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BIBLICAL TALK OF THE MOTHERLY GOD

By Tim Bulkeley

Now I want to move on from the foundation laid in the first lecture of a biblical understanding of God, to focus on the motherly language and pictures that the Bible uses to speak about God. I will also build on the claim that the one and only God is not "a god," and should not be limited to one gender. Consideration of how the Bible uses female, as well as male, word-pictures to speak about God will continue in the third lecture.

God Without Pictures

God is *sui generis,* unlike all other beings. The Old Testament expresses this, and God helps Israel to live in conformity with it, by the prohibition on idols. The second commandment forbids even images of the true God. While all over the ancient world, gods and goddesses were sculpted and painted, the Bible refuses such pictures of God. The one and only God may only be pictured using words.

It is striking that, despite all the ways in which Israel failed to live up to their calling, the archaeological record (so far at least) contains no statue of Yahweh. To be exact I have to qualify that; at Kuntillet 'Ajrud on the edge of Israelite territory in the Sinai peninsula there is one crudely drawn picture that possibly might have been intended by the artist to represent Yahweh. But that exception is only potential, for we do not know that the picture is meant to be of Yahweh. (It depends if the wording and picture relate to one another, and they seem to be perhaps done by different people.) The artifact also does not come from a population center but from an isolated settlement in the Sinai desert. With only this possible exception, no sculpture or drawing of Yahweh has been found from Bible times. However, the Bible is full of "word pictures."

All of the people around Israel depicted their gods in statues and paintings, such pictures of Yahweh were forbidden. These gods and

goddesses, whose statues archaeologists find everywhere, are usually based on either human or animal forms. This means that they are portrayed as either male or female deities. Indeed, as well as fighting, the gods of the ancient world also had sex and produced offspring. These gods were gendered. Only the God of the Bible, the one and only, who must not be portrayed by statue or painting, could avoid being limited to one gender or the other.

As an example of how word pictures work differently from physical pictures, think of Isaiah 40. In verse 10 we have a fine picture of God as conquering warrior king, bringing the spoils of war with him in triumph. In the very next verse we read of God carrying a little lamb, tender and gentle. In sculpture or drawing such a combination is difficult to achieve, but the prophet can combine both easily in words. Now each picture is true. God is a victorious sovereign; God is also tender and gentle. Either picture alone would fail to capture anything like the full truth of God but together they come closer to the truth. Without pictures we only have the negative route to talking about God, but that negative approach is not the language of worship.

Saying God is *sui generis* sounds like an abstract philosophical idea, but it helps us to understand something of the absolute otherness of God. However, at the same time as stressing God's sovereign otherness the Bible asserts and stresses that God is person.[1] Indeed, in the Old Testament, God has a personal name, Yahweh, and God is known by "his" name. In later tradition, seeking to keep the commandment against taking God's name in vain, Israel refused to pronounce it. Before the time of Jesus, Jewish people reading the Bible would read "LORD" instead. The English Bible, and many other languages' translations also, has followed this custom. This means that we no longer know how to pronounce the consonants YHWH. Yahweh is our best guess. God's name was even abbreviated into a kind of nickname, as *Yah* or *Yahu*. We find these abbreviated versions in the exclamation "praise yah" *halleluia* (*halelu yah,* praise Yah) and in people's names like Elijah *eli yahu* or Obadiah *'obad yah*.

Therefore for the Bible to picture this unique yet personal God it needs personal word pictures. Using word-pictures (not statues or paintings) allowed the Bible writers to picture God in both male and female ways, thus avoiding limiting God to either gender. As we have

[1]Indeed Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament.* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 211 could write: "It is his personhood. . .which is involuntarily thought of in terms of human personality. . .not the spiritual nature of God which is the foundation of Old Testament faith."

seen, though, popular religion in ancient Israel was seldom as pure as biblical law required. The Bible tells us about the worship of gods alongside Yahweh, and the prophets vehemently opposed talking about Yahweh as if "he" were merely a Ba'al, a (male) god. "He" was even thought by some Israelites to need a wife.

Israel, as we know from the history recorded in the Bible and from the prophets, kept failing to live up to God's standards. They kept failing to remember that God is the one and only, unique. But we are not called to imitate Israel, rather we are called to listen to the teaching of the Bible. In the first lecture I claimed that the Bible shows us that a merely male god was not God, the one and only.

Picture Language

Without physical images, Israel painted word-pictures. But word-pictures work differently from physical images. When the writers of the Bible needed to express God's love and care, and its persistence in extreme circumstances, some of them were provoked to use motherly language and pictures to talk about God. Think of the chapters of Isaiah that begin in chapter 40. The opening words of Isaiah 40 are striking. After thirty-nine chapters largely concerned to warn that God's judgment is coming and to correct Judah's apostasy and sin, suddenly in Is 40:1 we read: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God."

Whoever wrote those words, it seems clear to me that they are addressed to Judeans in exile in Babylon, to a people who are lost, broken and who have seen God's temple destroyed. They have come to believe either that Yahweh is powerless compared to the gods of Babylon, or that Yahweh does not love them, or that they have been so bad that Yahweh has deserted them. But the prophet has been commanded, by God, in 40:1 to speak "comfort" to them.

How do you speak comfort to a people who feel either deserted by God or that God is powerless? This loving God who takes the hopeless situation of an apostate nation, punished by defeat and exile, and opens new possibilities is celebrated using the picture-language of birthing in Isaiah 42:[2]

[2]On this passage see: Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, "Like Warrior, like Woman: Destruction and Deliverance in Isaiah 42:10-*17*," CBQ 49 (1987): 560-571; or her longer treatment in Lewis M. Hopfe, *ed., Uncovering Ancient Stones: Essays in Memory of H. Neil Rich*ardson (Grand Rapids: Eisenbrauns, 1987), 17–30; Van Wijk-*Bos, Reimagi*ng God, 51–55.

> For ages, I've kept still, silent and restrained myself, like a woman in labor I'll cry out, gasp and pant. (Isaiah 42:14)

The Hebrew here adds a breathless (audible) effect to the description of panting and gasping (meaning): *'aharîsh 'et'appaq kayyôledâ 'ep'eh 'eshshom ve'esh'ap yahad*.[3] This combination vividly and powerfully speaks of the violence of the final stage of labor and contrasts it with the expectant nine months of patient waiting that preceded it. The vividness of the picture language helps prepare us for the surprising thing in verse 15. Where God "lays waste" like an army, using drought as a weapon:

> I'll waste mountains and hills, and all their greenery I'll dry up. I'll turn their streams to islands, and their pools I'll dry out.

Alone this would offer no hope to deserted exiles, but when understood as birth-pangs (verse 14) the destruction is revealed as the beginning of something new because the most striking thing about the process of birth is its violence. Something new is happening:

> I will lead the blind by a road they do not know, by paths they have not known I will guide them.
> I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground.
> These are the things I will do, and I will not forsake them. (Is 42:16)

One way to describe something new is to say it is like a blind person who has been struggling to feel their way around, who can suddenly see. Another is to say that the new thing has been born. If instead of picture language this was a statue or painting, the picture of creation as God giving birth, or talk of God birthing new possibilities, would make God into a goddess. In the Bible as a word-picture it can be alongside picturing God as father. It is important that both pictures occur (see below) else a God described as motherly might be thought of as a goddess.

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[3]R. N. Whybray, *The Second Isaiah* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 78.

Yahweh and the Womb

Using words instead of material objects to picture God frees the Bible to connect Yahweh with births and fertility. This involvement of Yahweh in birthing is striking and ubiquitous in the Bible. "He" opens barren wombs (Gen 29:31) but also causes barrenness (Gen 20:18; 30:2; 1 Sam 1:5-6). All of the "blessings of the womb" are given by Yahweh (Gen 49:25; cf. Dt 7:13; 28:4). “He” forms in the womb (Job 31:15; Jer 1:5; Ps 1:5; 139:13; Cf. Eccl 11:5), and ensures safe delivery from the womb (Job 10: 18; Ps 71:6).[4]

This association of Yahweh and the womb is very clear in Psalm 22. Verses 9-10:[5]

> You took me from the belly.
> You kept me safe on the breasts of my mother.
> On you I was cast from the womb,
> and from the belly of my mother my God, you [are].

The first and the last word in Hebrew, as in this literal translation, is “you.” "On you" also begins the second verse. Since the “you” addressed here is God, these verses are about God and centered on God. Only nine Hebrew words are used (some words are repeated). Four of the nine speak of motherhood: "belly" (in each verse), "mother" (also in each verse), "breast" and "womb.” The story is carried by three verbs: “take,” “keep safe” and “cast.” The only other words in these verses are the pronoun “you” and "God.” Both the vocabulary and the construction of the poetry focus on motherhood, birthing and on God.

The theology is perhaps as careful as the use of language. After the trauma of birth, the safety and trust which the baby finds on the mother's breast is likened to the safety and trust the psalmist seeks in God.

The structure of this poetry focuses on the divine “you,” hinting at the enormous difference between God and the human mother. But as the verses meet, this mother and God meet, verse 9 ends with the word “mother,” and immediately the word “you” (referring to God) opens

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[4]Note that these examples are not exhaustive, but representative of many many other passages.

[5]In some Psalms, the numbering of verses in Hebrew is different from English Bibles, this is such a case. The translation used here is ugly but approximates to a word for word approach in order to reflect what is happening in the underlying Hebrew.

verse 10. Again, at the end of this verse "my mother, my god" places together the two beings who offer this peaceful security.

Yahweh Gives Birth

This close association between Yahweh and the womb is sometimes made even closer when the biblical writers speak of Yahweh giving birth. Psalm 90:2 is translated somewhat differently in different versions:

> Before the mountains were brought forth (NRSV) or born (NIV and NASB),
> or ever you had formed (NRSV) brought forth (NIV) given birth to (NASB) the earth and the world,
> from everlasting to everlasting you are god.

Here the NRSV closely follows the RSV which in turn closely followed the KJV, while the NIV, and more strikingly still the NASB, make the picture much clearer. “Bring forth” and “form” (NRSV) only hint at what is explicit in the other translations which use “born” and which speak of God who “brought forth” or “gave birth.” This more lively translation is also more correct since the verbs in Hebrew refer to birth. It is true that *yalad* might refer to the father's role, but *hul* has only the meaning: “to give birth to.”[6] Translating it “formed” is weak; the Hebrew word implies the effort and pain of giving birth.[7]

This picture of God who gives birth to the world is horribly dangerous. Several theologians, not least Elizabeth Achtemeier, recently (in response to Feminist theologians, who want to make this picture a central one) have pointed out how dangerous it is. If taken on its own, this picture associates God too closely with creatures.[8] It risks

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[6]Patrick Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 126; Julia A. Foster, “The Motherhood of God: The Use of *hyl* as God-Language in the Hebrew Scriptures,” in *Uncovering Ancient Stones: Essays in Memory of H. Neil Richardson* (ed. Lewis M. Hopfe; Winona Lake, In: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 93–102 (esp. 97–98).

[7]Marvin Tate, *Psalms: 51-100* (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 432–3

[8]Elizabeth Achtemeier, “Female Language for God: Should the Church Adopt It?,” *Transformation* 4,2 (1987): 24-30; Elizabeth Achtemeier, “Why God is Not Mother,” *Christianity Today* 37,9 (1993): 17-23; Elizabeth Achtemeier, “Exchanging God for ‘No Gods’: A Discussion of Female Language for God,” in *Speaking the Christian God: the Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (ed. Alvin F. Kimel; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 1-16; Elizabeth Achtemeier, “Female Language for God: Should the Church Adopt It?,” in *The*

minimizing the great gulf that separates creatures from creator. If they are right and this picture is so dangerous, how were the authors of Scripture able to take that risk? What protected them from the error?

It was precisely the fact that they were not using motherly pictures of God only. They used father, lord and other pictures alongside motherly ones. Some of these pictures, perhaps unlike the picture of God birthing the world, remind us that God is in no way part of the world. Creator God stands outside, in authority over creation. Two pictures are better than one.

God's Motherly Love

Not only is God pictured giving birth, in creation and in the renewal of hopeless situations, but God's love is often thought of as motherly. Modern Westerners think of providence as a masculine thing. In western culture, men are supposed to provide for their families. "He is a good provider" is a traditional description of a good husband and father. But this thought that providence is a masculine thing is a consequence of a money economy, and of work moving outside the home sphere. Often, and especially in traditional cultures, providing food is thought of as mothers' work. In Congo, women traditionally not only cook, but also till the soil, and care for the crops (men contribute by hunting and fishing, adding the luxury of meat). In wage economies fathers are pictured as "providing" for their families, but in more traditional contexts provision was the mother's role. The idealized wife in Proverbs 31 is not only a mother (v. 28), but she provides the food for her family:

> [14] She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from far away.
> [15] She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household and tasks for her servant-girls.
> [16] She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard (Pr 31:14-16).

But she provides through commerce too:

Hermeneutical Quest: Eessays in Honor of James Luther Mays on his Sixty-fifth Birthday (ed. James Mays; Allison Park, Pa: Pickwick, 1986), 97-114; see also other authors collected in Alvin F. Kimel, *Speaking the Christian God: the Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992).

> [24] She makes linen garments and sells them; she supplies the merchant with sashes. (Pr 31:24)

Such an understanding of motherly provision lies behind Moses' argument in Numbers 11. The Israelites have been complaining about their diet. They even moan about manna, which tasted like honey cakes (Ex 16:31). The rabble want meat, and remember fondly the fine dining they enjoyed as slaves in Egypt:

> [5] We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. . . (Num 11:5)

Moses is trapped between this demanding crowd and God. In verse 9, God burned part of the camp on hearing earlier complaints. By verse 10, the people's complaining has made Yahweh angry, and Moses, the intermediary, is upset. He complains to God:

> [11]So Moses said to the LORD,
> "Why have you treated your servant so badly?
> How have I deserved this?
> You lay the weight of this whole nation on me.
> [12]Did I become pregnant with this whole nation?
> Did I give birth to them, that you say to me,
> 'Carry them in your arms,
> as a nurse carries a suckling child,
> to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors.'
> [13]Where am I to get meat to give to this whole nation?
> For they come whining to me and say,
> 'Give us meat to eat!'
> [14]I am not able to carry this whole nation alone.
> They are too heavy for me.
> [15]If this is how you are going to treat me,
> kill me at once
> (if I have found favor in your sight)
> and do not let me see my misery."

Notice how Moses' argument runs: "You (YHWH) have been unfair to me, you expect me to provide for Israel, but I am not their

mother (verse 12). You are their mother and you should feed them!"[9] When Moses is up against it and the issue is providence, the picture he turns to is a mother, because often mother is the one who is expected to provide.

So, given such a background, it is not surprising that one common word for God's love carries overtones of motherly love. The word is plural in form, *rahamim,* looking like the plural of *rehem*. *Rehem* is the word for a woman's womb, while *rahamim* means love. Because James Barr warned against "the etymological fallacy," we cannot simply say that because *rahamim* looks like *rehem* the two words share meaning.[10] Yet Phyllis Trible noticed two Bible stories which suggest a deeper than merely etymological connection between *rehem* and *rahamim*.[11]

In this case it is not merely that the two words look alike, but also in at least two places the writers of the Bible associate the two ideas. This is not surprising because the Bible writers loved puns and all sorts of word-play or echoes. In the Joseph story, the second time his brothers appear in Egypt, Benjamin's presence is significant. Benjamin, like Joseph, was the son of Rachel, while the other "brothers" are children of Leah or of one of the maidservants. In Genesis 43:29-30 Joseph looked up and sees "his brother Benjamin, his mother's son." It is only then that the text speaks of Joseph's "affection" *rahamim* for his brother.

The story of King Solomon and the two women who each claim the same baby is even clearer. The story concerns motherhood and babies, but neither woman is called "mother" at the start. Only after Solomon suggests dividing the child "fairly" and one woman is moved to "compassion" (*rahamim* 1 Kgs 3:26), does Solomon inform us: "she is his mother." The true mother's *rahamim* demonstrates that the child is the fruit of her *rehem*. Now, *rahamim* is used more often speaking of God than of mortals, so this motherly compassionate love is a divine as well as a maternal quality.

Preaching Comfort

The last chapters of Isaiah preach "comfort" to a discouraged and beaten people, who fear that God is powerless or does not love them (Is 40:1). They are overawed by the power of empire, and the prophet must

[9]Martin *Noth, Numbers: a Com*mentary (London: SCM, 1968), 86 ff.

[10]James *Barr, The Semantics of Biblical L*anguage, (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

[11]Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 31–34.

evoke a picture of God who cannot, and will not, let his people go, whose love is strong and relentless.[12]

In Isaiah 49,[13] this despair of the Judean exiles is expressed clearly in verse 14: "but Zion said, the LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." The response in verse 15 is clear and strong:
Can a woman forget the infant at her breast, or a loving mother the child of her womb? Though these can forget, I will not forget you!
A mother's love is proverbially tenacious, but Yahweh's love outlasts it. Not even the attachment between a woman and the child she has born and feeds, can really be compared with "his" attachment for "his" people. God's love is like a mother's love for the baby she gave birth to and is feeding, but even stronger.

In Isaiah 44 and 46 again the prophet needs to show a dispirited people how strong and faithful Yahweh's love is. God "formed" Israel and is a "redeemer." Redeemer (*go'el*) is a term from family life. The redeemer was an older relative with responsibility to protect the vulnerable members of the family. So Yahweh as "maker" is not an impersonal technician, indeed those formed are "sons" and "daughters" (Isaiah 43:6-7). These ideas are the background against which we read chapter 44:

> Thus says the LORD your maker,
> your shaper in the womb, who helps you.
> Do not fear, Jacob my servant.
> Jeshurun[14] I have chosen you." (Is 44:2)

This association of creation and womb is repeated later in the chapter:

> Thus says the LORD, your redeemer,
> your shaper in the womb.
> I am the LORD, maker of all,
> stretching out the heavens,
> by myself spreading the earth."

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[12]Mayer I. Gruber, "The Motherhood of God in Second Isaiah," *RB* 90 (1983): 351–359; reprinted in Mayer I. Gruber, *The Motherhood of God and Other Studies* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992); and John J. Schmitt, "The Motherhood of God and Zion as Mother," *RB* 92 (1985): 557–569.

[13] Cf. Johanna Van Wijk-Bos, *Reimaging God: the Case for Scriptural Diversity* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), 61–2.

[14]The rare name "Jeshurun" is just one link between this passage and Deut 32, cf. v.8 "I am the rock."

Unlike the human mother who ages, and must eventually be cared for by her children, God will carry "his" children even when they are old:

> Listen to me, house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, borne by me from your birth, (literally "from the belly") carried from the womb. Even to your old age I am he. When you turn gray, I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear, I will carry, and will save.

As creator, Yahweh is like a mother. As a mother, Yahweh is like Zion. In chapter 49, in verses 14 and 15 God's love is described as stronger than a mother's. While in verse 20 the returning exiles are "children born during your bereavement." Although Zion did not birth these children, they are hers, and so she says: "who has borne by these… who has reared them" (Is 49:21)? How would you answer Zion? There seems to be only one candidate. Marduk (the god of Babylon) is hardly a candidate, nor even Ishtar their goddess. If Zion herself is not the mother then Yahweh is the only candidate.

Zion's motherhood, and God's, recur in 66:7-14.[15] The birth is again unanticipated and miraculous. Zion has sons, despite being deserted, and with no expectant waiting or labor. Verse 9 offers the explanation: "shall I open the womb, and not deliver? says the LORD. Shall I, who delivers, shut the womb? says your God." While there were none of the usual signs of the forthcoming birth, the midwife is trustworthy! Verse 11 continues the picture:

> For thus says the LORD, I will extend prosperity to her like
> a river,
> and the nation's wealth like an overflowing stream.
> And you shall nurse and be carried on her arm,
> and cuddled of the knees.

Verse 11 echoes 49:23 while verse 12 echoes 49:22. But in verse 13 Zion is no longer the mother, Yahweh is. "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you. You shall be comforted in Jerusalem." Again this echoes 49:15.[16]

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[15]On these verses compare Van Wijk-Bos, *Reimaging God*, 63–4.
[16]Whybray, *The Second Isaiah*, 286.

Two Parents Are Better Than One

As well as despair, Israel was also tempted like pagan religions to worship both a fatherly and a motherly god. If scholars who suggest that the Bible's God was thought of as a male were right, then this temptation would have been powerful. For, we know that two parents are better than one. Single parent families are neither ideal in terms of sociological research nor in theological understanding. If God were merely a male, then God would need a female counterpart as God "himself" recognized humans do in Genesis 2:18. But the Bible's God is not limited to being either male or female and the biblical word-pictures that describe God include both. We will now look at some passages that provide a balance of motherly and fatherly pictures of God.

In Psalm 27, the psalmist has been concerned about the possibility that God might forsake him (27:9) but recognizes that even: "if my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will gather me [to 'him']" (27:10). In Psalm 123 the imagery is gender-balanced but not parental: "See, as menservants' eyes are on their lord's hand, as a maid's our eyes are on her lady's hand, so our eyes are on the LORD our god, awaiting his favor."

In Job 38:28-29 the imagery, though impersonal, is parental:
Has the rain a father, or who begot the dew drops?

> From whose womb did the ice come forth,
> and who gave birth to heaven's hoarfrost?

Using the same verb (*yalad*) in the hiphil in verse 28 to mean "beget" and in the qal in verse 29 to mean "give birth" nicely both connects and distinguishes the motherly and the fatherly pictures here.[17]

The communal lament Psalm in Isaiah 63 begins (v.7) as such psalms often do, stating God's past grace:

> The LORD's gracious deeds, I will remember – the LORD's glories!
> For although the LORD has done for us, great good to the

[17]For this distinction between the qal and hiphil of *yalad* see a Hebrew lexicon or concordance.

house of Israel
that he has acted towards them according to his love
(*rahamim*),
according to his great faithfulness (*hesed*).[18]

God shows tender love for "his" children, for "surely they are my people, sons who will not deal falsely," so, he becomes their savior (Is 63:8). In verse 15 while "zeal and might" carry masculine overtones echoing warrior imagery, the next line is more feminine and motherly and so complementary. The expression "heart yearning" (*hamon me'eka*) is more literally "stirring of your insides" indeed *me'ah* can mean womb. The word translated love here is *rahamim*.

Where are your zeal and your might?
The yearning of your heart and your compassion? (Is 63:15)

The next verse presents God as father: "You are our father, for Abraham does not know us and Israel does not recognize us. You, LORD, are our father, 'Our redeemer from of old' is your name" (Is 63:16). As a father, God is both warrior proud and motherly tender (see verse 15).

Humans need a God who fulfills both fatherly and motherly roles. This need was clearly evident in the way in which gods very often had goddesses alongside them. It is evidenced too in the Catholic world by the way in which Mary (the Mother of Christ) is given a role which in everyday piety is divine. In Catholic dogma Mary's place is intended to be distinguished from God's, but in practice these subtle distinctions seem to be forgotten. We need a God who is both mother and father. If we make the mistake of picturing a god who is only a father, then somehow or other our need for a divine mother will burst out in ways which are dangerous. This has happened time and again in human history. The Israelites started to talk about Yahweh as if he were Ba'al. Ba'al was the male Canaanite god whose name meant "lord" a term appropriately applied to Yahweh. But *ba'al* also meant "husband." When they started to think of Yahweh too much as a *ba'al* "lord" and so also as husband, naturally they had to find a goddess to be his wife. This thought was wrong and the prophets told them it was wrong.

[18]Another "family" word, meaning the loving faithfulness expected between covenant partners and family members.

A similar thing happened in Christian history (see the next lecture) when Christians began to stop talking (in theology and worship) about God in motherly ways. When that happened, the Catholic Church strongly developed its devotion to Mary. Over time Mary became for them a kind of divine mother figure[19] because we need a God who is like both father and mother, but this need must not descend into idolatry.

Jeremiah chapters two and three tackle just this problem: "for numerous as your towns are your gods, Judah" (Jer 2:28c). God's people are once more turning to idols. And these graven images are shared by both leaders and ordinary people: "Like the thief's shame when found out, so the house of Israel shall be shamed, they, their Kings, their rulers, their priests, and their prophets" (Jer 2:26).
In verse 27 Jeremiah accuses them:

> Saying to a tree, 'you are my father', and to a stone, 'you gave me birth'. For towards my face, [they turn] their necks not their faces! But in the time of their trouble they say, 'Arise and save us!'

Whether such "homemade" gods are mothers or fathers they are equally useless:

> And where are your gods that you made for yourself?
> Let them arise, if they can save you, in your time of trouble
> (Jer 2: 28ab)!

God cannot be represented by physical images. God is a better "father" and a better "mother" than any log or stone idol!

Hosea chapter 11 provides an interesting case study. Here the Bible presents God in ways which are less gendered than many of its readers assumed. Mays titled it "the divine father,"[20] by contrast Lindbergh, more recently, rightly sees this passage presenting God as "parent."[21]

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[19]Indeed it happened slowly, beginning in practice in the Middle Ages, but the two key dogmas were only promulgated in 1854 (the immaculate conception) and 1950 (the assumption).

[20]James Luther Mays, *Hosea: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1969), 150.

[21]James Limburg, *Hosea-Micah: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 38–43.

Consider this. Were the actions of this parent more likely, in ancient Israel, to be performed by a father or by a mother? In verse 4, while either parent might lift the child, teaching her toddler to walk, using reins to prevent falling, it is more likely to be the mother's job, and in most cultures feeding is more a mother's than a father's task. Also in verse 8, God's compassion is described using the word *rahamim*. This word we've seen carrying motherly overtones in the stories of Joseph and his brother Benjamin and of Solomon with the two women who each claimed to be the true mother of the same child.

In the "song of Moses" in Deuteronomy 32 mother language is explicit in verse 18:

> The rock who bore you, you neglected,
> and you forgot the God who gave you birth.

The verb in the second line (*hul*) describes a mother beyond all doubt. *Hul* means " to be in labor," it can even be used to contrast the roles of mother and father (Is 45:10; 51:2).[22] Fathering is never described by the verb *hul*. On the other hand the verb (*yalad*) in the first line could speak of either a mother's or a father's role in begetting children. It is interesting though, that the only other occurrence of this verb, where God is the subject of the verb, is in Numbers chapter 11 verse 12,[23] and there (as we have seen) it is clearly motherly.

Verse 18 of Moses' song pictures God as Israel's mother, deserted and ignored by her child, against all nature. Yet this song also pictures God as father:

> Is this how you repay the LORD, foolish people, without wisdom?
> Is not he your father, who got you, and made you, and established you? (Dt 32:6)

So in Moses' song, of God the faithful rock and "his" faithless people, images of both parents are used to highlight Israel's unnatural desertion of God. Moses knew God too well to be limited to either picture of God alone. Sometimes commentators find the mixing of

[22]The other use of the root, incapacitating fear, is not intended here, and is secondary, as comparative expressions often indicate (Is 13:8; Mi 4:10). On Is 45:9-13 compare Van Wijk-Bos, *Reimaging God*, 55–8.

[23]A. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1979), 388.

motherly and fatherly pictures in this way strange or confusing.[24] Yet surely to associate the two parents is natural, for someone to be a mother requires that someone else be a father, and the reverse. Perhaps the fact that motherly talk of God is very rare in today's church drives these comments, rather than the actual content of the Bible itself.

In the fourth lecture in this series we will consider some of the ways in which the pastors and theologians of the Christian church, during its first 1,500 years, took up and made use of Biblical language and imagery describing God in motherly terms. There is one picture of God, found in the Old Testament, which I have not found anywhere else. It is at the heart of a short psalm, in this word picture, God is neither giving birth nor feeding, nor even protecting. Psalm 131 seeks to express and inculcate a simple and calm trust:

1. Lord, my heart is not proud,
   nor my eyes haughty;
   I'm not concerned with things
   too great and difficult for me.
2. Indeed I've calmed and quieted my soul,
   like a weaned child with its mother;
   my soul with me is like a weaned child.
3. Israel, hope in the Lord
   now and forever.

The core of the psalm in verse 2 is not easy to translate. My translation above is very close to both the NRSV and to the NIV.[25] However we render this verse, the picture it paints is clear. It speaks of a "weaned" child. The word is a passive form of the verb *gamal*. While talk of motherhood often leads to pictures of infants at the breast, this picture is different. Here a weaned child is cuddled to mother, but seeks nothing more than to be close to her. As a picture of the human relationship with God it suggests possibilities of a less demanding and therefore more mature interaction. The weaned child still depends on her parent, but the interaction is more complex than a baby demanding to suckle.

Interestingly the parent is a "mother," for children can cuddle either parent. If the Bible's God were merely male, then the parent here

[24]E.G. Samuel Rolles Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1986), 363.

[25]Compare e.g. Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms, with an Appendix: the Grammar of the Psalter 3, 101-150* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), 238ff.

could have been father. The parent **is** a mother, despite the non-gendered activity in which she is engaged, a further indication that the God of Scripture is beyond gender.

God as a Mother Hen

The New Testament is so focused on understanding who Jesus is, and what his coming means, that it has little space to explore more widely. Jesus' own teaching centers on the coming kingdom, and gradually introduces talk of his death and its meaning. But both Matthew and Luke record one occasion when Jesus pictured himself, or possibly God the Father, as being like a mother hen:

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to it! How often I desired to gather your children as a bird gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you [desolate]. And [For] I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.' (Matt. 23:37-39 and Lk. 13:34-35)

The word here that is translated as "bird" might suggest either a cockerel or a hen. Except that in this case the word is constructed as feminine. It must therefore be understood as a hen, because the possessives associated with it in both gospels are feminine. What Jesus is saying here reminds us strongly of passages talking about Yahweh's relationship with Zion. Especially in Isaiah, this relationship is often spoken of in motherly ways. Elsewhere, Jesus had talked of the father who sends prophets and messengers. But here either Jesus or his Father is pictured as a mother-hen who wants to protect her chicks. We keep chickens at home, and when one has hatched a brood she can be fierce. When she perceives danger, as well as threatening the source with her sharp beak, she spreads her wings tightly to cover and hide her chicks.

This picture that Jesus uses was common in the Old Testament. The Psalms especially refer to God's protection using phrases like "shelter in the shadow of your wings" (Ps 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7 and 91:4). Jesus expresses the picture more fully. He describes gathering the young and makes it explicit that the wings belong to a mother bird with a "brood." Thus Jesus makes clear the implicitly motherly picture he takes from the Old Testament.

New Birth

One of the central images of the New Testament implies that God is mother, but we seldom notice this. At the beginning of John's gospel, time and again through the New Testament and even more in more recent Christian speech, the imagery of being "born again" is used.

This idea was introduced in John 1:12 where those who believe "are given the power to become children of God." One becomes a child either by birth, or by adoption. Both processes are used as pictures for becoming a child of God in the New Testament. But birthing is the dominant picture at the beginning of John's gospel. John 1:13 speaks of children who "were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man, but of God." In Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, the motherly nature of God's parenting becomes the focus.

Jesus told the Pharisee: "Truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." The verb here *gennaio,* repeated eight times in just five verses, carries the theme. Nicodemus replies: "Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus affirms that entering God's kingdom is being born of the Spirit (John 3:6, 8). In verses 5 and 6 the preposition *ek* is used with this verb this usually indicates giving birth, rather than a father begetting. This new birth language is also prominent in 1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18 and the picture is also used in James and Peter. In James 1:18 the verb used, *apokeueo,* with God as its subject, means to give birth. (In verse 15 it is used again to distinguishing conception from birthing.)

How can Christians, who love the language of the "new birth," have difficulty with picturing God as a mother? Perhaps it is because talk of being born again has become such a cliché that we no longer understand it as picture-language. If we did we might ask ourselves who it is that gives birth?

Conclusion

The authors of the Bible were not afraid to use motherly language and pictures to describe God. Indeed when they needed a picture of God's unswerving, faithful love, this picture was powerful. Motherly language and pictures are less frequent than fatherly ones, but they are significant and important. The Bible is, however, restrained with such gendered and engendering pictures of God, and perhaps motherly and fatherly language and pictures occur together as one form of protection against the danger of idolatry inherent in the use of either alone.