



Newborn Babies and Nursing Jesus (1 Peter 2:2-3):

The Petrine Metaphor's Disruption of Patriarchal Renderings of God and the Child

Sally Douglas

Abstract

In 1 Peter 2 the author utilizes a curious metaphor: “Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good” (2:2-3). When this metaphor is disentangled from Pauline and patriarchal assumptions, it can be recognized on its own terms. This article demonstrates that here, despite repetitive obfuscation, the author invites Jesus communities to imagine themselves as newborn babies who nurse from Christ Jesus. Significant implications unfold from this first-century metaphor. While stubbornly resisted for centuries, the implications of the biblical metaphor of nursing from Jesus continue to flow with provocative challenge and sustenance.

Key words: Breastfeeding, Christ, babies, female divine, patriarchy, Wisdom christology, child, prayer

The author of 1 Peter invites Jesus communities to recast their own situation of increasing harassment within a larger cosmic frame. With Christ Jesus, who has suffered (4:1; 5:1), at the center of their existence (1:13), the author deftly weaves their current situation within a conceptual reality that stretches back “before the foundation of the world” (1:20) and forwards towards “the end of all things [which is] near” (4:7). Within this setting, in which people concurrently experience hostility and salvation, both on account of Christ Jesus, the author of 1 Peter chooses to employ a curious metaphor. It is one that has received limited attention. In 1 Peter 2 the author implores: “Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good” (2:2-3). When this metaphor is disentangled from Pauline and patriarchal assumptions, it can be recognized on its own terms. This article excavates

the biblical, christological, and contextual evidence, and demonstrates that here, despite repetitive obfuscation, the author invites Jesus communities to imagine themselves as newborn babies who nurse from Christ Jesus. Significant implications flow from this first-century metaphor. First, androcentric constructions of the Christian God are destabilized. Secondly, the Petrine metaphor provides access into a sublimated dimension

Sally Douglas, Ph.D. (Pilgrim Theological College, University of Divinity, Melbourne) an Honorary Research Associate and Adjunct Lecturer at Pilgrim Theological College, University of Divinity, 29 College Circle, Parkville VIC 2052, Australia; email sally.douglas@pilgrim.edu.au. Her forthcoming book *Jesus Sophia: Returning to Woman Wisdom in the Bible, Practice, and Prayer* (Cascade Books) is due for release in 2023. Email: sally.douglas@pilgrim.edu.au.

of the synoptic Jesus’ call to become like child. Rather than this being a call into humility or powerlessness, it is demonstrated that followers are invited into the dynamic of being dependent, demanding, and disruptive, just as Jesus explicitly instructs people to pray.

1 Peter

This text of 1 Peter resists easy categorization. Authorship continues to be debated. Dating continues to be questioned. The genre of the text itself is subject to ongoing discussion. The nature of the suffering experienced by Jesus communities (see 2:12; 3:9; 16; 4:14) is also disputed, with more recent scholarship dismissing claims that this was the result of full-scale Roman persecution but rather emerged from local hostilities (Elliott: 97-103; Boring: 33; Craddock: 14-15; Schüssler Fiorenza: 28). Despite the proliferation of questions in contemporary context about this text, the significant place of 1 Peter within the early church was quickly established. Polycarp quotes this letter early in the second century C.E. (*Letter to the Philippians*). Origen refers to 1 Peter as being part of the *homologoumena* (*Comm. Matt.*, book 1). As M. Eugene Boring states “First Peter was attested early and strongly, unlike the other Catholic Epistles” (Boring: 46). Within the confines of this article questions about authorship, dating, and genre will be largely put to one side.

As we embark upon analysis of the Petrine metaphor one further aspect of this text must be discussed. While this metaphor disrupts patriarchal renderings of God and the child, it is not being suggested that the text of 1 Peter is free from patriarchal bias. Within this letter the author implores communities to be “like obedient children” (1:14), and to honor everyone, including the emperor (2:17). Slaves are encouraged to accept the authority of masters, even when they are mistreated (2:18-21). Wives are urged to accept the authority of their husbands (3:1-6), and the young to accept the authority of elders (5:5). Feminist scholars continue to offer critical assessment of these Petrine invocations to submit to kyriarchal power dynamics, both in dialogue with one another, and the wider academy (see Schüssler Fiorenza: 262-65; Bauman-Martin: 63-81; Bird: 78-109; Schüssler Fiorenza 48-61). However, surprisingly, the metaphor of nursing

from Christ Jesus nestled amidst these implorations, has garnered little attention. Until now. In 1 Peter it is likely that we witness both the impacts of Jesus’ remembered teachings (see discussion below), and ongoing spiritual experiences within Jesus communities (Eisen: 207-8; and below), colliding with patriarchal expectations. The result is that tensions in this text co-exist. In the work of retrieving this nursing imagery, the significance of the metaphor and the complexity of 1 Peter are underscored.

Like Newborn Babies

1 Peter is addressed to Jesus communities spread across a vast geographic area of some 129,000 square miles (Elliott: 84), in the region of modern-day Turkey (Boring: 43). In this text, written to diverse audiences, the author challenges these communities to imagine themselves as babies (2:2). This metaphor has been habitually glossed over. Perhaps, in part, this is because 1 Peter’s metaphor stands in contrast to the imagery that Paul utilizes. Pauline metaphors of childhood and infancy are employed to give expression to perceived immaturity and deficiencies within Christian community (1 Cor 3:1-3; 14:20). For Paul, to drink only milk is a sign of spiritual immaturity, the goal is to advance beyond this to eat “solid food” (1 Cor 3:1-2). Paul’s assumptions about infancy and inferiority fold along the lines of widespread first-century constructions of childhood. Likewise, the author of Hebrews employs the metaphor of infancy to speak of deficiency (Heb 5:11-14). As Sharon Betsworth highlights, within the patriarchal context of the Common Era “...elite citizen men often used children to represent much or all of what they desired not to be. Indeed, the citizen man was defined over against the child” (Betsworth: 5). Reflecting this cultural assumption, Paul seeks to shame, or cajole, people within Jesus communities to change their behavior and “grow up” (McNeel: 135).

Before proceeding to examine the Petrine metaphor, it is interesting to note one further point of contrast in the Pauline material. Unlike the Petrine metaphor, and the Johannine metaphors of birth and nourishment discussed below, Paul understands himself as the source of this milk. This pattern of Paul centering himself is also reflected in Galatians. Here, in marked divergence from the Petrine and Johannine metaphors, Paul depicts himself giving birth to

the faith community (Gal 4:19). For an extended investigation of Paul's choice to image himself as mother and nurse in these passages, and in 1 Thessalonians 2:7, see Jennifer Houston McNeel (McNeel: 123-173).

Within the wider patriarchal setting of the first century in which infancy is equated with inadequacy, it is striking that the Petrine author chooses to present infancy as the ideal. Paul Achtemeier rightly notes this Petrine contrast: "The point here is not that the readers are to advance beyond the stage of being immature Christians; rather the point is that their desire for such milk is to be as constant and unrelenting as the infant's desire for its milk" (Achtemeier: 146). The language that the author of 1 Peter utilizes to speak of infancy underscores the disruptive nature of what is being claimed. Here Jesus communities are encouraged to imagine themselves as βρέφη *brephe*. This indicates tiny, neonate babies. The same language describes the unborn baby John, still growing within Elizabeth's womb (Luke 1:41; 44). This language is also used to describe Jesus as a newborn baby (Luke 2:12; 16), and the infants who are brought to the Lukan Jesus for blessing (Luke 18:15). Unborn and newborn babies are reliant on the body of another, usually their mother's, for growth, nourishment, and for life itself. This context of dependency does not conform to patriarchal constructions of power and autonomy. Despite this, the author of 1 Peter invites Jesus communities to imagine themselves likewise, as tiny babies, dependent upon the Lord for salvific nourishment and growth (2:2-3).

Conditioned by both Pauline and patriarchal bias against infancy, a cursory reading of 1 Peter, could lead to the conclusion that the Petrine newborn infant metaphor is a peculiar, passing reference confined to chapter 2: However, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that this metaphor is integral to the letter. In the opening of this text the author states: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1:3). The author goes on to expand this theme: "You have been born anew . . . through the living and enduring word of God" (1:23). The understanding of being born anew and the ideal of continuing to be like newborn infants are significant themes in 1 Peter. Indeed, the description of the milk, that is λογικὸς *logikos* (translated as "spiritual" in the NRSV), likely

contains a reference back to the "word" within the birth imagery of 1 Peter 1:23: Thus, this nourishing food from the Lord may be translated as the "word-milk" or "milk of the word" (Elliott: 398-400; Myers: 103-05).

The theological themes of being born anew, and of the w/Word giving life in 1 Peter, are also significant themes within John's Gospel (John. 3:3-10; 1:1-5; 14), as also noted by Alice Myers (Myers: 105). Furthermore, across the synoptic gospels Jesus repeatedly underscores the importance of infants and children (see Mark 9:33-42; 10:13-16; Matt 10:40-42; 18:1-10; 19:13-15; Luke 9:46-48; 17:1-2; 18:15-17). Not only does Jesus affirm the importance of children, Jesus explicitly argues that followers should become like infants/children (Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17; Matt 18:3). In their analysis of childhood within the early church, Cornelia Horn and John Martens argue that "It is highly probable that the sayings are authentic teachings of Jesus because of their dissimilarity to attitudes of the Jewish and Greco-Roman world" (Horn and Martens: 252). Jesus' affirmation of infants is not limited to canonical texts. The Thomasine Jesus also honors children, and like 1 Peter, the metaphor of breastfeeding is presented as the ideal expression of faithfulness. Readers are told that Jesus sees little babies being breastfed and says to his disciples "These little ones nursing are like those who enter the kingdom" (*Thom* 22:1-2).

In light of dominant first-century cultural and religious habits of equating infancy and childhood with immaturity and deficiency, it is likely that diffuse accounts of Jesus' disruptive affirmation of infancy and invocation to become like infants or children, have their origins in recollections of Jesus' teachings. Likewise, it is probable that Petrine author's call to Jesus communities to imagine themselves as newborn babies emerges from contact with these teachings. This possibility is underscored by the reality that Paul, who did not spend time with the historical Jesus, falls in line with cultural and religious expectations, as he employs the metaphor of infancy to illustrate inadequacy.

Nursing from Jesus

It is recognized by biblical scholars that "the Lord" who tastes good in 1 Peter 2:3 is a reference to Christ Jesus. It is also recognised that here Jesus Christ is equated with the "word-milk", the one "by whom believers have been reborn and fed" (Elliott: 404). Despite

acknowledging both these realities, with surprising regularity the two halves of this metaphor are stubbornly held apart by biblical scholars (Elliott: 404; Heil: 68; Boring: 93; Bartlett: 264; in contrast see Myers: 105). In 1 Peter 2:2-3, Christ Jesus is the Lord who is the giver and the source of the word-milk that enables growth into salvation. In this text Jesus communities are explicitly invited to imagine themselves as neonate babies who long to be fed. Here, Christ Jesus is imaged as nursing the community, sustaining, and nurturing their growth in salvation through the gift of nourishing self.

In 1 Peter, the metaphor of breastfeeding from Christ is presented as the ideal spiritual disposition for Jesus communities. The ways in which communities were understood to experience Christ’s nourishment were likely expansive. Despite contemporary reticence to acknowledge the evidence, within the New Testament and in early church texts, Christian communities make various claims about continuing to share in collective, religious experiences (Hurtado: 65). Nursing from Christ may have included references to Eucharist practices (see below for further discussion), absorbing the “word” through teaching (Myers: 104), as well as other experiences of ongoing spiritual nourishment (see my discussion Douglas: 91-3). A striking example of this third category is found in *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* (4:1-10). According to this text, dated to 203 C.E. (Gold: 13), while Perpetua is in prison, she receives a vision in which she climbs a ladder to a heavenly garden and is offered milk, or cheese from milk, by a shepherd figure (4:8-9), commonly understood as Christ (Heffernan: 181-83). Perpetua awakes from this vision “still tasting something sweet” and knows that she will be martyred for her Christian faith (4:10).

The imagery of being nursed by the Holy One is not limited to 1 Peter within the biblical text. In Isaiah the metaphor of breastfeeding is utilized to give expression to the Lord’s, and the city of Jerusalem’s, comforting, nursing and nourishing embrace of returning exiles (Isa 66:10-13). With the scaffolding of this Old Testament imagery, alongside traditions of Jesus calling people to become like infants, the author of 1 Peter chooses to invoke the imagery of nursing from the crucified and risen Lord, to inspire diverse communities in their ongoing practice of faith.

The reality that the author of 1 Peter invites commu-

nities to imagine themselves breastfeeding from Jesus may be shocking in contemporary context. However, for early church writers such as Clement of Alexandria the Petrine metaphor of breastfeeding from Christ Jesus was obvious. Within lengthy discussion of 1 Peter 2:1-3, Clement states “so, for us little ones who draw milk from the breast, that is, the Word of Heaven, it is Christ Himself who is our food” (Clement of Alexandria: 41).

The reality that Jesus, the central protagonist of the gospels, was biologically a man is commonly accepted. Because of this, the claim that a first-century text would choose to employ female divine imagery, inviting communities to imagine themselves nursing from Jesus as a mother, may appear to be the work of (ill-advised) imaginative reconstruction. However, there are rich biblical and christological resources, as well as significant contextual considerations, that offer insight into this choice of metaphor. To this evidence we will now turn.

Wisdom Christology

Alongside Isaiah’s breastfeeding imagery and traditions of Jesus invoking the metaphor of infancy, the author of 1 Peter had another biblical resource to draw from in choosing to invite faith communities imagine themselves breastfeeding from Christ. This is the female divine figure Woman Wisdom, חכמה Hokmah in Hebrew and σοφία Sophia in Greek, literally meaning Wisdom. In scholarship she is variously referred to as Sophia, Lady Wisdom, w/Wisdom, and personified Wisdom in English. The term Woman Wisdom is preferred as this reflects her importance as a divine wisdom figure in Old Testament and intertestamental texts and acknowledges her female personification, a central attribute of her personhood, without resorting to kyriarchal titles. She is celebrated across Old Testament and intertestamental texts including Proverbs, The Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, and Baruch.

Across these texts Woman Wisdom is celebrated as the source of wisdom and life (Prov 8:6-14; 8:35; Wis 8:3-13; Sir 1:19; 14:20-15:6). She is the one from the beginning (Prov 8:22-31; Sir 1:1-4; 24:2-9). She orders and sustains all things (Wis 7:27; 8:1; Sir 24:6). Furthermore, Woman Wisdom is the one who prepares the feast and calls for all to join her (Prov 9:1-6). While motherhood

imagery is not a central attribute of Woman Wisdom's personhood in Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon, in Sirach she is imaged maternally:

She will come to meet him [those who fear the Lord] like a mother... she will feed him with the bread of learning, and give him the water of wisdom to drink (Sir 15:2-3).

Woman Wisdom goes on to call to humanity to feed from her:

Come to me you who desire me, and eat your fill of my fruits... for those who eat of me will hunger for more, and those who drink of me will thirst for more (Sir 24:19, 21).

The overlaps between Woman Wisdom and the Johannine Jesus (John 6:35; 52-58), who both offer their flesh as food are significant (Massyngebaerde Ford: 126). This echoed invitation to eat flesh will be returned to below.

The evidence that Jesus is celebrated in the language and imagery of this female divine figure in New Testament and early church texts is extensive (for an overview see Johnson: 261-94; Douglas: 15-69). Jesus is explicitly imaged as Woman Wisdom in Matthew's Gospel (Matt 11:19; see also Matt 23: see Johnson: 281-84; Dunn: 197-204; Wainwright: 76-83; and below). Jesus is imaged as this female divine figure throughout John's Gospel (Scott: 94-115; Ringe: 60-83; Douglas: 46-51; and below). Furthermore, within the earliest evidence we have of the Christian tradition, hymn and prayer fragments embedded within New Testament texts (Hurtado: 147-8; Bauckham: 127-39), Jesus is regularly celebrated in the language and imagery of Woman Wisdom. This Wisdom Christology runs through the Colossians hymn (1:15-20: see Dunn: 83-104; Schüssler Fiorenza: 189; Smith: 160-2), the Johannine hymn (1:1-18: see Scott: 94-115; Brown: 524; Schneiders: 49; Barrett: 155), and the Hebrews hymn (1:1-3: see Beavis: 207-14; Schüssler Fiorenza: 189; Attridge: 41-5; Hurtado: 499; Douglas: 36-7).

Evidence that Jesus is celebrated in the language and imagery of Woman Wisdom in liturgical fragments within the New Testament is not incidental. In recent decades it has been increasingly recognized that these understandings of Jesus in relation to Woman Wisdom were integral to the ignition of earliest expressions of Christology. Reflecting on the emergence of the doctrine of the incarnation, James Dunn states: "The *Wisdom of*

God—that Jesus was very early on described in terms drawn from pre-Christian speculation concerning divine Wisdom is the nearest thing we have to a major consensus in this whole area" (Dunn: 8, italics original). Likewise, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza states: "this proclamation of Jesus Christ as the Sophia of God and the cosmic Lord functions in the Christian tradition as the foundational myth which engenders its own cult" (Schüssler Fiorenza: 190). Writing from within the early Jesus movement, in which Wisdom Christology was pivotal to proclamations about the lordship of the crucified and risen Jesus, the choice of the Petrine author to image Jesus nursing the community becomes less surprising.

Within 1 Peter there is internal evidence that indicates the presence of Wisdom Christology. In 1 Peter 2:3 it is stated that "the Lord is *good*". This language *χρηστός chrestos* is used to describe God in the LXX (Ps 100:5; 86:5) and may also reflect a play on words with *Christos* Christ (Myers: 105). However, *chrestos* is also the same language that the Matthean Jesus uses to describe his yoke (Matt 11:30), a yoke that resembles Woman Wisdom's yoke (Sir 6:24-31; 51:26). In Matthew 11 Jesus has already explicitly linked his actions of feasting with and befriending sinners and tax collectors with the vindicated actions of Woman Wisdom (Matt 11:19). As M. Jack Suggs states here: "Sophia is *identified* with Jesus. Jesus is Sophia incarnate" (Suggs: 58, italics original). The Matthean Jesus—Woman Wisdom feasts with all and then invites all to come and find rest as they take on his/her yoke—a yoke which is *χρηστός good* (Matt 11:28-30). In 1 Peter, Christ Jesus, is imaged breastfeeding the community so that they may grow into salvation—and we are told that this Lord tastes *χρηστός good* (1 Pet 2:2-3). The Petrine metaphor gives vivid expression to Wisdom Christology (Douglas: 89-90), one of the earliest articulations of faith within the Jesus movement.

Cultural Contexts

Alongside early christological convictions, wider cultural, philosophical, and religious factors likely contributed to the utilization of the Petrine metaphor. In this period nursing was understood to play a significant role in the character formation of children. In the ancient Mediterranean world breastmilk imbued the receiver

with something of the essence of the giver. As Alicia Myers states, it was believed that “breastmilk continues the formation of a child’s soul that began in her womb” (Myers: 79). Reflecting on writings from the Ancient Roman world, John Penniman observes that “mother’s milk carried significant ramifications for the social, political, and moral formation of the one being fed” (Penniman: 52). Penniman demonstrates that Jewish texts reflect similar understandings and argues that the notion of the “formative power of the *spiritus*-carrying milk that flows from the breast of a mother” informs Paul’s choice to imagine himself giving milk to the community 1 Cor 3 (Penniman: 73, italics original). It is likely that the Petrine author is also informed by such understandings of breastmilk. As communities feed from Christ Jesus who tastes good, they absorb Christ’s (trans)formative power and grow into salvation (1 Pet 2:3), thus becoming more like Christ, who they are repeatedly called to emulate (1 Pet 2:21; 3:17-18; 4:8-11).

Alongside philosophical and religious understandings of the power of breastfeeding, another, less esoteric, cultural factor may have contributed to the use of this metaphor. Unlike contemporary Western contexts, for the Petrine author, and for first audiences, breastfeeding was an inescapable feature of daily life (Henriksen Garroway: 89). In the Common Era, in which Jesus communities gathered in homes for worship and fellowship, the gritty realities of birthing and feeding, hunger and illness, growing and dying were unavoidable. As Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. Macdonald underscore, house churches “were places of women’s labour ... delivery, deaths of infants and mothers in childbirth, nursing babies, and the precarious work of keeping a baby alive from the first fragile days into the first few years” (Osiek and Macdonald: 66-7; see also Betsworth: 27-8). With the immediacy of this raw material to draw from, the author of 1 Peter summons Jesus communities to the ideal of imagining themselves like the tiny, hungry babies among them, who, amidst the brutalities of everyday life, instinctively seek out life giving nourishment from their mothers’ breasts. The Petrine author assures readers that, amidst their ongoing struggles, they too will be nourished and grown into salvation by their mother Jesus.

There is one further aspect of this first-century cultural context that may have contributed to the Petrine metaphor.

There were rumours that Christians practiced cannibalism. We perhaps catch glimpses of this in John’s Gospel. After the Johannine Jesus, like Woman Wisdom (Sir 24:19, 21), invites people to feast on him (John 6:35; 52-58;), the author of John states that Jesus’ words are so offensive that many people turn away (John 6:52-69). Early church sources indicate that Christians continued to be entangled with accusations of cannibalism, as evidenced in the writing of Justin Martyr (*Dial.* 10) and Tertullian (*Ad Nat.* 1:7; cf. *Apol.* 7 and 8). Such accusations may have been fuelled by the desire to strategically “other” Christians, rather than primarily being sparked by the language of Eucharist celebrations (Warren: 191-201; McGowan: 413-442). However, in contexts where the Eucharistic language of feasting on Jesus’ body and blood incited alarm, the imagery of breastfeeding from Christ Jesus may well have made this language more palatable. Interestingly, as Meredith Warren notes, a few centuries later Macarius seeks to defend the Johannine Jesus’ words (John 6:51-58), and the language of the Eucharist, by arguing “infants consume milk made from their mother’s blood” (Macarius Magnes, *Monogenes*, 3:23; Warren: 203).

While the link between blood and breastmilk may be obscure in contemporary context, in the ancient Mediterranean world “breastmilk was most often understood as extra menstrual blood” (Myers: 79). Reflecting this understanding of the human body, Clement of Alexandria confidently asserts that there is a direct connection between blood and breastmilk:

Of all the organs of the body, the breasts are the most sensitive to the condition of the womb. After childbirth, when the vein through which the blood was carried to the embryo has been cut off, then, with the passage obstructed, the blood is forced up into the breasts. As the blood accumulates, the breasts begin to distend and the blood begins to turn into milk. (Clement of Alexandria: 39).

Thus, for Clement, Christ’s milk and blood are one and the same: “Therefore, it is more than evident that the Blood of Christ is milk,” (Clement of Alexandria: 39).

Implications

When the Petrine metaphor of breastfeeding from Jesus Christ is acknowledged, a variety of implications emerge. Within the confines of space, we will explore

only two. First, it is argued that the biblical imagery of nursing from Christ disrupts androcentric renderings of God in Christian tradition. Secondly, it will be demonstrated that the invocation to be like newborn infants destabilizes patriarchal interpretations of Jesus' call to become like a child.

Beyond The Androcentric

Androcentric renderings of the Christian God have dominated in hymn, art, liturgy and, in many denominations, ecclesiology. The masculinisation of the Christian God has persisted, despite biblical claims that God is not limited to one gender (see Gen. 1: 26-27; see also Gal 3:28); despite evidence of female imagery for God within the biblical text (see for example Ps 131; Isa 66: 10-13; Matt 23:37-39; 1 Pet 2:2-3); and despite the reality that Jesus is celebrated in the language and imagery of the female divine, Woman Wisdom, within the New Testament and in early church texts, as traced above.

Insistence upon male imagery for God has been utilized as an exacting tool to control and exclude people who are women. However, the damage wrought by exclusively male constructions of God is not only experienced by women. Humans make meaning through metaphor and story. When the biblical text is ignored and female, non-binary, and trans images for the God of Christian faith are disallowed, all are malnourished. Through retrieving the biblical imagery of breastfeeding from Christ, disruptive nourishment is offered to all.

It is intriguing that the biblical imagery of breastfeeding from Jesus has been celebrated in prayer and theology from time to time through the centuries, despite the habitual minimization of the metaphor. As noted above, Clement of Alexandria readily acknowledges the Petrine metaphor and utilizes it to speak eloquently about the divine. Clement not only speaks of nursing from Christ, but also the first person of the Trinity: "Therefore, we fly trustfully to the 'care-banishing breast' of God the Father; the breast that is the Word, who is the only one who can truly bestow on us the milk of love. Only those who nurse at the breast are blessed" (Clement of Alexandria: 41, see also Clement's *Hymn to Christ the Saviour*).

Ephrem the Syrian also utilizes this metaphor. Drawing from Wisdom traditions, he writes with tenderness

about what happens when one breastfeeds from the divine: "how greatly will the soul be sustained on the waves of joy as its faculties suck the breast of w/Wisdom' (Ephrem the Syrian: Hymn IX). Centuries later theologian and mystic Julian of Norwich writes about nursing from Jesus: "our dear mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and he does so with himself...he can familiarly lead us into his blessed breast through his sweet open side" (Julian of Norwich: 60).

Christianity's idolatrous devotion to constructing God-as-male has been destructive for those within and beyond the church. Recovering biblical, female divine imagery has a potency that goes beyond words. Engaging with the Petrine metaphor of breastfeeding from Jesus in theology, liturgy, song, and art, offers resources for thinking differently about—and being differently with—the God of Christian faith. The question of "being with" leads us to consideration of the second implication.

Becoming Like A Child

The synoptic Jesus' call to become like a child (Mark 10:13-16; Matt 18: 1-4; Luke 18: 15-17), has been diluted by patriarchal bias (Horn and Martens: 259). As a result, emphasis has been given to renderings of the "child" that are bound up with notions of humility, passivity, and powerlessness. This trajectory begins early and has persisted. Already in Matthew's retelling of Jesus' call to become like a child (Matt 18:3), the Matthean Jesus explicitly links childhood with humility (Matt 18:4). Humility is not the focus in the earlier Markan account. Instead, Jesus' emphasis is upon receptivity: "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (Mark 10:15). However, Markan emphasis upon receptivity continues to be interpreted via assumptions about powerlessness (for example see Byrne:160; Betsworth: 68).

In such emphasis the fullness of what is being claimed is ignored. When the Petrine invocation to become like hungry newborn infants is taken seriously, critical access into sublimated dimensions of this ancient call becomes available. While newborn babies may be dependent and diminutive in size, anyone who has shared time and space with a newborn baby who is longing to be fed (1 Pet 2:2) can attest to the reality that these little humans are disruptive, demanding, and powerful. Hun-

gry newborn infants have the power to upend a household within moments and sustain this for hours or days. When this reality is acknowledged, we discover that within the metaphor of becoming like an infant or child a different understanding resides. Rather than this call being an invitation into powerlessness, humility, or passivity, the Petrine call to become like hungry newborn babies, and Jesus’ call to become like a child or infant, hold the invitation to become demanding and disruptive.

The idea that Christians may be called to become demanding and disruptive upends long held interpretations of Jesus’s call to become like an infant. However, being demanding and disruptive is exactly the kind of approach to prayer that Jesus repeatedly advocates across the gospels (see for example Matt 7:7-11; Mark 11:24; Luke 18:1-8; John 15:7, see also the “Lord’s prayer” Matt 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4). The Matthean Jesus explicitly commands followers to be demanding: “Ask and it will be given to you; search, and you will find, knock, and the door will be opened for you” (Matt 7:7). It is, perhaps, no accident that in this passage the Matthean Jesus goes on to share an analogy of children:

Is there any among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matt 7: 9-11).

Here Jesus does not advocate that followers be passive or powerless. In contrast, the Matthean Jesus challenges people to be active and demanding in prayer. Within this analogy, the contrast is made between humanity and God. Unlike humanity, God is utterly trustworthy, kind, receptive and ready to meet our persistent requests.

Luke’s gospel elaborates further upon Jesus’ call to become disruptive and demanding. As the Lukan Jesus commands people to be persistent in prayer, asking and knocking (Luke 11:9-10), he tells a story about an annoying person who turns up at a friend’s house at midnight and gets him out of bed (Luke 11:5-8). This person in the Lukan Jesus’ story graphically illustrates the ideal that is being advocated: people are to be disruptive, demanding, and obstinate in prayer. The Lukan Jesus states this at the conclusion of the story: “So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be

opened for you” (Luke 11:9). Within this same passage, the Lukan Jesus, like the Matthean Jesus, goes on to illustrate this call further by speaking of children and their (ongoing) requests, and God’s tender response (Luke 11:11-13).

At the beginning of Luke 18 the theme of disruptive prayer is returned to. Here the author explains that Jesus shares a parable about the “need to pray always” (Luke 18:1). The parable the Lukan Jesus then unfolds is a story of a woman who is a widow and who is treated unjustly. Because this woman will not be passive or humble, but instead is disruptive and assiduous, she ultimately receives what she requests (Luke 18:1-8). This woman’s active and unabated expression of power is presented as the ideal embodiment of prayer by the Lukan Jesus.

In the same chapter, soon after this depiction of this woman’s disruptive faithfulness, the Lukan Jesus’ calls people to become like a little child (Luke 18:15-17). In between these two teachings, the Lukan Jesus offers a parable illustrating the difference between ego driven prayer-as-performance and authentic prayer (Luke 18:9-14). The parable concludes with the Lukan Jesus speaking of the ideal of humbling self rather than exalting self. However, humility is not here presented as passivity or powerlessness—but rather as honesty about self and the need for God. As Jesus has just advocated, and illustrated in the parable of the woman, this man in the parable is demanding before God about his needs: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13).

It is within this chapter that unfolds the vital place of prayer, that the Lukan Jesus’ calls people to become like an infant. The author introduces Jesus’ call by first explaining that people are bringing babies *βρέφη* *brephe* to Jesus (Luke 18:15). The shared language of neonate babies in Luke 18 and 1 Peter 2 is striking. The author of Luke informs readers that it is the reality that parents are daring to bring *even* babies to Jesus that most offends the disciples (Luke 18:15). Readers are told that Jesus values and welcomes these infants, despite the objections of his (male) followers (Luke 18:16). It is in the midst of this clashing of world-views, that the Lukan Jesus goes on to declare that it is essential for people to receive the kingdom of God as a little child or they will never enter it (Luke 18:17).

Patriarchal constructions of the child that focus upon piety, powerlessness, and passivity have skewed the intent of Jesus’ call in the synoptics. When the Petrine

metaphor of becoming like hungry newborn babies is taken seriously and brought into dialogue with Jesus' call to become like a child, decisive insight is gained. Within these infancy metaphors we discover the command to be dependent upon, *and* disruptive and demanding towards, the God of Jesus Christ. While this may dismantle common assumptions, this interpretation aligns directly with Jesus' explicit and repeated calls about prayer across the gospels.

Conclusion

The author of 1 Peter calls diverse Jesus communities to imagine themselves as newborn babies longing to be fed. Drawing from biblical, and early christological and contextual resources, this article has demonstrated that, unlike Pauline metaphors, the Petrine author invokes the imagery of nursing from Christ Jesus as the spiritual ideal. This is a thick metaphor with rich implications. Here, Christian imagery for God expands beyond the idolatry of androcentrism. When taken seriously, the Petrine metaphor also destabilizes patriarchal interpretations of Jesus' call to become like a child. Rather than a call into passivity or powerlessness, here we recover the call to become like infants—dependent, demanding, and disruptive—in prayer, just as Jesus advocates in the synoptics. While stubbornly resisted for centuries, the Petrine metaphor of nursing from Jesus continues to flow with provocative challenge and sustenance.

Works Cited

- Achtemeier, Paul. 1996: *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Attridge, Harold. 1989: *Hebrews*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Barrett, Charles Kingsley. 1978: *The Gospel According to St John*. London: SPCK.
- Barrett, Charles Kingsley. 1994: *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. Henry Chadwick Black's New Testament Commentaries. London: A&C Black.
- Bartlett, David. 1998: 'The First Letter of Peter: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections' *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* ed. Leander Keck et al, vol. xii; 229-319: Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Bauckham, Richard. 2008: *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing.
- Bauman-Martin, Betsy. 2004: 'Feminist Theologies of Suffering and Current Interpretations of 1 Peter 2:18-3:9', *A Feminist Companion to the Catholic Epistles and Hebrews*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Maria Mayo Robbins, *Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Church Writings*, 8; 63-81: London: T&T Clark International.
- Beavis, Mary Anne. 2015: 'Hebrews and Wisdom', *Mark, Manuscripts and Monotheism: Essays in Honor of Larry Hurtado*, eds., Chris Keith and Dieter T. Roth, *Library of New Testament Studies*, vol. 528; 201-18: London: Bloomsbury, T&T Clark.
- Betsworth, Sharon. 2015: *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, *Library of New Testament Studies*, vol. 521: London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.
- Bird, Jennifer. 2011: *Abuse, Power and Fearful Obedience: Reconsidering 1 Peter's Commands to Wives*, *Library of New Testament Studies*, vol. 442: London: T&T Clark.
- Boring, M. Eugene. 1999: *1 Peter*, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Brown, Raymond. 1966: *The Gospel According to John I-XII: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. The Anchor Bible, vol. 29: New York: Double Day Press.
- Byrne, Brendan. 2008: *A Costly Freedom: A Theological Reading of Mark's Gospel*. Strathfield: St Pauls.
- Clement of Alexandria, *Christ the Educator*, *The Fathers of the Church*, trans. Simon P. Wood. 1954: Washington: Catholic University Press.
- Craddock, Fred. 1995: *First and Second Peter and Jude*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- DeConick, April. 2006: *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation: With a Commentary and New English Translation of the Complete Gospel*, ed. Mark Goodacre, *Early Christianity in Context*, *Library of New Testament Studies*, vol. 287: London: T&T Clark.
- Douglas, Sally. 2016: *Early Church Understandings of Jesus as the Female Divine: The Scandal of the Scandal of Particularity*, *Library of New Testament Studies*, vol. 557: London: Bloomsbury, T&T Clark.
- Dunn, James. 1980: *Christology in the Making: An Inquiry*

Dogulas, “Newborn Babies and Nursing Jesus”

- into the Origins of the Doctrine of Incarnation*. London: SCM Press.
- Dunn, James. 1996: *The Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, ed. I. Howard Marshall et al., The New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Eisen, Ute. 2000: *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*. Collegeville: A Michael Glazier Book, Liturgical Press.
- Elliott, John. 2000: *1 Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, ed. William Foxwell Albright et al, The Anchor Bible, vol. 37b. New York: Doubleday.
- Ephrem the Syrian. *Hymns on Paradise*, Introduction and translation by Sebastian Brock. 1990: Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press.
- Feldmeier, Reinhard. 2008: *The First Letter of Peter*, trans. Peter Davids. Waco: Baylor University Press.
- Gold, Barbara. 2018: *Perpetua: Athlete of God*, Women in Antiquity. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Green, Joel. 2007: *1 Peter*, The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing.
- Heffernan, Thomas. 2012: *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Heil, John Paul. 2013: *1 Peter, 2 Peter, and Jude: Worship Matters*. Eugene: Cascade Books.
- Henriksen Garroway, Kristine. 2018: *Growing Up in Ancient Israel: Children in Material Culture and Biblical Texts*. Atlanta: SBL Press.
- Horn, Cornelia. and John Martens. 2009: *Let the Children Come to Me: Childhood and Children in Early Christianity*. Washington: Catholic University of America Press.
- Hurtado, Larry. 2003: *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*. Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Johnson, Elizabeth. 1985: ‘Jesus the Wisdom of God: A Biblical Basis for a Non-Androcentric Christology’ *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*, 61: 261-94:
- Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Long Text, trans. Elizabeth Spearing. 1998: London: Penguin Books.
- Luz, Ulrich. 2001: *Matthew 8-20*, trans James Crouch, ed. Helmut Koester, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- McGowan, Andrew. 1994: ‘Eating People: Accusations of Cannibalism against Christians in the Second Century’ *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, vol 2:No 4: Winter: 413-442:
- McNeel, Jennifer Houston. 2014: *Paul as Infant and Nurs-*

- ing Mother: Metaphor, Rhetoric, and Identity in 1 Thessalonians 2:5-8*, Early Christianity and Its Literature. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press.
- Marshall, I. Howard. 1991: *1 Peter*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, ed. G. Osborne. Illinois: InterVarsity Press.
- Massyngbaerde Ford, Josephine. 1997: *Redeemer, Friend and Mother: Salvation in Antiquity and in the Gospel of John*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Myers, Alicia. 2017: *Blessed Among Women? Mothers & Motherhood in the New Testament*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Osiek, Carolyn and Margaret MacDonald, with Janet Tulloch. 2006: *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Penniman, John. 2017: *Raised on Christian Milk: Food and the Formation of the Christian Soul in Early Christianity*, Synkrisis series. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Ringe, Sharon. 1999: *Wisdom's Friends: Community and Christology in the Fourth Gospel*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Schneiders, Sandra. 2003: *Written that You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003.
- Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. 1990: *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company.
- Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. 2015: *1 Peter: Reading Against the Grain*, Phoenix Guides to the New Testament, 18: Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press.
- Scott, Martin. 1992: *Sophia and the Johannine Jesus*. Sheffield: The Sheffield University Press.
- Smith, Ian. 2006: *Heavenly Perspective: A Study of the Apostle Paul's Response to a Jewish Mystical Movement at Colossae*, Library of New Testament Studies, vol. 326: London: T&T Clark.
- Suggs, M. Jack. 1970: *Wisdom, Christology and the Law in Matthew's Gospel*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wainwright, Elaine. 1998: *Shall We Look for Another? A Feminist Rereading of the Matthean Jesus*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Warren, Meredith. 2015: *My Flesh is Meat Indeed: A Nonsacramental Reading of John 6:51-58*: Minneapolis: Fortress Press.