix 2 in *Glory to God*, p. 929).

## The Community of Faith

The PCOCS Statement on Language further reminds us that “a commitment to inclusive

language for the people of God reflects the consensus of the church” (p. 928). Once our ears have been opened to the ways in which language reflects and reinforces the norms of patriarchal culture, we can no longer sing “O Brother Man” (#474 in the 1955 *Hymnbook*) and expect women to read themselves sideways into the words. If we truly want to join the prophet Joel and the apostle Peter in encouraging our daughters to prophesy, then we must explicitly recognize their presence and participation alongside their brothers in the family of faith.

Such explicit recognition requires looking beyond a hymn’s opening words. “Brethren, We Have Met to Worship” (#396) may at first appear exclusive; however, its second stanza calls sisters as well to help—not in some conventional “helper” role (tending the sick or teaching the children’s Sunday school class), but in the universal Christian responsibility for proclamation: sharing the good news about the Savior. A version of Psalm 133 from Argentina (“O Look and Wonder,” #397) amplifies the psalmist’s original language about peace between brothers, adding a second stanza about peace between sisters. A contemporary praise and worship song opens with an exhortation, “Men of Faith, Rise Up and Sing” (#319), but continues with a second verse about women of truth. Further, the verse addressing men of faith upends conventional “macho” images of masculinity, reminding men that they are strong when they feel weak and “in [their] brokenness, complete.”

The theme of gender inclusion was well begun by the 1990 hymnal, with texts like “O God, We Bear the Imprint” (#759) and “Called as Partners in Christ’s Service” (#761) instructing us that as women and men, we are created and commis-

sioned for lives of love and reconciliation. Such themes continue in *Glory to God* with “In the Midst of New Dimensions” (#315), “Here in This Place” (#401), and “For Everyone Born” (#769), each of which speaks in its own way of the inclusiveness of God’s family as both a fact and a challenge. God has flung open the doors in invitation and set “a place at the table” for all, but we must carry forward the imperative of welcome within our own communities.

Nowhere is this welcome more clearly embodied than in baptism. In baptism, regardless of gender or ethnicity or any other human-made distinction, “You Have Put On Christ” (#491) and are welcomed into his fold (“Wonder of Wonders, Here Revealed,” #489). Therefore, we may boldly pray, “Wash, O God, Your Sons and Daughters” (#490), asking that all be filled and anointed with the Holy Spirit, empowered (as the prophet Joel proclaimed) to see visions and dream dreams.

Ultimately, we acknowledge that the waters of baptism wash away the divisions among us. We sing that “Now There Is No Male or Female” (#493). Rather, in the words of Paul in his letter to the Galatians (3:28), “All of [us] are one in Christ Jesus.”

---

*Mary Louise Bringle is Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Brevard College in Brevard, North Carolina. The winner of numerous international hymn-writing competitions, she now serves as President of the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada and chair of the new hymnal committee for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She is a member and elder at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Hendersonville, North Carolina, where she teaches an adult Sunday school class.*