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GOD AS MOTHER? IDEAS TO CLARIFY BEFORE WE START

By Tim Bulkeley

Who is God? Almost everyone I talked to before the lecture series, *God as Mother?*, referred to the topic as “interesting.” Interesting is an interesting word; it has two meanings. The dictionary definition concerns things we find of interest or attractive, but the other implies something that is on the fringe or odd. So my prayer is that through these lectures I can demonstrate that the topic is interesting in the good sense and not in the bad sense.

Starting at the Beginning: Genesis 1

Starting at the beginning always makes sense, but with a potentially controversial topic like this it makes even more sense. Since my topic concerns talking and thinking about God, “the beginning” is the question: Who is God? If we do not begin by sharing a common understanding of the nature of God, then we risk misunderstanding each other in all of our conversation.

In the case of the biblical understanding of God, “the beginning” really is the beginning. The Bible’s understanding of God is first made clear in the first book of the Bible. Genesis 1 is not the first chapter of Scripture by accident or merely because of chronology but because it lays the foundations on which the Bible is built. This chapter is familiar to all Christians, and therefore we may not notice one of the most important things that it would have communicated to ancient hearers. It may help us at this stage to consider the origin stories¹ that were known from the ancient Near East. While we do not have access to the ancient Canaanite origin stories, it is likely that they were similar to the stories of ancient Mesopotamia. We do know that a copy of the story of the hero Gilgamesh was found in the land that is now Israel, when it was

¹I am using the phrase “origin story” instead of “creation story” because, as we will see, except in Israel these stories did not describe creation so much as the originating of the world.

Canaanite country before arrival of the Israelites in the land.² We also know they would have been aware of the Egyptian origin stories from their time in Egypt before Moses.

Perhaps the best known, and one of the most important, Babylonian origin stories is called *Enuma Elish*. This name comes from its first words. It begins: "when on high," *enuma elish* in Akkadian.³ The story involves fighting among the gods, and one god, Marduk, who in the end becomes the king of the remaining gods by defeating and killing his rivals. In particular he defeats and slays Tiamat (the ocean deeps), and cutting her in half, Marduk uses the body to make the land and the sky. As the story continues we discover that each god has his or her own specialties.⁴

To illustrate what such stories said about the gods at their centre, here is how Marduk is introduced:

I: 79-103

Then, in the Palace of Fates.

Then, in the Temple of Destinies.

The most ingenious divine warrior was created.

The ablest and the wisest of the divine warriors.

Then, in the Heart of Apsu,

Then, in the sacred Heart of Apsu

Marduk was created.

Ea was his father.

Damkina, his mother.

Divine the breasts from which he nursed,

Nurtured with care and endowed with glory.

Marduk's posture was erect.

His glance inspiring.

Marduk's stride was commanding.

His stature venerable.

His grandfather Anu's face beamed,

His heart filled with pride.

²See, e.g. Herbert Mason, *Gilgamesh: A Verse Narrative* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003), 118. This evidence makes it (not certain but) likely that the most popular Mesopotamian stories were known in Canaan when Abraham arrived (from Mesopotamia) and when Joshua led the Israelites into the land again.

³Patrick V. Reid, *Readings in Western Religious Thought: The Ancient World* (Mawah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 4.

⁴The story is available in various translations e.g. *ibid.* and also online e.g. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/ane/enuma.htm>.

He declared Marduk flawless,
 His father endowed him with a double share of divinity.
 Marduk surpassed all of his ancestors. . . .⁵

The Egyptian stories are varied, according to the city in which they were told and which god "belonged" there. So in Memphis the story centres on Ptah, god of artisans, who designs the other gods including Atun, while in Heliopolis Atun is the source from whom the other powers come. In the end, though they all make one God primary, they feature a multiplicity of gods and powers, and also relate creation intimately and physically to the god(s).⁶

. . . [Thus] it happened that it was said of Ptah: "He who made all and brought the gods into being." He is indeed Tatenen, who brought forth the gods, for everything came forth from him. Nourishment and provisions, the offerings of the gods, and every good thing. Thus it was discovered and understood that his strength is greater than (that other other) gods. And so Ptah was satisfied.⁷ After he had made everything, as well as all the divine order. He had formed the gods. He had made cities. He had founded nomes. He had put the gods in their shrines, (60) he had established their offerings, he had founded their shrines, he had made their bodies like that (with which) their hearts were satisfied. So the gods entered into their bodies of every (kind of) wood, of every (kind of) stone, of every (kind of) clay, or any-thing which might grow upon him, in which they had taken form.⁸

There are fascinating similarities here to the biblical account, not least the detail that having finished the work of creation Ptah was satisfied or rested, but despite these similarities, and even despite the Hymn to Ptah's serene tone compared to the Mesopotamian account, the difference in the type of "theology" is striking. Not least when the next lines reveal the concern with earthly politics that has driven this

⁵Victor Harold Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East* (Paulist Press, 2006), 13.

⁶David Adams Leeming, *Creation Myths of the World: An Encyclopedia* (ABC-CLIO, 2010), 102–106.

⁷Or, "so Ptah rested."

⁸James Bennett Pritchard and Daniel E. Fleming, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 2.

account “So all the gods, as well as their *ka*'s gathered themselves to him, content and associated with the Lord of the Two Lands.”⁹ Memphis (Ptah's city) had recently become the capital of both Upper and Lower Egypt.

Like almost all the origin stories of the time, this one involved many gods, each with his or her own power, who fight and struggle, and out of these conflicts (often overt, sometimes under the surface), and out of the gods' bodies, the world and its politics and rulers comes to be.

In contrast Genesis 1 begins: “*bereshit bara' 'elohim*,” literally “in beginning Elohim created” there are several aspects of this phrase that are grammatically strange and difficult as Hebrew (and scholars have fun arguing about them) but, for a non-Israelite who understood Hebrew, the strangest thing, was the use of *'elohim*. The word is plural in form, and can mean “gods.” We can see it used that way in e.g.: Exodus 18:11, 20:3, 22:19, 23:13; Deuteronomy 5:7, 31:18, 31:20 (and many others); Joshua 24:2,16; Judges 2:12, 17, 19, 10:13; 1 Samuel 4:8, 8:8, 26:19, 1 Kings 9:6, 9; 11:4, 10, 14:9; 2 Kings 5:17, 17:35, 37, 38, 22:17; 2 Chronicles 2:4, 28:25, 34:25; Psalms 86:8; Jeremiah 1:16 (and several others); Hosea 3:1. So *'elohim* looks and sounds plural and is sometimes used as a plural meaning gods or the gods. But in Gen 1 (and its most frequently in the Bible) it is used as a singular (seen in the first words by the verb, *bara'* which is singular not plural). In this chapter it refers to the one, unique, “Gods” who brings the world to be, not in combat with other powers, still less from their bodies or from his own, but simply by expressing the desire that it be so. “Let there be light, and there was light” *yehi 'or, vayehei-'or* (Gen 1:3).

In Genesis 1 *'elohim* “Gods” is aggressively singular. All through the chapter there is only one actor. As Longman summarizes it: “The purpose of the [Genesis] creation texts, when read in the light of alternative contemporary accounts, was to assert the truth about who was responsible.”¹⁰

When the sun, moon and stars are created (they were prominent gods in the ancient pantheons) they too appear simply on command, and they have two purposes:

⁹Ibid., 3.

¹⁰Tremper Longman, *How to Read Genesis* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2005), 79.

14 And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years,

15 and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so. (Gen 1:14-15)

They offer a sort of calendar, telling people "times and seasons," like the agricultural and liturgical calendars i.e. when to sow and plant, and when to worship. They also provide light upon the earth and, therefore, are merely luminaries (things that give light) and signs of the calendar, not gods. These "gods" are creatures. Hamilton sums it up:

Few commentators deny that this whole chapter has a strong anti-mythical thrust. Perhaps in no other section - except the sixth day - does this polemic appear so bluntly as it does here. It is sufficient to recall the proliferation of astral deities in most Mediterranean religions: the sun. the moon. and the stars are divine. As such they are autonomous bodies. Around each of them focus various kinds of religious cults and devotees. In the light of this emphasis Gen. 1:14ff. is saying that these luminaries are not eternal; they are created, not to be served but to serve. That is the mandate under which they function.¹¹

But Westermann's classic statement is pithier: "The utter creatureliness of the heavenly bodies has never been expressed in such revolutionary terms."¹² The *'elohim* of the opening chapter of Genesis is one and unique, not one of many but one of a kind. There is no other like God. Not other gods, and not humans. The Bible keeps repeating this, there is none like God, neither "gods" nor humans may be classed with God (e.g. Dt 33:26; Ps 86:8; Jer 10:6 cf. Num 23:19; Job 9:23; Hos 11:9). God is *sui generis*¹³ not to be included as a member of any class or group of beings.

This was gradually discovered by the patriarchs (stories like Rachel stealing her father's "household gods" in Gen 31 reveal that this

¹¹Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 127.

¹²Claus Westermann, *Creation* (London: SPCK, 1974), 44.

¹³A Latin phrase meaning "of its own sort" that is: the only one of its kind, which is used when we want to make sure the word "unique" is fully understood and not minimized into meaning just special or rare.

understanding did not come naturally to them) and it was taught clearly by Moses and summed up in Israel's statement of faith, the *shema*: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone" *shema' yisra'el yhwh 'elohenu yhwy 'echad* (Dt 6:4) more literally "Hear, Israel: YHWH is our 'elohim, YHWH is alone/one."

Israel was called to declare that "Yahweh is our 'elohim and Yahweh is one/only/alone." The God of the Bible is not "a god." He is indeed one and only, incomparable with all other beings, *sui generis*.¹⁴

God or the Gods

Yet, of course, Israel was "only human" and the Bible stories reflect this, time and again the Israelites slipped back into the old ways of thinking, they personified powers alongside God, or pictured God as being like one of the gods. The story that epitomizes this regular lapsing back into polytheism is found in 1 Kings 18 where Elijah calls out the 400 prophets of Baal and challenges them to a contest which will demonstrate who is 'elohim. As he puts it talking to the people: "If the LORD is 'elohim, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." (1Kgs 18:21) But, of course, this story is only one episode. The history of Israel told in the books that begin at Judges and end with the telling of the exile in Kings, recording Israel's apostasy time and again.

In Judges we read how God raised up leaders to free Israel (or some of the tribes) from foreign rule. As a result Israel returns to serving YHWH alone, but with the peace and prosperity that follow, Israel gradually forgets and begins to serve gods and again becomes subservient to foreign nations.

In the book of Kings we frequently read of royalty who either place or remove the Asherah poles from the temple (1 Kings 15:13; 23:4; 2 Kings 18:5; 23:4, 6-7, 14-15; cf. 1 Kings 14:15, 23; 16:33; 21:7; 2 Kings 13:6; 17:10, 16; 21:3, 7). These Asherah poles were symbols of a mother goddess. She is known in Akkadian texts and in Canaanite texts found at Ras Shamra, where she is the wife of 'el and mother of other gods.

All through the history of the kingdoms we know that time and again there was a goddess worshiped in the Jerusalem temple alongside Yahweh. Time and again prophets and faithful kings kept calling Israel back to worship the one and only. We also know from Jeremiah that

¹⁴A useful Latin phrase used as a technical term say that someone/thing is in a class or group of its own and not like anything else.

some Israelites worshipped a goddess known as the “Queen of Heaven” alongside Yahweh (e.g. Jer 7:18; 44:17-19, 25).¹⁵

Archaeology tells us much the same thing, but focuses our attention even more on the popular idea that Yahweh had a wife. A couple of inscriptions talk of Yahweh's wife. On the best known, found at Kuntillet 'Ajrud (in the Sinai Peninsula), the writing reads: “I have blessed you by Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah.” All across the land of Israel many small female figurines have been found made of baked clay; they are almost certainly representations of a goddess. The prevalence of these figurines may well indicate the popularity of the goddess among ancient Israelites, despite the clear teaching that Yahweh was one and could not be associated with another beside him.¹⁶

The Bible time and again makes clear that since the rebellion of the first couple in Genesis 3. Humans are weak and foolish and often make mistakes. Unlike most ancient writings, Scripture does not hide this weakness, or the foolishness and sin of even the greatest heroes. Think of David. As well as his love of God and his skill as warrior and king, we read of his lust and sin. Similarly the Bible does not portray the chosen people, Israel, as always faithful to their calling, but admits and describes their apostasy.¹⁷

So, people ask: Why were some of the Israelite Kings, and even more so the writers of the Bible, so opposed to the idea that Yahweh, the god of the Israelites, should have a wife? After all, the kings of every ancient pantheon had a goddess as their queen consort. And that is precisely the problem. A god needs a goddess otherwise he cannot produce children. To speak of Asherah as Yahweh's wife is to make Yahweh a god, no longer unique or only, but one of a group of deities. The opposition of the Bible writers to Yahweh's wife is not, as some feminists have suggested, because they did not like women, or feared them, but rather because since Yahweh was not male, Yahweh could not have been married.

¹⁵See e.g. Judith M. Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2000) especially ch. 3.

¹⁶This archaeological evidence has been much discussed, William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?: Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Eerdmans, 2005) presents the issues at length.

¹⁷See e.g.: Leland Ryken et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998) article “Hero/Heroine,” 378-82.

There could not be, for the writers of the Bible, a Mrs Yahweh, because there was no Mr Yahweh. Yahweh was not male, because if “he”¹⁸ were, that would mean “he” was a member of one class of beings and not *sui generis*. A god who is paired with a goddess is not *'echad* one/only but is merely one among many.

The history of ancient Israel is the history of a people who being “only human” kept getting it wrong, acting as if Yahweh were merely a god, and needed a wife. The Bible in contrast to ancient Israel cannot accept this, because Yahweh is *'echad* the one and only, neither male nor female. The one true God is not to be compared with any other.

Grammar and Gender

In discussing this topic, as indeed in all our talk about God, we have a problem if we speak English. Languages like English use gender to identify the sex of people and animals. Some languages also ascribe gender to things, so in French a door is “she” - *la porte*, while a port is a “he” - *le port*. The way in which grammatical gender is not the same as biological sex is clear if we listen to a French-speaker talking about a man as a “person,” since “*personne*” in French is feminine (even though the man in question is masculine), they would use the pronoun “*elle*” she. Similarly even if they were talking about the dean and the dean is “*le doyen*,” a women, they should use the pronoun “*il*,” he. Tagalog, the national language in the Philippines, like many African languages, does not use gendered pronouns. This would make it easier to talk about God without making the mistake of suggesting that God is of one sex or the other.

English is at one extreme in this since there are three genders, two of them used for animals and people that are sexed, he and she, and one for inanimate objects, it.¹⁹ But for an English speaker to use “it” suggests an inanimate object (inappropriate for God, whom the Bible calls “the living God”), but to use “she” or “he” suggests a female or male being. If God is indeed beyond sex and gender then none of the English pronouns are really appropriate. Various writers and speakers

¹⁸In talking about this topic, indeed in all our talk about God we have a problem if we speak English. Languages like English use gender to identify the sex of people and animals. Some languages also ascribe gender to things so in French a door is “she” *la porte*, while a port is a “he” *le port*.

¹⁹Occasionally objects, most often boats and other vehicles, are spoken of as gendered.

try to overcome this in different ways, e.g. by writing “s/he” or by trying to avoid pronouns when speaking of God. These seem difficult to me so I am using “he” and putting the pronoun in “scare quotes” to indicate that it is problematic.

We Only Believe in One Less God

It is this mistake, reducing God to a god, that leads to one of the atheist's silliest arguments. "Do you believe in Zeus?" they ask. "No," you say. "What about Juno?" "No," you reply getting frustrated, "I don't believe in any gods, except one, there is only one God." "There" says the atheist triumphantly, "you don't believe in gods, I just don't believe in one more god than you don't believe in."²⁰ This argument is silly because it misses the basic point of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim theology, it mistakes god and God. A god, that is to say a being who is one of a group of powers, like or unlike others in various ways, is not the same as the one, only, God. God, the maker of everything, is not like or unlike any other. God is wholly other.²¹

Negative or Analogical Theologies

This makes life difficult for theologians. Because if God is not like anyone else, then how can we talk about God? One technical answer is called apophatic theology or the *via negativa* (the negative way). This means restricting ourselves to saying what God is not. In theory, by describing all that God is not, the hole that is left in the middle is God. Most ordinary people do not find this approach attractive. We prefer to say what God is like and find the filling-in-the-boundaries approach difficult to imagine. The problem with the God-is-like approach (*via analogica* or cataphatic theology) is that each of the "likes" that we may choose is partly true and partly untrue. For example, if we say that God is like a rock, this is partly true. God is strong. He is also indeed a fortress and protection. Yet, God is not hard and unyielding, nor is God formed in a volcano. If we say that God is like a mother bear protecting

²⁰Actually the classic formulation of this argument was found in Stephen F. Roberts' email signature: "I contend we are both atheists, I just believe in one less god than you do." see: Dale McGowan, *Atheism For Dummies* (Wiley, 2013).

²¹This helpful term was introduced by Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*. London; New York: H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1923.

her cubs, this also is partly true and partly untrue. God is protective of those he loves. But God is not hairy and does not have paws. All the things that we may say about God using comparisons, whether analogies or metaphors or similes, are partly right and partly wrong.²²

Failure to recognise this problem, and to think that when we say God is like. . . that we have really described God, reduces him to an idol, to a mere god. For a god who is really like. . . is part of a group, a member of a class of beings. This is obvious if we described God as like a mother bear since a god who was really a mother bear would be part of the group of mammals. Clearly at best not God, but a god.

God and Race

Take the category of race. Human beings often make the mistake of believing that God is like them. Imperialists have nearly always assumed that God was like them. European imperialism pictured God with a white skin and straight hair, meaning that other races were somehow less like God, less fully human.²³ This is dreadful theology and a terrible sin. But it is a common temptation. It is easy for us to imagine God as being “like us.” The one true God is not part of any class or group of beings. One of the greatest unfortunate results of the western missionary movement that began with William Carey in the 1700s is that intentionally and often unintentionally the idea was exported that God was a European, which is plainly untrue.

At this point it may be useful to think about how the incarnate particularity of Jesus relates to what we have been saying about the godhead. God the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit is not part of any exclusive category, like race or gender. Yet the second person (the Son) is incarnate in Jesus, and as such has gender and race. Theologians have therefore borrowed an idea from Philo who distinguished the *logos prophorikos* (the uttered word) and the *logos endiathetos* (the word within) and have distinguished the *logos endiathetos* (the second person in the Trinity) and the *logos ensarkos* (the Word made flesh). Thus while Jesus (the *logos ensarkos*) was a male Jew, the Son (as second person of the Trinity) is not in such ways limited to being part of

²²See: Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Wiley, 2011), 188ff.

²³See e.g. Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey, *Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press Books, 2012).

exclusive categories. Jesus is a Jew, but God is beyond race. Jesus is male, but God is beyond gender.

When I was a missionary in Africa, the missionary society was given collections of pictures that people could use when telling Bible stories to children. In these pictures, Jesus was portrayed with a brown skin and curly dark hair. When the pictures were shown to pastors, they said: "We cannot use these pictures, that is not Jesus, Jesus is a *mundele*!"²⁴ They had been brought up to believe that Jesus was a white man. In fact the brown-skinned curly dark-haired Jesus was probably more historically accurate than the fair straight-haired blue-eyed Jesus of "traditional" (Western) pictures to describe the incarnate Christ.²⁵ For we know that God (except when the Second Person is incarnate in human form) does not have hair or eyes. We know that God's eyes are not blue or any other colour. We know that God is not European, or Chinese. He has no race because God is '*echad*' one and only. I am suggesting as the basis for this series of lectures that the same is true of gender.

God and Gender

To say that God is male, or that God is female, is just as much idolatry as to say that God is European, or to say that God is a bear! Apart from the pronouns we use like "he" and "him" which I talked about above, the other main reason that we find the claim that God is not gendered difficult is that many of our names and pictures for God are male. Since the most powerful of these is Jesus' naming of God as "father" I will devote an entire lecture to this topic. Before we get there however, I will first spend time looking at some of the passages from the Bible that use motherly language and pictures to talk about God. Later in the week, I will both show that the great theologians of the early centuries of the Christian church understood that God was not of one gender or the other, and show that they also used motherly language and pictures to talk about God. They used these motherly pictures not only of "God the father," but also of the Son, and of the

²⁴*Mundele* is the Lingala word for a white person.

²⁵There was a recent example of this Jesus was a white man on Fox News' *The Kelly File*, broadcast Dec 11, 2013 in the USA where the host said: "I mean, Jesus was a white man too. He was a historical figure, that's a verifiable fact. . ." (see the video clip at <http://nz.news.yahoo.com/a/-/world/20299318/fox-news-host-megyn-kelly-says-jesus-and-santa-are-white/> accessed 12/13/13).

Holy Spirit. In the last lecture in the series I plan to take some of the Biblical starting points, and to use them to suggest ways in which we can explore more deeply how thinking of God as being like a mother, as well as like a father, can help us to a richer and more profound experience of God. For that is the goal of this series. I am not so much concerned with trying to cross the I's or cross the T's of your theology, but I am much concerned to enrich and deepen your experience of the one and only God.

Conclusion

But for today, we started at the beginning, with our fundamental understanding of the nature of God. The biblical God is not a god, even though one of the ways "he" is named is '*elohim*' which means "gods." God, in the Bible, is one, alone, wholly other. To reduce God to a being who is a member of some exclusive class of beings, like these ones and not like those ones, is to diminish God into a god. If the being we worship is not literally "incomparable," '*echad*' one/only, then we are committing idolatry, for we are worshipping some part of creation in place of the creator.