

Globethics Repository



Gender and God-Talk

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Briggs, Richard S.
Publisher	Gospel Coalition
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-07-16 23:29:14
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/157073

Gender and God-Talk: Can We Call God 'Mother'?

Richard S. Briggs

Richard Briggs teaches Old Testament at Cranmer Hall, St John's College, in Durham, and has previously taught courses in both Gender Studies and Hermeneutics. His book, *Reading the Bible Wisely* was published recently by SPCK.

Can we, should we, or should we not call God 'Mother'? Although originally the preserve of self-consciously radical theologies and church traditions, it is by no means uncommon now, across large parts of the theological spectrum, to see Christian liturgies and prayer-practices adopting the form of address 'God, Father and Mother of us all', or some such equivalent term. The question as to whether God is Father or Mother can rapidly become a contentious debate about whether or not God is male, and indeed whether God is female. Such debates often generate more heat than light, and various good points are thrown indiscriminately at the 'other side' without much genuine communication. In the words of Gail Ramshaw: 'About God's gender it is far easier to hold an impassioned opinion than to articulate a reasoned argument or a reasonable solution.'¹

'Is God male?' is, of course, the wrong question. God is, as all parties are likely to agree, neither male nor female. The real question is to what extent we are proscribed in our language about God. Must we restrict ourselves only to masculine terminology, or are we at liberty to adopt feminine terminology also? To put it more simply: if we can pray to God as Father, can we also pray to God as Mother?² There is evidently a third option: that we should drop all gender-specific language about God, and I will consider that briefly at the end. However, the aim of this article is not so much to answer the question about the appropriateness of using masculine and feminine language and imagery to talk about God, rather it is to clarify the different levels on which the discussion needs to be carried out, and thus to provide a framework for the debate. It will be helpful to proceed through this discussion by wearing two different hats, which for convenience I will label A and B.³ What follows is a dialogue on three levels:

- A. What the Bible says;
- B. What the Bible says when it is viewed in its historical context;
- C. What the Bible could possibly say i.e. how language about God works.

¹ Gail Ramshaw, 'The Gender of God', in Ann Loades (ed.), *Feminist Theology: A Reader* (London: SPCK, 1990), 168–80, here 169.

² Praying to God as Father can also, in certain circumstances, be problematic. The suitability of 'father' language in cases, e.g., of paternal abuse, is an important issue, but it is not the one I wish to address.

³ No reference to Barth's celebrated 'A and B' discussion is intended, where he takes man and woman, for better or worse (but undoubtedly for poorer) as 'not an A and a second A' but as 'an A and a B' — Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark), 169.

All these levels are important, but it is a matter of some frustration that people tend to respond to arguments pitched at one level with counter-claims pitched at another level, thus creating the effect of talking past each other. It is important to consider what the Bible says on this issue, even if it is equally important to recognise the various hermeneutical implications of accepting the point that the Bible did not set out to address this question directly, and that we are therefore engaged in the process of reading against its major intentions in an exercise such as this one.⁴ It, however, is equally important to note that biblical texts cannot be the whole of the matter. Biblical texts work within certain cultural and linguistic conventions and possibilities which also need to be explored:

Naming God truthfully is important, since to name God untruthfully is to delude ourselves and worship an idol. Naming God truthfully is especially important if language shapes and angles thinking and behaviour ... the fact that almost all our naming and depicting of God is in male terms (*he, king, father*) is either irrelevant or crucially significant, depending on our assumptions about language.⁵

What possibilities are there, then, for calling God 'Mother' in addition to (or perhaps instead of) 'Father'? We will at least begin with the Bible.

What the Bible says

The first claim (which we might label A1) is that the Bible contains many feminine images for God. Ruth Edwards conveniently brings together many of the most striking verses in her discussion of 'God as Father and Mother':⁶

As a mother comforts her child,
so I will comfort you;
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem
(Is. 66:13).

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.
(Is. 49:15)

For a long time I have kept my peace,
I have kept still and restrained myself;
now I will cry out like a woman in labour,
I will gasp and pant.
(Is. 42:14)

⁴ I develop this hermeneutical point with respect to gender-related issues generally in Richard Briggs, *Gender and the New Testament* (Grove Biblical Booklets 21, Cambridge: Grove Books, 2001).

⁵ Brian Wren, *What Language Shall I Borrow? — God-Talk in Worship: A Male Response to Feminist Theology* (London: SCM, 1989), 61.

⁶ The title of ch. 9 of Ruth Edwards, *The Case for Women's Ministry* (London: SPCK, 1989), 133–43. Edwards also gives several other examples.

In this third verse the voice speaking is that of God. All of these examples derive from the richly textured theology of the later sections of Isaiah. The next example is from Deuteronomy, and relates to Psalm 90:2, which also uses the strongly female image of child-bearing:

You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you;
you forgot the God who gave you birth.
(Deut. 32:18)

The final example uses the image of a mother bird, an image also picked up by Jesus in Matthew 23:37 (//Luke 13:34), when he says 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!' In Isaiah the image is:

Like birds hovering overhead, so the LORD of hosts
will protect Jerusalem;
he will protect and deliver it,
he will spare and rescue it.
(Is. 31:5)

In addition to this array of selected verses we might note that the image of wisdom, personified in Proverbs 8:22–31 as 'dancing with the Lord at creation' is typically a feminine image, and that the spirit is often characterised in feminine terms in the OT, a point given resonance (though of course not in any way proved) by the fact that the word *ruah* is feminine.

This is an impressive array of biblical images and citations which underlines the claim that female language about God is not just possible, but is actively modelled in the biblical tradition. Here in the prophets, in the wisdom literature, in the *torah*, and in the gospels, are examples of language which conceptualise God in feminine and even female terms.⁷

The counter-claim (B1) is to acknowledge that all the above is true, but that what is far more obvious and consistently emphasised in the biblical traditions is the strong predominance of masculine imagery for God. We can be brief here: God is king, father, shepherd and warrior. God is husband, judge, and many others. B1 does not deny the verses listed in A1, but makes the obvious point that the weight of evidence leans heavily, even overwhelmingly, in the other direction. The verses cited in A1 work with implications and unstated images, suggesting feminine characteristics of God without actually taking the step of naming God as Mother, or as female. On the other hand, masculine imagery does lead to the explicit naming of God as Father or as Warrior, for example, and hence the two cases are not at all parallel. In his discussion of this issue, Brian Wren coins the somewhat odd expression 'KINGAFAP' as a short-hand designation for the way that Christian worship language adopts the 'dominant metaphor system' of God as 'King-God-Almighty-Father-Protector'.⁸ Wren may have strong reservations about it, as his book does indeed make clear, but he is accurate in his analysis of the predominant imagery, and for good reason: this is the major tradition of the biblical text too.

⁷ Female is usually taken as a term of sex differentiation (we are physically either male or female), while feminine is a gender/role-related term. See Briggs, *Gender*, 3–6.

⁸ Wren, *What Language*, 119 and 124.

What the Bible says – read in historical context

Thus far, the two sides of the argument have done little more than lob verses at each other. In order to go deeper than this somewhat superficial level of argument, the claim A2 might now be put: that while B1 is correct in pointing out the predominance of male imagery for God in the Bible, what is significant is that given the patriarchal setting of the Bible, there is any feminine imagery at all. This is an argument which moves to the level of reading the Bible in its historical context. It has the merit of accepting the evident imbalance of evidence in the A1/B1 argument, but of clarifying where the emphasis should fall in assessing that imbalance. The emphasis should lie not on a counting of heads (or texts, in this case) since such an approach always favours the *status quo*, but on those indications amidst the majority view that there are other ways of speaking too.

The name often given to this kind of claim is that it follows the 'trajectory' of the biblical text: the kinds of thought processes lying behind Isaiah's language set in motion a type of theological reflection which eventually concludes, many centuries later, that while biblical evidence remains overwhelmingly one-sided, there are significant contextual factors to take into account. These contextual factors suggest that a counter-cultural way of thinking has been unleashed which will eventually prove to be of enduring value, even to the point of overcoming the preponderance of evidence pointing the other way.

Thinking in terms of trajectories is both promising and problematic. It makes sense to suggest that ideas essentially alien to biblical writers can in time germinate and produce fruit in new ways of theological thinking. Many would argue that this is precisely what happened historically with the church's eventual opposition to slavery despite an impressive wealth of evidence that biblical writers not only took it for granted, but actually supported it as part of the God-given order.⁹ The 'trajectory' approach gained ground in evangelical thinking with the bold use made of it by John Goldingay in his attempt to tackle theological diversity in the OT,¹⁰ but in fact it was mainly articulated in the wake of the discovery of the *Nag Hammadi* documents, by Robinson and Koester in their analysis of *Trajectories Through Early Christianity*.¹¹ It is not too far-fetched to suggest that they developed this approach in order to emphasise heterogeneity in the early Christian movement, in ways that were highly sympathetic to the (proto-) Gnostic tendencies of the most famous *Nag Hammadi* document, *The Gospel of Thomas*.¹² Trajectories can thus be both creatively flexible and problematically open-ended: slavery and gnosticism arguably being two test cases for their various positive and negative implications.

Even if we grant A2 for a moment, there is a response (B2) which makes its conclusions problematic. Allowing that one should read the biblical texts in historical context, it turns out that once we understand those contexts properly, the Bible is

⁹ On which see Kevin Giles, 'The Biblical Argument for Slavery: Can the Bible Mislead? A Case Study in Hermeneutics', *Evangelical Quarterly* 66.1 (1994), 3–17; Willard Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983), 31–64.

¹⁰ John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 40–43.

¹¹ See James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester, *Trajectories Through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

¹² Robinson helped to bring these documents to prominence when he edited *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3rd edn (1988, orig: Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977).

actually remarkably *male-orientated* in its talk of God. The OT world was a world full of goddesses, and there was indeed an abundance of conceptual resources to hand for describing God in feminine terms, or indeed for taking God as female – as Goddess. Read against this background, claims B2, the biblical text is in fact resolutely male-orientated in its depiction of deity.

The evidence for this claim is thought provoking. Fertility cults were common in Canaanite religion, where Baal had his female consort Astarte (or *Ashtoreth*), one of the many Canaanite goddesses of whom the most well-known is possibly Asherah, whose cult object was the 'asherah pole' and littered the horizon as a constant rebuff to the attempts of the leaders and prophets to bring the Israelite people back to monotheism. Jeremiah 44 is a key text here, a chapter wherein the prophet offers a sustained critique of idolatry, and promises that disaster will surely follow. (This passage, we may note in passing, includes the somewhat odd gender-pointed verse (24) where Jeremiah spoke 'to all the people and all the women'.) The men who see their wives as the source of the idolatry problem (15) waste no time in assessing this prophetic claim on their lives: 'we are not going to listen to you. Instead, we will do everything that we have vowed, make offerings to the queen of heaven and pour out libations to her' (16–17). Failure to worship the queen of heaven is the problem. Jeremiah, in contrast, sees this as the very weakness of the people: the heart of idolatry. In the complex political world of determining which prophetic voice is the true voice of God, biblical tradition landed on the side of Jeremiah against the people. Here, we could say, is as clear a case as one could wish for of a direct confrontation with feminine-orientated God-worship in the name of the God of Israel, and it is roundly condemned.

Thus it simply does not stand up to scrutiny to say that the remarkable feature of Israelite religion was any appearance at all of feminine imagery for God. All the necessary ways of thinking were manifestly there, and they were consciously rejected. In a world of polytheism and gods with divine consorts, Genesis 1 spoke a profoundly monotheistic word of the one single God who created everything: no pantheon of male and female goddesses here. Patriarchy this may be, but it is not ignorance of other possibilities, as Deuteronomy 4:15–16 makes clear: 'do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any figure – the likeness of male or female'. In full awareness of what it was doing, Israel restricted itself to the one male god.

The next step will be to respond to this claim by moving to a new conceptual level, but first a brief word about a possible response on this level itself. If B2 were put first as the relevant claim about God-language in the Bible as read in its historical context, what would a counter-claim (A2*) be? In this case the counter-claim at this level is to argue that it is precisely this set of historical data that actually explains why the Israelites avoided female imagery for God: it was to avoid any sense of identification with these idolatrous practices in the surrounding nations. The issue was not that this proved that only masculine language was appropriate for God. It is since God was neither male nor female it was not possible, in context, to use female language for God because it would have been subsumed into this idolatrous goddess-thinking. On this account, the historical context argument points the other way.

My own view is that this particular claim (i.e. A2*) is weak, which is why I did not present it as the main case at this level of argument. In general the biblical writers are willing to run the risk of being misunderstood if what they are defending, to their minds, is the truth about God, and in general they would not have avoided some truth about God simply because it could have been misconstrued. It is doubtful whether this argument gives reasons for saying why the writers avoided feminine imagery for fear of

misunderstanding but then did not avoid masculine imagery which could equally have been co-opted into thinking that the God of Israel was a deity similar in nature to others. So in this particular instance, the historical evidence seems more susceptible to a B2 type of explanation than an A2* one, and a response to the claim of B2 will need to press on to other grounds.

What the Bible could possibly say – how religious language works

The third level at which the debate needs to be articulated is at the level of what the Bible could possibly say: the nature of religious language about God. Here, clearly, while we still wish to take seriously the biblical text, we are also asking more philosophical questions about the conceptual schemes available to the biblical authors in their talk about God.

On this level, we might consider a claim (A3) about the way that all language about God works: it is all metaphorical (or perhaps *analogical*), an attempt to capture what cannot really be said, or rather what cannot be said by direct reference. Such a claim trades implicitly on the reorientation of our understanding of metaphor that has taken place over the past thirty years or so. The old view, which goes back to Aristotle, saw metaphor as 'ornamental', a 'deviation' from supposedly normal language, and fundamentally concerned with using one word to stand for another in a creative or illustrative way.¹³ This is still perhaps a dominant conception of metaphor in much popular thinking, and its essence could be caught by saying that it portrays metaphor as 'mere metaphor'. The late twentieth century saw a gradual reconsideration of metaphor towards the realisation that it is not simply a substitutable stylistic flourish, but rather can play an irreplaceable role, as a cognitive phenomenon in language.¹⁴ What does this mean? It means that metaphors can provide us with a language we could not otherwise have, and that they allow 'epistemic access' to regions beyond literal language.¹⁵

Fundamentally a metaphor locates item A in context B, and does so in unexpected and/or unfamiliar ways (until the habit of language use so familiarises us that we say that the metaphor has become a 'dead metaphor' and we no longer notice it, as in, perhaps, 'the salt of the earth', a phrase we now take as a unit to mean 'dependable, reliable and great to have around', although such an understanding is probably insufficient to help us unlock the multiple imagery of its live usage in Matt. 5:13.¹⁶ Thus we say 'John was a tower of strength to me', and we both do and do not compare John to a tower, in the process perhaps suggesting the sense of a tower rising above the landscape in the way that John stood out from the pack (another metaphor?), but

¹³ See the helpful summary account of Dan R. Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol and Story* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 112–33.

¹⁴ Two key works here are Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985); and more generally Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies in the Creation of Meaning in Language* (London: RKP, 1978), the subtitle of which is especially significant.

¹⁵ The phrase 'epistemic access' is cited in Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 31, as coming from Richard Boyd.

¹⁶ See the helpful discussion here of Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* (WBC 33A, Dallas: Word, 1993), 99.

allowing this to remain a secondary sense of the metaphor, which centres around the idea of support and reliability. Of course in many ways John is totally unlike a tower of strength.

With this understanding of metaphor it is important to note that there is both an 'is' and an 'is not': John is and is not like the tower. In the same way, and perhaps especially so, religious language works cognitively with this 'is' and 'is not': 'God is my Father' is both a comparison and a separation of the two ideas, since it does not refer to God going to work at the office, etc., but does claim that God loves, cares and nurtures me. That some fathers are not like this is not the point, at least in theory. Similarly, 'God is my shepherd' contains both an 'is' and an 'is not', as a moment's reflection demonstrates. The recontextualisation of A in terms of B requires an act of creative judgement, and deeply metaphorical expressions cannot be 'flattened out' into non-metaphorical expression without considerable loss of (cognitive) point.

That metaphor, on this account, is richly creative, is the heart of the argument for A3. The claim is that all these masculine images for God in the biblical text are working metaphorically, of necessity, since to talk of God is to try to put God into a context where we consider the divine nature from some suggested angle and see where the image leads us: thus 'God is my rock' or 'shepherd' are two different ways of saying God is like A or B, but in each case it is one angle only on divine reality. Likewise, 'God is my Father' does not have any necessary implication that God is male or masculine. It thus follows that the demarcation drawn by B1 between explicit attribution of masculine characteristics to God and only a few inferred feminine characterisations of God does not stand up to scrutiny from a linguistic point of view. That God is described as like a nursing mother, rather than as 'mother', turns out to be of minimal significance. Even if God had been 'mother' directly, as it were, the metaphorical point would still stand (and in passing we need to note that metaphors and similes are not fundamentally different in this respect, it is simply that one signals its intentions more clearly than the other¹⁷).

The claim of A3 is that the Bible mandates us to see God in terms appropriate to both masculine and feminine characterisations, and thus invites us to our own creative task of trying to find appropriate ways of speaking of God in, perhaps, a world where we might never have seen a shepherd, but are familiar with other protective roles, such as (arguably) customer support, or counsellor, in whichever context such a label might be used. It is not that a recontextualised metaphor will capture precisely an earlier one (this being the great problem facing all Bible translators). It is that there is no alternative than to seek out new and relevant ways of speaking of God, and in the light of contemporary understandings of male and female and God as beyond gender roles, we should seek non-gender-specific ways of so doing.¹⁸

In theory it might be possible to respond to A3 by arguing that its understanding of metaphor is deficient, or that it needs a better grasp of the distinction between metaphor and simile. Indeed some have taken this route, but let it suffice here to say

¹⁷ Despite the blank assertion to the contrary of James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), 111–15 in an appendix entitled 'On Human Language for God, Simile, Metaphor, Analogy, Parable, Name' (though note his generally helpful discussion of 'Gender, Sexuality, and the Trinity', 84–110).

¹⁸ We should note that A3 is not the same as the typically Eastern 'apophatic' or 'negative' theology which affirms that no truths can be asserted of God, but that the solution is not metaphor but clarification of the negative, i.e. saying only what is not true of God. This is beyond my competence to judge, but in any case I doubt that such a theologian would find our question very interesting.

that the linguistic and philosophical evidence seems likely to go in its favour, and is as accurate an account of the matter as can be reasonably hoped for at present.¹⁹ The real question is whether such an account of language is all there is to say on the matter, and here is where we can articulate a counter-response, B3.

A possible way to respond to A3 is to argue that while this is a fair enough account of how human language works, it fails to deal seriously with the difference it might make that it is God who is talking in the Bible.²⁰ The notion that the biblical text is not simply human speech but is also revelatory is the main point here. Consider the much discussed text, Ephesians 3:14–15:

I bow my knees before the Father (*pros ton patera*), from whom all fatherhood/every family (*pasa patria*) in heaven and on earth takes its name.

There is a play on words here which renders the translation slightly difficult, but it is easy enough to grasp in principle: human fatherhood derives its name from the Father in heaven. It is not the name as such which is at issue. Rather the claim of Ephesians 3 is that we know what true fatherhood is from our Father in heaven, and human fatherhood is an imperfect rendering of that divine reality. Traditionally at this point theologians have liked to distinguish between the *order of being* and the *order of knowing*. This is a distinction between how we come to understand God as Father, and how God's Fatherhood stands as the revealed truth which makes human fatherhood possible and meaningful. Clearly we work our way up through a knowledge of human fatherhood to grasp divine fatherhood, but in reality, or in 'the order of being', it stands the other way around. This view has a distinguished pedigree in the early church, articulated by, for example, Athanasius (c. AD 300–373): 'God as Father of the Son is the only true Father, and all created paternity is a shadow of the true',²¹ and Tertullian (writing around AD 200): 'Whereas other analogical terms like Lord and Judge indicate a merely functional relation to the world, the names Father and Son point to an ontological relation of distinct persons within the godhead itself'.²²

The discussion of analogy which is at work here (i.e. the question of how divine reality can be taken analogously with human reality) threatens to detain us for even longer than the foregoing discussion of metaphor, but does highlight the all-encompassing nature of the conceptual arguments needed to tackle the questions about God-talk. Suffice to say that many have argued that divine fatherhood is not an analogy derived from our conception of human fatherhood, but is revealed here as a fundamental aspect of the divine nature. Further, as Andrew Lincoln points out, in the context of Ephesians 3:14 (where 'I bow my knees' is a 'kneeling' which signifies subordination in worship), 'The God who is Father of all families is the same God who is Father of Jesus Christ' strengthening with the Spirit. Thus we have here the Trinity as

¹⁹ Specialists will forgive such an immense generalisation, in the interests of staying with the main topic.

²⁰ For a subtle defence of the idea that one could literally ascribe speech to God in the 'appropriated' biblical text see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), 75–129.

²¹ Athanasius, *contra Arian*, 1.23, 24; cited by Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (WBC 42, Dallas: Word, 1990), 203.

²² Tertullian, *adversus Praxean*, 9–10; quoted by Donald G. Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), 295, n. 77.

a revealed reality and about as far as one could imagine from being a metaphor.²³ To conclude, A3 confuses general language with revelation, because actually God is revealed using 'Father' language in Scripture in a way that 'Mother' language never reveals God in Scripture.²⁴

Further options and paths not taken

Where do we go from here? I have attempted to set out fairly the two views (A and B) with their own frameworks and assumptions, their own appeal to different biblical texts and theological schemes, and I am inclined to think that having reached A3 and B3 we have articulated these arguments as far as they will go. Is there an A4? If there is then it might be an argument which challenges whether (or how far) seeing biblical language as revelation actually requires us to hold fast to its form, or whether it is possible to honour it as revelation without needing to repeat its form. Conceptually this seems more likely to be best understood as a rejection of B3 on its own terms, and I cannot see a deeper conceptual level of argument which is available at this point.

To avoid the impression of giving the last word to B3, we should note a critique of one of the planks of its argument: that Jesus himself 'revealed' a certain understanding of the nature of God, in his use of so-called 'Daddy' language (*abba*) in prayers which are recorded in Scripture as prayed by Jesus. This view has been roundly attacked by James Barr as at best not proven, and most likely as forever unprovable, in an article the full force of which still appears not to have been felt.²⁵ One can take the notion of revelation seriously without supposing that this resolves the God-language issue.

Donald Bloesch, who appears to argue himself reluctantly into the view that we must call God Father, manages to say 'The God of the Bible completely transcends sexuality, but he includes gender within himself'.²⁶ I am not in fact persuaded that Bloesch demonstrates that one could defend a view of God as sexless but masculine (he actually seems to use a B3 type argument to respond to A2, which I suggest is bound not to work), but in theory there might be scope to turn the sex/gender distinction to this use, although I would tend to side with the linguists who see this as unlikely.²⁷

A final path not taken is the one offered by 'feminist theology', a phrase which sadly requires bracketing with 'scare quotes' if only because it means such widely disparate things to different people, and as such does little argumentative work for us. I have wanted to address the topic of gender and God-language on the merits of the various arguments concerned, and not in terms of whether they are labelled 'feminist' or not.²⁸

²³ The quote, although not the main point, is from Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 203.

²⁴ For a full, heavyweight defence of this view see Thomas F. Torrance, 'The Christian Apprehension of God the Father', in Alvin F. Kimel, Jr (ed.), *Speaking of the Christian God. The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 120–43. Many of the essays in this book are relevant to our topic.

²⁵ James Barr, 'Abba, Father and the Familiarity of Jesus' Speech', *Theology* 91 (1988), 173–79, summarising the full scale critical assault of his 'Abba Isn't "Daddy"', *JTS* 39 (1988), 28–47.

²⁶ Bloesch, *Theology*, 91.

²⁷ E.g. Brian Wren, 'Language change and male repentance' in Richard Holloway (ed.), *Who Needs Feminism? Men Respond to Sexism in the Church*, (London: SPCK, 1991), 135–48.

²⁸ One central feminist work on this issue is Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), claiming that it is appropriate and necessary to reclaim the divine self-revelation of Exodus 3:14 of 'the God who is' for the purposes of feminist God-talk, as 'She Who Is' (see esp. 13 and 241–43). A more muted wrestling with the issue is Janet Martin Soskice, 'Can a Feminist Call God "Father"? in Kimel (ed.), *Speaking of the Christian God*, 81–94.

Towards an answer

My own view is that having worked our way through to the well-articulated positions A3 and B3, we have reached the end of the argument, and are in a position where we have to exercise our *judgement*, in the Aristotelian sense of 'prudence' or 'practical wisdom' (*phronesis*). There are no conclusive reasons for taking either A3 or B3 as a final view: both are coherent and respectable positions which take account of how language works and what the biblical evidence is, and which take the Bible seriously in Christian life and thinking.

My presentation of 'A' and 'B' has not been meant to imply that either one is on the offensive or that either is simply a defensive reply to the other. Where I do hope to have clarified matters is in showing how easily defendants of either position can fail to address the appropriate points being made by the other side. Obviously not all theological issues can be separated out into two polar opposite positions, and there is always a danger that such an organising grid will ride roughshod over the delicacies of the issue at hand. In this case, however, if we did in fact succeed in formulating the key question accurately enough, viz 'Can we call God Mother?', then I think it is fair to suggest that most considerations will fall on one side or the other.

What practical steps can be taken at this point? A friend of mine who considered this issue said that she once brought herself to the point of lying in bed at night and praying into the darkness: 'Are you my mother?' This, unfortunately, is the title of a delightful Dr Seuss book concerning the quest of a little bird, who hatches while its mother is away, to find its mother, enquiring of various animals, machines and inanimate objects along the way 'Are you my mother?' She could not after this take the question with due seriousness, and simply reverted to her former 'Father'-orientated practice. Are we, in the end, in the same position?

Philosophers, more than theologians, have tried out the development of a new reflexive pronoun 'Godself' to replace the gender specific 'himself' (or equally 'herself') in relation to God. This takes some getting used to, but is in principle no different from the ways in which we have tended to train ourselves out of saying 'man' as a generic term for all people, a change in linguistic habit which ends up seeming entirely natural to those who adopt it. Gail Ramshaw suggests that judicious use of the adjective 'divine' is also a possible way forward: e.g. 'God shows us the fullness of divine love in ...'.²⁹ It has not been difficult to write this article without referring to God as 'he' or 'him', and Walter Brueggemann has demonstrated the possibility of large-scale writing in this way in his nearly 800 page work of OT theology.³⁰

Despite all these efforts, one is inclined to accept, with Janet Martin Soskice, that 'the masculine terminology of the New Testament will be with us as long as the New Testament is with us.'³¹ Finally, in the light of this can one pray to God our Mother? In the absence of there being a clear right answer to this question, this is probably a matter best left to the individual. It is tempting to suggest that in matters of public prayer, one should follow the principle of avoiding giving offence, although in the NT this principle usually relies on one party being strong and one weak, and it is not clear which side of the debate would like to label itself as weak on this matter, or indeed, where this consideration gets us in practice.³² My own practice encapsulates my ability to defend both sides of the matter: I continue to pray to God as Father, but believe that God would not in fact mind if I did otherwise. If those of both opinions were equally at ease with each other in this matter then perhaps that would be appropriate to the complexity of sorting out the question of gender and God-talk.

²⁹ Ramshaw, 'The Gender of God', 178.

³⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), though interestingly I had not noticed this feature of it until reading the review article of Donald E. Gowan in *HBTh* 20.2 (1998), 89–98 (noted on p 97 n 6).

³¹ Janet Martin Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism', in Susan Frank Parsons (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), 135–50, here 142.

³² Note here Craig Blomberg's discussion of the 'professional weaker brother' syndrome, in his *1 Corinthians* (NIV Application Commentary, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 167–71 and 205–206. The issue in 1 Corinthians in any case is sin, and not offensability.