

CHAPTER 6 |

Why should Adults want to be Sucklings again?

Some remarks on the Cultural Semantics of Breast-feeding in Christian and Pre-Christian Tradition

Joachim Kügler

Introduction: Breast-feeding as an Iconic Constellation

The image of a woman giving breast to a child is one of the most important images in human culture – especially in those cultural systems which do not know of industrial substitutes for mother-milk. In the field of cultural studies the basic image of a woman breast-feeding a child can be understood as an icon or an iconic constellation – using terms of Jan ASSMANN (1984: 135). An icon/ iconic constellation can be used in different cultural contexts and can be represented through various media like language, painting or other artefacts.

The iconic constellation¹ of breast-feeding (IBF) is based on a typical and more or less omnipresent experience. As breast-feeding is the most common way of feeding a new-born baby it is related with the beginning of almost every human person's life. By that it is an icon of special cultural strength. When used in cultural contexts the icon usually gains additional meaning while different aspects of the constellation can be stressed more than others. The IBF contains different elements, e.g. the mother or wet-nurse, the milk, and the baby. All these elements and their specific relations can be stressed in a specific way.

Therefore the title-question why adults should want to become babies again can be answered in many different ways. The answer depends on

¹ I suggest labelling breast-feeding as an iconic *constellation* because two persons (and a number of elements) are involved, and the way how they are related is of importance.

which aspect of the icon/ iconic constellation is stressed by the specific context. Who is the feeding woman? Is she the mother of the child or someone else? What is her social or religious status? What is the relation between feeding person and the fed one? What kind of milk does the suckling get? The last question in many cultures is connected with the question of who the feeding woman is. The breast-feeding person was seen as giving her own qualities with her milk. If, for example, you get the milk of a queen or goddess, it may be highly inviting to drink it – even as an adult person. It will make you strong and powerful. If, however, the milk you get shows you as being dependent and helpless then adults would not easily want to become a suckling again. Both aspects can be found in the New Testament and Early Christian tradition. Let us begin with the aspect of the powerless sucking.

The IBF as an expression of dependency and helplessness

The most prominent New Testament author using the IBF is Paul. The apostle compares his first preaching in Corinth with breast-feeding:

¹ Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly--mere infants in Christ.

² I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. (1 Cor 3:1-2 ^{NIV})

² γάλα ὑμᾶς ἐπότισα, οὐ βρῶμα· οὕτω γὰρ ἐδύνασθε. ἀλλ’ οὐδὲ ἔτι νῦν δύνασθε

Paul associates the IBF with a clear message of critique. The recently founded Christian congregation at Corinth is still in the state of helpless babies. They need “milk” (= simple teaching) instead of adult’s food. In their faith they do not have the status of adults yet. The inner conflicts in the congregation indicate that. That is why they continue to need the apostle as feeding authority. They cannot stand on their own feet yet, but remain dependent from Paul’s authority. Without the Apostle’s care and helpful guidance they cannot exist as Christians. In stressing the baby-like dependency of the Christians at Corinth, Paul at the same time stresses his own authority as feeding person to whom the Corinthians have to subordinate. The IBF serves Paul as a rhetoric tool to underline a hierarchical relationship: The baby-Christians at Corinth have to subordinate to the adult, nursing apostolic preacher. Paul is the founder (κτίστης) and by that in a way is the origin of the congregation. In a

cultural context where the founder of a city was often venerated as the god of this city, Paul can claim a specific authority towards his creation.²

Paul's use of the IBF stands in a cultural tradition which can be found also in the writings of Hellenistic-Jewish author Philo of Alexandria († ca. 50 CE). Philo, the exegetical philosopher and philosophical exegete, compares the general education preceding the genuine philosophy with maternal milk. It is "tender food" for souls who are still dependent and weak, "still naked like those of completely infant children" (Philo, prob. 160). On the other side adult souls, having come to the manly status of freedom and independence, do not "share in the infantine food of milk" (Philo, migr. 29) anymore.

Turning back to the New Testament, a similar kind of using the IBF can be found in Hebrews. In chapter 5 of this letter we find:

¹² In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!

¹³ Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.

¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. (Heb 5:12-14 NIV)

¹² καὶ γὰρ ὁφειλοντες εἶναι διδάσκαλοι διὰ τὸν χρόνον, πάλιν χρείαν ἔχετε τοῦ διδάσκειν ὑμᾶς τινὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τῆς ἀρχῆς τῶν λογίων τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ γεγόνατε χρείαν ἔχοντες γάλακτος [καὶ] οὐ στερεάς τροφῆς.

¹³ πᾶς γὰρ ὁ μετέχων γάλακτος ἀπειρος λόγου δικαιοσύνης, νήπιος γάρ ἐστιν.

¹⁴ τελείων δέ ἐστιν ἡ στερεὰ τροφή, τῶν διὰ τὴν ἔξιν τὰ αισθητήρια γεγυμνασμένα ἔχόντων πρὸς διάκρισιν καλοῦ τε καὶ κακοῦ.

Here the milk-food also stands for the immature status of the congregation addressed. And the construction of hierarchy is similar. The community must abide by the teaching of the (anonymous) author of the letter as they are dependent from his "milk". In Hebrews the critique on the congregation seems even stronger than in 1 Corinthians. While Paul was addressing a young congregation, the author here addresses an old

² It can be seen that he is much less displaying his apostolic authority towards Christian communities founded by other apostles. Cf. the careful words in Rom 1:12 ("*that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith*") where Paul corrects his quite boastful words in V.11 ("*I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong*") which were absolutely inappropriate in a writing to a non-Pauline community.

one. It is an awful shame to need baby-like basic teaching, when having already reached an age where one should be teacher. As to the hierarchy between author and addressees one can say: By stressing the conflict between baby-like status and adult age, the author shows that the dependency of the addressees from his teaching is not ideal. They should be independent; they should be teacher on their own and not be dependent from the author's teaching. Thus the shameful milk metaphor in Hebrews is meant to push the addressees to independency.

In all three cases the IBF is used only partially. The focus is on the milk and the helpless status of the baby, while the feeding person is kept somewhat in the background. By not stressing too much the male milk-giver gender irritation are avoided. Paul, Philo and the author of Hebrews not even say clearly who the source of the milk is. Maybe they suggest that they are only a (male) nurse giving the milk of someone else, or they simply don't care about gender issues in their metaphorical use of the IBF.

Later Christian teaching's use of the IBF knows two opposite lines. One line – focussing on Mary breast-feeding Jesus – is stressing very much the human quality of the milk. The other line – focussing on God or the Logos/Son – is dealing with the divine quality of the milk.

The Syrian Church father Ephraim (306-373 CE) is a very good example for this use of IBF, because he knows to combine the two aspects in one and the same text. In his fourth Hymn on the birth of Christ he writes:

Christ

„was the Highest and he drank Mary's milk,
while all creatures were drinking from his richness.
He is the living breast giving breath of life.
Out of his life did drink the dead and were revived.

/.../

While then he was drinking Mary's milk,
he himself breast-fed the universe with life.

/.../

Out of the great treasure of all creation Mary gave him all she gave him.
She gave him milk out of what he created,
She gave him food out of what he called into existence.
He gave milk to Mary on behalf of his divine nature.
He sucked it from her on behalf of his human nature.

(Nat. 4, 149-150.153.183-185; cf. Beck 1959. English translation JK)

The link between Mary's milk and the human nature of Christ is more than obvious in this text. As Mary is no goddess but a human being she

is giving human milk to her baby and by doing so she gives proof to the human nature of her son. He is drinking the milk of his human mother and by being weak and helpless like a baby he proves his truly human nature. On the other side Jesus Christ also is of divine nature and as God incarnate he is the one who give to his mother all she can give him. On the divine level Mary cannot be the giving one. Just in the contrary the the divine Logos (= word, plan, concept, logic) functions as the motherly³ source of all life! He is God-Son, mediator of creation (cf. John 1:3-4) and spender of all natural goods. Ephraim therefore stresses that every human gift that Mary could give her son derived from the divine creation power. In one single text Ephraim uses two different aspects of the IBF. In relation to Mary and her milk he stresses the human nature of mother, milk and baby. But due to the double nature of Jesus Christ he can at the same time use the IBF stressing the supreme divine quality of the milk which the son gives. The idea of divine milk leads to a line of using the IBF as an expression of power and honor.

Divine Milk as medium of salvific power

While the IBF connected with helplessness and dependency is to be found in two texts of the New Testament we have only one single text with a positive connotation of the constellation. This is an astonishing contrast to the importance of this use of the IBF in ancient cultural tradition. In 1 Peter 2:1-3 we read:

¹ Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.

² Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation,

³ now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. (1 Petr 2:1-3 ^{NIV})

² ὡς ἀρτιγέννητα βρέφη τὸ λογικὸν ἄδολον γάλα ἐπιποθήσατε, ἵνα ἐν αὐτῷ αὐξῆθητε εἰς σωτηρίαν,

³ εἰ ἐγεύσασθε ὅτι χρηστὸς ὁ κύριος.

³ The somewhat surprising transgender aspect can be found already in the OT – although in a different context: Isa 60:16 invites Israel to suck at the breasts of kings in order to take over their power and by doing so weaken them. In the history of religions it is not uncommon that deities transgress gender lines. Concerning God-Son the trans-gendering derives most probably from the fact that he inherited the tradition of Lady Wisdom, prominent in late OT scriptures and early Jewish texts.

In 1 Peter the use of the IBF obviously differs from the cultural tradition which Paul and Hebrews used. The text is not stressing the baby-like dependency of the believers. Just in the contrary the quality of milk-food is seen quite positively and the greediness of the hungry suckling is even used as an example which the believers should imitate. That means, 1 Peter is clearly linked to the tradition of another use of IBF namely the idea of maternal milk transferring special qualities of the mother to the baby. But who is the breast-feeding person here?

The reference to Jesus Christ as the good Lord of the faithful in V.3 may indicate that Christ himself is the source of salvific spiritual milk. The problem that Christ is a man is none. As we could already see from the hymn of Ephraim early Christians had no major problems with the idea of a “male” person playing the breast-feeding role in the IBF.

One example more for this kind of salvific “gender-switching” can be found for example in the post-canonical Odes of Solomon (2nd/3rd century CE). Several times the odes mention divine milk given by God (Father or Son), e.g. 8:16; 14:2; 19:1-4; 35:5. The most explicit reads:

¹ A cup of milk was offered to me,
and I drank it in the sweetess of the Lord's kindness.

² The Son is the cup,
and he who was milked, the Father,
and [the one] who milked him, the Spirit of holiness.

³ Because his breasts were full
and it was not desirable that his milk should be poured out uselessly,
⁴ the Spirit of holiness opened his [= the Father's] bosom
and mixed the milk of the two breasts of the Father.

(Odes of Solomon 19:1-4; cf. LATTKE 2009: 268)

The speaker of this ode is most probably a believer referring in V.1 to his coming to redeeming faith. LATTKE (2009: 270) rules out any relation to a special ritual or sacramental tradition like e.g. celebrating Eucharist with milk (instead of wine). And indeed, linking the text with a too specific “Sitz im Leben” would be highly speculative, as we cannot figure out anymore what V.1 is alluding to. From the text itself it is clear that getting a “cup of milk” is a metaphorical expression for finding salvation/being redeemed. We can conclude from the broader context that the way to redemption is faith. And perhaps we are right to say that coming to redemptive faith was manifested in the ritual of baptism. But how can we know if V.1 is alluding to a kind of baptismal ritual which was linked with getting a cup of milk? It seems much better to refrain interpretation to what is clear from the text itself.

“Drinking the milk” is clearly a way to redemption as the cup means the Son. It is common to identify the container with its content. Thus one can conclude that the Son is the Father’s milk (and not only the container). This means that the believer, by drinking the cup of milk, is taking the Son into him/herself. As the Son is an emanation of the Father (coming out of the Father’s breast by activity of the Holy Spirit) the believer, by hosting the Son is hosting the Father also. Similar concepts can be found already in the Gospel of John (e.g. 17:23). While the Fourth Gospel, however, indicates the unity of Father and Son by the concept of begetting, Ode of Solomon 19:1-4 prefers an androgynous concept of the Father-Son-relation. The message, however, is more or less the same. The Son is not a creation of the Father – if so he would be part of the world – but is an emanation of God, flowing out from inside the Father. As the common concept of milk as transporting the essence of someone can be supposed as cultural background for the Odes of Solomon also, the believer by “drinking” the Son participates in the divine essence of the Father. The unity between Father, Son and believer is the most appropriate “use” of the Father’s milk. If the Son is hosted by the believer, the milk of the Father is not “poured out uselessly” (V.3), but has found his true purpose.

Together with 1 Petr 2:2-3 the milk-texts in the Odes of Solomon are an excellent example for how early Christians used the IBF to express the reception of divine power, grace and redemption. One could add Irenaeus of Lyon (cf. LATTKE 2009: 270) and Clement of Alexandria. The latter develops an outspoken milk-christology. Clement’s work on the Logos as true pedagogue ends with a hymn where his basic understanding of milk is obvious: The heavenly milk coming from the maternal breasts of the Logos is the medium of salvation and can be seen as the Holy Spirit, or the teaching of Christ or the salvific suffering of Christ or his blood given in Eucharist. On the basis of 1 Peter 2 Clement even rejects any verbal understanding of 1 Cor 3, claiming that Paul does not mean what he says. Clement interprets Paul in the same way as he understands 1 Peter 2, seeing the IBF as an expression of salvific nourishment. We have to remember also of Ephraim’s Hymn cited above, where the son is breast-feeding the whole creation with his milk of life. It would, however, not be sufficient to see 1 Peter as the “mother” of this use of the IBF, as it can be found already in Ancient Egyptian religion. It seems to be a multi-cultural topic even.

Divine milk as medium of power in pre-Christian cultures

As already briefly mentioned above, many cultural systems regard mother's milk not only as a physiological phenomenon but also charge it with deeper meaning. And in ancient cultural worlds the idea that the breastfeeding mother will give something of her character or essence to the baby, is very common. That is also why the use of wet-nurses – widespread especially in upper-class families – was criticised by many ancient authors (cf. SCHREINER 1994: 193-4).

As to Egyptian tradition one can say that when a goddess gives breast to a baby her milk will give the divine power of blessing to the suckling. The milk of Isis is especially connected with the power of divine kingship. Mythological tradition connects her with Osiris the first god-king who was killed, but brought back to life by his sister-wife Isis. Being revived by his sister-wife Osiris becomes the prototype of the "Kingship in the West", i.e. the royal afterlife. On the other side Horus, the son of Osiris and Isis, is the prototype of the living king. Any living king is to be understood as „Horus on the Throne“. When the goddess is depicted as Isis lactans she gives not only breast to her mythical son but also to the Egyptian king who is an incarnation of Horus. The royal mythology, however, does not limit the milk-topic to Isis. Maybe she is the most important mother of the king, but she definitely is not the only wet-nurse to the king. Moreover the king is shown as being suckled by different female deities.

In Hatshepsut's "million-year-house", her afterlife-temple at Deir el-Bahari, the goddess Hathor is depicted in her divine appearance as a wild cow (fig. 1), speaking to her royal-divine daughter:

.... I am your mother, creator of your beauty. I have breast-fed you so that you have the rights of Horus, the Royal power over the South and over the North. I give you years in eternity [= your reign shall ever end].

In this text it can be seen clearly that the divine milk transports the power to exercise the divine office of kingship legitimately. Maybe Hatshepsut needed this milk more than others, as she – being a woman – claimed an office which was exclusively determined as a masculine one by the Egyptian tradition. This conflict between personal and official gender is made obvious by the contrast between text and image. While the text refers to the female gender of Hatshepsut, the image follows tradition and depicts the king with a male body.

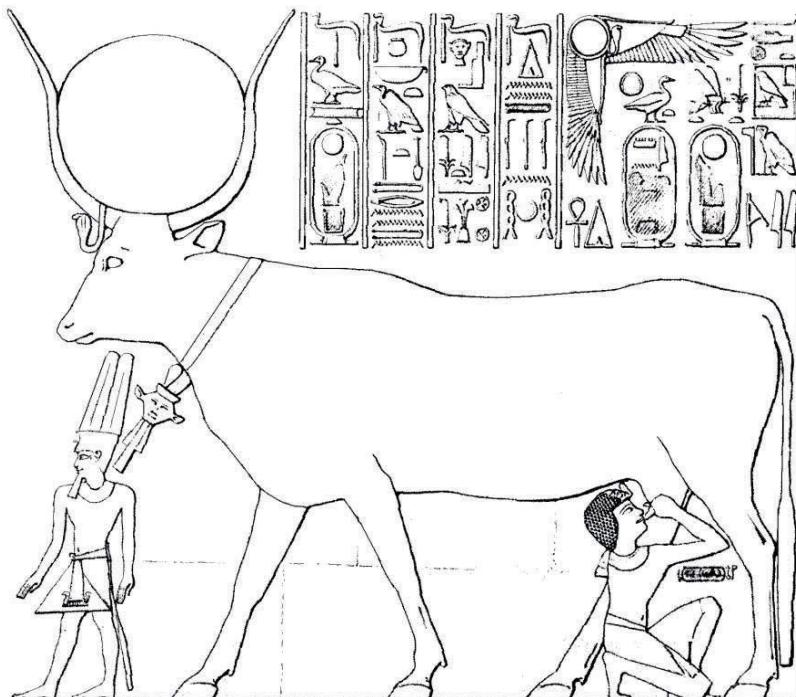


fig. 1

But even kings who did not have a conflict between personal and official gender are often depicted as suckling the heavenly milk of goddesses. The famous birth-relief of Amenhotep III in Karnak even shows four goddesses acting as wet-nurses for the new born king— two in human body, two in body of a cow (fig. 2). While the human mother is watching the scene without doing anything the goddesses transfer their divine power to the new king. By giving him her divine milk they bestow the king with the heavenly power which is necessary for his divine-royal office.

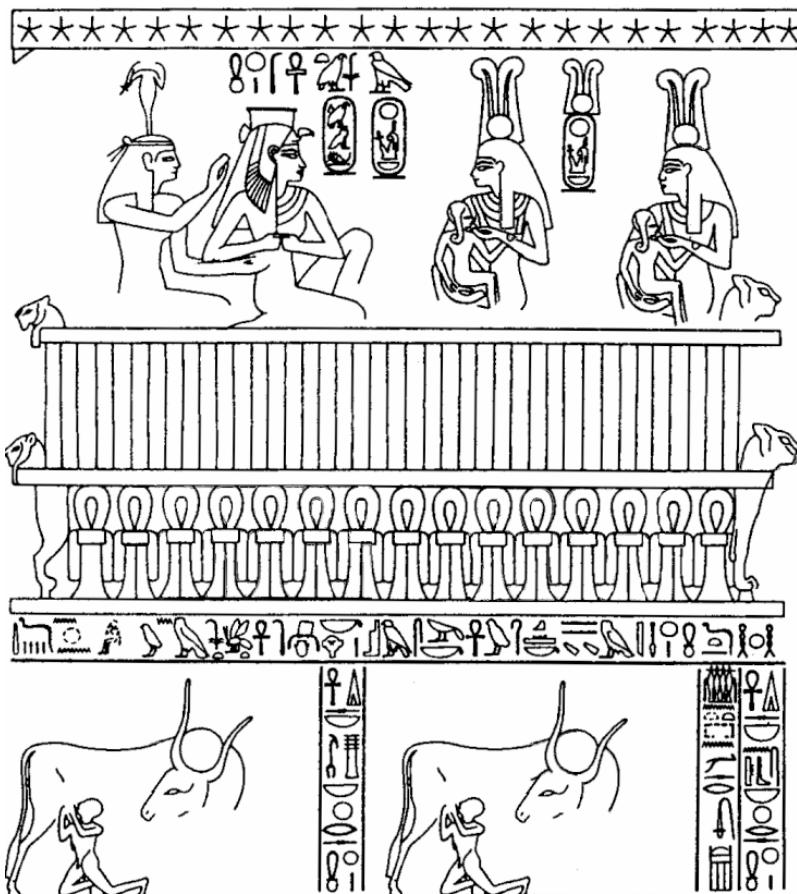


fig. 2

Although the king already was an adult person when he ordered to create the birth-relief on the temple walls, this relief depicted him as a suckling. Looking back to the childhood of the king did not damage the royal image as the most powerful, super-human man on earth. Just in the contrary! As the birth-relief looked back to the mythical childhood of the king it took part in construing his powerful royal essence as god-on-earth, which is central to royal ideology in Egypt. When the king is depicted as the suckling of a divine-mother the intention is not to stress his

natural weakness and dependency as a baby but to stress his royal-divine power which he got through the divine milk of his mother-goddesses.

In much later times the IBF served even Roman emperors to express their divine power and legitimization. Caesar Domitian (81-96 CE) for example erected an obelisk (cf. fig. 3) in his *Iseum Campense*, a sacred area for goddess Isis. The hieroglyphic texts of this obelisk show the Roman emperor in the role of an Egyptian god-king. Among the numerous topics used here to propagate the ruler's divine origin as "perfect god" (*ntr nfr*), we find the IBF also. The inscription on the western side of the obelisk says how Domitian got his power by the gods: The "two Ladies" (i.e. the goddesses of Upper and Lower Egypt) gave breast to Pharaoh Domitian and fed him. By doing so these divine wet-nurses transferred power and strength upon him so that he could rule already as a baby "on his napkin" (*tp nwd.t=f*) (cf. LEMBKE 1994: 212).

Apart from such direct political-religious use of the IBF the Hellenistic-Roman culture-world also knows the idea that the milk of goddesses transfers divine power or divine essence. The best known example is Heracles being suckled by Hera. Greek mythology presents Heracles as the son of god Zeus and the human mother Alkmene. Zeus, notoriously adulterous, visits Alkmene disguised as her husband Amphitryon and conceives a child with her. Alkmene having learned about the real father of her son tries to get rid of the baby. She abandons her son in order to avoid the revenge of Hera, the legitimate wife of Zeus, being known as very jealous. Athena, however, saves the baby and brings it to Hera. The goddess not recognizing the identity of the child starts breast-feeding it. Heracles, however, begins to suck his divine wet-nurse so forcefully that it pains her. She throws the greedy suckling off her breast and her divine milk shooting out creates stars – the Milky Way! But through the milk he has received from Hera, Heracles already has all the divine power that will enable him to accomplish his heroic deeds which the myth is telling about.

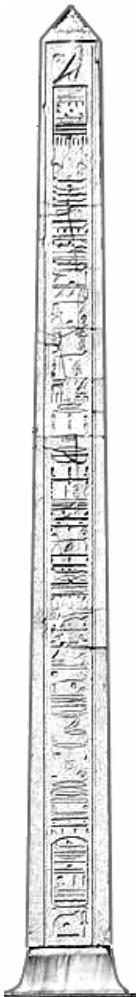


fig. 3



fig. 4

This pagan myth was part of the cultural heritage of Christian Europe as can be seen from an impressive painting achieved by Tintoretto for Emperor Rudolph II (fig. 4). One can ask if the Catholic emperor wanted to see himself as a second Hercules when he ordered this painting. We cannot know exactly, but we can be sure that the semantic link between Rudolph and Hercules definitely should not be seen in the powerless state of a baby who cannot help himself. The link must be seen in the powerful deeds which an Emperor accomplishes as well as the hero Heracles – at least on the ideological level.

“Re-ordering” Gender – How the source of divine milk got female again

Latest in the 5th century CE, higher spiritual semantics was attributed to Mary’s milk. This happened despite the fact that the earliest Church fathers had linked Mary’s human milk to the human nature of Christ.

SCHREINER quotes Theodore of Ankyra († before 446 CE), who invited Christian believers to drink milk of salvation from Mary's breasts.

"Because with her is the source of life, hers are the breasts of spiritual and unadulterated milk. We came here now with enthusiasm to suck sweetness from these breasts."

(SCHREINER 1994: 177. English translation JK)

This interpretation of Mary's milk is obviously nurtured by pagan ideas on divine milk and at the same time it is based on a New Testament text. Theodore quite obviously alludes to 1 Petr 2:2-3. But how can Mary become the source of divine milk on this basis? The answer can be given by recognizing the allegorical character of early Christian theology. It begins with Paul defining the Church as body of Christ. Later one concluded that Mary is the mother of the Church as she gave birth to the body of Christ which is not only the historical Jesus but on a metaphorical level the Church also. But the metaphorical conclusions go on. Mary can also be understood as the Church herself as she gave birth to the Logos and the Church is exactly doing that. Just as the incarnate Word of God was born by Virgin Mary, the Church is giving virginal birth again and again to the Word of God. In this allegorical logic characteristics of Mary can be transferred to the Church and also the other way round. That is why Mary – being the prototype of Church – can invite the believers to suck heavenly milk from their virgin-mother-breasts. And the birth of Christ from the virginal womb of mother Mary is the prototype of the permanent birth of believers (= body of Christ) out of the virginal womb of mother Church (cf. RAHNER 1935: 339-355).

This highly sophisticated theological game with metaphors which are rooted in the Bible appeared as purely Christian to its players, but it opened the door to the influence of older pre-Christian traditions. That is why patterns of Egyptian Isis-Hathor-religion can be found in Christian use of the IBF although the Christian theologians never intended to go back to these pagan traditions.

Isis lactans = Maria lactans?

For some centuries we find only texts which show a Christian use of IBF, but there were no artefacts. The situation is different from the 6th to 7th century CE on and the change can be seen first in the Coptic (Egyptian) Church. The eldest indigenous church in Africa created one of the

most remarkable topics in the history of Christian art, the *Maria lactans*. Mary, breast-feeding her son Jesus became the classical form of the IBF in later Christianity. Since long it is recognised that this type of images is very similar to that of the Egyptian mother-goddess Isis who gives breast to her son Horus ("*Isis lactans*").

And indeed, as can be seen from fig. 5-8 the similarities are quite astonishing.



fig. 5



fig. 6



fig. 7



fig. 8

Of course one has to be careful and not take similarities which maybe superficial as the only basis of far going conclusions. Things that look alike must not necessarily be alike. This statement often made by conservative Christian scholars is generally true and one should not overlook differences between Mary and Isis, especially not the biggest one: As far as we know Mary never was venerated as a goddess on its own – at least not in early Christianity. On the other side Isis was a real goddess. Although she always was integrated in the Egyptian or Hellenistic-Egyptian pantheon she enjoyed cultic veneration as an independent deity with universal competence.

We must, however say, that its relevance is somewhat limited. On the basis of a structural view of religion, it is not that easy to make a clear difference between a Christian saint and an Egyptian deity like Isis. The main reason lies in the fact that Mary belongs to a religious system which is dominated by a monotheistic claim. Isis, however, belongs to a religious system which does not have this problem. That is why she can be called a goddess, while Mary cannot. But on the other side yet there are structural similarities between Jewish, Christian and Islamic angels or Christian saints and Egyptian deities: they are neither almighty nor omniscient nor omnipresent; they have a beginning and by that they are not fully eternal. That means the fact that Mary never was venerated as a deity on her own right, with her own temple, priesthood and offerings, does not rule out any comparison with an Egyptian deity.

Mary, Isis and God's Wisdom

There is, however, another important aspect that should not be overseen. In Egyptian tradition Isis is not just mother, she is the royal mother. Already her name points in that direction as it means “throne”. Although Isis often was depicted with Hathor's cow-horns with sun disk, her original insignia was a throne on her head (cf. fig. 5).

Each and every Egyptian king could see himself as an incarnation of god Horus and when he was sitting on his throne he was re-enacting the mythical icon of Isis and Horus. The king (representing Horus) was sitting on the knees of his mother Isis, represented by the royal-divine throne.

Isis is mother to the legitimate ruler. Isis is also linked to Ma'at, the Egyptian goddess of order and justice as the divine order is the basis of

any legitimate ruling. That is why the Isis-Horus-constellation fits perfectly to the mother of the messiah-king. Since Christians are convinced that Jesus is the true messiah-king, Mary easily turns into a royal mother and the royal constellation “Isis-Horus” converts into the messianic constellation “Mary-Jesus”. Recognizing this one must also say that the similarities are not simply superficial, but is touching deeper structures of religious belief. One must say that obviously early Christians expressed their faith into Jesus as Messiah-King by means of not only biblical but also pagan patterns of thinking and believing. Regarding the cultural world they were living in one may ask if any alternative was given.

Connected with Mary’s status as mother of the Messiah is the title “See of Wisdom” (= *Sedes Sapientiae*). This is not very surprising as the title has two strong sources. The first is the identification of Christ with the divine wisdom-logos. Especially the Gospel of John presents Jesus as the incarnation of God’s Logos (John 1:14) who is a male version of God’s wisdom. The second source for Mary’s connection with God’s wisdom is the link between Lady Wisdom and Isis. Especially the Book of Wisdom, written in Egypt during the 1st BCE, undertakes a thorough re-interpretation of the biblical wisdom tradition using patterns of the then powerful Isis-religion (cf. SCHROER 1998). In doing so the Book of Wisdom, however, mainly stressed Isis’ role as universal deity and not so much her maternal aspects. Just like Isis the divine wisdom is reigning universally over space and time. In order to show up this universal role of God’s wisdom the whole history of salvation is retold as a history of Lady Wisdom’s impact on Israel (Wis 10-19). Just like Isis God’s wisdom is depicted as a royal Lady enthroned in heaven. And she also has a royal counterpart on earth, the most-wise king Solomon, who is the (fictitious) author of the Book of Wisdom.

As soon as Mary was understood as mother of a king the link with the divine wisdom was not farfetched at all. And so the royal Lady Mary was a central topic of Christian art from Late Antiquity to early Middle Ages. Especially the Romanic epoch when Christian art focused on the royal dignity of Jesus mainly depicted his mother as *Sedes Sapientiae*.

Mary as heavenly mother

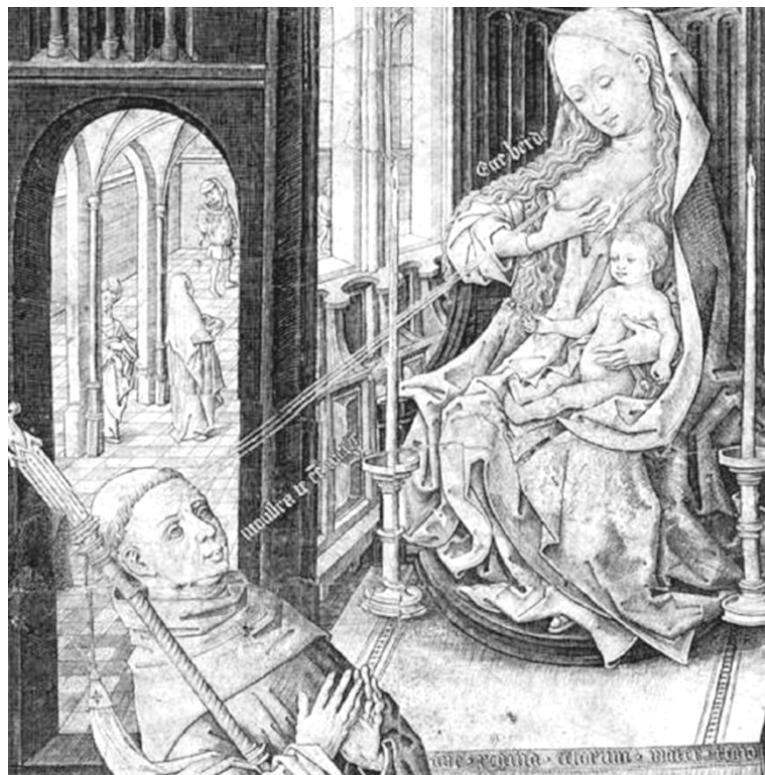


fig. 9

The further development of Christian art and spirituality more and more left the myth-critical stance of the first centuries behind and approached closer to the semantic structures of mythical tradition. This can be explained by the fact that the pagan religions did no longer exist. Their myths no longer meant any religious competition to Christianity – sometimes they even were forgotten. That is why the deeper mythical structures underlying the early Christian theology, gained more and more influence. This led back to the idea of divine milk as medium of power, connected with the IBF since old.

This can be seen clearly when Bernard of Clairvaux (ca. 1090-1153) and some saints more are said to have been nursed by Mary in a mystic way.

At that time Mary already had become a superhuman, heavenly mother. Not only Jesus was her son, but all Christian believers are her children. And the milk she is spending now does not only stand for human nature. The human nature of men like Bernard is completely out of discussion! As an adult Bernard also will not need human breastfeeding anymore but of course since long is used to normal nutrition. That means the IBF now is a means to show Mary's milk as transferring heavenly goods like divine wisdom, understanding, the ability to preach the Gospel, and others. That is why on the drawing presented here (fig. 9) Mary's milk shot does not hit Bernard's mouth but his forehead – the head being the place where virtues are located.

And of course it is not about natural nutrition when Mary breastfeeds the suffering souls in purgatory as can be seen on a painting dating from 16th century CE (cf. fig. 10). Already the relations of size – the huge body of Mary and the small figure of the souls – indicate that Mary is depicted as a superhuman, heavenly person. Her maternal milk effects spiritual comfort and perhaps even salvation. One has to keep in mind that in late Middle Ages Mary was not only seen as mediatrix (mediator) of salvation but also as co-redemptrix (co-redeemer). This idea was especially vivid in theology and spirituality of Franciscans and Dominicans. The picture of Filotesio Nicola (fig. 10) anyway shows that up to the beginning 16th century CE Mary was seen more and more in the role of a divine wet-nurse for Christian believers. Mary is giving divine spiritual goods by her milk – just as Isis-Hathor or Hera did in earlier times. This led to a vivid interest in milk-relics which gained an enormous spiritual and commercial importance. The veneration of these milk-relics was faced by fierce critique – not only by Church reformers like Martin Luther but also by roman-catholic theologians. We find the Franciscan author Bernardine of Siena (1380-1444), called the Apostle of Italy, mocking about the inflationary multitude of milk-relics:

“There are people who show around relics as being milk from Virgin Mary. Oh, one hundred cows cannot have as much milk as they show from Mary all over the world, but yet she did not have neither more and nor less than what was necessary for her child Jesus.”

(cf. SCHREINER, 1994: 203. English translation JK)

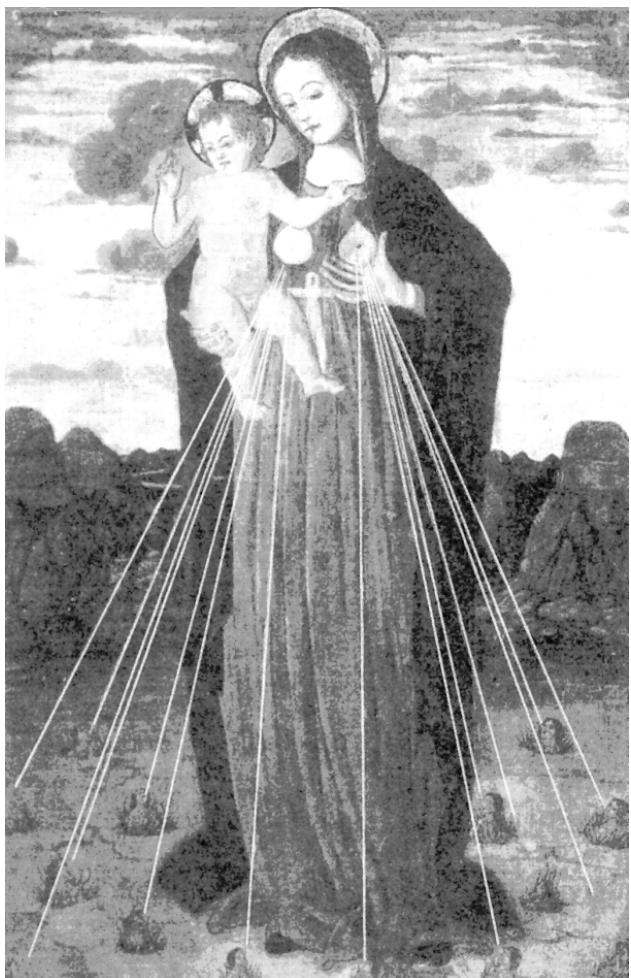


fig. 10

And indeed, even as a catholic author one must concede that some of the later developments in Mariology are charged with many problems if one looks at them from a biblical perspective. The main question is: Is later Mariology still preaching the Christian message with pre-Christian patterns – as the early Coptic Church did? Or is it the other way round and non-Christian mother-religion is reappearing in Christian disguise? Of course theology always has to pay respect to religious need of female and

maternal aspects in religion, which is so deep-rooted in human nature. From a biblical perspective the proper answer to this need would, however, be a stronger focus on the female aspects of God as they are shown by so many biblical text. This would be much more appropriate than an uncontrolled idolization of mother Mary.

Authors of New Testament texts as well as Church Fathers dared to integrate God-Father and the Son into the IBF to express the nourishing and empowering quality of salvation. Obviously they had no problem with talking about a breast-feeding Father or breast-feeding Son. If the first generations of Christians had no problem with a God who is beyond the categories of male and female, why should we have problems with it? It is time to decide whether our cultural gender-stereotypes are more important to us than oldest Christian tradition. If we opt for our tradition we must get ready to learn that God is transcending genders. God is a fatherly mother as well as a motherly father, and being that “he” is *all* we need. The moment we understand ourselves as “his” children, nourished by the milk of divine grace and love, we get the power to live in true freedom and dignity.

ὅσοι δὲ ἔλαβον αὐτόν,
ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι,
τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ,
οἵ οὐκ ἔξ αἰμάτων
οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς
οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρὸς
ἀλλ’ ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν.
(Joh 1:12-13)

Quoted Publications

- Jan ASSMANN, Ägypten. Theologie und Frömmigkeit einer frühen Hochkultur, Stuttgart 1984.
- Edmund BECK, Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen De Nativitate (Epiphania) (CSCO 187 – Scriptores Syri 83), Louvain 1959.
- Hellmut BRUNNER, , Die Geburt des Gottkönigs. Studien zur Überlieferung eines altägyptischen Mythos, Wiesbaden 1986.
- Sabrina HIGGINS, Divine Mothers: The Influence of Isis on the Virgin Mary in Egyptian Lactans-Iconography, Journal of the Canadian Society for Coptic Studies 3–4, 2012, 71-90.
- Othmar KEEL, Gott weiblich. Eine verborgene Seite des biblischen Gottes, Gütersloh 2010.
- Pierre LAFERRIERE, La Bible murale dans les sanctuaires coptes, Le Caire 2008.
- Michael LATTKE, The Odes of Solomon. A commentary (Hermeneia), Minneapolis 2009.
- Katja LEMBKE, Das Iseum Campense in Rom. Studie über den Isiskult unter Domitian (Archäologie und Geschichte 3), Heidelberg 1994.
- Edouard NAVILLE, The Temple of Deir el Bahari, Part IV, London 1901.
- Hugo RAHNER, Die Gottesgeburt. Die Lehre der Kirchenväter von der Geburt Christi im Herzen der Gläubigen, in: Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie 59 (1935) 333-418.
- Klaus SCHREINER, Maria: Jungfrau, Mutter, Herrscherin, München 1994.
- Silvia SCHROER, Das Buch der Weisheit. Ein Beispiel jüdischer interkultureller Theologie, in: Schottroff, Luise/ Wacker, Marie-Theres (Hg.), Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung, Gütersloh 1998, 441-449.

List of Illustrations

- 1 **Hathor lactans, old Egyptian**, 18th dynasty, time of Hatshepsut. Relief in the Hathor-chapel at Deir el Bahari. Computer graphic JK (cf. Naville 1901: plate CV).
- 2 **The King being suckled by several goddesses**, 18th dynasty, time of Amenhotep III. Detail (slightly complemented) of a wall relief at Luxor-temple. Computer graphic JK (cf. Brunner 1986: Tafel 12).
- 3 **Domitian's Obelisk in Rome** (nowadays at the Piazza Navona on a basis dating from Baroque time). Computer graphic JK.
- 4 **Heracles being suckled by goddess Hera**. Jacopo Comin „Tintoretto“ (1518-1594), „The Origin of the Milky Way“, painting, ca. 1575 (http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jacopo_Tintoretto_011.jpg)
- 5 **Isis lactans in old Egyptian style**. Goddess Isis breastfeeding her son Horus (4th-1st century CE). Martin von Wagner Museum der Universität Würzburg. Computer-graphic JK (cf. http://wege-ins-jenseits.de/dl/Isis_lactans.jpg).
- 6 **Isis lactans in Hellenistic-Egyptian style**. Fresco from a house in Kharanis, Oasis Fayum (4th century CE). Computer graphic JK (cf. Higgins 2012: 86 fig. 6). As can be seen Isis-religion was pertaining for long time even after the Christianisation of Egypt.
- 7 **Maria lactans in Coptic style**. Painting in a monk's cell of Jeremiah-monastery at Saqqara (7. Jh. nC); Coptic Museum, Cairo. Computer graphic JK (cf. Higgins 2012: 88 fig. 9).
- 8 **Maria lactans in Coptic style**. Painting in the apse of Coptic Amba-Bishoy-church „Red Monastery“, near Sohag (7th-8th century CE). Computer graphic JK (cf. Laferrière 2008: 92 pl. IV).
- 9 **Lactatio Bernardi, the Mother-of-God breastfeeding Saint Bernard of Clairvaux**. Detail of a woodcut by Master „IAM“, Zwolle ca. 1480, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Computer graphic JK. Cf. <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4b/StBernardFS.jpg>.
- 10 **La Madonna del Suffragio, The Mother-of-God giving heavenly milk to the souls in purgatory**. Painting by Filotesio Nicola (“Cola dell'Amatrice”), 1508, Chieti, Municipio. Computer graphic JK (cf. Keel 2010: 133 f. with fig. 28).