



# Describing God in Gender Terms

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# God & the Feminist Movement

- The feminist movement became very strong in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though it had existed for at least a century earlier.
- The more extreme versions of this movement emphasize the femininity of God over against the traditional emphasis on the masculinity of God.
- Some examples:
  - *The Women's Bible* (1895, 1898)
  - *The Inclusive Language Lectionary* (1983-85)

# The Women's Bible (1895, 1898)

- A commentary on the Bible from a feminist perspective by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others.
- Though this created quite a stir at the time, its position was fairly moderate compared with the most extreme views in recent times.

# The Women's Bible (1895, 1898)

## Commenting on Genesis 1:26-28:

HERE is the sacred historian's first account of the advent of woman; a simultaneous creation of both sexes, in the image of God. It is evident from the language that there was consultation in the Godhead, and that the masculine and feminine elements were equally represented. Scott in his commentaries says, "this consultation of the Gods is the origin of the doctrine of the trinity." But instead of three male personages, as generally represented, a Heavenly Father, Mother, and Son would seem more rational.

The first step in the elevation of woman to her true position, as an equal factor in human progress, is the cultivation of the religious sentiment in regard to her dignity and equality, the recognition by the rising generation of an ideal Heavenly Mother, to whom their prayers should be addressed, as well as to a Father.

# Inclusive Language Lectionary

- A set of Scripture readings commissioned by the National Council of Churches, to address feminist concerns about the Bible.
- Published in three parts, 1983-85
- Significant changes in wording:
  - God the Father → God the Father & Mother
  - Lord → Sovereign
  - Son of God → Child of God
  - Son of Man → Human One

# Inclusive Language Lectionary

- Other significant changes in wording:
  - King → Ruler
  - Master → Teacher
  - Kingdom of God → Realm/Reign of God
  - Masculine pronouns for God are eliminated
  - Sometimes feminine names are inserted "where generation or origin of the people is a major concern," e.g., Abraham → Abraham & Sarah

# Inclusive Language Lectionary

- John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Child."
- Php 3:20-21: "Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like Christ's glorious body, by the power which enables Christ even to subject all things to Christ's self."

# How Should Christians Respond?

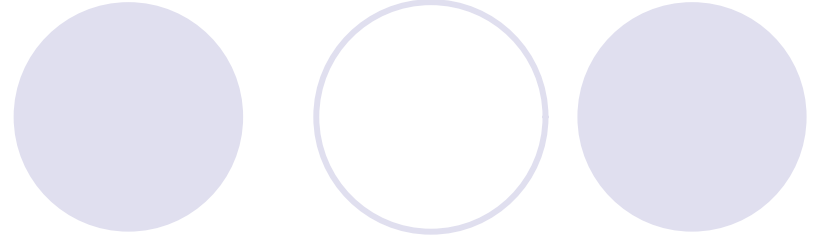
- Often Christians respond to obviously unbiblical approaches by:
  - Repeating traditional formulations
  - Contradicting the opponents' allegations
  - Taking the opposite extreme
- We want to respond here by seeing what the Bible actually has to say on this subject.





# God as Masculine in Scripture

# God as Masculine



- The pronoun "he"
- Father
- Husband
- King

# The masculine pronoun "he"

- This is the standard form for reference to God.
  - The Hebrew of the Old Testament does not have a neuter pronoun.
  - The Greek of the New Testament does have a neuter pronoun, but doesn't use it for God.
- The masculine pronoun is used for God hundreds of times in the Bible.

# The term "father"

- The term "father" is applied to God in the Old Testament some 14 times.
- In Matthew, God is called "father" 39 times.
- In John, he is called "father" 97 times.
- The count for the rest of the NT is: Acts 3, Romans 4, Corinthians 8, Galatians 4, Ephesians 8, Philippians 3, Colossians 6, Thessalonians 8, Timothy 2, Titus 1, Philemon 1, Hebrews 2, James 3, Peter 4, 1 John 13, 2 John 2, 3 John 0, Jude 1, Revelation 4.

# Some OT Samples of "Father"

- 2Sam 7:13 (NIV) He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men.
- Psalm 68:5 (NIV) A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.
- Isaiah 9:6 (NIV) For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
- Malachi 1:6 (NIV) A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?" says the LORD Almighty.

# Some NT Samples of "Father"

- Matt 5:48 (NIV) Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.
- John 4:23 (NIV) Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.
- John 6:37 (NIV) All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.

# Parabolic Use of "father"

- Jeremiah 35:1-19
  - Contrasts Israel's disobedience to God with the Recabites' obedience to their father
- Ezekiel 16
  - God adopts Israel as a father a foundling child.
- Hosea 1-3
  - Hosea's marriage a parable of God's to Israel.
- Matthew 21:28-32
  - Parable of the two sons
- Luke 15:11-32
  - Parable of the Prodigal Son

# God as Husband

- Isaiah 54 and 62
- Jeremiah 3 and 31
- Ezekiel 16
- Hosea 1-3

- 1 Corinthians 11:7
- 2 Corinthians 11:2
- Galatians 4:27
- Ephesians 5:23-27 and 32
- Revelation 19:7-9



# God as Husband in OT

- Isaiah 54:5 (NIV) For your Maker is your husband—the LORD Almighty is his name—the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth.
- Jeremiah 3:20 (NIV) But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you have been unfaithful to me, O house of Israel," declares the LORD.
- Hosea 3:1 (NIV) The LORD said to me, "Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes."

# God as Husband in NT

- 2Cor 11:2 (NIV) I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him.
- Ephesians 5:23-25 (NIV) For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. 25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...
- Revelation 19:7-8 (NIV) Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. 8 Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)

# God as King



- Used ten times in the Psalms
- Three times in Isaiah
- Once each in Jeremiah, Daniel, and Malachi
- Frequently in Matthew (14x) and John (11x)
- Twice in 1 Timothy
- Three times in Revelation

# God as King in OT

- Psalm 47:2 (NIV) How awesome is the LORD Most High, the great King over all the earth!
- Isaiah 33:22 (NIV) For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; it is he who will save us.
- Daniel 4:37 (NIV) Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.



# God as Feminine in Scripture

# God as Feminine

- The pronoun "she" not used.
- Queen not used.
- Wife not used.
- Mother (human)
- Mother hen
- Mother eagle
- Other possible references

# God as Mother

- Term is not used *per se*, but only in comparisons below.
- Parabolic use:
  - Ps 27:10
  - Ps 131:2
  - Isa 66:13
- God as mother bird
  - Mother hen in Matthew 23:37
  - Mother eagle in Deuteronomy 32:11
  - References to God's wings:
    - Ruth 2:12
    - Six times in the Psalms

# God as Mother

- Psalm 27:10 (NIV) Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me.
- Psalm 131:2 (NIV) But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.
- Isaiah 66:13 (NIV) As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem.

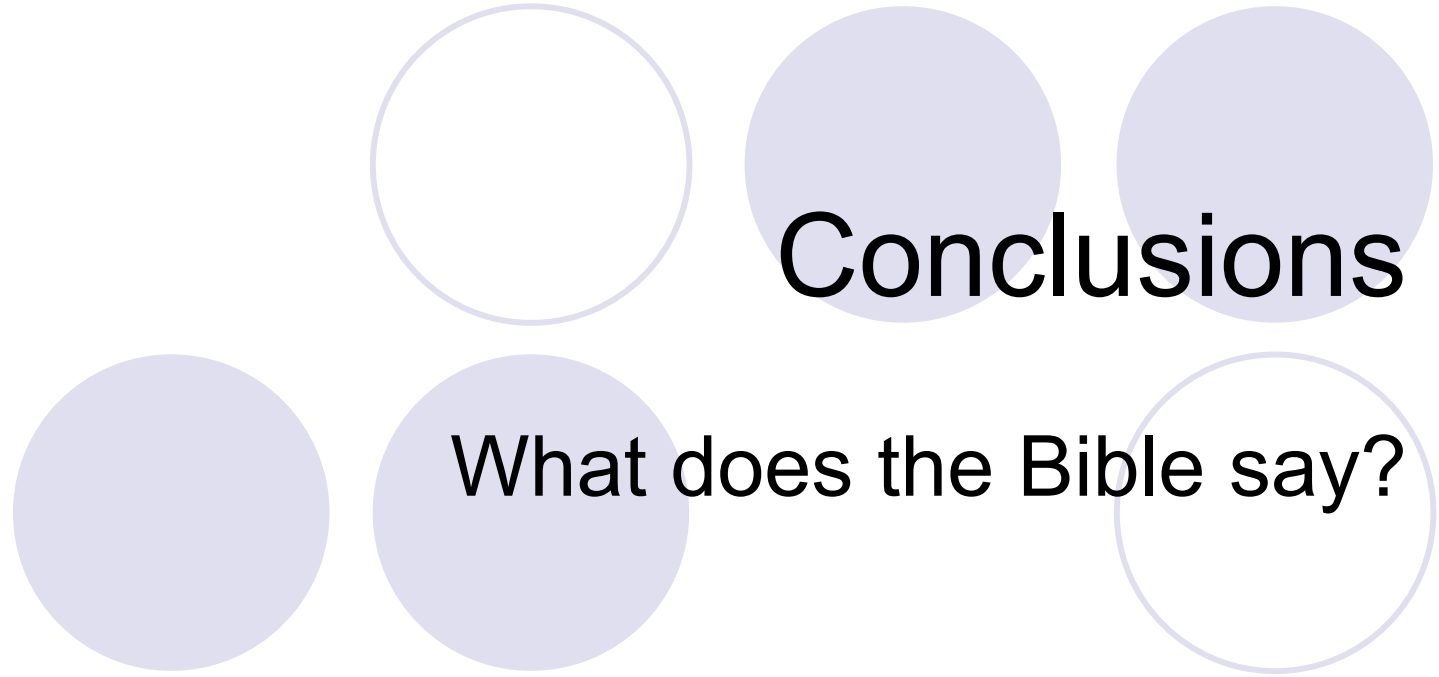


# God as Mother Bird

- Matt 23:37 (NIV) 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.
- Deut 32:11-12 (NIV) like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them on its pinions. 12 The LORD alone led him; no foreign god was with him.

# Other Possible Feminine References

- Parable of the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10)
  - Does the woman represent God?
- Parable of the Leaven (Matthew 13:33 and Luke 13:20-21)
  - Does the woman represent God?



# Conclusions

- There is a clear predominance of the masculine in reference to God.
- This is not merely a result of patriarchal society, as many of the ancient patriarchal societies had goddesses:
  - Asherah, Astarte among the Canaanites
  - Artemis, Athena among the Greeks
  - Juno, Venus among the Romans

# Conclusions

- Partly due to the authority relation.
  - Only clear references to God in feminine terms are those where God is pictured as a mother in authority over children.
  - Other pictures (wife/queen) would imply a husband/king in still higher authority.
- The feminine forms were probably saved to represent the people of God:
  - As wife/queen to God/Christ
  - As mother to individual believers

# Conclusions

- There may also be additional reasons which we do not as yet discern.
- It is not safe to restructure the imagery of the Bible to suit our own preferences.
  - Compare CS Lewis' distinction between "teacher's metaphor" and "student's metaphor"
  - Recall the Biblical warnings about tampering
    - Deut 4:2
    - Prov 30:5-6
    - Rev 22:18-19

# Don't Mess with God's Word

- Deuteronomy 4:2 (NIV) Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you.
- Proverbs 30:5-6 (NIV) Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. 6 Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.
- Revelation 22:18-19 (NIV) I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. 19 And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

