

## From Acorn to Oak

*Who is God, and what is he like? Part 3: Should we call God our Mother or She?*

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Karen Watts, a writer in New York State, was raised in a Baptist home, but her understanding of God as Father was shaped by her view of her earthly father. *The Wall Street Journal* reports that the 38 year-old writer perceived him, and therefore God, as being “monitoring and mostly punishing.” She thus has joined a large number of people today who now refer to God as a woman.

Many others, who don’t desire to go that far, still want to use inclusive language even when referring to God. They avoid using male pronouns to designate the Deity. Are they correct?

As with all questions pertaining to God, we should turn to his Word for our answers, and as we do, we must follow a basic principle of interpretation, described well in *A Liturgist’s Guide to Inclusive Language*, by Ronald D. Witherup, who strongly advises that “The uppermost goal of any attempt to communicate the Word of God in an inclusive way should be fidelity to the biblical text...[which is] inspired literature....” (19)

We see throughout the Bible that God has chosen to refer to himself with the masculine pronoun, but does God have feminine characteristics as well? In Genesis 1:27 we read that God revealed himself as having “created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (TNIV) Thus, the image of God is in both male and female. However, we cannot infer that God is therefore male and female; this text appears in a passage where God also created male and female animals that do not possess his image. Further, since Jesus revealed that God is spirit in John 4:24 we must be careful how much we make of human gender metaphors. All analogies have their limits.

God has not told us why he chose to refer to himself with male pronouns. Therefore, we can only speculate, which has limited usefulness. One likely reason for this choice has to do with his understanding of the impact of sin on mankind, particularly the masculine members. The anthropological principle of primogeniture (literally, first born, referring to the rights of the eldest and the respect for those older than oneself) has its roots in Adam’s creation prior to Eve’s. This principle is likely a significant reason most males are more receptive to and inclined toward the leadership of a divine being who has male characteristics. Men relate more to a deity who presents himself primarily in masculine terms than to a goddess. Such a thesis is borne out through studies of comparative religions which show that all the major and virtually all minor religions in the history of humankind are headed by male gods; goddesses are consorts of the males and, while powerful, are rarely portrayed in the superior role.

Yet, God has included in the Bible other passages referring to himself that reveal characteristics mirrored in human females. Giving birth, constant and caring concern for

her children, and compassion for her children, are identified by God as applying to him. “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!” (Isaiah 49:15)

As a comforter of his children, God also likens his caring for his children to a mother’s comforting of her children. “As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you,” says the LORD. (Isaiah 66:13)

Greatly desiring to gather his people together, our Lord Jesus Christ compared his deep yearning to a hen gathering her chicks under her wings. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” (Luke 13:34)

Leaders he has specially called through whom to reveal himself have also chosen to identify with and exhibit certain characteristically feminine qualities, e.g., gentleness, caring, and love. “We were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.” (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8)

However, did you notice anything these texts have in common? As with the interpretation of all literature, we must pay careful attention to grammar and other hermeneutical principles. Significantly, these passages all contain figures of speech that describe what God is like; but they do not name him. They tell us some of what he is like, but they do not tell us who he is.

A crucial principle of Biblical interpretation is to distinguish between figures of speech (such as similes and metaphors) and names and titles. As my esteemed colleague, Calvin Theological Seminary Professor John Cooper, has written in his excellent book, *Our Father in Heaven: Christian Faith and Inclusive Language for God*, unlike figures of speech, names and titles state who God is as well as what he is like. (132) Cooper also observes that “all the feminist references to God in Scripture are figures of speech. They are not names or titles for God. And in language for human beings, figures of speech do not usually warrant or function as names or titles.” (66)

Some theologians have argued that the Holy Spirit is feminine and that God can therefore be referred to as She. Careful consideration of the applicable texts, however, indicates that this position is unwarranted. The Hebrew word for spirit, *ruah*, appears 43 times in the Old Testament in the sense of Spirit of God. In 36 instances *ruah* is feminine and in seven it is masculine.

Nevertheless, we must remember the interpretive principle of distinguishing between personal and grammatical gender, the former referring to an individual’s identity and the latter to the way certain languages classify nouns, pronouns, and other parts of speech as masculine, feminine, or neuter. Grammatical gender cannot be used for identifying a person. In fact, there is often no correlation. As Cooper points out for example, the

Hebrew words for womb (*rehem*) and breast (*s'ad*) are masculine. (81) Further, in the Old Testament, the “*spirit* is not who God is but something he has—like his love, power, soul, or mind....In the New Testament the distinct personal nature of the Holy Spirit is more obvious...Since *pneuma* [spirit] is neuter in Greek, all the alleged feminine personal qualities of Spirit based on the feminine grammatical gender of *ruah* are abandoned by the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament). Since the New Testament adopts the neuter term *pneuma* from the Septuagint, it suggests that the person of the Holy Spirit is neither feminine nor masculine.” (110-111)

All the names for God in the Bible are masculine terms. This reality does not mean that God is ontologically male, but since Scripture never refers to him as a feminine person or in an impersonal term, and since God discloses himself in both testaments primarily in masculine terms, it is not proper for us to refer to him as “she” or in other feminine forms of address. We must refer to him as he refers to himself, though we rightly appreciate and value both the feminine as well as the masculine characteristics in his being.

Further, the honor we bestow upon our mothers at Mother’s Day, and always, is based on the Biblical truth that they bear God’s image and that he has commanded us to honor them. We cannot honor our mothers and other women by usurping a prerogative that belongs only to God, i.e., disclosing who he is. Is it not true that things go better for us when we honor Mom and God according to his Word?