

L. Juliana M. Claassens. *Mourner Mother Midwife: Reimagining God's Delivering Presence in the Old Testament*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012. 126 pages. \$25.

How do we retain God as deliverer without necessarily retaining the imagery and language of the Liberator-Warrior-God? In *Mourner Mother Midwife: Reimagining God's Delivering Presence*, L. Juliana M. Claassens leads the reader through possibilities for attending to this question, while retaining a biblical and theological account of God's presence in everyday suffering. Claassens problematizes the image of God as warrior, who delivers through destruction and violence. She argues that as we associate "Deliver God" (4) acutely with power and violence, we are shaping language and metaphors that could be, and have often proven to be, detrimental for the world of empire in which we live. Claassens acknowledges that the liberating-warrior is a dominant biblical image, while unearthing counter biblical images. As the book adeptly offers practical theological insight on the biblical text, it targets Biblicists as well as practitioners and teachers of pastoral care and worship.

In search of retaining a metaphor that is viable and meaningful to many, God as a delivering presence, Claassens recovers biblical imagery of God as Mourner, Mother, and Midwife. The book moves along a spectrum of personal and communal deliverance. The constructive moves of the final chapter demonstrate the significance of reimagining God's presence in relation to transformative teaching, pastoral care, and worship.

In chapter two, Claassens introduces God as mourner; she juxtaposes the weeping of the prophet as God in Jer 8:21–9:1 with the summoning of the weeping women (the keeners) that immediately follows in Jer 9:17-20. Both God and the women are shedding tears over the traumatic terror and bruising of exile suffered by the people of God. Both the text and Jewish tradition signify the ability to imagine powerfully God's tears as solidarity with human suffering, according to Claassens. She then traces the presence and potential of wailing being therapeutic, leading the community in lament, being prophetic, and bearing witness to loss as an inception of healing. Here, Claassens arrives at a Divine Wailing Woman, who mourns with the community.

In chapter three, Claassens presents God as Mother from the constructions of God in Deutero-Isaiah. Here, she makes the greatest turn in her argument against empire theology, while illuminating the Divine confrontation and response to empire and survivors of its destruction. Claassens' specific interest is the juxtaposition of male and female imagery of God and images of violent delivery as well as nurturing and compassionate delivery, which occur in four primary ways: 1) Liberator-Warrior/Mother in Labor (Isa 42); 2) God as Mother/Father/Potter (Isaiah 45); 3) God as Husband/Mother (Isa 49); and 4) God as Mother/Midwife (Isa 66) (60). She argues that a single metaphor fails to capture the fullness of God as deliverer and sovereign, while the presence of multiple metaphors demonstrates a theological refusal of constricting God to idolic constructions. The compassion, love, and birthing new life of Mother, meets survivors of destruction and exile, and "recodes" power as love; this is in opposition to the violent and destructive power of empire (62-64).

As the final metaphor, Claassens presents God as a delivering Midwife, in chapter four. She describes Pss 22 and 71 (with reference to Isa 66) as instances of transition from lament, suffering, and despair to trust, hope, and rebirth. The image hinges on the intimacy and trust that exists between a birthing mother and midwife at the intersections of life and death in childbirth. Similarly, God is present as deliverer when the believer is in despair. Just as the midwife does not offer a magic cure nor does God, and the believer converts despair and pleas into internal persuasion to struggle through delivery with the assistance of God. Both God and the believer

have agency in the struggle of deliverance. This imagery “reverses death and denotes an unflinching commitment to life” on the part of God and believers (68). God as Midwife calls for the community and individuals to become midwives within the struggle of confronting larger oppressive forces that cause individual pain and suffering.

Claassens biblical interpretation and demonstration of the contemporary veracity of these images in practice, leaves the reader with concrete inferences for their implementation in liturgy, preaching, and pastoral care. She advocates for directly engaging biblical texts of suffering, violence, and destruction alongside of these counter narratives, in order to attest to both the egregiousness of suffering and violence and to a God who is present and not absent from everyday struggles. While the book does not overcome gendered stereotypes in its imagery of God, it does broaden the spectrum of expansive language and imagery used for God while attending to theo-ethical implications of such language. This work is a valuable classroom and congregational resource for individuals seeking to explore expansive language and imagery in new ways as gendered and power constructions problematically co-exist with the everyday struggle to thrive in our world today.

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