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Feminine Language for God in the Hebrew Bible and the Implications for the Image of God in Women

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Shanté Grossett O'Neal

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Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Genesis 1:27 states "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Therefore, it seems logical to conclude that since God created male and female in his image, there are masculine and feminine aspects to God.[1] In fact, the Hebrew Bible contains at least twenty-two references to feminine God-language.[2] For example, in Isaiah 42:14, God is compared to a woman in childbirth; and in Deuteronomy 32:18, Moses describes God as the one who gave birth to Israel. Despite this, many evangelical Christians emphasize God's masculine qualities and minimize, or disregard his feminine qualities. God is often described as a father, king, or warrior and rarely pictured as a mother, midwife, or nurse. When God's feminine qualities are diminished, Christians run the risk of envisioning God and his creation in an excessively androcentric manner. Consequently, they miss the opportunity to see God's character on display through the lens of femininity. Moreover, an overly androcentric view of God may alienate women in the Church and negatively inform Christians' beliefs and practices concerning the image of God in women.

Statement of Purpose

In view of this, the purpose of this thesis is threefold: it aims to demonstrate that the masculine and feminine language for God in the Hebrew Bible is employed as a metaphorical

[1] God is neither male nor female.

[2] Deuteronomy 32:18, Isaiah 45:9-10, Isaiah 66:9, Isaiah 42:14, Job 10:10-11, Numbers 11:12, Job 38:28-29, Psalm 22:10-11, Psalm 71:6, Job 38:7-9, Job 39:1, Psalm 131:2, Isaiah 66:13, Isaiah 49:15, Psalm 34:9, Hosea 11:1-4, Isaiah 46:3-4, Ezekiel 36:25, Psalm 123:2-3, Hosea 13:8, Genesis 49:25-26, Jeremiah 31:20.

vehicle to communicate attributes of God such as God's compassion, faithfulness, and love; to bring awareness to the feminine metaphors for God in the Hebrew Bible; and finally, to address the implications of feminine God-language for women and their identities as image-bearers. Toward this threefold aim and recognizing that the language of God's fatherhood is significant for Christians, this paper will also explore the meaning of the Trinitarian designation "God the Father" and will consider its implications for the use of feminine God-language.

Statement of the Importance of the Problem

A disproportionately androcentric view of God implicitly esteems males as more important than females and leads to a distorted view of God. If one desires to worship God rightly and love their neighbors rightly, they must also know God rightly. It was an incorrect view of God that led Christians in the early church to view women as "subordinate…to the man", "weak and fickle", "untrustworthy" and "of mediocre intelligence."[3] While modern Christians may not go as far in their description of women, the general sentiment has not fully changed. For example, the complementarian position of denying women's leadership stem from a belief that women are created to be subordinate to men.[4] However, addressing this issue can lead to a more balanced understanding of God and women in which God is not perceived as masculine, and males are not regarded as superior to females.

Statement of Position on the Problem

Since God created male and female in his image, God likely possesses both masculine

[3] See Iraneus, *Fragment 32;* John Chrysostom, *Homily 9 on 1 Timothy;* Epiphanius, *Against Heresies 79.1.6.*

[4] For example, Andrew E. Steinmann, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=5844291, 81.

and feminine attributes. However, God is a Spirit and is neither male nor female.[5] Yet, God chooses to reveal himself through human gender. Although masculine language is primarily used in the Bible and in the language of the Church, masculine language does not have to be the only way in which Christians speak of God.[6] Seeing God in feminine and maternal ways, alongside masculine ways can help to ensure that masculinity is not overly emphasized and can affirm that women equally bear the image of God.

Limits/Delimitations

Considering the extensive body of literature on feminine language for God, this thesis will need clearly defined parameters and limits to narrow its focus. First, it will need to pay special attention to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory and its role in biblical theology. Since this field is broad, its contributions will focus only on explaining the function of metaphors in the scriptures and their use in describing attributes of God. Along these lines, although a case can be made for feminine language in the New Testament, this paper will focus solely on examples in the Hebrew Bible. Specifically, the discussion will prioritize four significant feminine metaphors for God: GOD AS A BIRTHING MOTHER, GOD AS A NURSING MOTHER, GOD AS A PROTECTIVE MOTHER BIRD, and GOD AS A MIDWIFE.[7] Through presenting these metaphors, the paper will highlight specific associations between God and women, reinforcing the case for women's value and complete inclusion in the Image of God.

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[5] Evangelical Christians agree with the Catechism of the Catholic Church that states: "God transcends the human distinctions between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman: he is God. He also transcends human fatherhood and motherhood, although he is their origin and standard: no one is father as God is Father." (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 239); Similarly, Numbers 23:19 (LEB) states: "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of humankind, that he should change his mind."

[6] This will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

[7] In linguistics, conceptual metaphors are presented in all capital letters.

Research Methods

In this paper, my research will center on exploring scripture and contemporary literary scholarship concerning feminine language for God, the concept of God as Father, and the image of God in women. I will analyze relevant passages by drawing from commentaries, articles, and biblical language resources. Further, I will discuss metaphor theory and examine its significance for biblical studies. While much of its focus is on the biblical texts, this paper also places a significant emphasis on theological implications, particularly as they relate to women.

Data Analysis

I plan to gather data using the Jerry Falwell Library, local libraries, Interlibrary loan, online databases such as ATLA, JSTOR, WorldCat, and EBSCOhost, biblical and theological journals, and books. The data will include existing scholarship on the issue as well as the biblical text. Existing scholarship will be compared, and their views will be analyzed according to how effectively they interpret the exegetical and theological issues relevant to this thesis.

Proposal for Chapter Division

The first chapter includes an introduction to the problem, explains the purpose and importance of the research, and addresses limits and delimitations of the thesis. Chapter two primarily discusses background information, including a brief survey of the history of scholarship and an introduction to metaphor theory. Next, chapter three explores the feminine metaphors for God in the Hebrew Bible. The metaphors in view are that of GOD AS A BIRTHING MOTHER, GOD AS A NURSING MOTHER, GOD AS A PROTECTIVE MOTHER BIRD, and GOD AS A MIDWIFE. Chapter four considers the Trinitarian doctrine of God's fatherhood in light of the feminine language in scripture. It addresses the meaning of the metaphor GOD THE FATHER and

its role in Christians' understanding of God.[8] Lastly, the final chapter addresses the implications of feminine God-language for the image of God in women.

Proposed Summary of Each Chapter

As previously mentioned, chapter one begins with an introduction of the problem and then addresses the purpose and importance of the thesis, the position of the thesis, and finally, its limits and delimitations. Chapter two addresses some early views on feminine God-language from the perspective of secular feminist scholars, non-evangelical Christian feminist scholars, evangelical feminist or egalitarian scholars, and complementarian scholars. Chapter two also includes an introduction to metaphor theory and suggests that metaphors in the Bible convey more than just poetic rendering of otherwise serious language, and instead are couched with deeper meaning. Particularly, metaphors about God are a vehicle for understanding God's nature and attributes. Chapter three focuses in on the metaphors GOD AS A BIRTHING MOTHER, GOD AS A NURSING MOTHER, GOD AS A PROTECTIVE MOTHER BIRD, and GOD AS A MIDWIFE. Each section includes select passages from the Hebrew Bible which demonstrates the metaphor. Chapter three closely examines these verses to explain the meaning and purpose behind the metaphor. Next, chapter four covers the metaphor GOD THE FATHER and acknowledges its significance in Christian theology. Chapter four also studies its role in the Christian understanding of God's

[8] Throughout this thesis, GOD THE FATHER is referred to as a metaphor. This is not to reduce the language of God's fatherhood to mere figurative language. In the following chapter, I will argue that metaphorical language serves as a means through which God accommodates to the finite knowledge of human beings, and thus a significant way of communicating divine revelation. I affirm the doctrine of the Eternal Generation of the Son and the ontological reality that God has always been the Father of Jesus Christ. However, since human language surrounding fatherhood typically depends upon sexual reproduction, language surrounding God's fatherhood can also be seen as metaphorical. The language used to describe God's fatherhood need not be literal for it to be an ontological reality. John M. Frame explains it well: "There is no reason to have any general theological preference for literal language over figurative language or to assume that every metaphor must be literally explained in precise academic terms. Scripture does not do that. Often, in fact, figurative language says more, and says it more clearly, than corresponding literal language would do." John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987), 222-228.

gender. It suggests that while Christians know God as Father, they do not often know why they call God “Father.” Lastly, it presents the argument that calling God “Father” does not mean that God is male and is therefore compatible with the use of feminine language for God. The thesis culminates with chapter five which centers on the image of God in women, female subordination, and the implications of feminine language for God in the Hebrew Bible for our understanding of the image of God in women devoid of subjugation.

Results

The goal of this paper is to promote awareness among evangelical Christians about the feminine language for God in scripture. Further, it aims to provide a balanced approach to the subtle belief that God is male or masculine. Ultimately, its purpose is to challenge the perspective that women do not reflect the image of God as fully as men, and instead affirm that experiences traditionally associated with femininity can lead others to worship God authentically, since these qualities originate from God.

Chapter 2: Background

Survey of the History of Scholarship

Introduction

During the late 1960s, feminist theologians and scholars became increasingly concerned with the patriarchal background of scripture and the Christian faith. They believed that Christians were susceptible to the "idolization of masculinity", or the "sin of alienation that estranges men and women as well as men and God."[9] Naturally, gender and divine God-language became of particular importance. Rather than promoting the equality of women, they believed masculine God-language encouraged males to elevate themselves to God-like statuses. Further, they suggested that "the naming of males as norms of authentic humanity has caused women to be scapegoated for sin and marginalized in both original and redeemed humanity."[10] For some, this marginalization of women necessitated religious reform. Other feminist theologians left Christianity altogether in favor of goddess religions which elevated the feminine to God-like status. [11] According to these post-Christian feminist theologians, God the Father was a sexist symbol that needed to be abolished.[12] Those who opted to remain in Christianity advocated for

[9] Melissa Raphael, "A Patrimony of Idols: Second-Wave Jewish and Christian Feminist Theology and the Criticism of Religion," *Sophia* 53, no. 2 (May 2014): 241–59, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-014-0409-1.

[10] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1993), 19.

[11] Carol P. Christ and Mary Daly are among some of the feminist theologians who turned to goddess religions. Mary Daly once considered herself to be a 'radical Catholic' and later described herself as a 'postchristian feminist.' Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1968), 5.

[12] Mary Daly suggested that the symbol of "God the Father" was a symbol of male dominance. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press), 1973, 19.

either the inclusion of feminine God-language alongside masculine God-language in liturgy and scripture or the substitution of gendered language with gender neutral language for God.

Many evangelical scholars responded by denouncing feminism. While both sides agreed that God is neither male nor female, evangelical scholars argued that since biblical language for God is primarily masculine, it is inaccurate to use feminine language to describe God. Moreover, while they held orthodox Christian beliefs and esteemed scripture highly, evangelical feminists[13] recognized how the Bible had been used to harm women. Therefore, while they agreed that the Bible does present masculine language for God as primary, they also observed that the scriptures include feminine God-language that could be used among Christians to speak about God. Nevertheless, they affirmed that language for God cannot be arbitrarily modified to fit the demands of a changing society. Ultimately, they concluded that Christians may only use feminine language for God in ways consistent with scripture. Since the history of feminist scholarship is broad, the following section will provide a concise overview of both the secular and Christian scholarship relevant to this thesis.

Secular Feminist Scholarship

Mary Daly, Carol Christ, and Elaine Pagels are among secular, or post-Christian, feminists who exchanged masculine symbols for goddess religions. In *Beyond God the Father,* Mary Daly, a former Catholic, famously stated that "If God is male, then male is god."[14] She argued for a "feminist idoloclasm," or removing images that "obstruct the becoming of the image of God" in

[13] Evangelical Feminists are also known as egalitarians or mutualists.

[14] Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father,* 19.

women.[15] For Daly, abandoning the image of God the Father would lead to women's liberation.[16] Next, Elaine H. Pagels believed that the texts considered heterodox and excluded from the Christian canon "abound in feminine symbolism" applied to God.[17] She believes that these texts often describe God as a "dyadic being," consisting of both the masculine and the feminine.[18] Some viewed the "divine Mother" as the Holy Spirit, a figure known as "the eternal, mystical Silence," and also as "Wisdom."[19] Notably, through these sources, Pagels implies that the "divine Mother" is a separate goddess figure than the God of Israel, who came from this "divine Mother."[20] Further, in an article entitled "Why Women Need the Goddess," and quoting Ntozake Shange's Broadway play, Carol Christ states: "I found God in myself and I loved her fiercely."[21] She maintained that religions that center on the worship of a male God will "keep women in a state of psychological dependence on men and male authority."[22] She explained that in such a religion, women cannot know the experience of having her entire sexual identity affirmed as the image and likeness of God. Therefore, women will trust in male power as salvific and will

[15] Daly, 29.

[16] Daly, 19.

[17] Pagels, 108.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Pagels, 109.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Carol P. Christ, "Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections," In *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power within the Feminist Movement*, 71–86. Garden City, NY, 1982, 273, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001125912&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[22] Christ, 275.

distrust female power as dangerous or inferior.[23] Consequently, she proposed that women need goddess religions.[24]

Christian Feminist Scholarship

For secular feminist scholarship, Christianity was too patriarchal to be redeemed. However, Christian feminists sought ways to reconcile the patriarchal background of their faith with their desire for women's liberation. This group of scholarship include evangelical and non-evangelical theologians. Evangelical scholarship saw women's rights as rooted in scripture whereas non-evangelical feminists often attempted to reinterpret scripture for the sake of liberation.

The non-evangelical scholars significant to this thesis are Janet Martin Soskice, Sally McKague, Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Elizabeth Johnson. Soskice studied the connections between metaphor and religious language, and clarified that metaphors are not simply poetic ways of saying something that could be said literally, but it is a vehicle for describing its referent. [25] She also emphasized that the metaphors about God in Scripture are not just meant to evoke an emotion or describe something literal using poetic words. Instead, they are often used to communicate aspects of God's character through language humans can understand.[26] Specifically writing about religious language, Soskice also explained that the reason for gendered imagery in the Bible is not that the authors were preoccupied with

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid, 276.

[25] Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 53.

[26] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language,* 109.

matters of sex, hierarchy, or subordination, but that they were interested in matters of kinship.[27] In order to express God's relationship to his creation, gendered familial language needed to be used.

In her book *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language,* Sallie McFague, a contemporary of Soskice, denounced "religious literalism," or the belief that all language for God in the Bible is literally true about God.[28] Furthermore, she argued that religious language carries a sense of irrelevance because of its widespread use in modern society. She mentioned that it has become "like a creed repeated too many times, boring and repetitious."[29] She argued that the paternal model for God turned into patriarchy and instead of "father" being a model of God, it has become God's name.[30] Ultimately, she concluded that the model of GOD THE FATHER is an idol that needs to be replaced, claiming that GOD AS FATHER is a root metaphor in Christianity that promotes patriarchy and harms women.[31] Finally, she proposed that the metaphor of GOD THE FATHER be replaced with the metaphor GOD AS FRIEND since "maternal and paternal models need to be balanced by nonfamilial, non-gender-related ones."[32]

Next, in *The Divine Feminine,* Virginia Ramey Mollenkott argued from scripture and church history for the language of liturgy and scripture to be transformed to include more feminine

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[27] Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4

[28] Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 4-5.

[29] McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 7-8.

[30] Ibid, 9.

[31] Ibid, 148.

[32] McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 9.

language for God.[33] Particularly, she believed that the Lord's prayer should be addressed to "Our Father/Mother who is in Heaven" and endorsed a doxology that uses the language of "Creator, Christ, and Holy Ghost" rather than "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost." As such, Mollenkott reasoned that masculine gendered terms such as "the Son of Man" can be interchanged with gender neutral terms such as "The Human One."[34]

Mollenkott's views are based on three premises: first, that the prophets and biblical writers used feminine terms for God although it was difficult to do so in a patriarchal culture, second, that Christ did not explicitly refer to God as Mother due to the patriarchal society in which he lived, and third, that the early church often spoke of and wrote of God using feminine language.[35] Regarding Christ's reference to God as Mother, Mollenkott clarifies that "to have introduced *directly* a female image of God would at the time have been misunderstood as a reversion to paganism's multiplicity of divinities."[36]

In *Sexism and God-Talk,* Rosemary Radford Ruether argued that "the affirmation of the equivalence of maleness and femaleness in the image of God" has become obscured by a tendency to view females as less than males.[37] Following Mary Daly, she explained that it is idolatrous to believe that males are more like God than females. Choosing to refer to God as

[33] Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female*, (New York: Crossroads Publishing Co, 1983), 117.

[34] Mollenkott, 110 – 117.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid, 61.

[37] Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk,* 93.

"God/ess," Ruether stresses the importance of seeing the masculine and feminine images for God as equal.[38] She argues that the Christian tradition is sexist but can be redeemed.[39]

Finally, in *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse,* Elizabeth Johnson argues that both masculine and feminine language can be used to represent God. Furthermore, she suggests that female imagery by itself can point to God as fully as male imagery.[40] While female imagery certainly does present God as nurturing and compassionate, it can also represent God as "powerful… creating-redeeming-saving, and victorious over the powers of this world."[41] Furthermore, she condemns the Hellenistic gender dualism that has been adopted into western theological thought. Identifying males with "mind, reason, and spirit" and females with "bodiliness and passion" has led to the belief that women are symbols of evil and representative of the "sin-prone part of the male self."[42]

Next, evangelical feminist scholarship includes Aída Besançon Spencer, Tim Bulkeley, Richard S. Briggs, and Andrew Dell'Olio. Spencer does not explicitly mention her views on whether Christians can use feminine language for God, but she notes that God the Father is a metaphor in scripture that communicates the idea of a powerful ruler who also has the intimate care of a parent. She further explains by stating: "God is Father not because God is masculine. God is Father because "father" in the ancient world was a helpful metaphor to communicate

[38] Ibid, 68.

[39] Ibid, 22.

[40] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (Chestnut Ridge, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2017), 54-55.

[41] Johnson, 54.

[42] Ibid, 70.

certain aspects of God's character."[43] Her conclusion is that Christians need many metaphors, similes, and descriptive words to understand God.[44]

Likewise, in *Biblical Talk of the Motherly God,* Tim Bulkeley surveys the passages in the Old Testament in which God is described using maternal language. He then concludes that the biblical authors did not shy away from using motherly language and word-pictures in their descriptions about God. He adds that when the biblical authors wanted to demonstrate God's love and compassion, they often used maternal language. Furthermore, he explains that maternal and paternal language for God are often seen together and may protect against the danger of idolatry that can come from only portraying God using descriptions from one gender.[45]

Additionally, Richard S. Briggs adds to the conversation and suggests that the language for God in the Bible (masculine or feminine) works together to form a metaphorical picture of God. Calling God father does not mean that God is male or masculine.[46] Addressing questions surrounding whether one can pray to God as mother, Briggs concludes that this should be left up to the individual. However, in public prayer and worship, he acknowledges that it is important to avoid offending other believers. He explains that he continues to pray to God as Father but does not think that God would mind if he did otherwise.[47]

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[43] Aída Besançon Spencer, "Father-Ruler: The Meaning of the Metaphor 'Father' for God in the Bible," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39, no. 3 (September 1996): 442, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001011253&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=liberty&authtype=ip,shib.

[44] Aída Besançon Spencer, "Father-Ruler", 442

[45] Tim Bulkeley, "Biblical Talk of the Motherly God," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 17, no. 2 (August 2014): 119–37, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0002000131&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=liberty&authtype=ip,shib.

[46] Briggs, "Gender and God-Talk", 15-25.

[47] Ibid.

Finally, Andrew Dell'Olio responds to criticism about inclusive language for God in Christianity, and specifically the reference to God as "Mother." His critics argue that supplementing "mother" in addition to "father" is inappropriate for Christianity.[48] Dell'Olio disagrees with those that state that all masculine language for God should be eliminated. However, he explains that there is maternal language given to God in the Bible, and as such, Christians can refer to God using maternal language.[49] He addresses the objections that many bring about calling God mother and argues that calling God "mother" should not carry a risk of pantheism because the relationship between mothers and their children is in no way parallel to pantheism, or the view that God is identical to the world. Just as a father and his children are distinct, a mother and her children are distinct.[50] Finally, Dell'Olio gives theological reasons for calling God mother and explains that it can remind us of our intimacy and closeness with God, help us avoid confusing God with a limited, gendered image, and can help women to realize that they too are made in God's image.[51]

Conservative Evangelical Scholarship

Elizabeth Achtemeier, John Cooper, and Susan Foh are conservative evangelical scholars who disagree that feminine language should be used for God. Elizabeth Achtemeier acknowledges that women have indeed been treated poorly in society and in the church, and

[48] Andrew J. Dell'Olio and The Society of Christian Philosophers, "Why Not God the Mother?" *Faith and Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (1998): 193–209, https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil199815214.

[49] Dell'Olio, "Why Not God the Mother?", 193-197.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Dell'Olio, 203-205.

agrees that "discrimination continues today, with the Bible misused as its instrument."[52] However, she disagrees that Christians can use feminine language for God. She explains that the Bible uses masculine language for God because of God's self-revelation. She continues by suggesting that the Christian faith claims no knowledge of God beyond the knowledge revealed in scripture, and the histories of Israel, Christ, and the Church.[53] Achtemeier mentions that God should not be referred to using feminine language because God will not let himself be identified with creation. She argues that using feminine language for God can open the door to the identification of God with the world. If God is described with feminine language, she says, then the idea of birth, the womb, and suckling come into play.[54]

Next, John W. Cooper argues that Christians can refer to God as "Mother" in a supplemental way. However, Christians cannot use the term "mother" interchangeably with "Father." The term "Father" is a primary title for God, while the term "Mother" can be supplemental or secondary.[55] He appeals to Deuteronomy 32:18 and argues that it is a case of "cross gender imagery," in which a feature normally associated with one gender is figuratively described with a person of the other gender. He argues that all the feminine reference to God in the Bible are cross gender images. Because of this, Cooper maintains that feminine figures of

[52] Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Exchanging God for 'No Gods': A Discussion of Female Language for God" In *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, ed. Alvin F. Kimel, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 2.

[53] Achtemeier, "Exchanging God for 'No Gods'", 5.

[54] Ibid, 8-9.

[55] John W. Cooper and The Society of Christian Philosophers, "Supplemental but Not Equal: Reply to Dell'Olio on Feminine Language for God," *Faith and Philosophy* 17, no. 1 (2000): 116. https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil20001719.

speech in the Bible do not linguistically warrant "Mother" as a primary name for God.[56] Instead, he believes that masculine language is primary and carries "exclusive authority."[57]

Susan Foh agrees with Cooper that paternal language for God is primary. She argues that there is a difference in comparison between paternal and maternal imagery. She believes that calling God "Father" describes the person of God while terms referring to God as "Mother" describes an action of God.[58] Foh's position is based on her understanding of figurative language, and the relationship between metaphors and similes. She suggests that feminine language for God is usually represented through similes while masculine language for God is depicted through analogy or metaphor. She concludes that analogies or metaphors are superior while similes are inferior.

Metaphor Theory and Feminine Language for God

Introduction

Andrea L. Weiss rightly notes that the study of metaphors for God should be central to biblical theology.[59] The biblical authors were careful about weaving metaphorical language throughout the pages of scripture. Since God is "wholly other,"[60] finite human language naturally falls short in describing his divine nature. Therefore, the best way to even begin to

[56] Cooper, "Supplemental but Not Equal," 118.

[57] I disagree with Cooper that masculine language carries exclusive authority. However, Cooper is correct in his view that fatherhood language for God is primary. Chapter four will argue that while fatherhood language is primary, it is because of the relationship between the Father and the Son, and not because of masculinity. Cooper, *Our Father in Heaven*, 195.

[58] Susan Foh, *Women and the Word of God: A Response to Biblical Feminism* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1979), 151.

[59] Andrea L. Weiss, "Making a Place for Metaphor in Biblical Theology," in *Theology of the Hebrew Bible, Volume 1: Methodological Studies* (SBL Press, 2019), 130, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvhrd0md.

[60] This term was coined by the Swiss Theologian, Karl Barth.

describe the awe, wonder, and greatness of God is through using metaphorical language. Similarly, John Calvin in his *Institutes of Christian Religion* explains that since he is infinite, it is impossible for human beings to understand God on our own. However, God accommodates to humanity and presents spiritual revelation in a way that is accessible to finite beings.[61] Metaphorical language is one of the ways in which God graciously accommodates to humanity and reveals his nature and character in a way that humans can grasp.

It is not surprising to find metaphors in scripture. The Psalms and the wisdom literature communicate God's revelation primarily through metaphors and other figurative language. For instance, Proverbs 12:18 describes the words of the wicked as "swords," and Proverbs 27:8 compares a bird fleeing its nest to a person fleeing their home in danger. Further, Psalm 23 famously depicts God as a shepherd and God's people as sheep. Yet, metaphorical language is not limited to the wisdom literature. In Deuteronomy, the Song of Moses is replete with metaphorical language. In Isaiah, the prophet describes Israel as a vineyard and God as the vinedresser. When the biblical authors use metaphorical language, they communicate divine revelation by giving their readers a fuller picture of God that would not be possible with literal language.

Pertaining feminine language for God, since God is a Spirit and is neither male nor female, all gendered language for God is metaphorical.[62] Gendered language highlight the personhood of God. Unlike the gods of the other Ancient Near Eastern civilizations, Israel's God

[61] Calvin compares the way a nurse speaks to an infant to the way God speaks to his people. He continues and suggests that this form of "speaking," does not completely express what God is like. Instead, it accommodates the knowledge of God to humans' capacity to understand. John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), 121.

[62] Hanne Løland, "Still Invisible after All These Years?: Female God-Language in the Hebrew Bible: A Response to David J. A. Clines," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 141, no. 2 (2022): 199–217, https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1412.2022.1.

was not distant or unknowable. God created humanity as gendered beings: male and female. Therefore, when God is depicted by humanity, it is most often through the lens of maleness and femaleness. Though it is true that there are more examples of masculine language for God than feminine, qualities of both genders can be used to demonstrate God's character. For example, Christians recognize that the metaphor GOD IS KING points to God's sovereignty and rule over creation. Similarly, the metaphor GOD IS A WARRIOR speaks of God's might in battle against the spiritual and physical enemies of his people. "Father," the most common metaphor Christians use to describe God is more complex and communicates many different aspects of God's nature. However, in scripture, God is also described as nursing mother (Isaiah 49:15), a midwife (Psalm 22:9), and a woman in labor (Isaiah 42:14). A brief discussion of metaphorical theology will reveal that this language has the power to communicate significant attributes of God.

The Meaning and Purpose of Biblical Metaphors

In their book, *Metaphors We Live By,* Lakoff and Johnson explain that most of our ordinary conceptual system is metaphorical.[63] This view of metaphor theory is directly in contrast with the Classical or Traditional View of Metaphor proposed by Aristotle that viewed metaphors primarily as a function of language and not of thought.[64] However, the basic premise of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory is that human beings naturally understand and experience one thing in terms of another. For example, in Western societies, the concept of an argument is understood through the idea of war. "Argument" is the tenor, or the thing being described, and

[63] Lakoff and Johnson, 4.

[64] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*.

"war" is the vehicle, or the figurative language used to describe the tenor. [65] In a heated argument, one might say to their opponent, "Your claims are indefensible."[66] This metaphor makes it clear that one defends their argument in the same way that an army defends a fortress. Or, after a loss, another individual might express sorrow that their opponent "shot down all of [their] arguments." [67] In this case, it is evident that an argument is something that can be attacked just as a city, or a group of people can be attacked by an enemy.

Though some may struggle to conceive of ARGUMENT IS WAR as a metaphorical concept, this is indeed the case. In contrast to the West, many non-Western societies have developed metaphorical concepts of ARGUMENT related to the idea of a dance. Therefore, the fact that the two ideas are so intricately connected demonstrates that there is some core value of Western society that causes the concepts to naturally be connected.

Similarly, the biblical authors introduced the idea of God as a Father, and in the New Testament Jesus taught his disciples to pray to "our Father." GOD IS A FATHER is a metaphor in which God is being understood through the idea of human fatherhood. God is not a literal father as God does not share in human sexuality and does not physically beget children. Additionally, human fathers are flawed, and God is perfect. However, human fatherhood does carry the idea of protection, authority, and love, qualities that God also shares. Furthermore, to say that GOD IS A FATHER is a metaphor does not imply that the statement is not true. As Peter Richardson, Charles

[65] The terms "tenor" and "vehicle" were introduced by I.A. Richards in his 1936 book, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric.*

[66] Lakoff and Johnson, 4.

[67] Ibid.

M. Mueller, and Stephen Pihlaja note in their book, *Cognitive Linguistics and Religious Language,* saying that something is metaphorical does not deny its veracity.[68]

Using the similar example GOD IS A SHEPHERD, Mark Z. Brettler explains that this concept is metaphorical because God is not a literal shepherd. There are certain attributes related to a human shepherd that are also true of God. God is a shepherd in that he cares for and is responsible for human beings in the same way that a human shepherd is towards their sheep. However, not all these attributes can accurately describe God.[69] A human shepherd gets tired and weak while leading their sheep; God never gets tired or weak. When describing God, the biblical authors take the best aspects of a concept and use them to express God's nature. God is the best of shepherds, the best of kings, and the best of fathers.

The feminine metaphors for God are less understood. Richardson, Mueller, and Pihlaja remark that "Christians who acknowledge that God cannot be properly described as possessing a gender still often resist using the metaphor GOD IS A MOTHER."[70] However, though the metaphor does not imply that God is a literal mother, the idea of motherhood can present a wide variety of conceptual ideas that are indeed true of God.

The purpose of the biblical metaphors for God is to make room for human beings to understand God. Metaphors have the unique ability to make complicated concepts accessible to finite humanity.[71] There is nothing on this earth that can perfectly describe God. Yet through

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[68] Peter Richardson, Charles M. Mueller, Stephen Pihlaja, *Cognitive Linguistics and Religious Language: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 34, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003041139.

[69] Marc Zvi Brettler, "The Metaphorical Mapping of God in the Hebrew Bible," in *Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Pierre Van Hecke (Dudley, MA: Leuven University Press, 2005), 222.

[70] Richardson et. al, *Cognitive Linguistics and Religious Language,* 38.

[71] Ibid, 35.

many metaphors, Christians can grasp the nature of our equally transcendent and immanent Creator.

Mixed Metaphors

At times, when feminine metaphors are used to describe God, they are used in conjunction with masculine metaphors. Isaiah 42:8-17, Isaiah 43:1-7, Isaiah 45:9-13, Isaiah 49:13-23, and Isaiah 50:1-3 are some of the passages in which these forms of metaphor can be found. Brettler explains that metaphorical language for God does not only show his incomparability but also allows for the mixing of incompatible images. [72] For example, Isaiah 42:8-17 describe God as a warrior raising a battle cry and triumphing over his enemies. In the same passage, the prophet also portrays God as a woman in childbirth crying out, gasping, and panting. Although these two images would be entirely incompatible if spoken about one human, they are not incompatible when used to describe God. Since God contains the qualities of both males and females, only God can be spoken of as a male warrior in battle and a birthing mother in labor at the same time. Yet, since God is beyond human language, it was important for the writers of scripture to use metaphors in this way in developing a fuller picture of God.

Sarah J. Dille calls these metaphors "mixed metaphors."[73] They often present two separate ideas juxtaposed together and separated by a single line in the text. Following Lakoff and Johnson, she explains that inconsistent metaphors can be "coherent," or that there can be an overlap of entailments between two metaphors.[74] For example, Lakoff and Johnson give two

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[72] Brettler, "The Metaphorical Mapping of God in the Hebrew Bible," 225.

[73] Sarah J. Dille, *Mixing Metaphors: God As Mother and Father in Deutero-Isaiah* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2004),14, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=436390.

[74] Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By,* 14, quoted in Dille, *Mixing Metaphors,* 10; entailments are the concepts that logically follow from a metaphor or metaphoric statement.

examples for the metaphor ARGUMENT. The first, AN ARGUMENT IS A JOURNEY and the second, AN ARGUMENT IS A CONTAINER. While these two metaphors are logically inconsistent, they are coherent. The shared idea between the two metaphors is that through an argument more of a surface is created:

> AN ARGUMENT IS A JOURNEY
>
> "As we make a journey, more of a surface is created. Therefore, as we make an argument, more of a surface is created…"
>
> ARGUMENT IS A CONTAINER
>
> "As we make a container, more of a surface is created. Therefore, as we make an argument, more of a surface is created."[75]

Dille explains that when inconsistent metaphors share a major common entailment, they become coherent metaphors. Therefore, in the example of Isaiah 42, the metaphors of GOD AS DIVINE WARRIOR and GOD AS A BIRTHING MOTHER can come together to express that God saves and destroys. Though a warrior is destructive, a warrior also saves. Although birth is life-giving, it also can be life-threatening.[76] Both of these metaphors come together to express two ideas about God that may be overlooked if they were not juxtaposed together.

Highlighting and Hiding

Additionally, Lakoff and Johnson also explain that metaphors are capable of highlighting or hiding certain aspects of the concept. They explain that if one focuses on the battle aspect of an argument, they end up hiding the collaborative and cooperative aspect of it.[77] They give another example involving time and money. Though a common saying today, time is not literally

[75] Lakoff and Johnson, 93-94.

[76] Dille, 72.

[77] Lakoff and Johnson, 10.

money. Unlike money, one cannot go to a bank to gain more time. Once time is gone, it does not return. Instead, the metaphor focuses on the value of time compared to money.[78] Therefore, as a metaphor used to describe God, "father," expresses very specific aspects about God, and the metaphor cannot necessarily be extended to include other concepts.[79] There are some features of human fatherhood that cannot be used to describe God. Likewise, a feminine metaphor for God may contain ideas surrounding God's comfort and care of Israel but may not be extended to include everything involved in the concept of womanhood.

Metaphors and Similes

The difference between metaphors and similes are also of great concern. Some biblical scholars argue that the masculine language for God falls under the category of analogy or that it is a more literal metaphor than the feminine language for God. The claim is that the feminine language for God falls under the subcategory of simile and is therefore less meaningful than the masculine language for God. The standard definition of metaphor is that it is a "figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them."[80] A simile falls in the subcategory under metaphor, and while all similes are metaphors, all metaphors are not necessarily similes. It is true that most of the feminine language for God in scripture are similes, while many of the masculine language in scripture are other types of metaphors. For example, Susan Foh argues that the difference between using paternal and maternal language for God is the difference between

[78] Lakoff and Johnson, 13.

[79] Chapter four will include a detailed discussion of the meaning of "God the Father."

[80] *Merriam Webster*, s.v. "analogy (*n.*)," accessed October 22, 2023, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/analogy.

saying, "God *is* our Father" and "God comforts his people *as* a mother comforts her child.[81] Her premise is that since a metaphor is used to describe God's fatherhood, God is literally a father and since a simile is used to describe God's motherhood, God is only *like* a mother. She argues that in passages like Isaiah 66:13, God's action in comforting his people is being *compared* to the way a mother comforts her child. Therefore, she concludes that Christians can legitimately refer to God as "father" but not as "mother".[82] Similarly, Donald G. Bloesch suggests that there is a distinction between the terms "like a mother" and what he calls a "direct metaphor." He argues that the term GOD THE FATHER is not a symbol and is "closer to being literal in that it is practically transparent to what it signifies."[83] John Cooper dismisses the feminine references in scriptures as indirect and implied figures of speech. Moreover, he recognizes that because of God's transcendence, all biblical terms for God are metaphorical in some sense.[84]

Ultimately, there is no grammatical difference between an "is" comparison and an "is like/as" comparison. In fact, the only difference between using a simile or a metaphor is stylistic choice. In Aristotle's *Rhetoric,* he says, "[similes] should be brought in like metaphors; for they are metaphors, differing in the form of expression."[85] Furthermore, following Lakoff and

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[81] Foh, 151.

[82] Susan Foh is correct that fatherhood should certainly be distinguished from other metaphors for God. However, this distinction should not be based on the difference between metaphors and similes. Instead, the distinguishing factor is the relationship between the Father and the Son, which, as will be argued in chapter four, does not suggest that God is more masculine than feminine.

[83] Donald G. Bloesch, *The Battle for the Trinity: The Debate Over Inclusive God-Language* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 35.

[84] Cooper, "Supplemental but Not Equal", 119-120.

[85] Aristotle explains that *"*a simile is also a metaphor; for there is little difference: when the poet says, "He rushed as a lion," it is a simile, but "The lion rushed" [with lion referring to a man] would be metaphor; since both are brave, he used a metaphor [i.e., a simile] and spoke of Achilles as a lion… [Similes] should be brought in like metaphors; for they are metaphors, differing in the form of expression." Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1406b, translated by John Gilles, *A New Translation of Aristotle's Rhetoric; with an Introduction and Appendix,* (United Kingdom: T. Cadell, 1823):

Johnson's research about the concept ARGUMENT and the idea ARGUMENT IS WAR, one must recognize that an "is" statement does not necessarily imply that a phrase is literal. Though the fatherhood of God is a unique metaphor that has become commonplace[86] and is used in everyday speech about God, it is still a metaphor. Both the language of fatherhood and the language of motherhood are permissible to use when speaking of God, and both concepts help Christians to better understand God's nature and character.

Conclusion

It is true that God *is* a Father. However, God is not literally a father in the human sense of the word.[87] Although GOD THE FATHER is a significant metaphor for God and it carries many theological implications for Christianity, GOD THE FATHER is a metaphor. Nevertheless, metaphors are powerful and often express spiritual and theological ideas that cannot be communicated literally. A later chapter will include a discussion about the meaning of GOD THE FATHER and its Trinitarian and Christological undertones. However, although the language of fatherhood is grounded in the Trinity, Christians can also speak of God in feminine ways. Since the concept of fatherhood is limited, many metaphors are helpful to express the wonder and greatness of God. Although a minority in scripture, feminine language can provide a balanced view of God and serve as a reminder that although God is a Father, God is not a male or masculine.

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[86] A metaphor that has become commonplace is also known as a "dead metaphor." Long explains that dead metaphors are those that were at one time novel but has been used so often that they become conventional. Gary Alan Long, "Dead or Alive? Literality and God-Metaphors in the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62, no. 2 (1994): 523, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000886099&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=liberty&authtype=ip,shib); Sally McFague sees "God the Father" as a "model." Like a dead metaphor, because of its widespread use and significance within Christianity, it carries more weight than other biblical metaphors. McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language,* 9.

[87] To be a literal father in the human sense of the word involves sexual reproduction.

Chapter 3: Feminine Language for God in the Hebrew Bible

Introduction

There are at least twenty-two passages in the Hebrew Bible which describe God using feminine language. This may seem like a small number in comparison to the many masculine metaphors for God in the Hebrew Scriptures. However, it is incredibly noteworthy that there are any passages like this at all since ancient Israel existed within a patriarchal world. Therefore, when the biblical writers describe God using feminine language, they prioritize the way in which God desires to be portrayed over the norms of their society. Since it is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss every passage that describes God using feminine language, I will focus on the select metaphors of GOD AS A BIRTHING MOTHER, GOD AS A NURSING MOTHER, GOD AS A PROTECTIVE MOTHER BIRD, and GOD AS A MIDWIFE.

God as a Birthing Mother

One of the most common feminine metaphors for God in scripture is the image of GOD AS A BIRTHING MOTHER. This image can be found in Isaiah 42:14, Isaiah 46:3-4, Deuteronomy 32:18, and Psalm 90:2.

Isaiah 42:14

In Isaiah 42:14, God says, "For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back. But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant."[88] Isaiah 42 is a part of a wider section of comfort and consolation in which God confirms his commitment to his people despite their suffering. In Isaiah 42, God makes it clear that he will intervene in their

[88] Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version of the Bible.

suffering. This section most immediately speaks to the Babylonian captives, but the message is universal and speaks of salvation for the entire world.[89]

Previously, in vv. 10-13, the prophet calls God's people to sing a "new song." J. Alec Motyer notes that the cause for singing is in v.13 where Isaiah prophesies that God will "march out like a champion," "stir up his zeal," will "raise a battle cry," and will "triumph over his enemies."[90] In Isaiah 42:14, God speaks. The phrase "for a long time I have kept silent" addresses God's lack of response to his people's prayers in Isaiah 64:12. During the Babylonian siege, they experienced the temple and their sacred cities becoming a wasteland and being burned with fire (Isaiah 64:10-11). The verb used here is הָסָה, suggesting that God held his peace and did not act during this time. Reflecting on God's silence, Andrew M. Davis explains that God was intentional about holding back during this time.[91] While Davis suggests that God's silence had to do with judging sinners, John N. Oswalt focuses on God's restraint in defending Israel during the Exile.[92] Now that the period of silence was over, God would no longer keep back from acting.[93] The second half of v. 14 is a feminine metaphor portraying God as a woman in childbirth. Bryan E. Beyer suggests that v.14 compares God's sudden judgment of the world to a pregnant woman's unexpected labor.[94] Speaking of the warrior and the childbirth metaphor,

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[89] J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 275-276.

[90] Motyer, *Isaiah*, 296.

[91] Andrew M. Davis, *Exalting Jesus in Isaiah* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), 203, accessed May 31, 2024, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[92] John N. Oswalt, *Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2003), 408, accessed May 31, 2024, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[93] Paul D. Wegner, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 309.

[94] Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Book of Isaiah,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 178.

Barry G. Webb states that the song reaches its climax in two "bold" and "dramatic" pictures of the Lord as Israel's savior.[95] Considering the context and Israel's situation, this metaphor powerfully conveys God's heart and intentions towards his people.

Virginia Mollenkott clarifies that this passage is a simile in which Yahweh is compared to a woman experiencing labor pains.[96] While pregnancy and labor is a challenging experience, it brings forth the blessing of new birth. Jennie R. Ebeling explains that the biblical writers were aware of the dangers of childbirth and viewed birth pains as "the greatest anguish known."[97] In the biblical world, 2 children survived out of the average 4 births per female.[98] In the case of Isaiah 42:14, Israel's deliverance is the "child" that is about to be born.[99] While Claus Westermann views v. 14 as only having in mind the change from silence to crying out, Mollenkott highlights the pain of childbirth.[100] She states: "God's anguish at the human failure to embody justice is captured in the image of a woman writhing, unable to catch her breath in the pain of travail. This image makes God seem very much present alongside all those who are oppressed by the turmoil and suffering of our world."[101] If the phrase were only meant to communicate the change from silence to crying out, there would be no need for the prophet to

[95] Barry G. Webb, *The Message of Isaiah* (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 173, accessed May 31, 2024, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[96] Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine*, 15.

[97] Jennie R. Ebeling, *Women's Lives in Biblical Times* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2010), 101.

[98] Ebeling, *Women's Lives in Biblical Times,* 105.

[99] Wegner, *Isaiah,* 310.

[100] Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66-OTL: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 1969), 106; Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine,* 15.

[101] Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine,* 15.

also include the rare terms אֶפְעֶה and אֶשֹּׁם.[102] Both of these terms are evocative of labor. אֶפְעֶה could also be translated as "moan" or "groan." אֶשֹּׁם speaks to the pant associated with severe pain.

Although God allowed his people to endure the Babylonian exile, this was not because he no longer cared for them. In fact, God's pains of childbirth communicate the endurance of his love towards Israel. V. 13 and 14 speak of the same account, and yet readers can recognize two different yet compatible characteristics of God through each. The first is that God, like a warrior, triumphs over his enemies. God is just and does not allow the wicked to prevail. The second is that God is compassionate towards his people and feels the pain that they feel. However, like a mother who, despite the pain of childbirth, labors until her children are brought forth safely, God labors until his people are free from the grasp of their enemies.

Isaiah 46:3-4

In Isaiah 46:3-4, God says, "Listen to me, you descendants of Jacob, all the remnant of the people of Israel, you whom I have upheld since your birth, and have carried since you were born. Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you." The LEB translates v. 3b as "who have been carried from *the* belly," which is more literally than the NIV's "you whom I have upheld since birth." The image presented here is of God's consistent relationship with Israel. God has carried them since their conception, and God will continue to carry them through their old age.[103] In ancient times as well as modern, mothers were the ones to carry their infants and young children. Ebeling explains that even during the busy harvest seasons when all the

[102] BDB, s.v. פעה, "groan" and נשׁם, "pant."

[103] Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 445.

members of the community were needed to work the fields, young children were brought along by their mothers. Infants were physically close to their mothers most of the time. Women carried their children in different ways: either in woven slings on her back or in a basket on her head or on her shoulder.[104] In addition to caring for her young children, a mother also supported and comforted her adult children. Isaiah 66:13 speaks of a mother comforting her child and uses the term אִישׁ, referring to an adult male as opposed to יֶלֶד for a male child.

Zachary Schoening suggests that the wider context is comparing Babylonian and Yahwistic religion by highlighting God's supremacy in the sphere of birth. He notes that in Isaiah 46:1, the verb כָּרַע though often used to describe bowing in reverence can also be used for crouching in labor. In 1 Samuel 4:19, upon hearing the news of the ark's capture, Phinehas' wife "crouched" in labor and gave birth. [105] Bel and Nebo experience the pains of labor but are unable to bring forth a delivery (Isaiah 46:2b). In contrast, the God of Israel has not only given birth to his people but has sustained them since then. Motyer describes God in this passage as "the burden-bearing God."[106] Furthermore, comparing the Babylonian gods with the God of Israel, Westermann notes that the "difference between such a god and the God of Israel – precisely in the hour of his people's downfall, *he* bears *them.*"[107] Davis concurs by stating that in "direct contrast to Bel and Nebo, however, the living God carries his people."[108] The prophet could have chosen any image to convey the truth that God carries his people. However, he chose to make

[104] Ebeling, 116.

[105] Zachary Schoening, "'Bel Crouches; Nebo Travails': Reading Birth Imagery in Isaiah 46:1–4," *Vetus Testamentum* 73, no. 3 (July 20, 2022): 391, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685330-bja10099.

[106] Motyer, 331.

[107] Westermann, 180.

[108] Davis, *Exalting Jesus in Isaiah,* 223.

this profound comparison through the image of a mother carrying her children. God's characteristic as a "burden-bearer" is beautifully pictured through the women whom he created in his image. Like a mother, God sustains his children. Those who are feeling alone or abandoned can find comfort in this metaphor.

Deuteronomy 32:18

Deuteronomy 32:18 is situated within the Song of Moses, which serves as a witness against Israel who despite their history with God, was unfaithful.[109] Scholars agree that the song functions as a lawsuit address: heaven and earth are called to bear witness to Moses' words to the Israelites.[110] Moses highlights God's greatness and righteousness in comparison to Israel's sinfulness and unrighteousness. He calls them to remember their past and recall how God rescued them from their desolate situation and nourished them. In v. 18, Moses tells Israel that they "deserted the Rock, who fathered you" and "forgot the God who gave you birth." This verse is an example of a mixed metaphor. [111] In fact, in Deuteronomy 32 alone, God is described as a rock, eagle, father, mother, warrior, provider, executioner, and healer.[112] L. Juliana M. Claassens

[109] Edward J. Woods, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 347; Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 374.

[110] Ajith Fernando, *Deuteronomy*, 645; G.E. Wright "The Lawsuit of God: A Form-critical Study of Deuteronomy 32,"; Daniel I. Block disagrees that Deuteronomy 32 is a prophetic lawsuit stating that, "this interpretation overlooks the significance of expansions that have nothing to do with lawsuits (vv. 2, 30– 43) and elements that are associated more with wisdom literature than with legal proceedings." Daniel I. Block, *Deuteronomy*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 539.

[111] Mixed metaphors, which are also known as "contrasting metaphors" and "incompatible metaphors" are addressed in the previous chapter; Ajith Fernando also hints at the mixed metaphor: "He 'bore' or 'fathered' them, which is the picture of a father… he 'gave…birth' to them – the picture of a mother." Ajith Fernando, *Deuteronomy: Loving Obedience to a Loving God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway), 655; Peter C. Craigie notes that "parental imagery is used of God once again; he is described as a mother who *begot* and *delivered in pain* the Israelites." Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 383.

[112] L. Juliana M. Claassens, "'I Kill and I Give Life': Contrasting Depictions for God in Deuteronomy 32," *Old Testament Essays (New Series)* 18, no. 1 (2005): 35,

suggests that the tension and ambiguity between these contrasting metaphors are significant and provide great insight concerning God's character.[113]

Verse 18 emphasizes God's life-giving nature. Therefore, the verbs יָלַד and חוּל are of particular importance for understanding Deuteronomy 32:18. While the NIV translates יָלַד as "fathered," the word may be better understood as "beget" or "bore." This word is both used for the fathering of a child as well as for the birthing of a child by its mother.[114] Richard D. Nelson translates יָלַד as "bore," indicating that it means "to bear a child" more often than it means "to beget."[115] Although the term can refer to the parenthood of either a mother or a father, due to the number of usages in regards to male parents, it is likely speaking of God's fatherhood of Israel. Interestingly, חוּל is less ambiguous and always speaks of birth and labor.[116] Michael Grisanti agrees that the verb refers to a "mother's writhing in pain as she delivers a child" but notes that here it "graphically depicts Yahweh's intense involvement in forming Israel as a nation."[117] Edward J. Woods briefly acknowledges the mixed metaphor and explains that Israel forgot the Rock who fathered them and "the God who, as a mother, *gave you birth."*[118] Don C. Benjamin suggests that this passage describes God as a midwife because of the term "rock", but

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https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAiG0V190722000242&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=liberty&authtype=ip,shib.

[113] Claassens, "I Kill and I Give Life," 36.

[114] Genesis 19:37-38; 29:32-35; 30:17-19; Exodus 2:2; Isaiah 26:18; 66:7 are examples in which the word means "to give birth."

[115] Richard D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2004), 368.

[116] Claassens, "I Kill and I Give Life," 37.

[117] Michael A. Grisanti, *Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2017), 390, accessed May 31, 2024, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[118] Woods, 352.

this is unlikely. While it is correct that mothers delivered on a birthing stool supported by two rocks, the metaphor "rock" when used for God speaks to his strength and steadfastness.[119] Claassens identifies the maternal metaphor in other areas of Moses' song. God nourished Israel with honey from the rock and with oil from the flinty crag; he also fed them with curds, milk, and fattened lamb and goats.[120] In Israel's infant state, God guarded them like a mother eagle guards her young and led them out of the desert land (Deuteronomy 32:10-12).

The mixed metaphor in Deuteronomy 32:18 highlights two contrasting and yet compatible aspects of God's parenthood: God as a father and God as a mother. Noting that v. 18 represents God through the image of both father and mother, Duane Christensen points out that a similar combination of metaphors appears in ancient Syrian inscriptions that describe kings as both father and mother to their people.[121] If Moses had only mentioned that Israel forgot how God fathered them and not how God gave birth to them, the metaphor would not have been as captivating. While God's fatherhood of Israel speaks to much about God's character, his birthing of Israel evokes imagery of the pain of labor and delivery. It calls one to consider the effort involved in birthing a child, and as a result, it demonstrates God's unwavering commitment to his people. Yet, despite God's labor, Israel was still unfaithful.

Psalm 90:2

Psalm 90 is written on behalf of the community of Israel and while it begins with a reflection on God's faithfulness throughout the ages, it moves into lament as Israel acknowledges

[119] Don C. Benjamin, *The Social World of Deuteronomy: A New Feminist Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015), 186.

[120] Claassens, "I Kill and I Give Life," 38.

[121] Duane Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10-34:12,* Vol 6B, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2013), 399, accessed May 31, 2024, ProQuest Ebook Central.

its sin and subsequent suffering and cries out to God for help.[122] Psalm 90 is often connected with Deuteronomy 32 because of its similarities with the Song of Moses and the superscription that ascribes the psalm to Moses. Richard D. Phillips explains that Moses cites God's eternal nature as proof of his changelessness. This is particularly important for humans living in an unstable, and constantly changing world.[123] While v. 2 primarily expresses the eternal nature of God, it also highlights his work in creation. Artur Weiser implies that the phrase "before the mountains were born" is an allusion to the idea common in antiquity of 'mother earth' bringing forth plants and animals.[124] However, God, not mother earth or any other entity, brings forth the world.

As in Deuteronomy 32:18, the verbs יָלַד and חוּל are of significance in this passage. While יָלַד can refer either to a father's begetting of a child or a mother giving birth, חוּל is specifically related to the writhing and travail of birth. Bringing out the meaning of חוּל, Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford translates v. 2 as "before the mountains were born, you God, writhing in labor, birthed the earth and the inhabited world."[125] She explains that the LXX translators may have altered the *polel* form of the verb to the *polal*, and thus, made "the earth and the inhabited world" a subject of the passive *polal*, rendering the translation as "was formed, or came to birth.[126] Eugene Boring

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[122] Tremper Longman III, *Psalms* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 427.

[123] Richard D. Phillips, *Psalms 73-106* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2020), 190, Accessed May 22, 2024. ProQuest Ebook Central.

[124] Artur Weiser, *Psalms-OTL: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 1962), 597.

[125] Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, "Feminine Imagery and Theology in the Psalter: Psalms 90, 91, and 92," in *The Psalter as Witness: Theology, Poetry, and Genre: Proceedings from the Baylor University-University of Bonn Symposium on the Psalter*, 15–25 (Waco, TX, 2017), 20, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAn5138287&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[126] Ibid.

suggests that the translators may have considered the *polel* to sound too similar to the "earth mother" concept of the Canaanite and Greek fertility gods and goddesses.[127] Tate agrees that the passive of יָלַד could imply that the earth was doing the birthing. Yet, חוּל speaks of God "who has given birth to the earth and the world, along with the mountains, as massive evidence of his creative power."[128] If the first part of v. 2 was not clear, the second half makes it evident that it is God who has given birth to the world.

Laboring to bring forth life is a uniquely feminine quality that points to God's creative power and faithfulness to his people. While this psalm primarily evokes imagery of Israel's wilderness experience, it can be an encouragement to Christians dealing with similar challenges of God's enduring love and commitment to them even in the face of their sinfulness. The writer of this psalm demonstrates that the people of Israel did not hesitate to call on God, the one who labored to bring forth the world, in their time of need. The same could not be said of the neighboring nations and their view towards their gods and goddesses. Only God labored to bring forth Israel and cared for them as deeply as a mother cares for her child.

God as a Nursing Mother

Similarly, the Hebrew Bible includes the metaphor of GOD AS A NURSING MOTHER in Isaiah 49:15, Numbers 11:12-13, and Hosea 11:3-4.

Isaiah 49:15

[127] Eugene Boring, "Psalm 90— Reinterpreting Tradition," *Midstream* 40 (2001): 123, quoted in Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, "Feminine Imagery and Theology in the Psalter," 20.

[128] Tate, *Psalm 51-100,* 440.

Isaiah 49:15 highlights the love and compassion of God towards Zion, who felt forsaken and abandoned in exile. [129] The pericope begins with verse 13 in which the prophet calls for heaven and earth to rejoice because the Lord "comforts his people" and will have "compassion on his afflicted ones." Sarah J. Dille explains that the central issue of Isaiah 49:13-21 is Zion's barrenness and the children that will subsequently be gathered to her.[130] Rather than rejoicing, Zion responds that the Lord has forsaken and forgotten her. Zion is like a woman who feels empty because she has no children. In the Hebrew Bible, a woman's barrenness often meant that the Lord had forgotten her.[131] Zion's experience is like that of Hannah, the wife of Elkanah, who pleaded with the Lord to remember her and give her a son (1 Samuel 1:11). When Hannah conceived, 1 Samuel 1:19-20 explains that the Lord remembered Hannah. Moreover, Genesis 30 explains that Rachel was barren for many years. However, God remembered her and allowed her to give birth to a son. Dille remarks that God's remembrance is demonstrated by the presence of children. Although Zion could not physically see the children God would bring to her, God wanted to make it clear that she was not forgotten. Isaiah 49:15 uses an analogy from motherhood to comfort Zion and remind her that he would never forget her.

In Isaiah 49:15, the Lord says, "can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!" The anticipated response to this question is an emphatic "no." In most cases, a nursing mother would experience the biological need to nurse her child, and would find it unthinkable to break the bond

[129] Dille, *Mixing Metaphors,* 140-141.

[130] Ibid.

[131] Dille, 140.

developed between her and her child.[132] Though it was rare for mothers to abandon their children, during times of siege and political unrest, women were sometimes tempted to do the unthinkable.[133] In Deuteronomy 28:56-57, Moses predicts that because of the suffering Israel's enemies would inflict on them during siege, a woman in dire need may secretly eat the children she bears.[134] Nursing a child was a difficult and dangerous time in which an infant was vulnerable to attack. If a child was not yet weaned, there was the potential that anything could go wrong.[135] Most mothers refused to do the unthinkable and put their children's wellbeing before their own. For example, in 1 Kings 3:16-27, depicting Solomon's judgment between two women claiming to be the mother of the same child, the true mother showed great concern and compassion for the child. She was willing to give up the child so that his life could be spared. Her concern was not only for herself and her own well-being, but she also cared for the health and well-being of her child.[136]

Ultimately, there were times in which *some* women would abandon or even harm their children, but most women would not dare to do such a thing. Therefore, when God compares himself to a nursing mother, he makes it clear for Israel that his love is like the love that a mother has for her children. Yes, in a rare case a mother may abandon her child, but God is greater than

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[132] Beyer, *Encountering the Book of Isaiah,* 195.

[133] Ibid.

[134] Moses' prediction comes to pass in 2 Kings 6:28-29. Ben-Hadad, the king of Aram set up a siege of Samaria, leaving them in a great famine. A woman came to the king of Israel for help because another woman convinced her to let the two of them eat her son. 2 Kings 6:29 notes that they "cooked [her] son and ate him." However, the second woman promised to also give up her son but hid him after the first woman's son had been killed.

[135] Dille, 137.

[136] Ibid, 137-139.

human motherhood and would never abandon his children.[137] The church father Theodore of Cyr rightly clarifies that God is nearer to his people than a father or a mother.[138] In this same vein, Ray C. Ortlund Jr. notes that God's love is even more mindful than the love of a "tenderly nursing mother."[139] Like a nursing infant depending on their mother for survival through intense danger, Zion depends on the Lord. Davis connects Isaiah 49:15 to Genesis 15:17 where God reestablishes his covenant with Abraham: "God also took a solemn oath when he made that promise (Gen 15:17), implying by the movement of the fire pot through the pieces of the sacrifice, 'May I cease to exist if I fail to keep my promise to you.'"[140] As with Abraham, Zion is engraved on the palms of God's hands. Because of the Lord's compassion, Zion's children are returning to her, and those who harmed her are leaving. Oswalt suggests that the proof of God's love for Israel will be made apparent through the abundance of descendants born to her.[141] As a bride wears many ornaments, Zion will be filled with many children.

Numbers 11:11-12

In Numbers 11:11-12, Moses expresses frustration that God has put on him the trouble of caring for the entire population of Israelites. Like children, the Israelites come to Moses weeping that they are hungry for meat. They reminisced on the meat and fish they ate in Egypt and complained about the manna that the Lord provided. In v. 14, Moses explains that he cannot

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[137] Virginia Mollenkott rightfully clarifies that this does not mean that a mother's love is an inferior kind of love. It simply means that human love is not as constant or reliable as divine love. In the prophet's eyes, a mother's love is the most caring and consistent of all forms of human love. Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine*, 20.

[138] Theodoret of Cyrus and Robert C. Hill, *Theodoret of Cyrus: Commentary on the Psalms, 73-150* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=3134913, 289.

[139] Ray C. Ortlund Jr., *Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 403.

[140] Davis, 240.

[141] Oswalt, *Isaiah,* 472.

carry all the people by himself. In his desperation he asks God to "go ahead and kill [him]" so that he does not face the ruin that the Israelites may bring him. The feminine metaphor in this passage is found directly in v. 12:

> Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors?

In his commentary on Numbers, Timothy R. Ashley includes an important discussion about the meaning of אֹמֵן in v. 12. The noun is masculine in form, but it is connected to the noun הַיֹּנֵק, seeming to require a feminine meaning. While הַיֹּנֵק could mean "foster father," the context seems to indicate that "nurse" is the best translation.[142] Gordon J. Wenham agrees and remarks that it was challenging for Moses to be a nursemaid for God.[143] Moreover, in the previous lines, Moses explains that he did not "conceive" or "give birth" to the people of Israel. Dennis Olson notes that "the implication of Moses' words is that God is the mother who conceived and gave birth to Israel. God is the one who ought to take responsibility for carrying Israel as a wet nurse cares for a breast-feeding child."[144] While Moses is a metaphorical guardian for Israel, God is their true parent. Even though a guardian is helpful, only a mother can adequately soothe her weeping child. Since God was the one who conceived and gave birth to Israel, only God could adequately address the needs and complaints of his people.

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[142] Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 156.

[143] Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and a Commentary,* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 66r.

[144] Dennis T. Olson, *Numbers: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2012), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=5974077, 33k; similarly, William H. Bellinger Jr. calls Numbers 11:12 an example of "striking maternal imagery." William H. Bellinger Jr., *Leviticus, Numbers*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 175.

Upon hearing Moses' cry for help, God appoints seventy of Israel's elders to help lead Israel. He also provides meat for the people to eat. However, this provision would turn into their judgment. They would eat meat until they loathed it since they rejected the Lord (Numbers 11:18-20). Still, this judgment is consistent with God's maternal compassion. God loved the Israelites enough to correct them when they went wrong and lead them on the right path even if it included suffering the punishment for their sins.

Hosea 11:3-4

Next, in Hosea 11:3-4, God says, "It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them." Through this passage, God proclaims his great love for Israel despite their rebellion. Like a mother who teaches a child to walk and comforts and feeds him, God provided Israel with everything they needed during the years of their infancy as a nation.

Bo H. Lim notes that the language and metaphors in these verses are difficult to interpret. While some commentators recognize the parental metaphor, others argue for an animal husbandry metaphor.[145] The husbandry metaphor is based on the MT which uses the word עָל (yoke) in verse 4, and reads, "one who eases the yoke on their jaws" as in the ESV. John Goldingay follows the ESV and considers v. 4 to be an animal husbandry metaphor. Referencing the Exodus, he says "[Yahweh] was drawing Israel in the way that a farmer draws a heifer, and doing so in a human way and/or by human means such as prophets."[146] However, the NIV and

[145] Bo H. Lim and Daniel Castelo, *Hosea* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=4859104, 139; David Allan Hubbard, Hans Walter Wolff, and James Luther Mays are among those who view this as a parental metaphor.

[146] John Goldingay, *Hosea-Micah,* Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Prophetic Books, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 131, Accessed May 22, 2024. ProQuest Ebook Central.

the NRSV emend the text from עָל to עוּל (suckling child).[147] Without the emendation, the passage would be confusing as the animal husbandry metaphor was used the previous chapter and chapter 11 begins by describing Israel as God's son (Hosea 10:11). Furthermore, a yoke would not have been placed on the jaw of an animal, so it is unlikely that the text is speaking of a shepherd guiding an animal.[148]

Most scholars agree that Hosea 11:3-4 contains a parental metaphor, but few acknowledge the possibility of a maternal metaphor in this passage. Derek Kidner comments that any family will recognize in the metaphor a father "absorbed with coaxing and supporting the child's first staggering steps; picking him up when he tires or tumbles" and "'making the place better' when he hurts himself."[149] Goldingay argues that the metaphor in Hosea 11 is generally parental, rather than paternal or maternal.[150] However, Gale A. Yee explains that although these actions can be performed by both parents, it is often the mother who is the primary caregiver and nurtures a child in this way.[151] Lim notes that Neo-Assyrian oracles and Ancient Near Eastern iconography portrayed goddesses as mothers to the king. He explains the similarities between these Assyrian oracles and Hosea 11: there is an expression of divine love for a child, an affirmation that the child is God's son, the nursing of the child, the raising of the child, and the

[147] Robin Routledge, *Hosea: An Introduction and Commentary* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=6422416, 151.

[148] Routledge, *Hosea*, 151.

[149] Derek Kidner, *The Message of Hosea* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=6707837, 87.

[150] Goldingay, *Hosea-Micah*, 135.

[151] Gale A. Yee, "Hosea", in *The Women's Bible Commentary,* ed. Carol A Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992, 200.

carrying of the child in one's arms.[152] Hosea may be employing a similar motif in his description of Israel as God's son and God's maternal love for Israel.

In Hosea 11:4, one can clearly see the patient and compassionate love of God. Although Israel continued to turn away from God, God continued to lovingly pursue Israel. For readers, the feminine metaphor in this verse may recall the love that their own mothers have shown them. Children often rebel especially later in their teenage years. Yet, mothers do not give up on their children. Furthermore, mothers are keenly aware even from birth that their children may not always listen and may go astray. However, due to a God-given maternal love, mothers patiently raise and care for their children. To a greater degree, God shows the same kind of maternal love to Israel and by extension to everyone who is a part of the family of God.

It is important for Christians to understand the metaphor of God as a nursing mother. It highlights God's compassion, patience, and sacrificial love towards people who often turn away and rebel. Yet, just as a mother does not forget her nursing child, God does not forget any of his children.

God as a Mother Bird

Another significant feminine metaphor in the Hebrew Bible is GOD AS A PROTECTIVE MOTHER BIRD. Often, the biblical authors describe God's people as those who take refuge under God's wings. This metaphor can be seen in Ruth 2:12 and Deuteronomy 32:10-11.

Ruth 2:12

The book of Ruth centers on the experience of Naomi and Ruth, two women who experienced great loss and great restoration from God. Though given the opportunity to return to

[152] Nissinen. Martti; Martti Nissinen, Prophetie, Redaktion und Fortschreibung im Hoseabuch: Studien zum Werdegang eines Prophetenbuches im Lichte von Hos 4 und 11 (AOAT 231; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlagsgesellschaft, 1991), pp. 321-22, quoted in Bo H. Lim and Daniel Castelo, *Hosea,* 140.

her home in Moab, Ruth pledged complete loyalty to Naomi and followed her to Bethlehem-Judah. Ruth and Naomi both entered Bethlehem-Judah empty and childless. However, unlike Naomi, Ruth was a young woman with more opportunities for remarriage. By divine providence, Ruth stumbles upon the field of Boaz, a wealthy relative of Naomi. Boaz' first words to Ruth, "Now listen, my daughter" (Ruth 2:8), express a "strong affirmation" to Ruth that she was welcome to glean in his field.[153] McKeon explains that by calling Ruth "daughter," Boaz was adopting a protective attitude towards her.[154] Boaz' kindness to Ruth was unusual since Israelite communities were close-knit and Ruth was a foreigner.[155] Furthermore, she was a foreigner from Moab, making her a technical an enemy of the people of God.

Therefore, it is no surprise that Ruth is puzzled by Boaz' actions. When she asks why he has been so kind to her, Boaz responds and says,

> "I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. **12** May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge." (Ruth 2:11-12)

Boaz mentions that Ruth has taken refuge under the כָּנָף (wings) of God. L. Daniel Hawk suggests that the motif of God's wings come from Syro-Palestinian iconography which depict winged deities fighting and prevailing against evil powers. He proposes that God is being

[153] James McKeon, *Two Horizons Commentary: Ruth*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 45; also see Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth,* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 154; Hubbard notes that in the MT, Boaz' opening words to Ruth are formed as a question, a typical Hebrew way to express strong affirmations.

[154] McKeon, *Ruth*, 45.

[155] Ibid, 47.

portrayed as a mighty warrior who identifies Ruth as a refugee.[156] Other commentators note that כָּנָף evoke a common metaphor for God's care and protection.[157] The image comes from that of a bird protecting its offspring from harm. Building on these insights, Havilah Dharamraj explains that Boaz' language "echoes an image found elsewhere in the OT of the Lord as a mother bird that spreads its wings over its young ones as they come scurrying to her for protection from danger."[158] Further, Mollenkott reveals that there are two types of wing-images portrayed in the Bible. In the first type represented by Ruth 2:11-12, human beings are depicted as resting under God's sheltering wings. In the second type, represented by Deuteronomy 32:10-12, humans are being lifted upon God's wings.[159] Though a non-Israelite, Ruth finds favor in the eyes of the Lord and as Boaz observes, he cares for and protects her as a mother bird cares for and protects her young. This presents a picture of a God who not only tends to his people, Israel, but also protects all those who will come to find shelter under his wings. The metaphor of GOD AS A MOTHER BIRD can effectively demonstrate the far-reaching love of God.

Deuteronomy 32:10-12

Next, Deuteronomy 32:10-12 describes God as an eagle that "stirs up its nest and hovers over its young." In vv. 10-14, Moses describes God's goodness using poetic language. He speaks of God's care for Israel in Egypt and how he brought them out and guided them as they journeyed to the promise land. Peter C. Craigie suggests that in this pericope, God is pictured as a father-

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[156] L. Daniel Hawk, *Ruth* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=4091378, 82

[157] Kirsten Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary,* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 60; James McKeown, *Ruth*, 44.

[158] Havilah Dharamraj, *Ruth: A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Creative Projects, 2019), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=5963347, 66.

[159] Mollenkott, 83.

figure.[160] While there is certainly paternal language in the Song of Moses (see Deut. 32:6), and though the pronouns are masculine, the imagery seems more likely to be maternal. Ultimately, throughout the song, the parental nature of Israel's God is highlighted.

Deuteronomy 32:10-12 compares God to a mother eagle teaching its young to fly. Grisanti suggests that it is unclear whether or not the eagle is rousing its young out of the nest in order to teach them, or simply, catching them when they fall.[161] However, Craigie notes that the eagle "taught its young to fly by throwing one out of the nest, and then swooping down and allowing the young bird to alight on its mother's wings."[162] In the same way that an eagle hovers over its young to protect them, God looks out for Israel in order to keep them safe.[163] As with the metaphor of GOD AS A NURSING MOTHER in Isaiah 49:15, God is able to do what an mother eagle cannot do.[164]

This training process turns out to be a painstaking process as the young eagles are naturally unsuccessful at first. Their mother watches nearby and spreads out her wings to catch them if they begin to fall. In a homily on Psalm 20, the church father Jerome mentioned this passage and noted that God protects his children as a father and as a "hen guarding her chicks."[165] In contrast to Ruth 2:11-12, through the image of God as a mother eagle, Deuteronomy 32:10-12 depicts

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[160] P.C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy,* 380.

[161] He writes that although many commentators believe that קִנּוֹ יָעִיר ("he stirs up its nest"), refer to an aspect of the eagle's treatment of its young, others doubt that an eagle would disturb its nest to teach the young ones to fly. However, most commentators agree that the eagle is there to catch its young if they fall. Whether the eagle is only protecting or teaching and protecting is unclear. Grisanti, *Deuteronomy,* 387.

[162] Ibid, 381.

[163] Grisanti, *Deuteronomy*, 387.

[164] Ibid, 388.

[165] Joseph T. Lienhard and Thomas C. Oden, *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=4620775, 669.

humans as being lifted *upon* God's wings. God's people did not only need sheltering care, but they also needed to learn how to "fly." This process of learning would have been challenging and dangerous. But as a mother eagle had the insight to know when her offspring needed support, God in his infinite wisdom knows when his people need to be "lifted up."

Whether the eagle in view is a female bird is of consequence. Rather than focusing on the sex of the bird, Daniel I. Block suggests generically that it is an adult bird involved.[166] While one may wonder if the male eagle held this training and protective in its offspring's development, science suggests that the female eagle did more of the incubation and hunting for her young since she was both larger and stronger than the male eagle. [167] Furthermore, the translators of the King James Version uses the female pronouns to specify that the writer is speaking of a female eagle.[168] Therefore, in Deuteronomy 32:10-12, it is possible to imagine God as a mother eagle who found Israel in a horrible state, lifted them out of their terrible predicament, guarded them, and taught them to "fly". This metaphor demonstrates the magnitude of God's protective power and compassion. As children of God, Christians are lifted on God's wings where they are safe from the threat of danger that often surrounds them.

The image of God as a mother bird is an important one that is often missed. However, it is a maternal quality to provide shelter and incubation for one's offspring. For example, when Psalm 17:8 or 36:7 speak of humans hiding under the shadow of God's wings, it is possible to imagine the care with which a mother guards her children. Ruth 2:11-12 and Deuteronomy 32:10-12

[166] Daniel I. Block, *Deuteronomy*, 539.

[167] Mollenkott, 86.

[168] Ibid.

metaphorically depict God as a female bird, highlighting the unique consideration with which females shelter and protect their offspring.

God as Midwife

Lastly, God is at times depicted as a midwife. The metaphor of midwifery is often a vehicle used to communicate God's deliverance of Israel.[169] While there is not a great deal of information in the Hebrew Bible about midwives, they played a significant role in Ancient Israel.[170] Most notable are Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives who saved Moses' life. The process of birth was dangerous for both the mother and the newborn child. There were internal and external threats to the mother and child's survival. For example, Exodus 1 details the threat of Pharoah on Moses' life.[171] However, in the ancient world, it was also believed that newborn children faced the threat of supernatural and spiritual entities as well. Furthermore, medical issues also threatened a safe delivery. Carol L. Meyers highlights the role of midwives in Ancient Israel when she states:

> Midwives were health professionals—experts in the techniques of delivering babies and the afterbirth, then tending to the mother's recovery and the newborn's vitality. They were also religious specialists who recited appropriate prayers, blessings, or incantations, as did midwives in other Near Eastern cultures"[172]

Midwives supported mothers through the difficult process of birth, and protected the newborn infant from the dangers they may have faced.

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[169] L. Juliana M. Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God's Delivering Presence in the Old Testament,* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 65.

[170] Gale A Yee, "Midwives in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Ancient Israel: An Intersectional Investigation," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 52, no. 3 (August 2022): 146–59, https://doi.org/10.1177/01461079221102970, 147.

[171] It is possible to see the entire Exodus story through the metaphorical lens of God as midwife.

[172] Carol L. Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 173.

Shiphrah and Puah are described as מְיַלֶּדֶת, or "one who assists with birth/delivery."[173] They served as human "deliverers" helping to carry out God's plan of salvation. However, God is the ultimate מְיַלֶּדֶת who delivers his people from sin and danger. In Psalm 22:10-11 and 71:6, the metaphor of God as midwife is on display as the psalmist acknowledges God's constant presence with him since birth.

Psalm 22:9-10

Psalm 22 is the lament of one who feels rejected and forsaken by God as he endures attacks from his enemies. It is ascribed to David and likely alludes to the suffering he experienced at the hands of Saul, and other enemies who sought to take his life. However, since it does not contain any specific references to David's experiences, others throughout the history of Israel may have been able to use the psalm as a prayer as they endured similar trials.[174]

The psalm begins with a question: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1). The speaker expresses how he cries out to God daily, but God has not answered him. After this, the speaker reflects on God's faithfulness to his answers. They put their trust in the Lord, and he delivered them. Though his enemies mock him for doing so, the speaker continues to trust in the Lord. Then he mentions that the Lord brought him out of his mother's womb and expresses that his relationship with God goes back to the time of his birth (Psalm 22:9-10). Ultimately, despite the "bulls" and "roaring lions" that surround him, he knows that the Lord is his strength (Psalm 22:19-21). Therefore, he resolves to praise the Lord (Psalm 22:22-31).

[173] מְיַלֶּדֶת is the Piel participle of יָלַד.

[174] Tremper Longman III, *Psalms*, 182.

Tremper Longman III notes that the speaker is especially shocked by God's silence because his relationship with God goes all the way back to his birth.[175] Gerard H. Wilson explains that the "yet you" phrase in v.9 introduces a sharp contrast between the psalmist's current reality and past experience with God. According to Wilson, the speaker is disappointed that he is experiencing God's silence despite their relationship from his birth.[176] On the other hand, as Artur Weiser proposes, it may be that the speaker recognizes that there is nothing else he can do but continue trusting God, since he has trusted God since birth.[177] The language of vv. 9-10 evokes the language of midwifery. Wilson writes that "Yahweh is depicted as the midwife upon whom the child is 'cast out/down' from the mother's womb." As a midwife, the Lord was there to protect the new infant as he approached the "harsh realities of life."[178] John Goldingay agrees, stating that the Lord "acted as midwife, first pulling the child out, then immediately setting it at its mother's breast with the instinctive trusting expectancy of finding milk there."[179]As a midwife brought the newborn infant out of the womb, so God brought the speaker out of his mother's womb. Indeed, the first human an infant was likely to encounter was the midwife who assisted at their birth. The speaker expresses to the Lord that "from birth I was cast on you," perhaps implying that even before encountering his mother, he encountered the Lord.

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[175] Longman, 185.

[176] Gerard H. Wilson, *Psalms,* Volume 1, *The NIV Applications Commentary,* (Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan Academic, 2002), 417.

[177] Weiser, *Psalms*, 222.

[178] Wilson, *Psalms*, 416.

[179] John Goldingay, *Psalms: Volume 1 (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms): Psalms 1-41*, ed. Tremper Longman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=3117022, 330.

The metaphor communicates that as a midwife delivers a child and keeps him or her safe, so God has kept the speaker safe from the moment he was born. Since God was the one who delivered him from the dangerous process of birth, he now depends on God for deliverance from his present suffering. This is why he can express confidence in the latter part of the psalm: God has been with him since the beginning and will remain with him until the end.

Psalm 71:5-6

In Psalm 71, the speaker faces a challenging situation. However, he expresses that he has taken refuge in the Lord, and he asks the Lord to deliver him from the hand of the wicked (Psalm 71:1-4). He looks back over his life from the vantage point of old age, and he notes how God has been with him the entire time. Therefore, he asks God not to forsake him when he is old, and his strength is gone (v. 9).

In vv. 5-6, he explains that God has been his hope and confidence since his youth; he has relied on the Lord who brought him out of his mother's womb since birth. While the NIV translates גּוֹזִי as "brought," the BDB lexicon notes that the term can mean "to cut" or "to sever."[180] Claassens notes that this is suggestive of a midwife performing surgery by cutting open the mother's womb during a dangerous birth and freeing the infant, saving both the mother and child. [181] The language can also refer to the cutting of an umbilical cord. In an article on birth and midwifery in the Hebrew Bible, Karen Langton suggests that the birth described in Psalm 71 was not dangerous or traumatic since there is no reference to bloody images or any language associated with trauma.[182] Even if traumatic language is not present, the dangers associated with

[180] BDB, s.v. גזה.

[181] Claassens, *Mother, Mourner, Midwife*, 75.

[182] Karen Langton, "Bringing to Birth," *Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern Research* 1, no. 1 (June 29, 2021): 65–88, https://doi.org/10.35068/aabner.v1i1.786., 84.

birth were known and the act of being brought forth from the womb was miraculous. Whether the birth involved a cesarean section or the cutting of an umbilical cord, this was an action typically performed by a midwife. As in Psalm 22, in this passage the speaker reminisces on how God has supported him since birth by delivering him safely from his mother's womb. Psalm 71:5-6 is the statement of trust and confidence that begins the section of lament.[183] Before he expresses his complaint, the speaker pauses to recall that the Lord has always been with him. Therefore, the Lord will also be with him through these trials. Like a midwife, God is present with his people through danger and delivers them from the challenging situations they endure.

Conclusion

The biblical writers did not hesitate to use feminine and maternal metaphors to communicate significant attributes of God to their audience. While masculine metaphors are sufficient to express certain qualities of God, feminine metaphors are more appropriate to express others. For example, God's compassion can certainly be portrayed through masculine language. However, it is better expressed through the image of a nursing mother's refusal to abandon her child regardless of the circumstance. Without a doubt, God's deliverance can be expressed through many metaphors. However, since birth was such a difficult and dangerous process, it is beneficial to speak of God's deliverance using the metaphor of midwifery. Since God created both male and female in his image, it is fitting that both male and female qualities are reflected in our language about God.

[183] Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100,* Volume 20, *Word Biblical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2015), 213-214, Accessed June 1, 2024. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Chapter 4: The Fatherhood of God and Feminine Language

Introduction

Few scholars would deny that the biblical authors used feminine language to describe God. However, the feminine language for God naturally raises questions concerning patriarchy, gendered God-language, and the Trinity. Trinitarian theology expresses that the Christian God exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is a strong precedent in the New Testament and throughout church history for calling God "Father." In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus famously taught his disciples to pray to their "father in heaven" (Matthew 6:9-13). Following Jesus' example, Paul and other New Testament writers often greet their audiences in the name of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. For many, since God is a Father, God is also masculine. This posits an unbalanced view of God which excludes women from their place in the image of God. Therefore, it is necessary to determine whether the fatherhood of God requires a predominantly masculine view of God. Central to this discussion is the debate surrounding the ontological naming of God as Father, an examination of the meaning of GOD THE FATHER, and a consideration of why fatherhood language rather than motherhood language is used for God if the language of Father is so deeply connected to patriarchy.

The Personal Name of God

Often scholars object to any use of feminine language for God by appealing to "Father" as a proper name for God.[184] For example, in a 2012 talk on God, Men, and Masculinity, John

[184] Alvin F. Kimel, "The God Who Likes His Name: Holy Trinity, Feminism, and the Language of Faith" *In Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, ed. Alvin F. Kimel, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 191-192; Wolfgang Pannenberg, Systematic Theology I, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 262; James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 100.

Piper suggested that since God is Father and not Mother, Christianity has a "masculine feel."[185] If "Father" is God's proper name, God cannot be spoken of in feminine ways. Therefore, using feminine language for God would be akin to describing God in ways contrary to God's self-designation. For example, citing Matthew 28:19, Alvin F. Kimel writes that "In the resurrection of Jesus, God declares his name of the new covenant: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."[186] This view is founded on the assumption that Jesus was unique in speaking of God as Father. However, the language of fatherhood can be traced back to the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic literature.[187] Jesus stood in continuity, not discontinuity with the ancestors of Israel.

While God was known as "Father" in the Hebrew Bible, "Father" was not considered as God's proper name. In Exodus 3:13, Moses expressed concern that the Israelites would want to know the name of the God who sent him. In response, God tells Moses אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה ("I am who I am"). Therefore, Moses was to tell the Israelites that יהוה, the God of their ancestors sent him. At the end of v.15, God states: "This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation." While Christians rarely speak of God as Yahweh today, this is still God's name. In fact, in Philippians 2:6-11, Paul explains that God bestowed "the name above all names" upon Christ. Bert-Jan Lietaert Peerbolte explains that this "name above all names" is not

[185] "God has revealed himself to us in the Bible *pervasively* as King, not Queen, and as Father, not Mother… From all of this, I conclude that God has given Christianity a masculine feel." John Piper, "The Frank and Manly Mr. Ryle: The Value of a Masculine Ministry," Desiring God, January 31, 2012, https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-frank-and-manly-mr-ryle-the-value-of-a-masculine-ministry

[186] Kimel, 191-192; Ronald Mushat Frye also writes that "according to biblical religion… only God can name God." Ronald Mushat Frye, "Language for God and Feminist Language: A Literary and Rhetorical Analysis" In Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism, ed. Alvin F. Kimel, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 45.

[187] Marianne Meye Thompson cites Deut. 32:6; Hos. 11:1, 3, 4; Jer. 31:9, 18, 20; the apocryphal books of Tobit, 3 Maccabees, and the Testament of Job; the Jerusalem Targum I on Lev. 22:28; and Targum Onkelus on Deut. 32:6.

the name "Jesus," but is instead the divine name Yahweh.[188] According to Trinitarian theology, the name "Yahweh" is applied to each member of the Trinity. The language of "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit" express the relationship between each member of the Trinity: the Son is eternally generated from the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son.

Moreover, although God's Fatherhood is an important part of Christian tradition, it does not exclude believers from using feminine language to speak of God. In fact, in Genesis 16, Hagar becomes the first person to name God. After fleeing from the unjust treatment of Sarai, Abram's wife, Hagar encounters the angel of the LORD, who has compassion on her. She recognizes that it is the LORD who was speaking to her and gives him this name: אֵל רָאִי , or "the God who sees" (Genesis 16:13). Hagar named God אֵל רָאִי because she recognized that God saw and cared for those who were often overlooked and rejected. She noticed this "seeing" as an attribute of God. Christians can also name God according to God's attributes. Naming God as mother does not assume that God is literally a mother in the human sense.[189] Nor does it take away from the Trinitarian designation of "Father" for God.[190] Instead, it expresses God's mothering of his people.[191] God cares for his people as a mother cares for her children. Naming

[188] Bert-Jan Lietaert Peerbolte, "The Name Above All Names (Philippians 2:9)" ed. George H. van Kooten, *The Revelation of the Name YHWH to Moses: Perspectives from Judaism, the Pagan Graeco-Roman World, and Early Christianity*, (Leiden: BRILL, 2006), 201.

[189] By this, I mean that one can name God as mother in a supplemental way. I will later argue that Christians should not use the language of "Heavenly Mother" as a primary title for God.

[190] Non-evangelical feminists often suggest using language such as "Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer" or "Mother, Lover, Friend" to replace the Trinitarian designation of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." In stating that Christians can "name" God as mother, I do not propose that this should in any way replace the language of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

[191] Jurgen Moltmann suggests that the Father is one who "both begets and gives birth to his son" and describes God as a "fatherly" and "motherly" Father. In support of this view, he cites the Eleventh Council of Toledo: "we must believe that the Son was not made out of nothing, nor out of some substance or other, but from the

God as mother can be a deeply personal way for Christians who have experienced the compassion and kindness of God to express what God has done in their lives.

Meaning of "God the Father"

Although according to Exodus 3, Yahweh is God's proper name, Christians know God as "Father." Even though promoting equality for women is of great importance, the fatherhood of God should not be minimized in order to achieve these goals. In fact, an appropriate understanding of GOD THE FATHER can correct the misconception that God is masculine. McFague explains that "God the Father" is a central *model* in Christianity.[192] The use of the term "Father" for a deity dates back to the Ancient Near East. Joachim Jeremias clarifies that "whenever the word father is used for a deity in this connection it implies fatherhood in the sense of unconditional and irrevocable authority."[193] In the religions of the Ancient Near East, people saw themselves as the offspring of a divine ancestor. Interestingly, in these societies, "father" also carried the connotation of mercy and compassion.[194] Jeremias notes that this is like what the term "mother" signifies to individuals today.[195] In the Hebrew Bible, God is characterized as a father with absolute authority *and* compassion.

Furthermore, when God is called "Father" in the Hebrew Bible, it is often to honor him as Creator. For example, speaking to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 32:6, Moses asks them, "Is

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womb of the Father (*de utero Patris*), that is that he was begotten or born (*genitus vel natus*) from the Father's own being." Jurgen Moltmann, "The Motherly Father: Is Trinitarian Patripassianism Replacing Theological Patriarchalism?" in Metz and Schillebeeckx, *God as Father*, 51.

[192] McFague, *Metaphorical Theology,* 439.

[193] Joachim Jeremias*, The Prayers of Jesus*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 11.

[194] Jeremias, 11.

[195] Ibid.

[God] not your father, who created you…?" The prophet Malachi asks a similar question: "Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us?" (Malachi 2:10; cf. Isaiah 64:8ff). It is important to note that as Father and Creator, God is unlike the deities of the Ancient Near East. Their worshippers saw them as ancestors. Jeremias rightly notes that in the Hebrew Bible, there is nothing comparable to the Sumerian belief that their moon god, Sin, was the father and "begetter of gods and men."[196] God creates not by physically begetting his offspring but by his Word.[197] Instead, as a Father, God has adopted Israel and has chosen them to become his son. Marianne Meye Thompson suggests that when presenting God as "Father," the Hebrew Bible interprets the act of "begetting" in terms of the redemption or calling of the people of Israel.[198] Svetlana Knobnya also connects the idea of God's fatherhood with the redemption of Israel and mentions Exodus 4:22-23 in which God tells Moses to say to Pharoah, "Let my son go, so that he may worship me."[199]

Moreover, the idea of inheritance was also a part of this image of God as Father. Like a father in the Ancient Near East, God as Father gave an inheritance to his children, Israel.[200] Thompson rightly notes that many of the narratives in the Hebrew Bible are centered around the births of heirs and the inheritance of those heirs.[201] God first gave an inheritance to humanity

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[196] Jeremias, 12.

[197] Passages like Psalm 2:7 that speak of God begetting are about God's adoption of Israel, not about a physical begetting of Israel.

[198] Marianne Meye Thompson, *The Promise of the Father: Jesus and God in the New Testament*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 43.

[199] Svetlana Knobnya, "God the Father in the Old Testament," *European Journal of Theology* 20, no. 2 (2011): 140.

[200] Thompson, 43.

[201] Thompson, 44.

through Adam and Eve in Genesis 1. After humanity lost that inheritance, God began to work through individuals such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and eventually the nation of Israel as a whole. Therefore, when God is called "Father" in the Hebrew Bible, it also speaks of God's parental and provisional relationship with Israel. God had a unique interest in the well-being and survival of Israel as a people.

Furthermore, Jeremias proposes that it is in the prophets that the idea of God's fatherly love is fully on display in the Hebrew Bible.[202] As a father, God is gracious to Israel who continues to repay such love and kindness with a lack of gratitude. In Jeremiah 3, God speaks through the prophet and expresses that he desired to give Israel a pleasant land and that they would call him "Father" and would commit to following him. However, they were unfaithful.[203] In Malachi 1:6, God asks, "If then I am a father, where is my honor?"[204] Finally, Jeremias writes that Israel's constant response to these questions is the declaration that God is their father.

The fatherly love of God is most evident through God's interactions with Israel. Even so, God's fatherhood does not play a primary role in the Hebrew scriptures. Interestingly, the Apocrypha only includes four passages that describe God as Father. The Pseudepigrapha has even fewer references.[205] The first century Rabbi, Johanan b. Zakkai who taught during the time that Jesus' ministry was active was the first to use the phrase "heavenly Father" to describe God.[206] Still, most people did not call God "Father." The *Mishnah* and the Targums are reluctant

[202] Jeremias, 13.

[203] Jeremiah 3:19-20

[204] Malachi 1:6

[205] Jeremias, 15-16.

[206] Mek Ex. On 20:25 par Siphra Lev on 20:16 and Tos BQ 7.6

to describe God as "Father." However, whenever Palestinian Jews did speak of God as Father, they were referring to the idea that God is the Father of his people, the Israelites. He was the one they were to obey, and he was also compassionately present as their help in time of need.[207] It only becomes common to call God "Father" after the New Testament.[208] This is because Christ introduces the use of "*my* Father" as a means of describing God. God is not only the Father of the collective nation of Israel, but he is also the Father of Jesus Christ, and thus, the adoptive Father of Christians.

In the Gospels, Jesus speaks of God as Father at least one hundred and seventy times.[209] However, Jeremias argues that it was through Matthew's writings that the title "Father" for God was popularized. In Mark and Luke, Jesus calls God Father four and fifteen times respectively. But in Matthew and John, Jesus calls God Father forty-two and one hundred and nine times respectively.[210] Jeremias does not deny that Jesus called God Father, but he expresses uncertainty that the title "Father" was as commonly used by Jesus as Christians believe today.

Through his study of the use of the term father by Jesus in the Gospels, Jeremias concludes that the "my Father" sayings from Jesus speak to his unique revelation and authority from God. Jesus based his authority on the truth that God made himself known to him like a father does for a son. When Jesus calls God "Father," he is speaking of God as his unique father, not just that he is a member of Israel, the nation that collectively represented God's son. Instead,

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[207] Jeremias, 18-19.

[208] S. Vernon McCasland, "'Abba, Father,'" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 72, no. 2 (1953): 84, https://doi.org/10.2307/3261345.

[209] Jeremias, 29.

[210] Ibid.

Jesus had a personal relationship with God as the preexistent son of the Father.[211] When Jesus called God "Father," he spoke as one who had an intimate relationship with the God to whom he prayed.

It is no wonder that Jesus also taught his disciples to pray, "our Father." The disciples and all believers in Christ would become adopted sons and daughters of God because of Christ's death and resurrection. Therefore, when Christians speak of God as "Father," they are subconsciously declaring that God is the Father of Jesus Christ, and therefore by adoption, the Father of all believers. Quoting Marianne Meye Thompson, William B. Bowes suggests that although some of the characteristics and functions of human fathers are used to describe God, these are not connected to any sense of "ontological gender or 'masculine' essence" regarding God.[212] In sum, the title "Father" does not have anything to do with masculinity. Instead, it has a long history within the Ancient Near East, Palestinian Judaism, and the words and ministry of Christ. When we call God Father, we are recognizing his authority as creator and ruler, but we are also acknowledging his mercy and compassion as a parent to his adopted sons and daughters. Since God is not masculine, it would not be a mischaracterization of God to use feminine language in our speech about God. God is our Father *and* God can also be described in feminine ways. Still, there is good reason to caution against using the language of "Heavenly Mother" or attempting to replace the masculine Trinitarian designations with feminine ones.

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[211] Jeremias, 53-54.

[212] Thompson, *The Promise of the Father*, 19, quoted by William B. Bowes, "The Fatherhood of God in Scripture: Theology, Gendered Language, Points of Reference, and Implications," *Puritan Reformed Journal* 12, no. 2 (July 2020): 24, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAiCEDRIC200914000727&site=ehost-live&scope=site

Why Jesus Did Not Call God "Heavenly Mother"

Phillip J. Nel argues that "God as 'Father' cannot be distinguished from the authoritarian position of the patriarchal father."[213] Patriarchy is harmful to both men and women. Many scholars express legitimate concern that speaking of God as Father justifies patriarchy, sacralizes male domination, and legitimizes the oppression of the weak by the strong.[214] Using a balance of both feminine and masculine language for God can certainly help to form a society in which both males and females are treated equally. However, Christians should not abandon the primary Trinitarian designation of God the Father for the designation of "Heavenly Mother."

According to Aída Spencer "God is Father not because God is masculine. God is Father because "father" in the ancient world was a helpful metaphor to communicate certain aspects of God's character."[215] God is both a compassionate parent and an authoritative ruler. However, in ancient Judaism, women rarely ruled or inherited. Women also could not adopt. For example, it was prohibited by the Jewish Mishna for a father to allow his daughter to inherit in place of his son.[216] Similarly, in ancient Babylon, if a father wanted his daughter to remain within his household, he had to legally make her his son.[217] Paul R. Smith proposes that one of the main

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[213] Philip J. Nel, "Does Changing the Metaphor Liberate?: On the 'Fatherhood' of God," *Old Testament Essays (New Series)* 15, no. 1 (2002): 136, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAiFZU190722001335&site=ehost-live&scope=site.136

[214] Sandra Marie Schneiders, *Women and the Word: The Gender of God in the New Testament and the Spirituality of Women*, Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 6.

[215] Spencer, "Father-Ruler," 10.

[216] M. B. Bat 8:5.

[217] See Ruether Rosemary Radford, *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 176.

associations of God the Father in Paul's writing is the idea of adoption.[218] In Galatians 4:6, Paul famously writes, "Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, *"Abba*, Father." Smith explains that Paul speaks of both males and females as "sons" of God in this context. His reasoning had nothing to do with masculinity. He simply wanted to maintain the metaphor of fatherhood and adoption that was already a significant part of the Bible.[219] Due to the patriarchal structure of the ancient world, mothers did not have the same authority or influence as fathers. If Jesus told his disciples to pray to God as Heavenly Mother, they would have been confused since they knew the power and authority of God the Father, and that women in their world did not have such authority. Calling God "Father," maintained the idea of God's authority as divine ruler but also conveyed intimacy and personal relationship. If one wants to simultaneously speak of both aspects of God's nature, it makes the most sense to call God "Father." Calling God "Mother" would not communicate this idea effectively.

Additionally, in the Hebrew Bible, God made it clear that he did not want to be associated with the fertility cults of Israel's neighbors. Unfortunately, Israel was often tempted to worship foreign gods, including the female deity Asherah. Asherah was worshipped by the Canaanite, Sumerian, and Ugaritic religions in the Ancient Near East.[220] She bore the title "bride of the king of heaven" and was known as the consort of the Ugaritic god El.[221] Some theologians

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[218] Paul R. Smith, *Is It Okay to Call God "Mother": Considering the Feminine Face of God*, (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 94.

[219] Smith, *Is It Okay to Call God "Mother",* 94.

[220] Tilde Binger, *Asherah: Goddesses in Ugarit, Israel and the Old Testament* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 1997), 48, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=436248.

[221] Ibid.

go as far as to imply that Asherah was Yahweh's wife in the Hebrew Bible.[222] However, Israel was to be a monotheistic nation that worshiped only one God. They did not need to approach a pantheon of Gods to have their needs met. Instead, they prayed solely to Yahweh their God. In addition to breaking from the metaphor established by the language of God the Father, Jesus also would not have called God "Heavenly Mother" because he was aware that in the semitic religions and the Greek religions of the region, there were female deities known as "heavenly mother."[223]

Speaking of God as "Mother" in the same way that one speaks of God as "Father" might imply that there are two deities and not one God. God made it clear throughout scripture that Israel was to have no other gods beside him (cf. Exodus 23:13; 34:14; Deut. 6:14; Is 44:6). Furthermore, it would affirm the theological error that Yahweh had a wife or female consort. Due to the female deities of the Ancient Near East, the language of "Heavenly Mother" is associated with pagan religion and polytheism. The language of God the Father, on the other hand, is associated with monotheism. Calling God "Heavenly Mother" would not have led Israel to truer worship of God and would have instead returned them to the temptation and sin of their ancestors.

Furthermore, Jesus called God "Father" and not "Mother" because of the unique relationship he shared with God. Amy Peeler writes, "A patriarchal society and the few glimmers of God's fatherhood in the Scriptures of Israel do not fully explain the incarnate Son's linguistic

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[222] Ibid, 111.

[223] The Ephesians worshipped Artemis, a mother goddess figure and Asherah was a false deity that Ancient Israel was often tempted to worship. Likewise, in the modern day, Mormons believe in a "Mother in Heaven" along with a "Father in Heaven." (See Kevin L. Barney, "How to Worship Our Mother in Heaven (without Getting Excommunicated," *Dialogue* 41, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 121.) The World Mission Society of God, a religious cult led by Ahn Sahng-hong in South Korea also believes in a Father and Mother deity.

expression of his eternal, personal, and begotten relationship with God."[224] She further explains that the incarnation influences Jesus' choice in calling God "Father."[225] Mary was Jesus' earthly mother and God was his heavenly Father.

Conclusion

It is true that for many the language of God the Father evokes the image of a masculine God. One might be led to believe that if God is "Father," then God endorses patriarchy. On the other hand, the language of "Heavenly Mother" is associated with paganism. Moreover, calling God "Mother," would not adequately express what it means for God to be a divine ruler with both authority and compassion. It also would not properly account for the relationship between God and Christ. While Christians should not abandon the language of fatherhood and adopt the language of "Heavenly Mother," Christians should be aware of the reasons why God is our Father. When Christians call God "Father," they are expressing that through Jesus, they have been adopted into a family that was once not their own. Speaking of God as "Father" does not indicate that God is a masculine deity that endorses patriarchy. In fact, using feminine language for God in a supplemental way can help remind believers that although God is Father, God is not male. This acknowledgment carries serious implications for women and their identities as image-bearers.

[224] She suggests that one of the reasons why Jesus calls God "Father" and not "Mother" is because Jesus already had an earthly mother, Mary; Amy L. B. Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, (Grand Rapids Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2022), 115.

[225] Ibid.

Chapter 5: Feminine Language and the Image of God in Women

Introduction

Throughout the ages, Christians have argued that if women bear the image of God, it is to a lesser degree than men. For example, Augustine believed that woman is in the image of God if she has a husband. However, on her own she is not the image of God. Yet, a man is the image of God "fully and completely" whether he is married or single.[226] Similarly, Aquinas adopted the Aristotelian view that women are simply "misbegotten males." Although defective, she is useful because of her role in procreation. According to Aquinas, this is because males are more rational, and females are less capable of having self-control and morality.[227] Next, Luther believed that the original Eve was created equal to Adam but women after the fall are nothing like the original Eve.[228] Calvin deviates from his predecessors, and argues that women and men are equally created in the image of God but God designed social orders that ordained men to rule and women to be subjugated.[229] Today, the complementarian view on gender equality falls in line with Calvin's view on women and affirm that men and women are created in the image of God but men are created to lead, and women are created to follow.[230] For example, Ray Ortlund argues that "subordination is entailed in the very nature of a helping role." [231] However, if the image of

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[226] Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 7.7.10.

[227] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1993), 96.

[228] Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 97.

[229] Ibid, 98.

[230] It should be noted that there are varying positions on the complementarian side of the gender debate. Amongst complementarian theologians, there are those who affirm this to a lesser or greater extent than others.

[231] Ray C. Ortlund Jr., "Male-Female Equality and Male Headship," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (Revised Edition): A Response to Evangelical Feminism,* ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021), 136.

God includes the joint call to rule over creation, then it is unlikely that a woman can bear the image of God and be permanently subordinated to men at the same time.

Genesis 1:27-28 states:

> "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Ortlund is right in stating that few people teach that only men bear the image of God.[232] Yet, while this is rarely taught *explicitly,* it is often implicitly assumed. Ortlund will go on to suggest that the word "man" is a hint at God's plan for males and females, stating that "God's naming of the race "man" whispers male headship…"[233] Furthermore, the belief that God is male is often taken as support for male headship and female subordination. If God is male, then maleness is somehow superior to femaleness. However, if the God who created male and female in his image has both masculine and feminine qualities, Christians are empowered to affirm the equal identity and call of men and women to fill the earth and subdue it as the image of God. This final chapter will discuss what exactly the image of God entails, whether female subordination affects the image, and finally, the implications of feminine God-language for women.

What is the Image of God?

The debate surrounding the meaning and function of the image of God has persisted for centuries. Despite the numerous suggestions, three major views remain: the Spiritual View, the Relational View, and the Functional View. First, the Spiritual View maintains that the image of God may refer to humanity's spirituality, reason, and emotional capability that separates us from

[232] Ortlund, "Male-Female Equality and Male Headship," 126.

[233] Ibid, 127.

animals.[234] Augustine believed that the human memory, intellect, and will reflect the Trinity.[235] Athanasius and Aquinas thought that the image of God had to do with human reason. In contrast, Calvin and Ambrose believed it had something to do with the soul.[236] Furthermore, Irenaeus supposed that there was a distinction between the image and the likeness of God. He argued that the image was permanent, while the likeness referred to human qualities that were lost after the Fall. [237] Although this view was popular through the nineteenth century and is the traditional view concerning the image of God, it has fallen out of favor. These speculations about the image of God do not fully consider the context of Genesis 1:26-27, and what the language surrounding the text can reveal about the meaning of the image of God.

The Relational, or Reciprocal View was a contribution of Karl Barth. He believed that the image of God consisted of the reciprocal relationship between male and female.[238] Similarly, Dietrich Bonhoeffer argued that a part of being the image of God included freedom to be in relationship with other humans. Barth's view is problematic because it implies that apart from each other, man and women do not bear the image of God. Interestingly, Genesis 9:6 attributes to the image of God the reason for forbidding murder. Rather than highlighting the relationship

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[234] John Day, *From Creation To Abraham*, The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2022), http://www.bloomsburycollections.com/collections/monograph., 22-41.

[235] Augustine, *De Trinitate*, books 7-15.

[236] Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 3; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* part 1, question 13; *De Veritate* 10; Calvin, *Institutes* 1.15.3; Ambrose, *Hexaemeron* 6.7-8.

[237] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.6.1; 5.16.1-2.

[238] Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* 3.1 (Zollikon: Evangelischer Verlag, 1945), pp. 205-26, ET *Church Dogmatics* 3.1 (trans. G.W. Bromiley; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958), pp. 183-201, quoted by John Day, *From Creation to Abraham,* 22-41.

between male and female, this command centers on protecting the dignity of individual human life.[239]

Finally, the Functional View is most widely accepted among scholars today. According to the functional view of the image of God, God created humanity to rule over creation as viceregents.[240] Basil of Caesarea argued that the image of God included royalty and rulership. He stated: "where the power to rule is, there is the image of God."[241] Richard L. Middleton connects the image of kings in the Ancient Near East with the image of God. He notes that there was a common practice amongst Ancient Near Eastern kings to set up statues of themselves in locations where they were not physically present as a symbol of their rule.[242] He mentions Ancient Egypt and the role of the Pharaohs as the image of their gods. For example, Ahmose I is described as "his heir, the image of Re, whom he created, the avenger (or the representative), for whom he has set himself on earth."[243] Furthermore, Amenhotep III is called Amon-Re's "beloved son… my image… I have given to you to rule the earth in peace."[244] According to this view, the image of God speaks of humanity's status as God's stewards and rulers over creation.[245]

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[239] Day, *From Creation to Abraham,* 22-41.

[240] Ibid.

[241] Basil of Caesarea, "First Homily: On the Origin of Humanity, Discourse 1," in *On the Human Condition*, ed. John Behr and Augustine Casiday, trans. Nonna Verna Harrison, PPS (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), 36–37.

[242] J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005, 64.

[243] J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*, 67.

[244] Ibid.

[245] Ibid, 145.

While the Functional View rightly associates the image of God with a divine calling to rule and subdue the earth, it fails to address how the image of God impacts humanity's identity. Therefore, building on the Functional View, Christopher D. Kou suggests that the image of God is humanity's very identity, and that the creation of humanity is the pinnacle of God's cosmic temple creation.[246] He compares the accounts of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 with the construction of the tabernacle in Exodus 25-29, and discovers striking comparisons.[247] Kou writes that the "consummation of God's sanctuary construction project is the constitution of humanity as priest."[248] While the image of God in humanity also refers to ideas of royalty and rule, this is only an aspect of the image. Unlike the statues of the Ancient Near Eastern gods, humans are not conceived as deities. Kou explains that the כִּי particle used after דְּמוּת is a qualifier and distinguishes God from humanity.[249] Furthermore, Kou argues that humanity is not merely created *in* God's image but *as* God's image. The image of God is a shared identity that was given to all human beings.

Female Subordination and the Image of God

The image of God includes a shared identity and calling between males and females. However, how that shared identity and calling are lived out is oft disputed. For example, complementarian theologians suggest that while males and females are ontologically equal,

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[246] Christopher D. Kou, "God's Statue in the Cosmic Temple: צֶלֶם and דְּמוּת in Genesis and the Plural Cohortative in Genesis 1:26 in Light of Sanctuary Setting and Christological Telos," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 66, no. 1, (March 2023), 11–31. https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAiGU0230707000760&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[247] Kou, "God's Statue in the Cosmic Temple", 16.

[248] Kou, 17.

[249] Kou, 24-25.

women are functionally subordinate. This is argued from the term עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ, the 'order of creation' in Genesis 2:7 and 2:21-23, and the curse in Genesis 3:16.

עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ ("Ezer Kenegdo")

John M. Frame agrees with Middleton and Kou that as the image of God, human beings resemble and represent the one they picture.[250] Humans are like God in human nature, moral excellence, moral agency, bodiliness, and sexual differentiation. He compares the likeness between God and man to a likeness between man and woman. Citing Genesis 1:28, he argues that human beings are created to help God in the same way that women are to help man.[251] However, Genesis 1:28 does not express that humans are created to help God. It simply conveys a commandment given to humanity from God. Furthermore, God is the one that is spoken of as our helper.[252] Frame goes on to say that "the very submission of the woman also images God… the Lord is not too proud to be our 'helper.'"[253] Yet, "helper" does not necessarily imply submission.[254] God's help towards his people in no way suggests that he also submits to them. R. David Freedman challenges the typical translation of עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ. He writes,

> I believe the customary translation of these two words [i.e. *ezer kenegdo* or "helper"], despite its near universal adoption, is wrong. That is not what the words are intended to

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[250] John M. Frame, "Men and Women in the Image of God," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (Revised Edition): A Response to Evangelical Feminism,* ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021), 304.

[251] Frame, *Men and Women in the Image of God*, 306

[252] For example, Exodus 18:4, Deuteronomy 33:7 Psalm 54:4, Psalm 33:20, Psalm 115:9-11, and Psalm 121:1-2.

[253] Frame, 311.

[254] Chingboi Guite Phaipi suggests that the term עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ may imply superiority. Following a study by William J. Webb, she explains that 72% of usages for עֵזֶר involves someone superior helping someone inferior. 18% of usages involve equals, and only 10% of usages mention someone that is inferior helping someone superior. William J. Webb *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: exploring the hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis, 128,* quoted by Chingboi Guite Phaipi, "The Bible and Women's Subordination: A Tribal Woman Re-Reads Genesis 2-3," *International Journal of Asian Christianity* 5, no. 1 (2022): 69–88, https://doi.org/10.1163/25424246-05010005, 73.

> convey. They should be translated instead to mean approximately "a power equal to man." That is, when God concluded that he would create another creature so that man would not be alone, he decided to make "a power equal to him," someone whose strength was equal to man's. Woman was not intended to be merely man's helper. She was to be instead his partner.[255]

Moreover, the examples in which God is called "helper" do not imply a subordinate role. As an עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ, Eve is an ontologically and functionally equal partner to Adam.

Frame suggests that as the representation of God, men and women both have authority.[256] He clarifies that they are both also *under* authority, stating that Jesus is both "Lord and servant" and that "a man rules his family, but he is subordinate to his employer.[257] Frame is right in stating that human beings have authority and are under authority. However, in his example about a man being subordinate to his employer, this subordination is temporary. Yet, Frame argues for the permanent subordination of women to men on the basis of gender alone. If women are subordinate to men, then there is an imbalance of authority, and therefore, an inequality between the sexes.

Likewise, Andrew Steinman mentions that in Genesis 2:23 the woman was designed specifically for Adam.[258] Bruce Waltke concurs: "The word *help* suggests that the man has governmental priority, but both sexes are mutually dependent upon each other."[259] Both Steinmann and Waltke express that there is no ontological superiority or inferiority between

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[255] R. David Freedman, "Woman, a Power Equal to a Man: Translation of Woman as a 'Fit Helpmate' for Man Is Questioned," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 9, no. 1, 1982, 56.

[256] Frame, 313.

[257] Ibid.

[258] Andrew E. Steinmann, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=5844291, 81.

[259] Bruce K Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzE3ODA2NTVfX0FO0?sid=bf1edaeb-3f54-4591-a7ae-ca127c051d75@redis&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1, 88.

Adam and Eve.[260] Frame would agree. Although, if a man has "governmental priority" to rule and exercise authority and if there is an imbalance of authority between men and women, then it is unlikely that the man and woman are truly equal.

'Order of Creation'

The case has been made that the term עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ does not support the permanent subordination of women to men. However, complementarian theologians often argue from the order of creation in Genesis 2:7 and 2:21-23 to suggest that God "established man as the head over the woman."[261] In Genesis 2:7, "The LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." Since the man had no suitable partner, God puts him to sleep and creates a woman out of him. Upon seeing the woman, the man exclaims, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man (Genesis 2:21-23)." George W. Knight III suggests that Paul's treatment of the 'order of creation' in 1 Corinthians 11:11ff explains how male headship was established.[262] 1 Timothy 2:11-13 is also used to support male headship on the basis of created order.

In contrast, the egalitarian view denies any hierarchy between males and females. In the introduction to *Discovering Biblical Equality,* Ronald W. Pierce, Cynthia Long Westfall, and Christa L. McKirland note that the consensus amongst egalitarians is that males do not have

[260] Steinmann, *Genesis,* 81; Waltke, *Genesis,* 88.

[261] George W. Knight III, "Husbands and Wives as Analogies of Christ and the Church," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (Revised Edition): A Response to Evangelical Feminism,* ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021), 227.

[262] Knight, 227.

"unilateral leadership simply because they are males."[263] For example, Kevin Giles sees Genesis 1 and 2 as the "strongest imaginable affirmation of the equal status of man and woman," "of male and female differentiation," and "of their conjoint authority over creation."[264] Although complementarian theologians highlight created order, egalitarians often point out that אָדָם can mean both "male" and "human." Rebecca Groothuis proposes that "the man is called 'the human' because he was, at first, the only human in existence, and because the primary significance of his existence was that of his humanness, not of his maleness."[265] Groothuis also explains that while the man has a "temporal priority" due to the language, he does not have a priority of power or authority.[266] Furthermore, even if created order is significant, it does not imply that men are created to lead. Interestingly, Deborah Savage argues that there *is* a hierarchy in the Genesis narrative. She observes that the lower life forms are created *before* the higher life forms.[267] Savage further elaborates that Eve was not merely created "second," she was created last. Therefore, Eve can be seen as the "pinnacle of creation, not as a creature whose place in that order is subservient or somehow less in stature than that of Adam."[268] Additionally, it is unlikely

[263] Ronald W. Pierce, Cynthia Long Westfall, and Christa L. McKirland, "Introduction" in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Cynthia Long Westfall (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2021), xx. Accessed May 20, 2024. ProQuest Ebook Central.

[264] Kevin Giles, "The Genesis of Equality Part 1," *Priscilla Papers* 28, no. 4 (2014): 3, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAiA14190731001591&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=liberty&authtype=ip,shib.

[265] Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1997), 124-125.

[266] Groothuis, *Good News for Women,* 125.

[267] Deborah M. Savage, "The Nature of Woman in Relation to Man: Genesis 1 and 2 through the Lens of the Metaphysical Anthropology of Aquinas," *Logos* 18, no. 1 (2015): 78, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=CPLI0000592280&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=liberty&authtype=ip,shib.

[268] Deborah M. Savage, "The Nature of Woman in Relation to Man", 85.

that created order implies male hierarchy because throughout the scriptures the older child (created first) often serves the younger (created second).[269] Despite this, in Genesis 1, both sexes are given equal status in the eyes of God. Moreover, as the "prologue to the whole Bible,"[270] Genesis 1 should inform how Christians interpret and theologize the rest of scripture. The order of creation in Genesis 2 does not suggest that males are created to lead, and women are created to follow.

Genesis 3:16

However, some argue instead that Genesis 3:16 upholds the complementarian view on gender. Waltke comments that because of the Fall, the man will dominate the woman. However, he also contends that "male leadership, not male dominance, had been assumed in the ideal, pre-Fall situation."[271] If created order does not imply male hierarchy, does Genesis 3:16 propose that God originally designed men to lead and women to follow? Egalitarians look to Genesis 1:26-28 as an interpretive clue for Genesis 3:16. Man and woman are tasked with the responsibility of ruling together over creation. Yet, in a turn of events, the man now works against his wife and instead of co-ruling with her, he rules over her.[272]

Similarly, the word תְּשׁוּקָה has often been interpreted to suggest that after the Fall, Eve had an inordinate desire to rule over her husband and assume his authority. However, the word

[269] Mary L. Conway, "Looking to Scripture: The Biblical Texts, in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Cynthia Long Westfall (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2021), liv. Accessed May 20, 2024. ProQuest Ebook Central.

[270] Ibid, 3.

[271] Waltke, 94.

[272] Aída Spencer mentions that Adam's ruling over Eve is a consequence of her longing and her fall. Aída Besançon Spencer, *Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 36. Rebecca Groothuis also notes "there is no mention of either spouse ruling over the other – until after their fall into sin…" Rebecca Groothuis, *Good News for Women,* 123.

only has three usages in the Hebrew Bible, and the connotation can be negative or positive.[273] In Genesis 4:7, God speaks to Cain after his unacceptable sacrifice and tells him that "sin is crouching at the door" and desires him. However, Cain must rule over it. Clearly, in this passage, תְּשׁוּקָה is negative. Sin desires Cain, and ultimately, he gives in and murders his brother, Abel (Genesis 4:8). Nevertheless, this word is used in Song of Songs 7:10 in a positive way. Solomon's bride exclaims with joy that he desires her. Davidson suggests that תְּשׁוּקָה in Genesis 3:16 should be interpreted in light of Song of Songs 7:10. He explains that it "denote[s] a positive blessing accompanying the divine judgment. A divinely ordained sexual yearning of wife for husband will serve to sustain the union that has been threatened in the ruptured relations resulting from sin."[274] Interestingly, Chingboi Guite Paiphi mentions that the term could be read as "returning," following the translation of the term as "returning" in the LXX or a secondary development of the root שקק .[275]Although its exact meaning is uncertain, it is unlikely that תְּשׁוּקָה suggests that Eve desired to negatively dominate her husband. Eve's desire is in no way connected to Adam's rule over her. Therefore, the NIV's rendering of Genesis 3:16 as "*and* he will rule over you" is more favorable than the ESV's rendering "*but* he shall rule over you." Adam's rule over Eve is a condition of the Fall, not a condition of Eve's desire.

The complementarian view implies that maleness is normative, and that even though males and females were created equally, males have an inherent right to rule over women. Even so, Phyllis Trible proposes that "male and female" is a metaphorical vehicle used to understand

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[273] Along with its usage in Genesis 3:16, תְּשׁוּקָה is also found in Genesis 4:7 and Song of Songs 7:10.

[274] Richard M Davidson, "The Theology of Sexuality in the Beginning: Genesis 3," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 26, no. 2 (1988): 129, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000806394&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=liberty&authtype=ip,shib.

[275] Phaipi, *The Bible and Woman's Subordination*, 80.

the image of God.[276] Furthermore, "the image of God" is a vehicle used to understand God. Metaphors such as God the Father, God as husband, God as king, and God as warrior are expressions of the image of God in men. Similarly, metaphors such as God the birthing mother, nursing mother, and midwife are expressions of the image of God in women.[277] Together these metaphors create a picture of the image of God, which itself creates a picture of God.

Women bear the human identity as the image of God and maintain the same function that men do to rule and replenish the earth. Since there is no subordination within the Trinity, it is unlikely that there should be subordination between males and females.[278] A balanced depiction of God as masculine and feminine can help to correct the implicit belief that men are more like God than women.

Feminine God-Language and its Implications for Women

As discussed in the introduction, Christians prefer to think of God as a father, warrior, or king. These are all valid ways to describe God. However, speaking of God as a mother, midwife, or nurse is less accepted. When Genesis 1-3 is read with female subordination in view, these feminine qualities are seen negatively. Associating God with femininity may seem like defaming his character. However, if the image of God speaks to human identity and rulership, and women are included in this image, there is no reason to think that feminine qualities are subordinate to masculine qualities. Elizabeth Johnson has noted the disconnect between the belief that male and female were created in the image of God and the "gender dualism" Christianity adopted from

[276] Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 20.

[277] Ibid, 22.

[278] There are diverse opinions among Evangelicals concerning subordination in the Trinity. The position taken in this paper is that the Son is not eternally subordinate to the Father, but only economically so in the context of the incarnation (For more, see William Grover, "A Review and an Evaluation of Diverse Christological Opinions Among Evangelicals: Part 2: The Eternal Role of Subordination of the Son," *Conspectus 6* (September 2008), 43-66.)

Hellenistic thought.[279] She further explains how this disconnect caused women to be viewed as symbolic of evil and "the anti-image of God."[280] Thankfully, feminine language for God in the scriptures consistently remind Christians of Genesis 1-3 and disrupts the subtle belief that women are "the anti-image of God." Humanity cannot understand themselves apart from an understanding of the divine. Therefore, feminine language for God has the potential to bring Christians back to the truth about human anthropology. Steinmann writes,

> The threefold use of *created* emphasizes the high position for which God created humans. Twice they are said to be created in God's image, and once that they were created male and female. This emphasizes that both men and women were bearers of the image of God.[281]

Thus, feminine language is a powerful reminder that neither gender is superior or inferior to the other. Instead, both genders equally reflect the image of God.

If women also bear the image of God, then one should expect to see femininity valued in Christian spaces. One of the ways in which we do so is by acknowledging and celebrating the feminine qualities of God. God being imaged as a birthing mother, a nursing mother, a mother bird, and midwife calls us to remember the dignity of woman. The unique capacity for compassion and care that God has given to women were first reflected in his divine nature.[282] Awareness of the feminine language for God may help remind women of their innate worth and value, highlight the stories of women, and correct the lingering beliefs about women as the "anti-image of God."

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[279] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2017), 70.

[280] Ibid.

[281] Steinmann, *Genesis,* 73.

[282] Of course, God has also given males a capacity for compassion and care. However, because of the potential to carry life within their wombs, women have a unique capacity to nurture and care for their children.

Lastly, embracing the feminine language for God can create more unity between men and women, and a joint desire to fulfill their God-given call. Rather than either sex dominating or ruling over the other, both can equally point to the goodness of God. This has implications for the Great Commission and the work that Christ has called Christians to do. It will be challenging for Christians to fulfill this call with one group ruling and the other being subjugated. In order to fulfill our God-given call, the Church needs the gifts of both males and females being used to their fullest capacity.

Conclusion

Christian language for God carries weight and significance. Pertaining to the Hebrew Bible, the Conceptual Metaphor Theory suggests that metaphors do not merely present figurative versions of otherwise literal language. In speaking of our transcendent and immanent creator, metaphorical language can convey divine truth that otherwise could not be grasped without the metaphor. Thus, the bible offers many metaphors to help believers rightly understand and properly worship God. God is most often described through gendered and parental language. In the Hebrew Bible, masculine language for God is presented more often than feminine language for God. Since Israel's cultural background involved patriarchy, it is remarkable that the Hebrew Bible even describes God in feminine ways. This, perhaps, is because God is neither male nor female, and has created both genders in his image.

Unfortunately, among Evangelicals, it is common to view God in excessively androcentric ways. One's view of God often impacts their view of the people God has created. If God is only masculine, then feminist theologian Mary Daly is correct: maleness becomes interchangeable with divinity, and females are subordinate. This thesis has argued that scripture does not support the subordination of women. Men and women are called to equally show forth

the glory of God on earth. Men and women do not necessarily have distinct roles, although due to biological differences, men and women fulfill their God-given call in slightly different ways. If Christians can begin to envision feminine attributes of God, then we can also begin to rightly celebrate masculinity and femininity equally.

Due to the limits of the thesis, this paper has not been able to address all the implications, nuances, and discussion useful to the study of feminine language for God. For example, along with the feminine metaphors for God, there may be Hebrew language terms such as *Shaddai* and Shekinah that highlight a feminine side of God. While this paper did address womb-language and maternal images of God, this topic alone is extensive. Exploring Ancient Near Eastern birth rituals of praying to fertility goddesses to alleviate the dangers of birth, and the polemic of Yahweh as the one who opens and closes the womb might prove to be fruitful. Some feminist scholars have suggested that Yahweh's control of the womb is another way in which patriarchy subjugates women. However, it can instead be argued that Yahweh's control over the womb is good for women since God is neither male nor female and empathizes with the plights of both genders. Similarly, the motif of midwifery and God's deliverance was touched upon in this paper. Although the word "midwife" is not often used in scripture, midwifery is significant to the biblical story. A study of God's deliverance and the motif of midwifery would be useful.

Ultimately, this thesis aims to present a balanced view of God that may lead Christians to truer worship and devotion, and a balanced view of humanity in which men and women are equally esteemed as bearers as the image of God.

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