

*The Bible's authors often used feminine images and terms in describing Deity. In so doing, they challenge us to expand our own understanding of what it means to be male or female as created in God's image.*

## GOD AS MOTHER

By Carrie A. Miles

**I**N CHURCH THIS PAST JUNE, THE OPENING SONG was an old round, "Father, I Adore You." The fact that we sang this traditional campfire song on a Sunday morning was surprising, but what I found jarring was that this particular Sunday was Father's Day. The lyrics of next two verses, "Jesus, I adore you" followed by "Spirit, I adore you," quickly made it clear that this choice was a pun, intended to shift the congregation's focus from earthly to heavenly father. The word play worked too well, however: The juxtaposition of God and Father's Day only served to emphasize the well-acknowledged truth that for most of us, our earthly father serves as our first image of God. This identification serves well those of us fortunate to have adorable fathers, but for some, the metaphor does not edify. For if "Heavenly Father" is the only image you have of God, how do you relate to him when your earthly father fails you, or heavens forbid, abuses you? How do you raise children to trust God the Father if their earthly father abandons them?

Unfortunately, Christianity as a whole has come to emphasize the image of God as father to the exclusion of other ways of relating to him. But it does not pay to take too literally any single, limited human metaphor for our limitless God. For example, in verses too numerous to cite, the Old Testament tells us that God is our rock. This statement conveys the steadfast nature of God—an important point—but this does not mean God is literally made of stone or that steadfastness is his only important quality. Likewise, while the image of God as father offers important insights, it cannot describe God comprehensively. In particular, the creation account of Genesis tells us that woman, like man, was made in God's image. If this is true, it follows that the female, and the mother, must also be part of our image of God. And, in fact, these mother images exist in the Bible. Appreciating God as mother as well as father adds a rich and wonderful dimension to the parental metaphor. Taken



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together, mother and father, they "approach a balance that recalls our basic metaphor, the image of God male and female."<sup>1</sup>

I am not trying to convince you here that God is "really" a woman, that you should become a goddess worshipper, or that you should not adore Heavenly Father. But including and appreciating the feminine images of God help us feel the full wonder and beauty of our role as children of God, male and female.

### IMAGE OF GOD AS FATHER

*Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another?* —Malachi 2:10<sup>2</sup>

(Speaking to David of David's future heir:) *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. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you.* —2 Samuel 7:14-15

*Is this the way you repay the LORD, O foolish and unwise people? Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?* —Deuteronomy 32:6

*A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.* —Psalm 68:5

*Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, O Lord; do not remember our sins forever.* —Isaiah 64:8-9

*As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him. For he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.* —Psalm 103:13-14

IN most of these passages, the father metaphor calls on "father" as disciplinarian. God as Creator has occasion to be angry at the wayward nature of his creation. Because God made us from dust, we have an obligation to fear (respect) him and his

other children. But also because God remembers that he made us from the dust, he has compassion on his children—and in compassion, the line between father and mother begins to fade away.

#### IMAGES OF GOD AS MOTHER

PERHAPS the best introduction to the evocative nature of the biblical mother-images can be seen in a historic mistranslation. In the King James Version, Deuteronomy 32:18 reads:

*Of the Rock that begat thee thou art unmindful, and hast forgotten the God that formed thee.*

The New Revised Standard Version, however, offers a more accurate translation of this verse:

*You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the god who gave you birth (literally “writhed in labor pains with you”).<sup>3</sup>*

“Begetting” is the act of fathering, but only mothers bear and give birth. And anyone who has been through childbirth, either as a participant or as an observer, can tell you that there is a big difference between conceiving a child and bringing one forth. Invoking a maternal image, this graphic depiction of God “writhing in labor” for us presents an immediate and compelling picture of God’s love and sacrifice on our behalf.

Similarly, other passages that refer to God’s love for us do so in terms of female physiology:

*Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he a pleasant child? for since I spake against him, I do earnestly remember him still: therefore my bowels are troubled for him (literally: “my womb trembles for him”); I will surely have mercy (literally: “motherly-womb-love”)<sup>4</sup> upon him, saith the Lord.* —Jeremiah 31:20

In combining masculine pronouns with feminine body parts and actions, the Bible challenges rigid ways of thinking about gender. For example, Isaiah 63:15–16 couples maternal imagery with a direct address to God as “Father”:<sup>5</sup>

*Look down from heaven and see, from thy holy and glorious habitation. Where are thy zeal and thy might the trembling of thy womb and thy compassion (literally: “motherly-womb-love”) are withheld from me. For thou art our Father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us; Thou, O Lord, art our Father, our redeemer from of old is thy name.*

Several other verses likewise portray God’s steadfastness and mother-love:

*For thus says the LORD: I will extend prosperity to her like a river, and the wealth of the nations like an over-*

The graphic depiction of God “writhing in labor” for us presents an immediate and compelling picture of God’s love and sacrifice on our behalf, and does so in terms of female physiology.

*flowing stream; and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.* —Isaiah 66:12-13, NRSV

*Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnants of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he; even when you turn gray I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.*

—Isaiah 46:3-4

*Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.* —Isaiah 49:15

Hosea 11:1-4 reads:

*When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. 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. I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them.*

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The actions described here—teaching a child to walk, leading him by cords (which were used to support the toddling child), nursing the sick, and feeding children—are all activities of women. It was as *mother* that God said, “Out of Egypt I called my son.” Further, one textual variant of Hosea 11:4b tells us that God loves us “like someone who lifts an infant close against his cheek”<sup>6</sup>—certainly a very evocative and motherly image. Think of a time when you held an infant close against your cheek. What feelings does this memory invoke for you? Does it mean something to you to know that God feels this way about you?

Two other passages provide a slightly different view of motherhood:

*The LORD goes forth like a mighty man, like a man of war he stirs up his fury; he cries out, he shouts aloud, he shows himself mighty against his foes. 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 travail, I will gasp and pant.*  
 —Isaiah 42:13-14

*But when they had fed to the full, they were filled, and their heart was lifted up; therefore they forgot me. So I will be to them like a lion, like a leopard I will lurk beside the way. I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs, I*

*will tear open their breast, and there I will devour them like a lion, as a wild beast would rend them.*

—Hosea 13:6-8

These verses portray a fierce feminine god—a woman active in childbirth (and in parallel with the mighty man) and as a ferocious bear defending her cubs. Interestingly, while the verses referring to God as father speak of God’s anger towards his wayward children, the mother defends them with a fury that is even more graphic.

#### THE NAMES OF GOD

LEOPARDS, bears, women writhing in labor, and potters, the Old Testament writers invoked many different metaphors in their attempts to describe the indescribable deity. In the same way, the various names and titles used to refer to God throughout the Old Testament instruct us on different aspects of his character. *Elohim*, usually translated “God,” is the (plural) name used in the Creation account. *Yahweh*, translated “LORD” or “GOD” and meaning “I am who I am” is the name God used to introduce himself to Moses. Other names used for God in the Old Testament are *Adonai* (Lord), *Jehovah Elohim* (LORD God), *Adonai Jehovah* (Lord GOD), *El Elyon* (Most High God), *El Olam* (Everlasting God), *El* or *Elim* (Almighty) and *Jehovah Sabaoth* (LORD of Hosts).

When the Old Testament refers to God as God Almighty, the underlying Hebrew word used is *El Shaddai*. *El Shaddai* is the name God used when he first appeared to Abraham:

*When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty (El Shaddai); walk before me and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.”*  
 —Genesis 17:1-2

For me, the image of “God Almighty” has always been that of a fierce, mighty warrior or general, perhaps analogous to the mother bear. If “God Almighty” were translated into the Greek pantheon, he would certainly be Zeus, throwing thunderbolts. But this understanding of *El Shaddai* is mistaken. Some translators note that *El Shaddai* can also be translated, “God of the Mountains.” But *shaddai* means “mountain” the same way that “Grand Tetons” means mountain;<sup>7</sup> the picture evoked intends not majesty or power, but the female breast. The word *shaddai* is derived from the word *shadu*, “breast” in Hebrew. A literal rendition of *El Shaddai* would be “the Breasted One.”<sup>8</sup>

It does not pay to take these metaphors too literally. I am not suggesting that God has breasts. But in his book on the names of God in holy scripture, Andrew Jukes writes that the most accurate rendering of *El Shaddai* draws on the image of God as a nursing mother: the Nourisher; the All Sufficient; the One Who Satisfies—a god who is “almighty” not in arms and in war, but in providing everything to his children.<sup>9</sup> Besides revealing himself to Abraham as *El Shaddai*, God is referred to by

this name in the stories of Job and Ruth. This pattern of usage suggests that “God Almighty” is the God who is all sufficient to those who live by faith: Abraham (that God would multiply), Ruth and Naomi (that the Almighty would provide), and Job (that the Almighty would restore).

Substituting the All Sufficient one, the Satisfier, or the Nourisher for “God Almighty” in verses in which *El Shaddai* appears often fits the passages better than our normal idea of “God Almighty” as a fierce general:

*When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am the All Sufficient One (El Shaddai); walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between men and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.”* —Genesis 17:1

*The Satisfier (El Shaddai) bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples.*

—Isaac’s blessing to Jacob as he sends him off to find a wife, Genesis 28:3

*And Jacob said to Joseph, “The All Sufficient One (El Shaddai) appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, and said to me, ‘Behold, I will make you fruitful, and multiply you, and I will make of you a company of peoples, and will give this land to your descendants after you for an everlasting possession.’”*

—Genesis 48:3

*By the God of your father who will help you, by the Nourisher (El Shaddai) who will bless you with blessings of heaven, blessings of the breast and of the womb.*

—Jacob’s blessing to Joseph, Genesis 49:25

“God Almighty,” then, is not Zeus, a warrior-God throwing thunderbolts. Ironically, the Almighty God of the patriarchs is instead a nursing mother, mighty in providing her children with the “blessings of the breast and of the womb.” The use of feminine imagery for God expands the notion of God as parent to emphasize his faithfulness, compassion, care-giving, protection, and sacrifice.

#### JESUS AND FATHER

ALTHOUGH the Old Testament writers occasionally referred to God as a “father,” the prophets who wrote the verses cited above would probably be surprised at the twentieth century insistence on addressing God as “Heavenly Father” to the exclusion of all other names.<sup>10</sup> Although occasionally referred to as “Father,” this was not one of the names of God. Further, the authors of the New Testament did not commonly refer to God as “Father” either. Only Jesus regularly addressed God that way—and Jesus will be the exception that proves the rule that God cannot be limited to a single category.

Jesus often called God *Abba*, a word rendered “father” in

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most translations of the Bible. As Christians, we have the privilege of also calling God *Abba*. But in order fully to appreciate the familial bond in which we are included, we have to understand that *abba* was not the formal word for “father.” Instead, it means “daddy” or “papa.” It is what little children called their dear father, a term of intimacy and nurturance, more evocative of the warmth of the nurturing mother of Hosea 11:1–4 than of a wrathful disciplinarian.<sup>11</sup>

By calling God not Father but *Abba* and encouraging his followers to do the same, Jesus invited us into a new type of relationship with the abstract and transcendent god of the Jews. Like God when he introduced himself as *El Shaddai*, Jesus shifted the parental image from that of Zeus with a thunderbolt (the Father God of the Greeks and Romans) to the picture of a god who nourishes and guides, a god who could be called “Papa.”

Perhaps Jesus’ use of the word *abba* vindicates those who say that God wants us to think of him as male. But if this is so, this male—who “writhes in labor” for our sakes, whose loves us “like someone who lifts an infant close against his cheek,” and who endures with the steadfastness of a nursing mother—severely challenges our conventional notions of masculinity. God himself does not scruple to be thought of in feminine terms. If this god is male, then masculinity must be redefined to include compassion, nurturance, self-sacrifice, tender love,

and, for good measure, Jesus' own abnegation of earthly power and privilege. This would not be a bad outcome. Rather than constrain God by our limited notions, the Bible challenges us to expand our own definitions of male and female as created in God's image.

#### A FINAL CHALLENGE

**A**S I HAVE led Bible study groups through this material, I have found this topic, more than most, touches people on a personal level. For example, one single mother commented on how happy she was to have a fuller image to offer her two young sons, whose own father was too unreliable to provide any positive image of God. Even if you haven't experienced a personal trauma with your parents, children, or spouse, thinking about the verses comparing God to a mother can be deeply meaningful, and on different levels. For example, as a former nursing mother, I can easily understand the very physical nature of the yearning God has for us. So I ask you as you read the verses we've covered to consider, perhaps with a study partner, some application questions:

- How might they enrich your relationship with God?
- Do they unearth any family baggage you are carrying around that keep you from having a better relationship with him?
- Is there any false scriptural understanding that you can profitably dispense with?
- What does the image of God as mother and as father tell you about your relationship with your own parents? About the kind of parent, man, or woman, you should be?

•If you absolutely can not relate to a feminine (or masculine) image of God, why not? What images can you accept?

The various images of God used in scriptures have the purpose of reaching each of us, at the places where we each are, to take us into different levels, but ultimately, to draw us into closer harmony with each other and with God. ☺

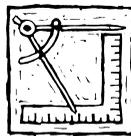
#### NOTES

Thanks to Linda M. Ikeda for her inspiration and insights for this article.

1. Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 53.
2. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations are to the King James Version.
3. Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Women* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1979).
4. Paul R. Smith, *Is It Okay to Call God "Mother?"*: *Considering the Feminine Face of God* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publications, 1993), 56, citing Swidler. See also, Tribble, 45.
5. Tribble, 52–53.
6. Swidler, 30.
7. Grand Tetons means "big breasts" in French.
8. The Scofield Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917); Andrew Jukes, *The Names of God in Holy Scriptures*, American ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregle Publications, 1967).
9. Jukes.
10. Smith demonstrates that this custom became common only in the last one hundred years.
11. Joachim Jeremias, *Prayers of Jesus* (New York: Scribner, 1963), 11.



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## FUSION

If there's anything left stirring above  
the ground, I might think of it as an auger  
or drill bit, a tool that could puncture  
the ends of our history and string it from one  
quasar to another (from the relative  
span of their beginnings). Then watch my neighbors  
as the fusion sings about something deeper  
than its own language, something with the hum

of light so old that it still resonates  
in its own ocean, waiting for a place  
to stand in all of its diversity,  
with all of its hope dreaming in this long wait,  
this long reach that just might penetrate  
the confusion resting up and down this street

—BARRY BALLARD