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Salvation as Slavery, Marriage and Birth

Does the Metaphor Matter?

Anna Rebecca Solevåg

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.[1]

—EPH 6:5–6

Then the Kingdom of the heavens shall be likened to ten virgins. They took their torches and went out to meet the bridegroom.[2]

—MATT 25:1

Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above."

—JOHN 3:5–7

1. Unless otherwise noted, English bible translations are taken from NRSV.
2. My translation.

Introduction

In early Christian texts, there are many different images used to depict the concept of salvation. To mention only a few, salvation is described as becoming a child (Mark 10:13–16), becoming male (*Gos. Thom.* 114), winning a fight or athletic contest and receiving the crown of victory (e.g., 1 Cor 9:24–27; 1 Tim 6:12), resting (Matt 11:28–29; Rev 14:13), feeding (e.g., John 6:32–35) and putting on new clothing (e.g., Eph 4:22–24; *Acts Thom.* 111–114). Salvation is an abstract theological concept that has different nuances in different texts. It usually contains the aspect of rescue from a negative worldly condition, somewhat realized in the present life of the believer. Eternal life after death also emerges as an important element.[3] When different images are used to describe salvation, is this mere ornamentation, or do the metaphors shape the meaning of the concept? In other words, what difference does the metaphor make?

In this essay I will focus on three central salvation metaphors from the New Testament: the metaphors of slavery, marriage and birth. The imagery of *slavery* as salvation can be found in Paul's letters (e.g., Rom 6:22; 1 Cor 7:22), as well as in the parables of Jesus found in the gospels (e.g., Matt 18:23–35; Luk 12:35–48). Drawing on imagery from the Song of Songs, the metaphor of *marriage* to Christ is evident in the two wedding parables from the gospels; the parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Matt 25:1–13) and the Wedding Banquet for the King's Son (Matt 22:1–14). Paul uses the metaphor when he says to the Corinthian community in 2 Cor 11:2, "I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ." In Eph 5:22–33, the pseudo-Pauline author also compares marriage and the relationship between husband and wife to the relationship between Christ and the church. The most well known example of soteriological *birthing* imagery is arguably Jesus' words to Nicodemus in John 3, that "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above" (John 3:3). Salvation as birthing is prevalent in 1 John (e.g., 1 John 3:8–10; 4:7–10) and also appears in Titus and 1 Peter, where "rebirth" seems to be connected with baptism (Tit 3:5; 1 Pet 1:3; 23).

The conceptualization of salvation as slavery, marriage and birth appears in texts that came to be considered canonical and thus have had a long and influential reception history. These metaphors relied on a social reality of institutionalized slavery, patriarchal marriage and gendered ideas about men and women's role in conception and childbearing. This essay will explore this connection between social reality and metaphor. I will examine

3. Slusser, "Salvation," 102–25.

the kyriarchal (see definition below) framework of these images and some of their metaphorical and literal uses in early Christian texts. It is my contention that the metaphors matter. The particular soteriological imagery of slavery, marriage and birth made a profound impact on Christian theology and shaped family life for centuries to come.

The Kyriarchal Structure of Greco–Roman Society

In this essay, I will use intersectionality as a framework to structure and make sense of early Christian salvation metaphors. Intersectionality is an interdisciplinary approach at the crossroads of feminist, gender, anti-racist, postcolonial and class sensitive modes of analysis. An intersectional approach tries to identify how different vectors of domination and oppression function together, while remembering that categories sometimes overlap and that identities are complex.[4]

With a view to intersectional analysis of early Christian texts, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has coined the term *kyriarchy* and puts it forward as a useful model for interpretation. She defines the term as such: "Derived from the Greek term lord, this coinage underscores that domination is not simply a matter of patriarchal, gender-based dualism but of more comprehensive, interlocking, hierarchically ordered structures of discrimination."[5] By employing this term, Schüssler Fiorenza shows how important the role of the *kyrios/paterfamilias* is for understanding the intersecting power structures of antiquity. Following Schüssler Fiorenza's model, I argue that within the kyriarchal structure of Greco-Roman society, the groups of the household are the quintessential categories for an intersectional analysis. The *kyrios* of the household held authority over wife, slaves and children, and thus the most important differentials are those of gender (male/female), status (slave/free) and age (adult/child)/generation (parent/offspring). According to Aristotle, these three relationships together constituted household management (*oikonomia*) and represented the microcosm of society.[6] Hence, the Emperor was configured as a *paterfamilias* for all of his subordinates, "the ultimate father and lord, the *pater patriae*."[7]

The three soteriological metaphors that I will explore, slavery, marriage and birth, are each closely connected to one of the three relationships that organize the kyriarchal household: the owner-slave relationship, the

4. Kartzow, *Destabilizing the Margins*, 10.
5. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, ix.
6. Aristotle, *Pol.* 1253b.
7. Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word*, 152.

husband-wife relationship and the parent-child relationship. In a kyriarchal society, childbearing, marriage and slavery are closely intertwined. Kyriarchy is the common matrix and the concepts cannot be understood separately. For example, the institution of slavery regulated who was deemed free and thus fit to legitimately marry, and since marriage was for the purpose of procreation, childbirth in a legitimate marriage had completely different implications than childbirth by a slave. Sheila Murnaghan and Sandra R. Joshel have pointed out that to the ancient Greeks and Romans, "gender and slavery are not independent phenomena that operate in parallel ways, but intersecting variables in a process . . . whereby women and slaves are assimilated only to be distinguished, compared but never quite identified."[8] An intersectional approach helps us to keep this close connection in mind, and perhaps to ask new questions of the texts: When a text speaks of marriage, what does it implicitly say about slavery? When a text speaks about slavery, what does it implicitly say about childbearing, and so on?[9]

Metaphors Matter

The study of metaphor goes back to ancient Greece, where Plato and Aristotle, among others, brooded about its meaning and proper use. Aristotle was particularly interested in how metaphors recognized similarity and analogy.[10] Thus, according to Eva Feder Kittay, Aristotle recognized that metaphor is "a conceptual tool of much power." In their seminal book, *Metaphors we live by*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that metaphors are among our principal vehicles of meaning and that they play a central role in the construction of social and political reality.[11] More than rhetorical flourish or poetic creativity, metaphors are integral to the way we think.[12] Specifically, conceptual metaphors function as powerful cognitive tools that enable readers or listeners to think about abstract and difficult theological concepts in terms of more concrete and familiar ideas and imagery.[13] Different conceptual metaphors are often used to highlight various aspects of a given concept.[14]

8. Joshel and Murnaghan, "Introduction: Differential Equations," 3.
9. See Kartzow, "Asking the Other Question."
10. Kittay, *Metaphor*, 2–3.
11. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 159.
12. Ibid., 3–4.
13. Lundhaug, *Images of Rebirth*, 27.
14. Ibid., 27.

It is important to note that early Christian texts employ the metaphors of childbearing, slavery and marriage in a discursive context in which literal slavery, marriage and childbearing are integral parts of everyday life. It is not only the metaphorical side of slavery, marriage and childbearing that we encounter in the New Testament; we find numerous references to these social realities. For example, we read about slaves in the gospel narratives, because they were a natural component of the social fabric of first century Palestine. Similarly, we find advice on the treatment of slaves, as well as guidance on how slaves should behave, in the epistles of the New Testament. The letter to Philemon is in its entirety devoted to the issue of what to do with the (runaway?) slave Onesimus. When it comes to marriage, both Jesus, Paul and the other letter writers offer advice as well. Childbearing is a less prominent theme, but we nevertheless find it in the birth narratives of Jesus and in the curious soteriology of 1 Tim 2:15, which states that women "will be saved through childbearing."[15] In early Christian texts, then, we read about both literal and metaphorical childbearing, slavery and marriage. In this essay, I will take particular interest in the mutual interplay between theological metaphor and social reality. What shape does the social context give the theological metaphor, and how did the theologized concept shape kyriarchal family organization?

Salvation as Slavery

In the Roman Empire, slave ownership was an indispensable component of the economy and slaves were thus an inextricable aspect of the social reality. Aristotle called the slave an "animate piece of property" (ὁ δοῦλος κτῆμα, τι ἔμψυχον, *Pol,* 1253b)[16] and, as Jennifer Glancy has noted, slaves were often referred to as bodies (σῶματα), indicating the slave's instrumental function as a mere extension of the owner's body.[17] Such bodies were exempt of honor, they were bought and sold and they were vulnerable to abuse, physical punishment and sexual exploitation. It was an important characteristic of the slave in contrast to the free male that he or she could not control the boundaries of his or her own body.[18] A slave was either male or female, but the categories of man (*ἀνήρ*/*vir*) and woman (*γυνή*/*mulier*) were—in Greek as well as Latin—connected to honor, and thus conceptually incompatible

15. For a discussion of this passage as part of early Christian childbearing discourse, see Solevåg, *Birthing Salvation.*

16. My translation; Greek retreived from TLG.

17. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 10–11.

18. Ibid., 12, 25.

with the status of a slave. Female slaves were especially vulnerable to sexual violence and abuse and their labor was often reproductive. Even if they could not produce legitimate heirs, female slaves' reproductive capacity was useful, since they could regenerate the slave population and thus contribute to the increased wealth of the owner.[19]

An important source of early Christian slavery imagery is, as already noted, Paul. Although Paul was a free man, he sometimes draws on slavery imagery to describe himself (e.g., 1 Cor 9:19). He designates himself as a slave of Christ, Δοῦλος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ, at the beginning of several of his letters (see, e.g., Rom 1:1; Phil 1:1; Gal 1:10). Glancy has pointed out that Paul uses a number of tropes of slavery and freedom.[20] Some of his metaphors engage overarching narratives of enslavement, sale and manumission, but not all of his uses are commensurate with each other. Sometimes he stresses the freedom of the saved condition, other times he stresses the enslavement of the believer to God. Salvation is not only described as slavery, but also as freedom and release from enslavement, as adoption and thus becoming legitimate children and heirs (e.g., Rom 8:14–17; Galatians 4). In Rom 6:16ff, Paul uses the imagery of slavery to sin. The paradoxical condition of every believer is that s/he is both slave and free: "But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life" (Rom 6:22). In Paul's metaphorical usage of slavery discourse, to be saved is to live as free (from sin) and enslaved (to God). In a comment on this passage, Elisabeth Castelli makes two points that are interesting for our purposes. Firstly, she argues that the ways in which Paul's audience first heard and experienced these statements probably depended on their social location. This metaphor of bondage must have held different resonances for slave owners, who had not experienced the bodily suffering and profound social dislocation of slavery, than for the slave members of Christian communities.[21] Secondly, Castelli points out that even though this passage is clearly not ultimately about slavery, "it depends on the reality of slavery to convey its meanings and therefore reinscribes the relation of slavery."[22]

The metaphor of slavery was also used to draw out the meaning of salvation in the gospels. Several parables about the Kingdom of God/Heaven draw on slavery imagery, and particularly on the difference between good

19. For a discussion of the reproductive labor of slaves, see Solevåg, *Birthing Salvation*, 51–54.

20. For this and the following quotations, see Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 99.

21. Castelli, "Romans," 294.

22. Ibid.

and bad slaves, in order to extol the reward for believers (salvation and eternal bliss) and the punishment for misbehavior (eternal suffering). In the parable of the Unmerciful Servant in Matt 18:23–35, God is cast as a slave owner. He is portrayed as a kind master who forgives his slave his debt, but also as a harsh one who punishes the slave for not showing the same mercy to his fellow slave as the owner had shown him:

> Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured [παρέδωκεν αὐτὸν τοῖς βασανισταῖς] until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart. (Matt 18:32–35)

Glancy has noted that in the parables of Jesus, slaves' bodies are vulnerable to abuse—they are often beaten and even killed.[23] In this parable, the slave is handed over to torturers (βασανισταί). The background for this image may have been wealthy estate owners who would have had detention centers for recalcitrant slaves.[24]

"Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them," says Jesus in Luke 12:37. The believer who is prepared for the Son of Man's return from heaven is likened to the vigilant servant who patiently awaits his master's arrival. Eternal punishment is also likened to the just torture of misbehaving slaves in this parable (Luk 12:46). These are but two of the many parables that draw on the imagery of slavery to cast God as *kyrios*, as ruler and slave-owner, and to cast believers as his slaves (see, e.g., Matt 13:24–30; Mark 12:1–12; Luke 17:7–10).

Paul and the parables' metaphorical use of the concept of slavery is intricately connected with the social reality of slavery in the Greco-Roman world. The brutality and violence in the parables reflect the harsh reality of slave life in antiquity. This metaphorical usage also draws on negative stereotyping of slave behavior. Slaves are cast in Greco-Roman discourse as morally inferior beings, prone to steal, lie, and behave promiscuously.[25] In the parables discussed above, the underlying assumption is that slaves are naturally disposed to misbehave when the master is absent. Paul's image of slavery under sin links the idea of naturally bad slave morality with the

23. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 103.
24. Βασανιστής, BDAG.
25. Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome*, 123.

notion of sin. The exceptional "good slave" is the slave whose innermost self is completely conformed to the master's will.[26]

As noted above, Paul also confronts the issue of slavery as a lived experience within the communities to whom he writes. In 1 Cor 7:20–25, Paul gives words of advice to both free and slave members of the Corinthian community and recommends that each remain "in the condition in which you were called" (7:20). In this passage, metaphorical and literal aspects of slavery are combined. Slave believers are called "the Lord's freedmen" [ἀπελεύθερος κυρίου] and free believers are "Christ's slaves" (7:22). The interpretation of this passage is disputed. Is Paul encouraging slaves to become free or to remain in slavery? The ambiguity particularly hinges on the understanding of the phrase μᾶλλον χρῆσαι in verse 21. Should the one who was called as a slave "better make use of" his/her opportunity to become free or his/her current position as slave?[27] But perhaps some of the difficulty also derives from the profound interlocking of literal and metaphorical slavery in the passage. Paul's phrasing blurs the boundaries between slave and free here, as it does in Gal 3:26–28 when he claims that the distinctions between Jew and gentile, slave and free, male and female do not exist among believers because they are all sons of God (3:26). Slaves are sons, just as women are men and Gentiles are Jews. The question that arises from both passages is whether this is meant to be interpreted as socially disruptive speech or whether Paul is being intentionally vague.[28] I am inclined to think that Paul is negotiating the potentially counter-kyriarchal message in the early Christian kerygma of "we are all one in Christ Jesus." By upgrading the terminology and claiming that "in Christ," slaves are simultaneously free, women are men and pagans are Jews, he gives an egalitarian discursive veneer to his otherwise conservative social stance.

Harsher and more clear-cut advice is given to slaves in the household codes of Colossians, Ephesians and the Pastorals. Instructions to slaves in the Pastorals (1 Tim 6:1–2; Tit 2:9–10) are not tied into metaphorical imagery of slavery.[29] In Col 3: 22–25 and Eph 6:5–8, however, slaves are urged to

26. Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament*, 23–24.

27. See, e.g., Conzelmann et al., *1 Corinthians*, 127; Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 219.

28. The scholarly dispute about how to understand the Letter to Philemon may be another indication about Paul's vagueness when it comes to slavery. Is he arguing for the manumission of a runaway slave? Or returning a dispatched slave he has borrowed to his rightful owner? See discussions in, e.g., Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament*, 6–16; Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 91–92.

29. In these letters, however, the "household of God," modeled on the kyriarchal Greco-Roman household, is the primary metaphor for the Christian community.

surrender themselves to their owners as they submit themselves to Christ and thereby create an analogy between the will of the slaveholder and the will of Christ, the ultimate *kyrios*. In Colossians, fear of the Lord (φοβούμενοι τὸν κύριον, 3:22) who punishes the wrongdoer (3:25) is instilled. In Ephesians, slaves are called "slaves of Christ" (δοῦλοι Χριστοῦ, 6:6), mimicking Pauline usage, but also developing it. Here, it is not the free who are slaves of Christ, but the slaves themselves who are doubly so. Both *Haustafeln* invoke the heavenly Lord who watches even when earthly masters are absent (Col 3:22; Eph 6:6).

Instructions to slaves with metaphorical overtones can also be found in 1 Pet 2:18–21. In contrast to Colossians and Ephesians, 1 Peter draws a connection between slaves and Christ, rather than slaveholders and Christ.[30] The author compares slaves' endurance of unjust beatings to Christ's suffering on the cross (1 Pet 2:21). According to Glancy, "The equation between the violated bodies of slaves and the tortured body of Jesus, which underlies the advice of 1 Peter, invites Christians to align themselves not with slaveholders but with slaves."[31] Nevertheless, the message is not socially subversive, but uses Christian ethics to teach slaves to be submissive and accept unjust beatings.

As we have seen from these textual examples, early Christian slavery discourse employs both metaphorical and literal components of slavery with various social and theological outcomes. With the exception of 1 Peter, the metaphorical usage reinscribes slavery and gives the social institution theological weight.

Salvation as Marriage to Christ

The legal and social institution of marriage gave rise to a range of metaphors in early Christianity, and not only soteriologial ones. Here, I will only concern myself with the metaphor that likens salvation to marriage with Christ.

The nuptial imagery of the Song of Songs and Psalm 45 form the background for New Testament references to Christ as bridegroom/husband (e.g., Matt 9:15//Mark 2:19–20//Luke 5:34–35; John 3:29–30; 2 Cor 11:2;

30. In the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, the slave woman Felicitas is likened to Christ in her suffering, and so is Blandina in the *Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne*, another martyrdom story. These images depend on the fact of Jesus' crucifixion—a degrading form of death preserved for slaves and criminals in the Roman empire—but perhaps also draw on the description in Phil 2:7 of Jesus taking the form of a slave as he becomes a human being.

31. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 150.

Rev 19:6–9).[32] The Matthean parables about the royal wedding feast (Matt 22:1–14//Luke 14:16–24)[33] and the ten virgins (Matt 25:1–13)[34] liken the Kingdom of Heaven to a wedding and establish Christ as eschatological bridegroom.[35] The bride, however, is strangely absent from both parables. These parables play on the liminality of the wedding to cast salvation as an eschatological event—the transitional moment of consummation. Salvation is compared to a heavenly wedding feast that comes unannounced and thus calls for vigilance.

In Matt 22:1–14, many of those invited to the wedding refuse to come, causing the king to cast his circle of invitees ever wider. The violent treatment of those who refuse the invitation (22:7) or show up improperly dressed (22:13) stands in stark contrast to the exuberance and joy of the wedding feast (22:4). In Matt 25:1–13, there is a similar focus on the differentiation between those who deserve to enter the feast with the bridegroom (the five wise virgins) and those who—futilely pounding on the door—have only themselves to blame for being excluded (the foolish virgins). As noted, there is no explicit bride or wife in these parables, only servants and virgins. The theme of vigilance and good behavior overlaps with the slave parables discussed above. God is the king and master who has the power to both throw extravagant parties for those whom he chooses to invite and to punish and exclude those who misbehave.

In 2 Cor 11:2–3, Paul draws on the marriage metaphor. Here, the bride, the chaste virgin being promised to Christ, is quite explicitly the believing community, the Corinthians. Paul, the father of the Christ-believers at Corinth, fears for the bride's "virginity." He is afraid that the community has been deceived by other apostles. Paul compares them to Eve, who was deceived by the serpent. However, the imagery from the Hebrew Bible of the fornicating wife, Israel, who cheats on YHWH also seems to resonate here (see, e.g., Hosea 1–3; Jeremiah 3; Ezekiel 16; 23; and the Jezebel cycle in 1

32. The Wedding at Cana (John 2:1–11) could perhaps also be included in this list.

33. The Lukan parallel does not identify the party as a wedding feast (γάμος), but as a banquet (δεῖπνον μέγα, Luk 14:16). The host in Luke is not a king, but a householder (οἰκοδεσπότης, Luk 14:21).

34. There are no direct synoptic parallels to this parable, but Luke includes a parable involving male slaves vigilantly waiting for their master to come home from a wedding feast (Luke 12:35–38). For Luke's masculinization of the parable, see Seim, *The Double Message*, 81.

35. Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 234–35.

King 21 and 2 King 9).[36] The imagery reflects kyriarchal sexual ethics, in which the virginity of the bride is of prime importance.[37]

The most well known use of the marriage metaphor is perhaps Eph 5:22–27, and it should be noted that in this letter it is closely connected to the relations between real husbands and real wives. According to this passage, the mystery of salvation can be compared to the union of husband and wife. Just as a husband cares for his wife, the savior redeems the church (7:23). The husband-wife imagery is combined with body imagery to explicate the relationship: as the head rules the body, thus rules Christ over his church (and saves her) and the husband rules over his wife (and loves her). Earthly marriage mimics a heavenly, mysterious pattern (7:32). The passage is part of the Ephesian household code, in which wives are ordered to submit to their husbands; they must live out this metaphor in their marriages. As Turid Karlsen Seim has pointed out, the patriarchal marriage pattern is here justified christologically.[38] Again, we see the close relation between social reality and metaphor. In this case the metaphor gives added weight to the instructions about female subordination and male headship. It sanctions kyriarchal prerogative and power both within marriage and within the *ekklesia*. Seim has argued that Ephesians struggles to negotiate an early Christian ethos of "mutual submission" (cf. Eph 5:21: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ").[39] The major purpose of the Ephesian household code is, according to Seim, to explore an understanding of domination that does not violate the ideal of mutual submission and that is found "theologically acceptable provided that it is exercised according to the paradigm of Christ's love for his church."[40] The social maneuvering is similar to what I argued above concerning Paul's use of slavery metaphors: the Ephesian household code seems to negotiate a potentially egalitarian ethos, but in an ultimately conservative direction.

However, this is not the only way that the marriage metaphor functioned in early Christianity. It was also used in the discourse of sexual continence. Elisabeth Clark has noted that "the metaphor of 'celibate Bridegroom' enabled Christians simultaneously to valorize the institution of marriage while lauding (in a titillating manner) sexual continence."[41] The imagery

36. For the use of the imagery of fornication for religious infidelity, both in the Hebrew Bible and in early Christian literature, see Streete, *The Strange Woman*.

37. Cf. Joseph, who wants to break off the engagement with Mary for fear that she has become "damaged goods," Matt 1:18–25.

38. Seim, "Interfacing House and Church," 56.

39. Seim, "A Superior Minority?," esp. 174–77.

40. Ibid., 177, 80.

41. Clark, "The Celibate Bridegroom and His Virginal Brides," 1.

of Christ as bridegroom to the chaste believer held together 'marriage' and 'celibacy' ideologies in a creative tension and ensured that even a virgin was *someone's* wife.[42] In two texts from the late second and early third centuries, the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* and the *Acts of Andrew*, we also find this imagery of marriage to Christ. Perpetua is called "matrona Christi," the wife of Christ (18.2), as she enters the arena to fight the wild beasts.[43] In the *Acts of Andrew,* the Christian convert Maximilla is called to renounce sexual relations with her husband.[44] Simultaneously, Christ is called Maximilla's inner husband (ἔσω ἀνδρί, 16). Both these texts devalue marriage—the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* for the sake of martyrdom, the *Acts of Andrew* for the sake of sexual renunciation—but concurrently reconstitute it by relying upon it metaphorically.[45] These are two early examples of what would become a very popular usage of the metaphor, as Christianity turned gradually more ascetic in Late Antiquity.[46]

Salvation as Birth

In early Christian discourse, the imagery of birth was used in several different ways. Seim has shown how birthing imagery was used in apocalyptic discourse in Second Temple Judaism and the New Testament to denote the pain and affliction of the believing community, but also the eschatological transition from adversity to joy.[47] Paul draws on childbearing imagery to express his own birthing and nourishing role in relation to the communities he had founded (e.g., 1 Cor 4:15; Gal 4:19). However, to expound the idea of God's parentage and the inheritance God has in store for his heirs (i.e. salvation), Paul combines childbearing imagery with metaphor of adoption (Rom 8:12–23).[48] In this passage from Romans, salvation is simultaneously adoption and childbearing. It is, however, not God, but "creation" and "we ourselves" who are "groaning in labor pains" [συστενάζει καὶ συνωδίνει] and awaiting "the redemption of our bodies" (8:22–23).

42. Ibid., 2, 9.

43. The text in its original Latin and a translation may be found in Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 106–31.

44. The text in its original Greek and a translation may be found in MacDonald, *The Acts of Andrew and the Acts of Andrew and Matthias in the City of the Cannibals*.

45. Solevåg, *Birthing Salvation*, 251.

46. See, e.g., Brown, *The Body and Society*, 259–60; Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 360; Clark, "The Celibate Bridegroom and His Virginal Brides."

47. Seim, "Smerte og forløsning," esp. 88–92.

48. Seim, "Motherhood and the Making of Fathers in Antiquity," 107.

In the New Testament, the soteriological use of birthing imagery is most prevalent in the Johannine literature, where it seems to be less connected to a baptismal setting than in the two other New Testament texts that cast believers as reborn children of God (Tit 3:5; 1 Pet 1:3, 23).[49] In the Gospel of John and the First letter of John, birthing imagery is an important component of both Christology and soteriology. The verb γεννάω[50] with God as the agent recurs in both the gospel (e.g., 1:13; 3:3; 8:41) and in 1 John (e.g., 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1). The use of γεννάω in this way is a unique feature compared to other New Testament writings.[51] In the gospel, the special relationship between God the father, and his son, Jesus Christ, derives from Jesus' status as μονογενής, only-begotten (John 1:14; 18). Jesus is unique as the *son* of God, but believers are still the *children* of God (John 1:12), and they become so through a special birthing process. All who receive the son as the *logos* are "born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God [ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν]" (John 1:13). They are born from above (ἄνωθεν, John 3:3; 7), of water and spirit (John 3:5).

Following Adele Reinhartz, Seim has argued that John draws on ancient understandings of conception and genetics, and more specifically the Aristotelian notion of *epigenesis,* to develop his idea of birth from a heavenly father.[52] Aristotle's embryological theory claims that it is only the male that contributes form, and thus *logos* and *pneuma*, in conception.[53] The female contributes only matter: the mother is the fertile soil, the breeding ground for the fully formed, life-giving seed of the father. Aristotle argued against the Hippocratics, who believed that both males and females contributed with seed at conception, a position that Galen also supported.[54] Seim states that John uses this embryological theory to construct an omnipotent, male, birthing God and, moreover, that the mother of Jesus "does not matter because matter is what she provides."[55] Her point is that a birthing God does not necessarily possess feminine or maternal qualities. I agree with Seim—in John, God's birthing rather represents "male completion and omnipotence."[56]

49. Lieu, *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles*, 34, 38. See also Seim's discussion of baptismal language in John in Seim, "Baptismal Reflections in the Fourth Gospel."

50. Γεννάω: beget; become the father of; bear (of women), BDAG.

51. Seim, "Motherhood and the Making of Fathers in Antiquity," 107.

52. Seim, "Descent and Divine Paternity in the Gospel of John."

53. Reinhartz, "And the Word Was Begotten," 88–89.

54. Solevåg, *Birthing Salvation*, 72.

55. Seim, "Descent and Divine Paternity in the Gospel of John," 375.

56. Ibid.

Similar to their portrayal in John's gospel, believers in 1 John are born of God the father. They cannot sin, it is claimed, because God's seed (σπέρμα) dwells in them (1 John 3:9). The children of God are here juxtaposed with "the children of the devil" (τὰ τέκνα τοῦ διαβόλου, 1 John 3:10). According to Judith Lieu, this static quality of no possibility to sin, and the starkly developed dualism between the children of God and the children of the devil (1 John 3:7–10), differs from the Gospel of John, where "this birth is an option laid before the individual which demands a response."[57] The generative language of God's seed imparted in the believer seems nevertheless to resonate with the gospel's discourse and may imply that the notion of *epigenesis* also informed the theology of this letter writer.

In 1 Pet 1:3 and 1:23, the believers are reborn from God (ἀναγεννάω). Their birth is of imperishable seed (σπορά ἀφθάρτου). The term used here is not σπέρμα, the common word for human semen that is used in 1 John 3:9, but σπορά, the term used for plant seeds and thus, vegetative generation. The term is perhaps used to create a bridge to the following quote from Isa 40:6–8: "All flesh is like grass." However, the likeness between human/animal and plant regeneration is also quite clear in Aristotles' *epigenesis* theory, in that the woman acts as "fertile soil" for the generative seed/semen. The divine element in 1 Peter, the "imperishable seed," is thus clearly male, as in the Johannine literature. In 1 Peter, the writer continues to draw on the imagery of birth from God, the Father, when he refers to the believers as newborn infants (βρέφος) who should long for spiritual milk so that they can grow into salvation (1 Pet 2:2). The strong emphasis on baptism in 1 Pet 3:18–22, in which baptism is conceived of as salvation through water (1 Pet 3:20–21), makes it likely that rebirth from God in this letter's theology occurs during baptism.[58]

In the Pastorals, childbearing imagery is developed in several interesting way. Childbearing is quite literally woman's way to salvation, according to 1 Tim 2:15.[59] The childbearing discourse in the Pastorals is primarily concerned with real women bearing real children (see, e.g., 1 Tim 2:9–15; 5:14: Tit 2:3–5). In Tit 3:3–7, however, childbearing imagery is employed metaphorically to speak about salvation. Interestingly, it draws together several images from the kyriarchal matrix:

> For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, ***slaves*** to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. But when the

57. Lieu, *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles*, 37.

58. Moxnes, "Because of 'The Name of Christ,'" 609.

59. As I argue in Solevåg, *Birthing Salvation*, esp. 112–35.

> goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the ***water of rebirth*** [λουτροῦ παλιγγενεσίας] and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become ***heirs*** according to the hope of eternal life. (Tit 3:3–7)

The imagery in this passage draws on Paul's notion of "enslavement to sin" and is dependent upon the Greco-Roman assumption about slaves' bad morality. The letter argues that "the water of rebirth" has changed the believers' situation from slavery into one of heredity, of inclusion into a family as son and heir. The ritual alluded to as "the water of rebirth [λουτροῦ παλιγγενεσίας]" (Tit 3:5) is presented as a sign of the future possibility of eternal life. If this is a reference to baptism, as is commonly assumed,[60] it is an example of the early Christian notion of baptism as a second birth.[61] As in Rom 8, the imagery of birth is used here, along with images of manumission and adoption. The baptismal birth is a transition to the state of being legitimate children. In the Greco-Roman world, there was a huge difference between the childbearing of a free, married woman and that of a slave (a difference that Paul draws on in Gal 4:1–7). A wife gave birth to a legitimate heir, a slave woman to a piece of property that could be sold or dispensed with as the owner pleased. This passage draws on the kind of birthing the free, married woman does, the one that produces a legitimate child. Slavery is referred to as a previous state in this passage, and there is negative stereotyping of slave behavior as foolish and disobedient. Yet, slavery was not a previous state, but a present condition for some of the recipients of this letter, as we now from the Household Code in Tit 2:9–10. Again, we see how images of slavery, marriage and childbearing are connected to the kyriarchal matrix. Speaking of baptism as (re-)birth, the author simultaneously draws on ideas connected to slavery, inheritance and adoption.

This imagery of birth gradually became an important paradigm for the understanding of baptism in early Christianity.[62] From the middle of the second century onwards, baptism was understood as generation from mother church, thus reinstating a female element in the divine birthing process.[63] The water in the baptismal rite could, then, refer to the amniotic

60. Vegge, "Baptismal Phrases in the Deuteropauline Epistles," 553–57; Fiore, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 219–20; Dibelius and Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 148–50.

61. Vegge, "Baptismal Phrases in the Deuteropauline Epistles," 556.

62. Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, 35–36; Räisänen, *The Rise of Christian Beliefs,* 188. See also Ysebaert, *Greek Baptismal Terminology*, 130–54.

63. Jensen, "*Mater Ecclesia* and *Fons Aeterna*," 139.

fluid, the life-giving water of the womb that flows forth at birth. But, as Seim discusses, lifegiving 'water' in antiquity could just as easily be interpreted as the watery fluid that carried the lifegiving seed: semen.[64]

Conclusion

In this essay I have scrutinized three metaphors of salvation—the slavery metaphor, the marriage metaphor and the childbearing metaphor—and their close relationship with the kyriarchal structure of the Greco-Roman family. All these metaphors draw on the same social figure, *the paterfamilias/kyrios*, to represent God as simultaneously slave master, bridegroom/husband and (birthing) father. Salvation in these contexts means holding the inferior position in a relationship to this figure, as a devoted, overachieving slave who receives favors beyond her/his status; as a bride anticipating the consummation of the wedding night or a wife dutifully submitting to patriarchal authority; and finally, as a fetus in the process of being born by the heavenly father, whose parentage has entirely usurped that of the female.

Although the metaphors may seem to be distinct, they are interrelated in many ways. In the parables, virgins wait, just as slaves do, in anticipation for the Lord and bridegroom to return; the good receive their reward, the bad, eternal punishment. In Paul's rhetoric, sonship and slavery are intricately connected; at times, one becomes the other, at other times he tries to keep them apart. Childbearing imagery overlaps with slavery imagery in Rom 8:18–22, as well as in Tit 3:3–7 by way of adoption and inheritance as a metaphorical link. As soteriological metaphors that all derive from the same kyriarchal matrix, we should expect that when one is used, the others, too, can be easily invoked.

There is a certain flexibility in these metaphors. The metaphors work differently depending on the text and can be used for different purposes. Sometimes, social reality and metaphor reinforce each other. For example, in Ephesians both wives and slaves are ordered to submit to the householder and their submission is Christologically justified. In other texts, however, the metaphor is employed when the literal level is devalued, as we saw in the repurposing of childbearing in contexts of asceticism and martyrdom. The marriage metaphor, similarly, has been used to devalue marriage. Finally, in 1 Peter, slavery discourse allows for identification between the divine and the slave rather than the divine and the slaveholder.

Despite this flexibility, the widespread early Christian use of these kyriarchal metaphors had profound effects towards a preservation of kyriarchal

64. Seim, "Motherhood and the Making of Fathers in Antiquity," 115–16.

structures in family and church. The choice of kyriarchal imagery more often than not reinscribed hierarchy and gave it added theological weight.[65] Having been preserved and canonized in the New Testament, these metaphors have had an impact throughout the history of Christianity.[66]

The choice of metaphors, then, mattered. It profoundly shaped people's understanding of salvation as well as people's understanding of the proper organization of church and home. These images continue to have effects today. We can find evidence of the metaphorical connection between salvation and slavery, marriage and childbearing in our sad legacy of slavery, in discussions over gay marriage and even, as Marianne Bjelland Kartzow argues in this volume, in current debates about reproductive technology. What do we do with this troublesome legacy from the New Testament? Remembrance, critique and creativity may be three useful key words. I would like to end with a quotation from *The Double Message*. Although Seim is specifically referring to Luke's ambiguous message concerning women, I also find it fitting for the conclusion of this discussion:

> It is precisely in the remembrance of this past story that the key to critical insight and to a new evaluation and a new understanding is to be found. *Remembrance unmasks critically and it also creatively opens up people's eyes.*[67]

65. At certain points in the textual material I have discussed, it seems like the sources are concerned with a divine "reality" with similar structures to the worldly, rather than just metaphor. Seim argues that this is the case concerning the generational language in the gospel of John. Seim, "Motherhood and the Making of Fathers in Antiquity," 107. Similarly, Reinhartz argues that the Johannine understanding of the relationship between God and Jesus was that "Jesus was quite literally begotten by God." In my opinion, it is also valuable to examine the headship/marriage metaphor in Eph 5:21–33 from this perspective.

66. Line Cecilie Engh's article in this volume shows how the marriage metaphor in Eph 5 was used in twelfth-century debates about the authority of the pope.

67. My emphasis. Seim, *The Double Message: Patterns of Gender in Luke–Acts*, 260. With thanks and gratitude to a formidable Doktormutter.

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