WOMEN’S VOICES BEARING WITNESS: BIBLICAL MEMORIES IN ANCIENT ORTHODOX LITURGY

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1. Biblical Memory as Biblical Instruction

There is a famous verse in the Gospel of Matthew, at the end of the crucifixion account in chapter 27. It follows the bleak narration of Jesus’ death on the cross, and reads, “There were also many women there, looking on from afar, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.” (MT 27: 55-6, RSV)

You may remember the larger context: the disciples were missing, because they were afraid. One (Judas) had betrayed his Lord, another (Peter) had denied him, and another would soon doubt the Resurrection (Thomas, according to the Gospel of John). But the women were there at the cross, and would soon be there at the tomb; they would be the first to see their Risen Lord, and the first to proclaim the glad tidings of his Resurrection — to the male disciples, who at first refused to believe them. Matthew’s verse sums up much of the stark contrast we find in the New Testament gospels between the presentation of men and women believers. The men fail their Lord repeatedly, but for the most part find their way and emerge from the biblical pages triumphant — reformed, redeemed and victorious in their apostolic witness. We know their names. We sometimes know their stories.

By contrast, the women consistently and repeatedly bear steadfast witness to their Lord and Savior. They understand when others do not; they persevere despite all obstacles. Like the male disciples, they, too, leave their families and
homes to travel and accompany Jesus on his ministry. Yet, even when afraid they do not hide. They stay, bearing witness first during the ministry of Christ, then at his death, and finally in the glory of the Resurrection. Matthew tells us “there were many women.” Like the other gospel writers, he identifies only a few, and rarely by name. I have often wondered: who were these women bearing witness? What were their stories?

There came a moment in ancient Christian history when it seems the church, too, became interested in biblical women — not only those of the Gospels, but of both the Old and New Testaments. Between the fourth and sixth centuries (roughly the period we call “late antiquity”) in the eastern Mediterranean world, a striking prominence was granted to biblical women in Christian teaching. This attention was often rhetorically crafted and ritually expressed in the poetry of liturgy, both metrical verse homilies and hymns of diverse types. The interest seemed to flourish especially in the hands (and voices!) of Greek and Syriac-speaking Christians, the two traditions I will consider today.

Late antique homilies and hymns present a number of biblical women as favored exemplars of faith. Sarah the wife of Abraham, Tamar the daughter-in-law of Judah, Potiphar’s Wife, Rahab the prostitute of Jericho, Jephthath’s Daughter, Ruth the Moabite, the Widow of Sarepta, the Shunnamite Woman; the Virgin Mary, the Sinful Woman of Luke 7, the Canaanite Woman, the Hemorrhaging Woman, the Samaritan Woman, and others are explored through a variety of exegetical techniques. Most often, these take the form of imaginative narrative expansions of the biblical text presented in hymns and sermons by different participants in the worship service. Clergy, deacons, male and/or female choirs, and congregations all intoned, chanted or sang in praise of women of the Bible to the larger late antique Christian community as a means of doctrinal instruction.

Several things make these occurrences important for women in the history of Orthodox Christianity. First, in the Bible itself — as in the passage I cited from Matthew’s gospel — women are sometimes mentioned, but usually only in pass-
ing. Often they are unnamed. Yet in late antique hymns and homilies, these same women were sometimes set at center stage. The stories were sometimes told as if from their perspective, and even in their (imagined) voices — with the words people thought they might have said. What made these women important to late antique Christians? Why did they matter?

Second, the literary forms and ritual performance of these stories were not arbitrary. Hymns and verse homilies were forms of poetry: heightened speech, not the ordinary ways of speaking one heard in normal conversation. Further, they were specifically written for liturgical presentation: to be chanted, intoned and sung in the sacred space of worship, and particularly in the civic church building where the entire community of faithful came together. How they were presented, and by whom, were matters that affected their meaning. By these special words (liturgical poetry) and in the special space of liturgy (the church building or shrine), women’s stories were rendered not only important, but sacred. At the same time, they were also removed from the ordinary places of people’s daily lives. What meaning did such presentations add to the stories of these women?

The interest in biblical characters of all sorts as subjects for liturgical focus occurred at a particular moment in Christianity’s development. The Emperor Constantine had legalized Christianity in 312 and also explicitly favored it, showering Christians and their churches with political, economic and social benefits of astounding scale. These policies continued under his successors. By the end of the fourth century, Christianity had been declared the state religion of the Roman Empire — an empire extending from Britain to Persia, both north and south along the Mediterranean Sea.

Church historians love to speak of this era as that of Christianity’s “triumph,” but the reality was rather messy. In a matter of decades, Christians grew from a tiny and persecuted sect to wholly dominating their society. Converts flooded into churches. Church leadership scrambled (with considerable imperial help) to stabilize and standardize biblical canon, confessional creed, sacramental practices
and liturgical order. Above all, they scrambled to educate. Christians needed to know their scriptures, and they needed to understand right doctrine.

In this context, the liturgy became, quite literally, the church’s school. In cities, towns and villages, Christians gathered daily for morning and evening prayers, and for the Eucharistic liturgy on Sundays. Late antiquity brought the elaboration of this basic pattern with the establishment of feast days to commemorate martyrs and saints and, gradually, the formalizing of the great feasts of the Christian year — not only Easter but also Christmas, and eventually other celebrations of the life of Christ, of the Virgin Mary and of the Church. Vigil services through the night, processions to fill the civic streets, devotional readings and recollections at shrines or tombs — all provided occasions for instruction. Indeed, one of the strongest characteristics of late antique liturgy was precisely its pedagogical focus (in other centuries, that focus would change).

Late antique homilies and hymns were designed as vehicles for this instruction. In an age when few could or would have owned a Bible, liturgy was the place where the majority of people gained their biblical knowledge. Scripture readings were dotted throughout the worship services. Biblical imagery filled the hymns, while biblical characters and stories were displayed throughout church buildings in frescoes, mosaics and icons. Preachers used their homilies to explicate these references, to retell the stories and to explain the readings. The very structure of liturgical ritual was used to instill biblical awareness. Rarely, then, was the Bible itself, as a text, the object of study or even scrutiny for most Christians. Instead, homilists and hymn writers cultivated a sense of “biblical memory,” by which people learned their Bible as the Christian story of salvation. This means, of course, that they learned the Bible in an interpreted form. The attention given to biblical women was part and parcel of this larger educational enterprise.

Today I would like to consider the presentation of biblical women in two Orthodox poetic traditions, Syriac and Greek, with particular attention to St. Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373) and St. Romanos the Melodist (fl. 540s). I hope you will
forgive me if I linger a bit longer on the Syriac, because it is often less familiar to audiences than the Greek.

2. THE SYRIAC TRADITION

Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic, the language that Jesus spoke. From a local dialect spoken in the region of Edessa (now Urfa in southeastern Turkey), Syriac grew during the first two Christian centuries to become a major Christian language of the Middle East. It remains a living and vibrant language to this day.

Ancient Syriac is famous for its rich tradition of liturgical poetry and the varied modes of its ritual performance. The madrashe were doctrinal hymns of varying meters. An example is Ephrem’s Hymns on the Nativity, in which Ephrem often presents the Virgin Mary speaking — or rather, singing! — about the extraordinary wonders that accompanied Christ’s birth. As with many of Ephrem’s hymns, these were sung by women’s choirs and thus seemed to represent Mary’s own presence within the church. Some madrashe were structured into stanzas, punctuated by a repeated refrain. The male chanter (Ephrem) may have sung the stanzas, and the women’s choir the refrain, or the choir may have sung the stanzas and the congregation the refrain.

Madrashe took various forms, with an array of performative arrangements by choirs, congregation, chanters and clergy, in different patterns of vocal exchange. A favorite form was the Soghitha, the dialogue hymn, sung antiphonally by male and female choirs. These hymns often presented a biblical story through an imagined dialogue between two characters, such as Sarah and Abraham, or Mary and the Archangel Gabriel or Joseph, or the Sinful Woman and Satan. In these cases, the woman’s voice was sung by the women’s choir. The dialogue always revolved around a conflict or disagreement that required resolution; the alter-
nating male and female choirs added an element of performative drama, as the competing figures argued their respective positions. For example, Gabriel argued to convince Mary that his promise of miraculous conception was God-sent and genuine; or, in other hymns, Mary argued with Joseph that her claims to virginity were true despite her pregnancy.

The other major Syriac poetic form was the verse homily, the *mimra*. This was a prose-like explication intoned in metered couplets (usually 7+7 or 12+12). It was intoned or chanted by its male presenter (bishop, priest or deacon). If the homily included imagined speech or dialogue, such presentation changed the quality of how it would have sounded. In the case of Jacob of Serug’s homilies on the Virgin Mary, for example, these included long passages of Mary’s imagined speech, but presented through the intoned voice of the male homilist (who might also, as Jacob did, provide much framing comment about that imagined speech).

Although these poetic forms have often been likened to drama, we must keep in mind that this storytelling had its own purpose. These were highly stylized presentations — forms, in fact, of exegesis. The biblical characters were often represented through stereotypes, caricatures and stock figures; or they might function as personifications of roles or positions. The pure virgin, the seductive sinner, the righteous wife, the penitent harlot, the resourceful widow, the vulnerable child: all were familiar types used to represent the persons of biblical stories. This did not preclude powerful artistry on the part of the poets. Tragic elements of fear, dread, horror, recognition and catharsis could be employed with profound and lyrical skill. Humor, cunning, playfulness, even a kind of brash sassiness could attend dialogic exchange, even of the most stylized form. By such means, Syriac poets rendered biblical women in memorable terms, for invariably (and in contrast to Greek and Latin traditions on the same characters) the women were portrayed as the heroes in these tellings, while the men were drawn as obstinate obstacles to faith. The figures of biblical men would be used to demonstrate the limits of reason. Whether Abraham, Joseph or Simon the Pharisee, these men were portrayed as pedantic and literal-minded, burdened by the deaden-
ing weight of habit. In stark contrast, the female characters through women’s voices sang the radiant power of faith: refusing every obstacle, prevailing over every assault, gloriously steadfast in devotion to their Lord. (The message here, of course, carried the familiar sense that if even weak, feeble, frail women could prevail, how much more could the men if they chose…!)

As poetry, these hymns and homilies must be analyzed with consideration of their literary forms and techniques. Yet I would argue that it is also critical to consider the performative requirements of the composer’s chosen form, and how performance would have shaped presentation. How a biblical story was told, or how the dialogues were imagined, were aspects qualitatively changed by who was speaking, from what narrative perspective, in what ritual context, and with what performative features. The authority of the presentation could be heightened or diminished depending on whose voice presented it: the voice of the biblical character (male or female); that of the narrator, whether literary or performative; or that of the office through which it was spoken (priest, chanter, choir male or female, or congregation). Gendered voices sang these stories in worship services. This element was indelibly part of the interpretation such poetry presented.

Women’s choirs were a tradition in many respects distinctive to Syriac Christianity. Our evidence indicates that women’s choirs were liturgically significant in Syriac churches by the middle of the fourth century, when St. Ephrem mentions their singing. A century earlier in the 260s, women’s choirs in Antioch under the bishop Paul of Samosata had been considered scandalous. But Ephrem’s choirs were viewed differently. By the fifth century Syriac church canons (both western, in the Roman Empire, and eastern, in Persia) mandated the participation of women’s choirs in Syriac-speaking civic churches in all villages, towns and cities. Yet, Greek churches of the same period apparently disallowed women’s choirs, except in women’s monastic communities. There is much evidence that Greek women participated in congregational singing (as opposed to choirs), and that choirs of Greek nuns sometimes participated in public religious celebrations by singing Psalms. But Christian leaders as diverse as Cyril of Jerusalem in the
mid-fourth century or Isidore of Pelusium in Egypt at the turn of the fifth century periodically admonished that women should not even join in the congregational hymns, citing the New Testament passages that exhort women to keep silence in church (1 COR. 14. 33-5; 1 TIM 2. 11-12). The chronically caustic Latin scholar Jerome firmly agreed. But in Syriac tradition, women’s choirs were considered essential for the liturgy. Indeed, they continue in Syriac churches even now.

Syriac women’s choirs first became important at the very moment that Christianity in the Roman Empire was standardizing its structures in the wake of legalization. This was also a time when Christian women found themselves increasingly marginalized by the church institution, as their few authoritative or public religious roles became more tightly restricted. Late antiquity was the time when the offices of widows and deaconesses gradually disappeared, and when consecrated virgins were increasingly cloistered in convents rather than living with their families. In Syriac churches, these changes came more slowly than in their Greek and Latin counterparts, in part because of the women’s choirs. Ancient Syriac choirs consisted of consecrated men and women called Sons and Daughters of the Covenant (Bnay and Bnat Qyama), an office perhaps lasting until the tenth century. Under simple vows of poverty and celibacy, they were consecrated to assist the bishop in the civic work of the church. Their office did not replicate the work of deacons or deaconesses, nor were they displaced by the rise of monasticism. Their work took place in the public activities of church life, and notably, in civic worship. By the early fifth century, Syriac church canons specify that the most important work of the Daughters of the Covenant was to sing in various church services the doctrinal hymns, for the proper instruction of men and women gathered in public worship.

This is perhaps the most startling aspect of the Syriac women’s choirs. The hymns assigned to these choirs were explicitly doctrinal, addressing the same topics that occurred elsewhere in the great canonical manuals of the time (e.g., Didascalia, ch. 15) expressly forbidden for women to teach. Hence the practice of Syriac women’s choirs immediately brings to the forefront issues of gender,
authority and social control in the church. At the same time, these choirs show us one way that those tensions could be collectively negotiated. Scholars have given much attention to the capacity of holy women in late antiquity to attain high levels of spiritual authority among the general populace, and to serve as spiritual teachers and counselors. Yet their authority rested on a pattern of direct, even personal instruction by a mentor to a devotee. The teaching performed by the Syriac women’s choirs differed substantially from this model, both in kind and in nature. Their teaching communicated the collectively identified corporate doctrines of the Church, not the revealed wisdom of a holy individual. Further, they sang their hymns in the most accessible and inclusive context of the ancient church: that of the civic parish. How did these choirs contribute to the remembrance of biblical women?

Allow me to focus briefly on Ephrem’s Nativity Hymns, which he composed to be sung at the night vigil served in anticipation of the Nativity feast. In these hymns, Ephrem sings at length about the Virgin Mary. He presents Mary as the object of attention and the focus of liturgical veneration. But further, he presents her as a participant in the very event to which these hymns contribute: that of collective worship. Interestingly, Ephrem’s style here is quite unusual for Syriac tradition, for he does not portray Mary in active dialogue with other biblical characters. Generally in the dialogue hymns or the metrical homilies, Mary converses and debates with others: the archangel Gabriel, her husband Joseph, the Magi who visit the newborn Christ, or the Gardener at the empty tomb who turns out to be her risen Son. Instead, Ephrem presents Mary as a singer whose voice (sung by women’s choirs) cuts across time to join the congregation in raising songs of praise to God. That is, these hymns celebrate Mary as part of the biblical past, when the story of Jesus’ birth took place. But sometimes they also show her joining her voice to that of the choir in the liturgy of the Nativity vigil, in the sacred present of liturgical time.

In these hymns, Ephrem reflects on women’s part in the entire swath of biblical history. From Eve’s tragic silencing at the Fall to Mary’s song, Ephrem reminds
the congregation that women’s words have woven the very fabric of God’s salvific plan. Consider the righteous women of the Old Testament, he sings. With songs and lullabies he recalls, with tears, vows, voiced and silent prayers, women called upon their Lord in shadowed types of the exalted role that awaited Mary’s consent. Sarah sang lullabies to Isaac; Rachel cried to her husband; Hannah with bitter sobs prayed for a child; Rebekah and Elizabeth made their vows through long years of barrenness (H NAT 8. 13-15). Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah sang their lullabies with “soft words” (H NAT 10. 1); the Hebrew daughters sang the laments of Jeremiah as they intoned biblical lullabies (H NAT 13. 1). By contrast and with greater faith than these, Ephrem admonishes, Mary began with silence: “Blessed is Mary, who without vows/ and without prayer, in her virginity/ conceived and brought forth the Lord of all” (H NAT 8. 16). From the silence of her perfection then sounded a song unlike any sung before. In Ephrem’s hymns, Mary sings a new song: “Since I have learned by You/ A new way of conceiving, let my mouth learn by You/ A new [way of] giving birth to new glory” (H NAT. 15. 4-5).

Ephrem grants Mary a prophetic voice, one that declares God’s intention in the presence of God’s people. Her words of prophetic truth ring out amidst the gathered congregation of the believing community. There in the public space of the civic church where the faithful gathered, Ephrem’s hymns show Mary’s song unmasking the falsehoods of convention. Her words reveal truth, about us no less than God. Remembering the gospel story but also interpreting it, Ephrem imagines Mary as young, female and poor, from a place of no account (Bethlehem): a “needy girl” from “a small town” (H NAT 25. 12). When Ephrem gives Mary voice, the social context beyond the church doors looms into view. Suddenly, those normally disregarded by society are championed by Mary, Full of Grace. In the choir’s voice, Mary sings to her newborn Son:

All the chaste daughters of the Hebrews
And virgin daughters of rulers
Are amazed at me. Because of You, a daughter of the poor
Is envied. Because of You, a daughter of the weak
Mary’s identity as poor human mother of the divine Son shatters the illusory stability of a moral universe known through familiar social order. Ephrem the hymnographer addresses the Christ child triumphantly, “The womb of Your mother overthrew the orders” (H Nat. 11. 7). Ephrem’s hymns draw Mary’s voice across biblical history and into the present gathering of the church community. The biblical past is suddenly rendered present and active in the lives of the singer’s congregation.

Ephrem’s Hymns on the Nativity, like most hymns, do not tell a narrative story. Rather, they presume the familiar narratives of the gospel nativity accounts. Yet they do not follow those accounts in the rendering of Mary’s voice. Instead, they locate her speech in unidentified moments of the larger story. Their content does not contribute to the narrative gaps of the gospels. In a different but related task, these verses engage the work of interweaving Old and New Testaments, biblical with historical time, providing an exegesis that sets the Nativity and its characters typologically within scripture as a whole. Mary’s voice weaves together, with Ephrem’s own voice, an understanding of biblical narrative as the emergence of Christian history. Mary’s voice is thus a teaching voice, instructing the faithful in right doctrine.

By this means, the voice Ephrem grants to Mary becomes double-edged. He may use Mary’s voice to challenge social complacency, and also to remind the congregation that women are fully part of — and essential for — God’s salvific plan. But these hymns remain safely within the ritual structure of the church — a structure that supported and sustained the Christian community as a viably constituted social body. Within the sphere of sacred ritual, the constraints of
civic patriarchal order could be critiqued through the challenge from the example of women’s voices. But that order was also upheld, by women’s redefinition as the instruments of divine dispensation. The social order was reinscribed as the church’s liturgy played out in its ordered ranks: bishops, priests, deacons, choirs male and female, and the laity, all in their right places.

3. THE GREEKS

Late antique Greek liturgical poets, both homilists and hymnographers, also chose to explore this territory with exquisite artistry, and in a variety of literary forms. For reasons of time, I will focus briefly only on the kontakia of Romanos the Melodist. These offer fitting counterpart to the Syriac liturgical poems, and not by chance. Apparently of Syrian birth himself, Romanos would have grown up with Syriac hymns ringing in his ears. Indeed, aspects of his literary form, poetic techniques, exegetical themes and interpretive strategies all bear strong associations with Syriac tradition and especially the hymns of Ephrem.

Romanos’ hymns were composed in effect as sung sermons, performed in the vigil services to expound upon the lectionary readings. The male chanter (Romanos himself) intoned the verses, with the strophes punctuated by a short, repeated response, sung by the choir or perhaps the congregation and choir combined. The hymns presented narrative retelling of a biblical story expressed in the form of lively dialogic exchange between main characters, for the most part people of the biblical text but sometimes additional dramatic characters (for example, Satan, Hades or Death in the hymns on the resurrection). Sometimes the characters were drawn from stories of widely separate narrative time, as when Eve and Adam converse with Mary at the Nativity.
But the contrast to Syriac tradition is sharp when it came to performance. For the male chanter voiced every character, male or female. At the end of each verse, the choir and congregation responded with a simple, short refrain. The responsorial dynamic of the sung refrain — the give and take between congregation, choir and chanter — did not coincide with the dramatic interaction between biblical characters. Rather, it provided a dimension of ritual intersection and exchange amidst, or within, the drama played out through the chanter’s sequential presentation of the dialogue’s voices. The chanter’s voice inhabited each character of the drama in turn, drawing the congregation’s awareness into the subjectivity of each. The short refrain repeated throughout drew every participant into first person identification with the story, its drama, and each of its characters. Neither the gender of the singing voice nor the liturgical place of those singing matched the story in dramatic fashion. Instead, led by the chanter, every member of the congregation joined into every persona and role offered in the kontakion.

I take two examples for our purposes today. The first is Romanos’ Second Hymn on the Nativity (less famous than his first, which is the stuff of legends; but no less profound in its theological and poetic crafting). Here the hymn begins with Mary’s exultant lullaby to her newborn child. She declares the astonishing event of the incarnation, even as she realizes what her own reality has become:

\begin{quote}
Thou, my fruit, my life,
   By whom I am known as I am and was. Thou art my God,
As I behold the seal of my virginity unbroken,
   I proclaim Thee the immutable Word become Flesh.
For I rule over the world,
   Since, bearing Thy power in my womb, I am sovereign of all.
Now rejoice with me Heaven and earth,
   For I carry your creator in my arms.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
...I heard myself called “Mary, Full of Grace.” (STR. 1-2)
\end{quote}
As Mary’s song unfolds, her voice awakens Eve, slumbering amongst the dead. Wonderstruck, Eve sings, “A virgin has given birth to the Redemption of the Curse/ Who has caused this hoped-for news to ring out in my ears?/Her voice alone has released me from my torment.” (STR. 3) At once, Eve sets to rousing her sleeping husband Adam.

But Adam has also been wakened by Mary’s voice. When he hears his wife’s call, he recoils in horror. Sweet is the song, he admits, but not to be trusted. Having once been led astray by a woman’s words, he will not easily succumb again. Eve is exasperated by her husband’s lack of comprehension, even as she perceives life awakening every sense of her being. She sings to Adam,

Be fully assured, my husband, by the words of your wife;
For you will not find me again giving you bitter advice.
For the ancient things have passed away,
And Christ, the son of Mary, brings to light all things new.
Catch the scent of this fresh smell, and at once burst into new life.
Come, follow me to Mary… (STR. 6)

The hymn proceeds by a lyrical reversal of the Genesis story of the Fall. Where once Eve’s senses had led her away from God (the sound of the serpent’s words; the sweet sight and taste of the fruit), now they lead her directly to God’s own self (the sound of Mary’s song, the scent of new life, the sight of her savior newborn). Eve’s comprehension of what this means is immediate, even as Adam’s is slow, unwilling and uncomprehending. (Indeed, Eve laments to Mary that she has had to endure Adam’s complaints, reproaches and insults throughout the centuries until this moment!) It is Eve’s forceful and faithful insistence that brings the couple in supplication to Mary’s feet, Eve’s strength that has roused them from their demise. Moved to pity by their eloquent pleas, Mary in her turn supplicates her son in their behalf. “My son, since Thou hast exalted me through Thy condescension,/ my poor race, through me, now beseeches Thee.” (STR. 12).
The hymn turns to a dialogue between Mary and Christ, the babe in swaddling clothes who is also “creator of the universe,” “creator of all languages.” Speaking outside of time, Christ reveals to Mary the salvific events still to come, the Passion by which he will save the human race, and summons her to “announce these things to all.” (STR. 18). And so Mary turns back to Adam and Eve with words of comfort and compassion, urging their patience as God’s plan unfolds. The hymn is remarkable for its presentation of both Eve and Mary. They are women of wisdom, of powerful words: words to bring death or life, destruction or salvation — a characterization offered as much of Eve as it is of Mary.

In his sixth hymn on the Resurrection, Romanos focuses on the myrrh-bearing women at the tomb, with Mary Magdalene as their leader. A sequence of encounters and dialogues follows. In the narrative Romanos laces through the strophes, the women come bearing their spices, taking upon themselves the role of the Magi at the Nativity. Arriving, they find a death more like birth, for the tomb is empty and a new life has begun. “Full of wisdom,” as Romanos calls them (STR. 3), they send Mary Magdalene to proclaim the news to the disciples.

The singer then turns his voice to the disciples, who hear Mary’s words but do not believe; who speak in dialogue to one another in their confusion, and who do not find their Lord in the empty tomb. Again Mary sings out, offering wisdom and courage to the men: “Be patient, do not lose heart./ For what has happened was a dispensation,/ so that women, as those who were first to fall,/ might be the first to see the risen One.” (STR. 6) Then, standing alone at the tomb, Mary becomes the Sinful Woman, longing to behold her Lord that she might bathe with her tears “not only [his] feet, but truly [his] whole body.”

As Mary’s words recall the ministry of Christ, he himself responds in compassion. Now in dialogic exchange, Savior and devotee call to one another, singing the news of resurrection, until Christ pronounces this charge to her:
Now, woman, let your tongue proclaim these things
and explain them to the sons of the Kingdom,
to those who await the rising of me, the Living.
Hurry, Mary, and assemble my disciples.
I am using you as a loud-sounding trumpet.
Sound peace to the terrified ears of my friends in hiding.
Rouse them all as if from a sleep… (STR. 12)

Next the chanter turns Mary back to the women at the tomb. First she proclaims her news, laced with the types and images of Old Testament prophecy; thus we have the whole of biblical narrative, retold by Mary Magdalene as contained in the moment of her declaration. And what a declaration! Mary has “been glorified as Moses,” but she has seen more than he on Mount Sinai; she is the dove carrying the olive branch to the descendents of Noah. In reply, the women — now called a choir! — begin to sing that her words are true, her teaching correct. Having sung their hymn, the women join in dialogue with the angel sitting on the stone rolled back from the tomb. Now the singer chants the angels words, “You are not to be afraid [O women]; but these guards here,/ they will shudder, they will tremble and become like dead men… Be immortal, then, O women; do not be like the dead.” (STR. 19, 20)

At last Romanos turns the women once more away from the tomb, to fellowship with the disciples. “Why are you downcast?,” they sing. “Why do you hide your faces?/ Let your hearts be on high, Christ has risen./ Form your choirs and say with us: The Lord has arisen.” (STR. 22). As the voices of the women join in narrated song with the men, Romanos joins the chanter’s voice with that of choir and congregation, voices past and present, sacred and mundane, to sing the resurrection hymn. His final strophe is a prayer, offered in his own voice as one and the same with that of the ecclesial body:

My Father, holy and compassionate,
May Your name be ever hallowed
by my mouth and by my lips,
by my voice and by my song.
Give me grace as I proclaim Your hymns, for You can do so,
who grant resurrection to the fallen. (STR. 24)

I find it hard not to hear echoes of the Syriac women’s choirs — such as Roma-
nos would have heard in his youth — woven into this resurrection hymn. The
singing of the women in chorus, the dialogic — even antiphonal — exchanges
between Mary, the women, the disciples and Christ, in varying patterns of inter-
action, all in song, recall the liturgical arrangements of Syriac civic churches,
even as they are cast by Romanos to reflect and join in the Resurrection vigil of
Constantinople’s congregations. Moreover, the prominent role granted to the
women, as we saw also in his Nativity hymn, offers again a striking emphasis
on the women as figures of courage, strength and grace. Their words teach: their
speech reveals plainly what the words of men confuse or misunderstand. The
words of biblical women bring divine action into human reality.

Unlike the Syriac hymns, those of Romanos were not chanted by women. Yet he,
too, has presented these biblical voices in such a way that the church is reminded
dramatically and profoundly of women’s crucial participation in God’s saving
plan for humankind. Remembering and imagining the voices of biblical women
provides a powerful means to this end.

And in fact, the voices of male clergy and chanters were not the whole story for
biblical women in Greek tradition. In subsequent centuries, Byzantine monastic
life flourished for both women and men (differently than for Syriac-speaking
Christians, for whom Islamic rule brought an end to women’s monasticism until
relatively recently). In their convents, Byzantine women nurtured a rich liturgi-
cal life joined with a notable intellectual tradition of learning and study. Our
evidence is appallingly scarce, but the shreds that survive are telling. Whereas
in Syriac, no known text of any kind authored by a woman survives to us until
modern times, Greek tradition preserves the memory of women hymnographers.
Only four are known by name: Thekla, Theodosia, and Kassia in the ninth century, and (five hundred years later) Palaiologina in the fourteenth. No writings of this last one survive at all, and only small portions of Thekla and Theodosia are extant. Of Kassia, renowned as one of the greatest of Byzantine hymnographers, there appear to survive forty-nine hymns, twenty-three of which are preserved in liturgical books, albeit sometimes wrongly ascribed to men.10

Enough of Kassia’s work remains for us to recognize her exquisite skill as poet and musician. As with the other Byzantine women hymnographers, Kassia’s compositions would have been sung first — and perhaps only — by women’s choirs, the nuns of her convent. But there is something appropriate — poignantly so — in the fact that one of her hymns continues to be cherished and sung to this day in Orthodox churches of Byzantine tradition. This is the hymn Kassia set in the voice of the Sinful Woman who approached Christ in repentance to wash his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair. Imagining her as she joins the other myrrh-bearing women enroute to the tomb of her crucified Lord, Kassia weaves a hymn of brief yet haunting power, sung at the matins service for Holy Wednesday (that is, on Tuesday night of Holy Week). The verses render the staggering weight of a mourning that assumes the burden of all humanity’s sins. With lyrical, luminous beauty, the Woman’s confession of sin is transfigured into radiant confession of Christ’s divinity and the salvation it renders. It is a singular moment in the Orthodox liturgical year, and it is called still by its composer’s name, the Kassiane.

As with the women of Matthew’s gospel verse, we do not know the name of the Sinful Woman, although her story is among the best known and most beloved of Christian tradition. In Kassia’s hymn, she becomes every human person at the moment of reckoning, a visceral self-examination received in the infinite compassion of divine mercy. Other biblical figures hold open a similar image: the Prodigal Son, the Penitent Thief on the Cross. Yet, as late antique homilies and hymn writers often remarked, no symbol portrayed the universal human condition so piercingly as the Sinful Woman — whose gender was invariably seen as indelibly crucial to her meaning.
The Gospel of Matthew reminds us that there were also many women in the story of God’s work. It is worth considering how and why biblical women have been remembered in Christian tradition, who has voiced their memories, and what is learned each time women’s voices are heard in the liturgical practices of Christian tradition. Biblical stories mark women’s presence and women’s absences in Christian sacred narrative, acknowledging their witness while constraining their impact. For these same remembrances mark the presence and absence of real women in Christian history, who often remain unnamed in our history books. From the sung memory of biblical women, we have much to learn about how ritual forms and defines communities, as well as whose voices matter, when, and why.


Jerome, *Dialog contra pel.*, 1, 25.

See Harvey, “Spoken Words, Voiced Silence.”


Compare Luke 1. 46-55. Ephrem has Mary present salvation history in like manner, recalling the scandalous women of Jesus’ genealogy (Matthew 1. 1-16: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba) as women who reversed the social order: H Nat 9. 7-14. See also H Nat 16. 16.


