
Recovering Discarded Images

BY KRISTINA LACELLE-PETERSON

Scripture's feminine metaphors for God yield a more dynamic understanding of divine nature and remind us that women as well as men are capable of bearing God's image in the world. Embracing these images in worship helps us to engage with God's gracious, multifaceted invitation to us.

Once a student of mine read the “woe to you, you hypocrites” passage in Matthew 23:1-36 and declared emphatically, “The Jesus I believe in would never say such things!” Clearly he preferred his own picture of Jesus to the characterization of Jesus in Scripture. Many Christians function in the same way when it comes to female imagery for God: they prefer their comfortable, uncomplicated picture of God in exclusively male roles rather than the rich, multi-faceted depiction of God in Scripture.

Since God is, in fact, referred to with female imagery in various biblical texts, the question is not whether using female images for God will draw us away from orthodox Christianity, but whether using exclusively male metaphors will so distort our view of God as to render our concept of God unbiblical. Put simply: If we reject an entire class of biblical metaphors do we still have a biblical understanding of God? The answer seems to be “no” since in large sectors of the Church many Christians assume, either explicitly or implicitly, that God *is* male, despite the fact that Scripture depicts God as a spiritual being without the physicality on which sex is based.

In what follows we will examine some of the assumptions afoot in the Church about metaphors for God before we turn to scriptural texts in which the writers employ feminine imagery to refer to God. A recovery of these images in worship and Christian reflection can help us broaden our understanding of and deepen our engagement with God, as well as help us live out what we say we believe about women and men bearing the image of God.

RICH DIVERSITY OF BIBLICAL IMAGES

Many Christians, especially in evangelical circles, speak of God exclusively with father language as if Scripture offered just this one picture of God. However, to ignore the rich diversity of images of God in Scripture not only leaves us with a partial picture of God but allows us too easily to assign our cultural assumptions about human fathers to God. In other words, we not only reduce God to one image, but we also reduce God to *our* image, our cultural ideals regarding male parents. This, of course, borders on idolatry.

Identification of God with our assumptions about fatherhood is especially misleading given the fact that the writers of the Old Testament use the father metaphor almost exclusively to refer to the nurturing activity of God who protects the orphan (Psalm 68:5), pities the weakness of the vulnerable (Psalm 103:13-14), and welcomes back the wayward child (Jeremiah 31:9). The father image is not used to denote authority and discipline, as many Christians assume, but rather points to the gentle, nurturing aspects of God.

In any case, the nearly exclusive use of father language makes it difficult to have discussions about the feminine imagery for God, but also makes it fearfully important. Since our language both displays and (in)forms how we think, if we refer to God only in male terms we show what we think of God and we also reinforce these concepts of God in our minds.

In contrast, the many metaphors for the Divine in Scripture give us a variety of ways to understand God and to draw close to God experientially. Metaphors have a didactic function, teaching about the abstract in terms of the concrete, and in the case of God, the unknown by use of the known and the infinite through the finite. But more than that, metaphors possess an affective aspect that goes beyond rational lessons about a given topic. As they draw on personal experience they produce an emotional response, so we experience one thing in terms of another.¹ The Psalmist, for instance, could say "God is strong and steady," but states the idea more powerfully in the metaphor "God is our shelter" that not only communicates characteristics about God but also beckons readers into a particular intimacy with God. The image invites those who have experienced life as unpredictable or out of control, to rest in the protective and enduring presence of God.

Given both the didactic and affective functions of metaphors, it is clear that no one metaphor will suffice when it comes to God and our relation-

ship with God. God's nature is too immense to be captured by one image and our disparate life situations too varied to be tapped by one metaphor. Graciously, God has offered us in Scripture a range of images, from inanimate objects or forces of nature (such as trees, the sun, water, rocks, shelter, wind, and fire) to animals (lion, mother bear, eagle, and dove), as well as people of varying roles (potter, warrior, ruler, gardener, and friend) and both genders (king, woman giving birth, master, mistress, father, and mother). If we were to take them literally, they would be nonsensical together—how can something be both an inanimate rock and a living dove, for instance, or a mother and a father?—but the clash is important to help us remember that they are all metaphors.² None was meant to stand alone. The focus on a single metaphor discussed above displays a misappropriation of that metaphor: worshipers confuse metaphor with reality and make absolute something that was meant to be illustrative.

Dealing with the diversity of metaphors for God demands careful thought in other ways as well. It does not make sense, for instance, to count how many times God is referred to as a rock and how many as wind to decide which one is more "true." Similarly, the preponderance of male imagery does not suggest that God is somehow more male or more rightfully depicted as male. In fact, the most theologically significant name for God in the Old Testament, *Yahweh*, I AM, emphasizes God's being, not a male identity. God is not pictured as a sexualized male deity akin to Ba'al or any of the other gods of the Ancient Near East who had female consorts with whom to procreate. Rather, the writers of the Old Testament material displayed God as male or female, and even, perhaps most surprisingly, as both, in a number of texts with gendered pairs of images. It is with examples of these texts that we will begin our survey of feminine imagery.

FEMALE IMAGES FOR GOD IN SCRIPTURE

In some passages, Scripture employs male and female images for God in conjunction with one another, without using stereotypes of gender to give "opposite" or even complementary messages. Rather both images reinforce the same point. For instance, Isaiah 42:13 compares God to a warrior:

he cries out, he shouts aloud,
he shows himself mighty against his foes.

The very next verse states:

For a long time I have held my peace,
I have kept still and restrained myself;
now I will cry out like a woman in labor,
I will gasp and pant.
I will lay waste mountains and hills...

Isaiah 42:14-15a

The cry of a soldier in battle and the cry of a woman in childbirth function in a similar way to drive home God's distress at the people's unfaithfulness and warn of the imminent action God will take. The point is similar, but the disparate images invite men and women to identify with God's frustration.

In God's challenge in Job 38, God asks Job where he was during the creation of the cosmos. A pair of masculine and feminine poetic images point to creation:

Has the rain a father,
or who has begotten the drops of dew?
From whose womb did the ice come forth,
and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven?

Job 38:28-29

The writer pictures God as the one who begets and the one who births, neither of which is literally true, a fact underscored by their back to back usage. Yahweh, the fullness of being, can be metaphorically portrayed by both types of human biology, though possessing neither. Interestingly, birth imagery is not off-limits; the writer does not hold to the modern notion that maternal imagery in religious circles is inherently pagan, or more likely to lead to paganism, and should be avoided on that basis.³

Jesus also taught through the use of pairs of gendered images, most notably in Luke 15:1-10 where God is both the shepherd looking for lost sheep and the woman looking for the lost coin. Obviously the message in both parables is that God persistently seeks the lost, so the shepherd seeking the lost lamb and the woman seeking the lost coin do not say different things about God. Rather, the images address different sectors of the audience: men who have looked for an economically essential lost lamb and women who have searched for a coin that was their security should anything happen to a husband, are being invited to draw on their experience to understand the urgency with which God seeks for the lost.

Another pair of gendered roles in Jesus' teaching represents God as the farmer who plants the mustard seed and God as the woman working yeast into lump of dough (Luke 13:18-21//Matthew 13:31-33). These traditional activities of men and women describe the growth of the kingdom of God: the kingdom is like seed that grows after the sower has done his work and the kingdom is like yeast that expands throughout the dough after the baker has done her work. A man's work and a woman's work point to the activity of Jesus as the agent of the kingdom. (The baking imagery also lies close behind his teaching in John 6:31-59: God gave manna in the wilderness and now gives the living bread, Jesus himself.)

Some female metaphors, however, are not paired directly in the text with male imagery. In some passages womb and birth imagery stand alone. In Job 38, again, we find these verses:

Or who shut in the sea with doors
when it burst out from the womb? —
when I made the clouds its garment,
and thick darkness its swaddling band....

Job 38:8-9

God births and clothes the sea. In Deuteronomy, as Moses reviewed Israelite history before entering the Promised Land, he observes of the people:

You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you;
you forgot the God who gave you birth.

Deuteronomy 32:18

Moses characterizes God's formation of the nation of Israel as giving birth. The Psalmist compares his contentment with God to a child with its mother:

But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.

Psalms 131:2

In a similar vein, God's faithfulness is compared with that of a nursing mother:

Can a woman forget her nursing child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these she may forget,
yet I will not forget you.

Isaiah 49:15

God, like the mother of a young child, never forgets the people in their weakness and helplessness. In Isaiah's final chapter, God promises to act like a comforting mother:

For thus says the LORD: ...
As a mother comforts her child,
so I will comfort you.

Isaiah 66:12a, 13a

Finally, Hosea depicts the nation of Israel as a wayward son who had forgotten the tenderness with which God led them out of Egypt.

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them up in my arms;
but they did not know that I healed them.
I led them with cords of human kindness,
with bands of love.
I was to them like those

who lift infants to their cheeks.
I bent down to them and fed them.

Hosea 11:3-4

Interestingly, the Hebrew words for womb and breast are related to words used of God. The word for womb, *racham*, when used as a verb *rechem* means to be compassionate or to have pity. God shows womb-like compassion on the people of Israel. Further, the word for breast, *shad*, forms one of the names for God: El Shaddai. This term traditionally has been translated as God Almighty, though the term literally means God with breasts and occurs in conjunction with fertility blessings. (See, for example, Genesis 17:1-2 in which God calls Abram and promises a multitude of offspring.) The Old Testament writers seem less squeamish than modern readers about linking images of female reproduction and God.⁴

In the New Testament we have birth imagery employed again, most memorably by Jesus in his conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:3-10). You must be born again, or born from above, Jesus declares using metaphorical language that Nicodemus tries to understand literally. "Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" he asks, showing his inability to embrace the message and the metaphor. Jesus elaborates, naming the Spirit as the one who gives new birth. Later New Testament writers name God as the one who gave the believers birth or new birth (see James 1:18 and 1 Peter 1:3). It is ironic that in our era the people most comfortable calling themselves "born again" Christians are most opposed to picturing God as the mother who birthed them, the one who gave this born again experience.

By comparing Christian growth to nursing, 1 Peter 2:2-3 extends the maternal metaphor first used in the Old Testament and reaffirmed by Jesus: "Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good." Birth and nursing imagery, rather than being embarrassing or beneath God in some way, were worthy comparisons to emphasize the intimacy of God's connection to and care for us.

Jesus also uses maternal imagery to express the desolation he feels for Jerusalem just before his death. As he stands outside the city looking back over it he weeps and cries out: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem.... How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Luke 13:34). This presents another tender, protecting, maternal image of God in the person of Jesus.

One of the important implications of thinking about these images of God as mother is the possibility it opens for us in how we learn about God. In other words, many of us have been taught to think about what God must be like from looking at the ways our fathers interacted with us, or from looking at how they failed, and understanding God in contrast to their lack.

If we recognize that God is also like a mother to us, then we can look at our mothers and learn about God's character from them. We can and should ask: what do we see about God from our mother's care for us? Conversely, if we never look to mothers to learn about God, it suggests that we deem mothers and mothers' love less capable of pointing to God, and therefore inherently worth less than fathers and fathering love. This belies our own theology that affirms we are equally created in the image of God and then equally fallen and equally redeemed to bear the image of Christ.⁵

Feminine imagery for God is not limited to motherhood, however. The Psalmist depicts God as a midwife:

Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother's breast.

Psalm 22:9

Here God receives honor as a skilled woman in a potentially perilous setting. Elsewhere the Psalmist evokes the anticipation of a servant toward a master and mistress:

As the eyes of servants
look to the hand of their master,
as the eyes of a maid
to the hand of her mistress,
so our eyes look to the LORD our God....

Psalm 123:2

Finally, there is the literary echo between Wisdom in Proverbs 8 and the Logos in John 1. In the Proverbs passage, the writer personifies wisdom (*hokma* in Hebrew and *sophia* in Greek) as a woman who speaks truth and righteousness, who is valued above anything humans can desire and who, existing before creation, assisted God with it. John alludes to this wisdom passage in his discussion of the Logos in John 1, affirming the Logos' pre-existence and agency in creation. Though the two are not identical—Wisdom is described as created by God whereas the Logos *is* God, and Wisdom assists God with creation while the Logos brings it about—nevertheless, the literary connection is intriguing and may call into question the assumption of Jesus' pre-existent maleness.

USING FEMALE IMAGES FOR GOD IN WORSHIP

Given the numerous female images for God in Scripture, it would seem appropriate to use both feminine and masculine language for God in prayer and worship. However, in many Christian communities the practice would have to be introduced gradually in order for feminine imagery to aid in worship rather than detract from it. To start, we can address God in worship with gender-neutral terms (such as Gracious God or Loving Savior) and avoid the heavy use of masculine pronouns, to move people away from conceiving of God as male. Sermons and other Christian instruction should

include the metaphorical pictures from Scripture of God as female so that worshipers know that this is a biblical approach to God (and not the invention of the feminist movement as students have told me it is). Finally, in liturgy, prayer, and song, worshipers can be led to address God with all the rich variety Scripture has taught us.⁶

In liturgy, prayer, and song, worshipers can be led to address God with all the rich variety of feminine and masculine imagery Scripture has taught us.

However, some people will resist on a number of different grounds, a few of which will be addressed here. Some people assume that since Jesus was a male human being God must be gendered, and, of course, male. However, the maleness of Jesus does not suggest that the Trinity is male any more than the humanity of Jesus makes the

Godhead human. Obviously to enter into the human race God had to adopt biological sex, not to mention a particular skin color, eye color, height, and so on. None of these things are characteristics of the whole Trinity, but of the divine-human Savior who came among us. Furthermore, the maleness of Jesus is not salvifically significant: in other words, it is not the maleness of Jesus that saves, but God entering into human flesh. As the early Church affirmed, only that which has been incarnated can be redeemed.

Another objection to feminine language for God resides in a fear for Trinitarian formulations. The credal affirmation of the Trinity is Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, but clearly this is not necessarily the only way we should think about or refer to God. The New Testament writers did not necessarily resort to "Father" even in Trinitarian passages: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" (2 Corinthians 13:13). Furthermore, each member of the Trinity is sometimes referred to in feminine imagery or language: the Creator gives birth to the seas in Job 38; God gives manna in Exodus 16 and Bread of Life in John 6. Jesus compares his impulse to protect and sustain Jerusalem to a mother hen protecting her young and he teaches that the Spirit can give Nicodemus a new birth (in Hebrew the word for Spirit is a feminine noun).

Others suggest that since Jesus taught us to pray "Our Father," we must use those words whenever we address God. However, Jesus, himself referred to God in other ways in the Gospel accounts, the later New Testament writers used a variety of names for God, and in the eleven prayers recorded in the New Testament outside the Gospels, God is never addressed as "Father."⁷ Furthermore, if we believe that Christians can pray using their own phrases of thanksgiving and petition rather than adhering to the

language of the Lord's Prayer, then surely we are not bound to begin every prayer "Our Father."

The use of feminine images for God calls into question our conceptions of a male God, a God hemmed in by human biological characteristics. God the Almighty is the one whose ways are higher than our ways, as the heavens are higher than the earth, Isaiah tells us (55:8-9). When writers of Scripture compare God to human beings, they emphasize the personhood of God, the fact that God is a relational being with whom we can enter into a real relationship. But all of our metaphors finally fall short because God, though an eminently personal Being, is not merely a human being.

In the end, using feminine metaphors for God is important for our theology, to give us a much more dynamic understanding of God's nature. Feminine imagery would also serve as a reminder that women as well as men are capable of bearing God's image in this world. Finally, embracing feminine and masculine imagery would be good for our doxology, helping us engage with the gracious, multifaceted invitation of God to us.⁸

NOTES

1 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 5.

2 Brian Wren, *What Language Shall I Borrow?* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 132.

3 See, for instance, Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Why God is Not Mother," *Christianity Today*, 37:9 (August 16, 1993), 16-23.

4 Paul Smith, *Is It OK to Call God "Mother"? Considering the Feminine Face of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 56-58 and 67.

5 Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 75.

6 For helpful guidance, see Brian Wren's *What Language Shall I Borrow?* and Paul Smith's *Is It OK to Call God "Mother"?* cited above, and Ronald Witherup, *A Liturgist's Guide to Inclusive Language* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996).

7 Smith observes that "Father" occurs only once in twenty times New Testament writers refer to God (*Is It OK*, 82-83).

8 I discuss the issues in this article in further detail in *Liberating Tradition: Women's Identity and Vocation in Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).



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