



8-22-2011

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Recommended Citation

Nelson, E. R. (2011). Handmaid: The Power of Names in Theology and Society. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 15(1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.1501092013>

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Handmaid: The Power of Names in Theology and Society

Caroline N. Mbonu
Wipf and Stock, 2010
\$18.00, 136 pages

Reviewed by Esther R. Nelson

This slim, but provocative book focuses on Mary, the “Handmaid,” the mother of Jesus. It opens up a creative space, prompting us to think differently about Mary’s popular portrayal as Handmaid in the Church and society throughout time. Mbonu grounds the mother of Jesus within that noble line of women “savior figures” in the Hebrew Bible, reflecting Mary’s self-understanding as *doule kyriou* (servant of the Lord).

Mbonu, an African woman of Igbo ethnicity and a member of the religious community called The Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus located in Nigeria, West Africa, writes with experiential authority in several disciplines: New Testament, African Christianity, and Christianity. In this modest volume, she attempts (and succeeds) in “revalorizing women’s agency through a redemptive reading of biblical and cultural name texts” (p. ix) as she focuses her attention on the Handmaid (Luke 1: 26-38), “redreaming of a new image of women in church and society” (p. x). If the Gospel or “good news” means that people on the margins of society, such as women, have become part of the larger conversation, the Lukan passage Mbonu deconstructs and then reconstructs accomplishes that lofty purpose.

When we understand the word Handmaid in English to mean “supporter” or “helper,” it “tends to downplay the role of this valiant woman [Mary] in her cooperating with God’s plan of fostering salvation and redemption, communion, and reconciliation” (p. xiv). Christians throughout time have polarized the Mary figure in Scripture. She is sometimes seen as the “wielder of Christ’s imperial authority, and at other times as the submissive maiden of Nazareth” (p. 2). Traditionally, Mary has been given a supportive, secondary role by exegetes in the Church, thus trivializing and marginalizing her. One of the effects of using Handmaid to mean “supporter” has been to place women in a subordinate position. The term has an even greater effect on African women because “[i]n most African societies, a name functions as a place-holder, social location, and a part of belonging...in some sense, a name represents the essential characters or circumstances surrounding individuals at the time of their birth” (p. xiv).

Mbonu states, "Israel's *doulas*...function as neither appendage nor auxiliary to the male" (p. 37). She reveals the huge rift that exists between the expansive role of women that the Gospel insures and the diminished space women generally occupy. She shows that the Church, on one level, reflects that expansive role of the Gospel message. "By inscribing the images of the 'savior' figures on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the Catholic tradition makes an unequivocal statement on women's equal participation in Church life" (p. 37). Mbonu then appropriately asks, "[W]hy does the Church still keep women, the Catholic *doulas*, out of full participation in church life?" (p. 37).

"Because service to the community marks God's servants; service becomes the quintessential character of the *doule*" (p. 26). However, as Mbonu carefully demonstrates, Mary has agency in the Lukan narrative, being fully engaged in the social processes of her community. A *doule* serves the world engaged in "relationality and mutuality" (p. 14). Mary, servant of the Lord or *doule kyriou*, does not refer to herself as *paidiske*, the word used to designate "female abject servants, handmaidens or slave women" (p. xv). A *paidiske* has no voice or agency since a *paidiske* essentially and legally is the personal property of a specific person. "In antiquity, the status of a slave was determined by the status of the householder" (p. 53). Luke characterizes Mary of Nazareth as "slave of the LORD." In so doing, Luke undercuts the maneuvering for positions of status in the first-century Mediterranean world, allowing Mary the freedom the Gospel offers.

Mary gains full liberty through the very act of expressing her *fiat*.... Like her foremother[s], Israel's *doulas*, she takes responsibility and personally makes this self-offering to God....By her self-gift, Mary enters into a bilateral covenantal relationship with God. She matches God's descending gift with her ascending response. (p. 53)

Mary's famous and often-quoted response, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord, May it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1: 38), understood in the context of Scripture and history, now has the ability both to empower and liberate. "Voice proclaims a person as a conscious being capable of independent thought and action in ongoing history" (p. 54).

Grounding herself in her own experience, Mbonu then writes:

Unfortunately, when Sisters or any group of women, can no longer make informed decisions about their lives, the community itself ceases

to exist in the proper sense of the word. The stifling of initiatives and barring Sisters from active participation hits at the very foundation of the Incarnation story. In order to recover the proper sense of mission therefore, we as religious must interpret for ourselves our Scripture, and make our own agenda. We must reject the burden of a name [Handmaid as is commonly translated and interpreted] that is not truly ours. (p. 58)

Fortunately, Mbonu has a clear vision of the work needed to move forward effectively. Since some myths (or stories) represent structures that restrict women's full participation in the community (as well as the larger culture), the task becomes "to uncover, recover and reconstruct these structures" in order for the community to discover the fullness of life inherent in the Gospel message. "Such activity involves a prophetic stance that can end the denial and the containment by the dominant culture, a denial that deprives society of the synergy of human potentials" (p. 71).

Women have been erased and marginalized in the stories that shape traditional (and therefore patriarchal) faith communities. Mbonu says, "For the retrieval and celebration of women's positive image to have meaning, there must be a remembrance, a memory, continuity, and a story" (p. 67). Much like the contemporary Jewish theologian Judith Plaskow who reclaims women's place in Jewish "story" through her work, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (1990), Mbonu asserts that storytelling "creatively opens people's eyes so that by remembering, they can see, understand, and believe" (p. 67).

Mbonu stands in stark contrast to the poet/writer Audre Lorde (1984) who writes in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*, "The Master's tools will never dismantle the Master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never allow us to bring about genuine change" (p. 112). Clearly, Mbonu dismantles the patriarchal establishment institutionalized in the Church and the larger society by using the very tools "Masters" have used to enslave and marginalize various groups of people. At the same time, Mbonu reminds us of the contemporary Christian feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1996), who wrote in her chapter "Breaking the Silence: Becoming Visible": "In every generation women have to challenge anew the patriarchal definition of reality, we have to speak...because patriarchy cannot tolerate the conscientization of the oppressed" (p. 172).

"Redreaming represents a beautiful act of imagination, and a sustained

act of self-becoming—*doule*, a servant as well as a leader. Without imaginative identification a person exists only as a distant spectator in ongoing history” (p. 126). Who can be content to watch the Gospel message unfold and not actively participate in the “good news?” Mary wasn’t. Thanks be to God.

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