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Proverbs 31: 10 – 31
The Mother of All Living

She was a superwoman, a supermom. She was wise and kind, dignified, with a sense of humor. She worked outside the home and inside. She was commanding in the marketplace and at home. She raised children and ran the household, cooked, sewed, purchased property and managed finances. She did not sleep at night and reached out to the poor, while her husband apparently had nothing to do for he sat and chatted at the gates with the wise men of the land. She is the superwoman, supermom of the Bible, perhaps the author and creator of multi-tasking. Most women, especially mothers today, would identify with her as they too multitask and handle endless responsibilities at home, at work and beyond.

Such was the approach of the book of Proverbs, a wisdom book, a compilation of moral and religious instruction given to Jewish youth by professional sages. In it Wisdom and Folly are personified as two women, or, one can argue, that women are categorized as either foolish or wise... Thank goodness wisdom is a feminine word – Hokma in Hebrew, Sophia in Greek. And this reminds me that in the scripture we find this general attitude toward women. Wise women are rare, hard to find. Most are foolish and unfaithful like Eve. Very few are wise and trustworthy like Mary. This superwoman perhaps stands as the personification of Wisdom.

I will venture to suggest that Eve and Mary carry the same classification – Eve as the foolish, Mary as the wise. They are the two most famous women/mothers in our tradition, portrayed as contradictory opposites. One is hated, the other is loved. One is accused, the other honored. One is blamed, the other revered. Eve has been the most reproached woman of all time. According to many church fathers, she alone caused humanity's "fall." Deceived by the serpent, deceiving her own husband, she doomed us all. Tertullian, (155-245 AD,) wrote about Eve--*You are the devil's gateway: the un-sealer of that forbidden tree. You are the first deserter of the divine law... You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of you even the Son of God had to die.* These are harsh words, the remnants of which can still be felt today.

Mary, on the other hand, has been the innocent, the pure, the untainted young woman who, called by God, gave birth to the Son of God. An obedient, dutiful and faithful woman she accepted her role, her calling. She was nothing like Eve. Eve was rebellious, insubordinate and defiant. Mary was compliant, dutiful and well-behaved. The traditional attitude toward Eve and Mary dichotomize them. But I think Eve and Mary have a lot in common.

Let me give you some interesting tidbits about Eve. Eve--the name means the *Mother of all Living*, tracing back to the Hindu goddess *KaliMa* whose titles was *Jaganmata* meaning, *Mother of all living*. In ancient Biblical times Eve was one of the common Middle-Eastern names for superior feminine power. To the Hittites, she was *Hawwah*, "Life." To the Persians, she was *Hvov*, "Earth." In India she was *Jiva* or *Ieva*, the Creator. Aramaeans called her *Hawah*, "Mother of All Living." In Assyrian scriptures Eve was the Mother-Womb, Creator of Destiny. In Anatolia she was *Hebat* or *Hepat*, with a Greek derivative *Hebe*, "Virgin Mother Earth." Her Tantric name was *Adita Eva*: "the Very Beginning." In northern Babylonia, she was known as "the divine Lady of

Eden.” Assyrians called her *Nin-Eveh*, “Holy Lady Eve,” after whom their capital city was named. So **Hawwah** (CHAVVAH), **Eve**, the root of her name is linked to *Haya*, an Akkadian word meaning “to make live.”

Thus the Semitic root of her name was *hay*, from which also is derived the word *serpent*. In Arabic, life is *hayat*, Eve is *hawwa'*, serpent is *alhayyah*. At that time serpents represented new life because they shed their skin and emerged renewed and reborn. This is why to this day the image of a serpent is part of physicians' emblem. In addition, the word Yahweh, *Jehovah*, traces its root to the Hebrew H-W-H, meaning both life and woman—in Latin letters, E-V-E.

There is more. Remember when Yahweh, in the second chapter of Genesis, created Eve from Adam's rib? The word *rib* in Sumerian, the language of ancient Mesopotamia, is *ti* which also means *to make live*. This explains why Yahweh God chose Adam's rib to make the woman, as opposed to a toe or an ear. Also, the man himself is created out of earth which itself is a feminine word – *adamah*, mother earth, *Adam*, in masculine form. At the time the sky was perceived male, the earth, female.

This background gets lost in the traditional interpretation of the creation stories which, as we see, have more feminine roots than has been acknowledged. Some scholars to this day do not accept this background as credible. Yet not many can argue that the ancients understood that life's source is feminine, because women gave birth and created life. The word *mother* itself has an interesting derivation – in Sanskrit *matra* and in Greek *meter*, so mother also means measurement. Mathematics is, by derivation, mother-wisdom. At that time women did temporal and spatial calculations for so long that it was thought that they could give birth because of their superior skill in measuring and figuring and keeping calendars. Now, what this says to today's theory that men are better in math than women, I don't know!

What about Mary? In early Christian, especially Eastern Orthodox traditions, Mary's title is *Mother of God*, as she is the Virgin Mother who gave birth to the Son of God. She is embraced as the protector of humanity, the mediator, the negotiator between God/heaven and the people. She is the feminine side of God, somewhat of a Queen of Heaven, a concept which traces its roots to her pagan ancestors such as Ashera, the Semitic Queen of Heaven, the mother of all, the fertility goddess, and the womb. Mary's name can be conjured in the name of Mariamne, Semitic God-Mother; in Aphrodite-Mari, the Syrian version of Ishtar; Juno, the Blessed Virgin, queen of the gods; Isis as Stella Maris, the star or the lady of the sea; Maya the oriental virgin mother of the redeemer; Moerae the Greek trinity of Fates.

It seems that because of the goddess connection, church fathers tried to eradicate any hint to the feminine in God, even though God has always been creator of all, the birth giver, the author, the beginner, the nurturer and the source of life. Therefore, in my opinion, God alone is truly the Mother of us all. And even though the Church traditionally has not upheld God as mother, sometimes I am pretty convinced that God is mother because God gets blamed for everything, just like mothers do!

How often do we hear the question – What kind of mother is she? Society rests so much responsibility on the shoulders of mothers. I wonder if the roots can be traced to ancient times when motherhood was the only recognized bond of human relationship. During the early evolution

of humanity when men's contribution to reproduction was unknown, motherhood was the only recognized bond. Giving birth, nurturing, raising children was all women's work. Such acknowledgment and responsibility still hold true in the question – What kind of mother is she?

I believe this is the question that underlies women's struggle with the issues of their role. Should she stay home and raise children? Should she work outside the home? Will she be able to do all and do it well? Eve and Mary were not so different. What kind of mothers were they? We cannot be unaware of the tragic stories of their families. Eve's children Cain and Abel fought, and one killed the other. Mary lost her son to execution by capital punishment. Today at the face of similar incidences, the question continues to be asked – What kind of mothers would raise that kind of children?

The women and mothers of the Biblical narrative who are not so different from us can really give us comfort and encouragement. They too suffered loss, were blamed for their children's behavior, struggled with infertility or troubled children, lost their children in war, accidents, famine or illness. None were perfect. Some were nurturing mothers, some were questionable; some were happy, others sad; some fertile, others infertile; super-moms, surrogate moms and not-so-super moms. And, some were invisible and unnamed such as the prodigal son's mother. Have you ever thought about her?

She makes me think about the countless nameless, invisible women around the world. Such as women who have no rights or no control over their children because their father, the male head of the household, is in charge of the family. I think of women who live with domestic abuse, those who shoulder the responsibility of raising children alone. I think of mothers who have to work several jobs to make ends meet, those who lose themselves and eventually give up.

It seems to me that women, mothers especially, need to claim our power, and our likeness of God who is the Mother of all Living. The theology and spirituality of motherhood, womanhood, even humanity, is based on this God who is Love, who gave birth to us in her image of divinity and sacredness. So each woman, as each man, carries the sacred, the divine within us, and as such we are empowered to live with courage, strength, hope and fearlessness.

Above all, human relationships are about celebration of Love. Loving relationships are often named and ritualized, they are cherished and sought. Without them our lives would be empty and meaningless. And celebration of love, no matter how imperfect, is good for the heart and spirit, and gratitude for the gift of love is always good for the soul. So today, we give thanks for love, for motherhood and children, for womanhood and families. We give thanks also for larger families – church families, human families where we can walk with one another, nurture and care for each other, striving to become circles, families of love as the children of one Mother, God alone.

Resources used:

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