Adapted from Henry Moore's "Rocking Chair"

God's Feminine Roles

Female metaphors for God abound in Scripture. Without them, our God is too small.

by Iris Yob

FEMININE METAPHORS IN SCRIPTURE PROVIDE more prevalent and powerful interpretations of the nature of God and our relationship to the divine than they do within our present religious consciousness. In exploring the nature of God, any single metaphor is inadequate, as is any set of metaphors too exclusively drawn. An inclusive theology, one that approaches God through images drawn from the experiences of all believers, both women and men, is a richer theology.

Theologians admit and believers concur that God is invisible, and indeed that no one can see God and live. Yet they not only continue to talk *to* God, they also insist in talking *about* God.

In language developed in and drawn from common, ordinary, finite life, religious people presume to talk about the Uncommon, the Extraordinary, the Infinite. With their relatively small cognitive capacity and limited experience of the universe, humans discuss Omnipotence. Confined in time, space, and matter, people dare speak of Spirit. Restricted by sin and falling short, they attempt to articulate holiness. Some skeptical moderns have asked how such talk can be responsible and meaningful. Yet, even in the face of the most relentlessly skeptical asking, talk about God has persisted, enhancing the lives of believers with faith, hope, and love.

How can our talk about God be responsible and meaningful? Only if its terms are employed somewhat oddly. When we call God "loving" or "powerful" or "just" or "merciful," we implicitly compare God with other things to which these predicates already apply. The odd part is that we know all along these predicates apply to God differently—ideally, infinitely, supremely. But, even terms and categories "stretched" to encompass the divine appear to be inadequate, for God is more than love, more than power, more than justice,

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and more than mercy as we know these qualifiers even when raised to the highest degree imaginable. God is "Wholly Other" in the sense that the Holy One is not only better than anything else we know, but at some level, different from everything else we know.

Because such comparisons between finite reality and infinite reality are inadequate to express God, responsible and meaningful talk of God is largely, if not completely, metaphorical. A metaphor is not merely a linguistic ornament or an artistic device. Rather, it is a way of entering the relatively unknown and mysterious. In technical terms, the metaphoric process involves the transfer of a system of concepts from a more familiar setting to a novel one. Guided by the networks of understandings of its past usage and the present context in which it is applied, we use this system of concepts to organize the new realm along the same lines as the old.[1]

When we speak of God as Father, for example, we apply to the nature of God all that the term *father* suggests to see what insights such applications might contribute to the sum total of all that we know of him. The metaphor suggests that if God is Father, we are his children. We bear a resemblance to him. He not only gives being to us, but also sustains and protects us. We may approach him with confidence that we will find acceptance. He has authority over us, and we can choose to submit to this authority or rebel against it. He disciplines us. We love and respect him. He also intends for us to grow and gives us a measure of freedom to do so. And even when we disappoint him, he never rejects us. The possibilities suggested by the metaphor are virtually limitless and have occupied religious thinkers for centuries. And each metaphor we add to our lexicon of talk about God brings additional depth and breadth to our theistic understanding.

But we do not say that God is *literally* our father. There has been no mother, no procreative act, no sins of the God-Father to be passed down from generation to generation, no aging and death that we associate with our literal fathers. Rather, the metaphor has given us the words, structures, and relationships of a known domain (fatherhood) with which to talk about an esoteric other (the Godhead). That is to say, the metaphor does not merely make comparisons. It also gives us a way of talking about the realm of the divine that provides us with terms and categories familiar to us. It suggests conceptual possibilities, each of which must be evaluated to see how it fits within our present understandings and how it is relevant to our experience. It gives God a form familiar to us so that we may know how to relate to Him.

Our collective metaphors for God have been predominantly masculine. But feminine metaphors are being rediscovered and reclaimed in ways that promise to enrich and complement our present understandings of God and those created in God's image.

The use of metaphors does not make talk of God untrustworthy or undependable. Rather, literal language may very well be our only means of access to one we long to know better. Unlike literal language, metaphorical talk carries the implication that the knowledge it yields is suggestive and approximate, and therefore not necessarily infallible, exhaustive, or unrevisable. It is, however, sufficient for a faith seeking understanding.

Over the course of time, numerous metaphors for God have caught the human imagination, forming the basis for theological development. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God has been recognized in terms of the Good Shepherd, the High Priest, the victorious Warrior, the righteous Judge, the powerful King, the Fisher of Men, the faithful Bridegroom, and, of course, most enduring of all, the loving Father. All these metaphors draw from the experience of those who have used them. Since the notable writers, preachers, and theologians preserved in our tradition have been male, our collective metaphors for God have been predominantly masculine. But feminine metaphors are being rediscovered and reclaimed in ways that promise to enrich and complement our present understandings of God and those created in God's image. We shall here explore briefly just four of these images, drawn from what we have come to regard as the typical—though, we must immediately add, neither necessary nor the only—experiences of women.

God as Helper

In Genesis 1,[2] we discover the first role given to women. It appears that God intended women and men to "rule over" the natural world and to do so in a way consistent with their creation in the image and likeness of God. In Genesis 2, the story tells how the first human-creature was "formed . . . from the dust of the ground." "The breath of life" was breathed into this creature and it was placed in the garden "to work it and take care of it."

But when God placed the human in the garden,

> The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone.
> "I will make a *helper suitable* (*ezer neged*) for him" (v. 18).

The first task was to name "all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field." But in all the parade of creatures, "no ***helper suitable***" was found until Eve was made "from the rib . . . taken out of the man" (v. 22).[3]

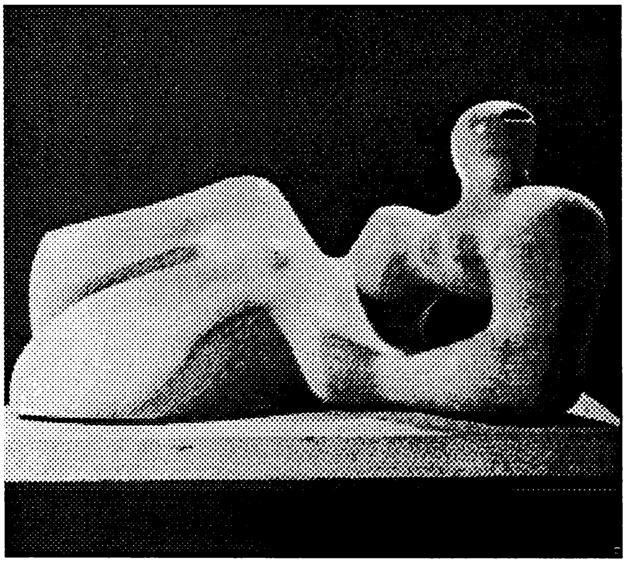
Ezer, notes Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, is found 21 times in the Hebrew Scriptures. Three times it refers to vital help in times of extreme need; twice it refers specifically to Eve's role; and 16 times it speaks directly of God's assistance to human beings. Reflecting on this, Mollenkott makes two important points: first, a word used 16 times to describe divine action must be "an exalting and glorious word that carries no connotations of secondariness"; second, since only Eve and God are specifically identified as *ezer*, there is a sense in which woman's role as the *ezer neged* of mankind serves as a metaphor of God's relationship with humankind.[4] One way to understand and know God, then, comes through the terms by which we understand and know woman: the helping partner.

What kind of helper does *ezer* suggest? Moses named one of his sons Eliezer, for he said: "'My father's God was my ***helper***; he saved me from the sword of Pharaoh'" (Exodus 18:4). Later, in his parting blessing on the tribes of Israel, Moses reminded Asher: "'There is no one like the God of Jeshurun, who rides on the heavens to ***help*** you and on the clouds in his majesty'" (Deut 33:26). David picks up the same theme: "I am poor and needy; come quickly to me, O God. You are my ***help*** and my deliverer; O Lord, do not delay" (Psalm 70:5). The same metaphor appears again in Paul's writing: "In the same way, the Spirit ***helps*** us in our weakness" (Romans 8:26). Taken together, these references suggest that the helper uses her power in service, not as a slave or subordinate but from a position of strength and willingness. To regard the helper as weak, exploitable, or secondary is to misconstrue the role of women and the person of God, for our understandings of the two are inseparably connected by the metaphor.

God as Female Lover

In the first two chapters of Genesis, we learn that God made a world of relationships: animal and animal related in peace; human and human related in mutuality and complementarity; human and divine related in communion. But after chapter two, the story of humankind takes a turn for the worse. By the end of chapter three, the love story has gone awry. The harmony that marked relationships is replaced by shame, blame, pain, and the domination of one by the other. The rest of Scripture essentially unfolds the story of how God reclaims the lost loves.

One book of the Bible—usually neglected, at times even spurned—superbly reveals God's attempts to reclaim the beloved human: *The Song of Songs.* Here the lovers make up. When the story of the Fall is compared to the lyrical images of the Song, the transition is clearly from condemnation and death to the celebration of life in its fullness. At the Fall we observe the destructive powers of the senses: the couple *saw* the fruit; *heard* the tempter's voice; *touched* the fruit; *smelled* its fruity fragrance; and *tasted* the fruit. In the Song, however, we find pleasurable and uplifting delight in the senses. In chapter two, for instance, image is piled on image of sensory activity: sweet taste and banquets, raisins and apples, gazing, peering, looking, cool shade and tender embraces, singing and cooing, blossoming vines and fragrance. Between the fall and the Song, the movement flows from the separation of sin to the renewal of closest intimacy: from the shame of nakedness to delight in nakedness; from leaving father and mother to bringing the lover into the mother's house; from the woman's desire being toward her husband to their mutual desire for each other; from expulsion from a garden to return to a garden. The description of the love affair between the man and the woman of the poem figuratively carries the theme of the restoration of all lost love relationships.



Adapted from Henry Moore's "Reclining Figure"

In chapter five, verses 10-16, the woman (in this translation referred to as the Beloved) describes how she feels about him (referred to as the Lover):[5]

> My lover is radiant and ruddy,
> outstanding among ten thousand.
> His head is purest gold;
> his hair is wavy
> and black as a raven.
> His eyes are like doves
> by the water streams,
> washed in milk,
> mounted like jewels.
> His cheeks are like beds of spice
> yielding perfume.
> His lips are like lilies
> dripping with myrrh.
> His arms are rods of gold
> set with chrysolite.
> His body is like polished ivory
> decorated with sapphires.
> His legs are pillars of marble
> set on bases of pure gold.
> His appearance is like Lebanon,
> choice as its cedars.
> His mouth is sweetness itself;

he is altogether lovely.
This is my lover, this my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem (vv. 10-16).

This man not only appears strong and handsome, he has a strong and good character, too. She finds in him sweetness and loveliness and friendship.

Her appreciation of and attraction to his fine qualities are increasingly apparent. In chapter 8, she speaks again:

Place me like a seal over your heart,
like a seal over your arm;
for love is as strong as death,
its jealousy unyielding as the grave.
It burns like blazing fire,
like a mighty flame.
Many waters cannot quench love;
rivers cannot wash it away.
If one were to give
all the wealth of his house for love,
it would be utterly scorned (vs. 6, 7).

The richness and provocativeness of the imagery prompts the metaphoric transfer of these descriptive networks from the human lover to the divine. We know God's love is stronger than death and his possessiveness unyielding. We have experienced this love as more precious than all our worldly possessions. By means of the love of the man to the woman we have given a form to the love of God to humanity. In her overflowing response to his love, we may give articulation to our response to God's love.

We have come to regard the Song of Songs, appropriately, as a picture of God's love for the church, where the man and his actions metaphorically depict God and his actions, and the woman and her responses metaphorically depict the welling-up and overflowing responses and actions of the church. The strength, passion, and possessiveness of the man's love for the woman suggests possible qualities in the love of God. The woman's reception of the love as an irreplaceable and indispensable gift expresses the church's reception of the boundless love of God. By itself, however, this interpretation of the Song of Songs takes into account no more than half of the total possibilities it affords. Without the other half, both our knowledge of ourselves and our understanding of God are limited.

In the case of our self-knowledge, the temptation is to regard man, the metaphor for God, as somehow a more worthy being than the woman, the metaphor for the church.[6] As far as it goes, this interpretation reflects *some* of the content of the Song. But by overlooking a large part of its message, this interpretation alone casts the man forever in the role of one superior and worthy and the woman forever in the role of one needy and undeserving, with concomitant destructive effects on their respective identities and personal self-esteem.

When God is perceived only in terms of the man's experience as lover, valuable insights into the love of God and its impact on our lives are lost. When we look at the neglected half of the metaphorical potential of the Song, it is apparent that the woman lover can give us insights into the character of God, too. In fact, in the total context of the Song, the woman is the more dominant figure. She opens and closes the song and is the more active player throughout—facts that theological exegesis should not overlook.

An early clue to the metaphoric potential of the woman is offered in chapter 2, where she declares:

I am a rose of Sharon,
a lily of the valleys (v. 1).

These images have later been applied to Jesus. In chapter 6, the man's words to the woman continue the description:

. . . my dove, my perfect one, is unique,
the only daughter of her mother,
the favorite of the one who bore her.
The maidens saw her and called her blessed;

the queens and concubines praised her.
Who is this that appears like the dawn,
fair as the moon, bright as the sun,
majestic as the stars in procession? (vs. 9, 10).[7]

Again, we find here expressions reminiscent of descriptions of God Incarnate: perfect, unique, the only-begotten child, favored, blessed, and praised. The place the woman occupies in her lover's mind and heart suggests the place of Christ in the believer's thoughts and affections.

The full power of the woman-lover metaphor, however, is realized at the most poignant moment of the Song. In chapter 5, she recounts this episode:

I opened for my lover,
but my lover had left; he was gone.
My heart had gone out to him when he spoke.
I looked for him but did not find him.
I called him but he did not answer.
The watchmen found me
as they made their rounds in the city.
They beat me, they bruised me;
they took away my cloak,
those watchmen of the walls!
O daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you—
if you find my lover,
what will you tell him?
Tell him I am faint with love (vs. 6-8).

The infidelity exhibited here by the man is consistent with similar images representing the waywardness of God's chosen people.[8] Other "watchmen of the walls of Zion," acting in their official capacities, would eventually see to it that the One they called "the Beloved" would be beaten and bruised and have lots cast over the cloak taken away from him. In the same way, the woman's deep sense of loss, her driven seeking and the pain she suffered in that search serve well as figures for the activity of a God who seeks and saves the lost without counting the cost. Her concluding words in this episode:—"Tell him I am faint with love"—are in the same spirit of reconciliation as those of Jesus who said, "'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'"

An interesting expression found three times in the Song and always uttered by the woman provides a key to the kind of love she models. She repeats:

Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires (2:7; 3:5; 8:4).

In her unique way, the woman's way of loving represents aspects of God's way of loving: wooing, searching, seeking, inviting. It does not demand or force a reluctant response, but is patient and long-suffering.

When a balanced interpretation of the Song is taken into account, women and men discover something about themselves: all are faulty and imperfect yet valued, favored, praiseworthy, and needed. Moreover, they discover God as a lover like themselves: one who loves strongly, passionately, and possessively as the man has done, and who also loves patiently, perseveringly, and sacrificially as the woman has done.[9]

God as Homemaker

The domain of housekeeping has largely fallen into the hands of women as far back as we can discern. Before the production of food became big business, the women in virtually every cultural group grew, gathered, prepared, and served the meals for the family[10] and they have always washed, mopped, polished, scrubbed, swept, and dusted most of the homes in the world. Such women's work has aimed to serve others with attention and to make sure that all are well fed and well cared for. Herein lies grounds for theological reflection.[11]

In Psalm 123, the singers declare that they lift up their eyes "to you whose throne is in heaven" (v. 1). But how are we to understand

and approach one who so royally occupies the seat of honor in a place beyond our scrutiny? The succeeding verse gives us some figurative parallels to reassure us in this regard:

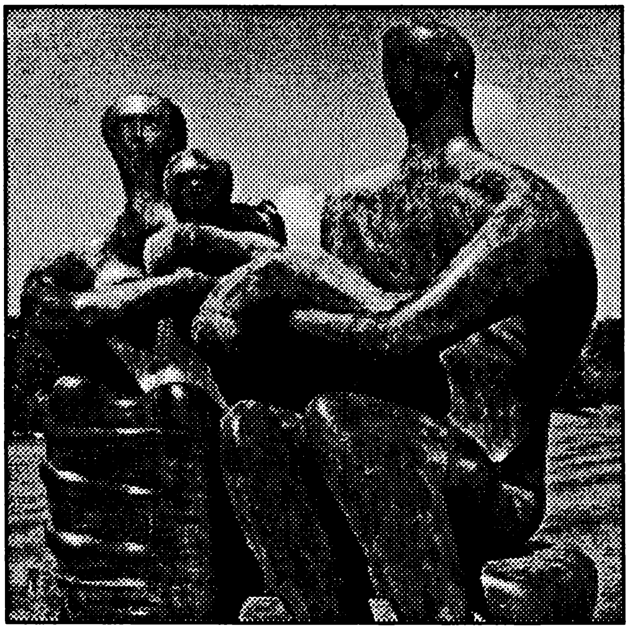
> As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their *master*,
> as the eyes of a maid look to the hand of her *mistress*,
> so our eyes look to the *Lord our God*,
> till he shows us his mercy.

We are accustomed to thinking of God in terms of "master," but the Psalmist here encourages us to see God also in terms of "mistress," the female householder who governs her home in orderliness, thoroughness, and mercy. In her preparations and efforts for the members of the household she is a figure for God who governs the world with the same kind of loving care and attention to detail.

In extending the insights of this verse, Mollenkott suggests that it "gives us permission to see in Proverbs 31 a full-scale description of Yahweh as the perfect female homemaker, the perfect wife to a humanity which is cast by this image into a masculine role."[12] The "wife of noble character" depicted in this Proverb is an extraordinary person:

> Her husband has full confidence in her
> and lacks nothing of value.
> She brings him good, not harm,
> all the days of her life.
> She selects wool and flax
> and works with eager hands.
> She is like the merchant ships,
> bringing her food from afar.
> She gets up while it is still dark;
> she provides food for her family
> and portions for her servant girls.
> She considers a field and buys it;
> out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.
> She sets about her work vigorously;
> her arms are strong for her tasks.
> She sees that her trading is profitable,
> and her lamp does not go out at night.
> In her hand she holds the distaff
> and grasps the spindle with her fingers.
> She opens her arms to the poor
> and extends her hands to the needy.
> When it snows, she has no fear for her household;
> for all of them are clothed in scarlet.
> She makes coverings for her bed;
> she is clothed in fine linen and purple.
> Her husband is respected at the city gate,
> where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.
> She makes linen garments and sells them,
> and supplies the merchants with sashes.
> She is clothed with strength and dignity;
> she can laugh at the days to come.
> She speaks with wisdom,
> and faithful instruction is on her tongue.
> She watches over the affairs of her household
> and does not eat the bread of idleness.
> Her children arise and call her blessed;
> her husband also, and he praises her:
> "Many women do noble things,
> but you surpass them all . . ." (vs. 11-29).

This extraordinary woman can be no mere mortal. Only one is so untiring, dependable, and perfect in the fulfillment of all her duties and responsibilities. Like the good shepherd in relation to his flock as described in Psalm 23, so the noble wife in relation to her family in this Proverb gives us access to an understanding of God in relation to us. Hasidic Jews to this day, in the belief that God has both



Adapted from Henry Moore's "Family Group" masculine and feminine manifestations, traditionally recite on the Sabbath day both Psalm 92, which recounts God's deeds in masculine terms, and Proverbs 31 with its feminine imagery.

In the chapter of lost things, Luke 15, a sheep, a coin, and a son are lost. In classical understanding, these lost things represent lost humanity. The chapter's message, however, is filled with hope: each of the lost things is found—by the faithful shepherd, the energized housewife, and the patient father, respectively. Christianity has celebrated and immortalized in song, art, and sermon the shepherd's and father's agony, effort, and reward as parables of God. But traditional expressions have been strangely silent—or even more strangely, cynical—about the parallel figure of the housewife.[13] However, as we can comprehend God in terms of the shepherd with his rod and staff on the rugged mountainside searching for one lost sheep and perceive God in the father with ring and robe scanning the horizon, his eyes longing for his one lost son, so we can also discover God in the woman who, with broom in hand, desperately sweeps her home from top to bottom for one lost coin.[14]

The realities of motherhood—the authentic experience of giving birth and raising children—can effectively picture God for us: not only by means of the joy and dignity of its calling but also by its pains and sacrifices.

In the chapters of the workers who represent the work of God in establishing the kingdom of heaven, Matthew 13, the writer adopts as metaphors a number of common employments of first-century Palestine: a sower who sows seeds and reaps a bountiful harvest; a bakerwoman who mixes yeast into flour and produces a loaf of nourishing bread; a man who discovers a great treasure in a field; a merchant who searches for fine pearls; and a fisherman who hauls in a great catch. Again the parallelism of these parables compels the reader (or hearer) to find in the activity of the bakerwoman a metaphor for the activity of God. As her leaven permeates the whole mixture and gives it the texture and lightness of a good loaf, so God's words and deeds permeate all parts of society and all stages of life for salvation and righteousness.[15] Furthermore, in her cooking tasks, the woman recalls God's provision of manna in the wilderness and Jesus, the bread of life (John 6:35, 48).

God as Mother

Just as our understanding of God is mediated by the metaphor of "Father," so it can also be mediated by the metaphor of "Mother." In the many instances where motherhood appears, a wide range of associations are called upon to help us know God.

When Yahweh spoke to Job out of a storm of creative energy it was to pose a series of rhetorical questions to remind him of divine mystery. In describing the abundance of majestic and powerful natural phenomena, the Lord asks:

> Does the rain have a father?
> Who fathers the drops of dew?
> From whose womb comes the ice?
> Who gives birth to the frost from the heavens . . . ? (Job 38:28, 29).

One approach to understanding and appreciating the creative act of God in giving form, energy, and life to the world is to see it in terms of the procreation and birth that brings a new being into the world.

Furthermore, the relationship of human beings to God can also be appreciated and understood in terms of the relationship of a child to its parents. For instance, in his farewell song to the Hebrews, Moses recounts how God "found" Israel in a "barren and howling waste," "shielded him and cared for him" like an eagle hovering over her young, and set him up in a land rich with all good things. But Israel, "filled with food" and grown sleek and fat, abandoned and rejected God, giving allegiance instead to foreign deities. Then addressing the prophet directly, he adds:

> You deserted the Rock, who fathered you;
> you forgot the God who gave you birth
> (Deuteronomy 32:18).

God, like a father and a mother, had given them every advantage only to be taken for granted and finally rejected. As a parent would say: No one could have done more for them; no response could have been more ungrateful!

The image of God as Mother pervades both the Old and New Testaments. Job 38:8 speaks of when the sea "burst forth from the womb." In Isaiah 42:14, God speaks of keeping silent for a long time until now, "'like a woman in childbirth,'" she cries out, gasps, and pants, for she is about to deliver a new world. On an individual level, in John 3:5, 6, Jesus declares, "'Unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.'" Later, Jesus faces the prospect of his imminent death and, endeavoring to explain to his followers the shape of events to come, he offer them this same metaphor: "'A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world'" (John 16:21). The coming into being of a new world, a new being in Christ, or a new epoch is understood as a "birthing" act in which God has conceived, waited through the period of gestation, gone into intense labor, and ultimately delivered with great joy.

Not only does God figuratively give birth to us, but also figuratively nurses that "aspect of ourselves that remains always in infantlike dependency,"[16] constantly, reliably, consistently:

> "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast
> and have no compassion on the child she has borne?
> Though she may forget,
> I will not forget you!" (Isaiah 49:15).[17]

When Jacob calls his 12 sons to his side to give them his final blessing, he tells them one by one of a God of power, turbulence, and might. But the tone of the old patriarch's blessing changes when he comes to speak of Joseph and Joseph's God:

> "Joseph is a fruitful vine,
> a fruitful vine near a spring,
> whose branches climb over a wall.
> With bitterness archers attacked him;
> they shot at him with hostility.
> But his bow remained steady,
> his strong arms stayed limber,
> because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob,
> because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel,
> because of your father's God, who helps you,
> because of the Almighty, who blesses you
> with blessings of the heavens above,
> blessings of the deep that lies below,
> blessings of the breast and womb" (Genesis 49:22-25).

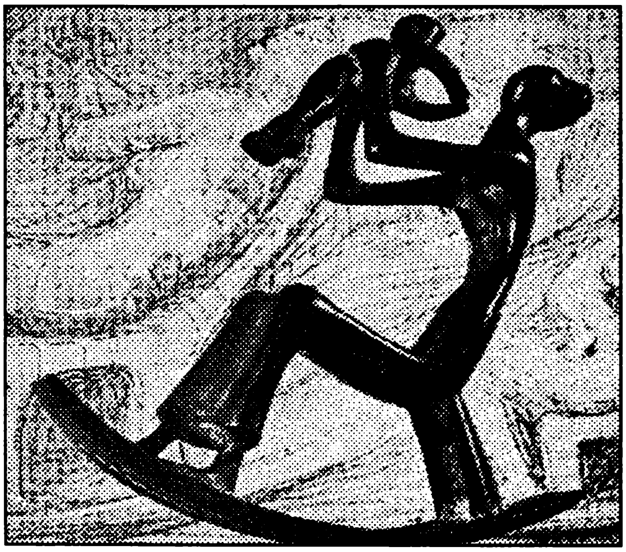
God, referred to here as God Almighty, is *El Shaddai*, drawing on the root word, *shad. Shad* carries two meanings: one, "mountain," a particularly destructive volcanic mountain; the other, "breast," a woman's nurturing breast. While it is possible to read in this blessing that Joseph would prevail because he had the hand of the Mighty God of the Mountain to strengthen him, the other interpretation cannot be ignored while being true to the context. The God of the Mighty Breasts is the one who "blesses you with . . . blessings of the breast and womb." In fact, the succeeding verse directs attention away from the mountain imagery:

> "Your father's blessings are greater
> than the blessings of the ancient mountains,
> than the bounties of the age-old hills" (v. 26).

With the dual meaning of the imagery suggested in the name *El Shaddai*, we can know God as the one who combines the power of an unleashed volcano with the power of nurturing love for our protection and maintenance.[18]

God's mother-activity toward us is not exhausted by the images of birthing and nursing, but continues with child-minding and child-raising. In the closing chapters of Isaiah, the prophet gives us this touching picture of God:

> "Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her,
> all you who love her;
> rejoice greatly with her,
> all you who mourn over her.
> For you will nurse and be satisfied
> at her comforting breasts;
> you will drink deeply
> and delight in her overflowing abundance."
> For this is what the Lord says:
> "I will extend peace to her like a river,
> and the wealth of nations like a flooding stream;
> you will nurse and be carried on her arm
> and dandled on her knees.
> As a mother comforts her child,
> so will I comfort you;
> and you will be comforted over Jerusalem"
> (Isaiah 66:10-13).



Adapted from Henry Moore's "The Rocker"

The Scriptures do not sentimentalize motherhood,[19] but remain consistent with the declaration made to woman in Genesis 3:16: "'I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children.'" The realities of a demythologized motherhood—the authentic experience of giving birth and raising children—can effectively picture God for us: not only by means of the joy and dignity of its calling but also by its pains and sacrifices, by its burdens and heartaches and losses, and yet by its fundamental long-suffering and constancy.

Summary

When we see God through the metaphors of our helping partner, our committed lover, our dedicated homemaker and our caring, comforting mother, neglected aspects of the divine nature become again accessible to us. God is not only just, powerful, strong, destructive, and judging, but also tender, merciful, caring, providing, supportive, self-giving, suffering, tireless, and nurturing. In the balance of attributes and virtues, God appears to us as one not only fearsome and mighty, but also as approachable and approaching.

When the "feminine" aspects of God are present in our theological and devotional understandings, the "feminine" virtues take on new value. In the nature of God we discover the ideals of womanhood as well as of manhood. Through knowing God in terms of the characteristic traits, interpersonal relations and life's devotions of women as well as men, we all may recognize that God understands and appreciates who we are, as individual women and men, in being all that we are meant to be. A theology that recognizes the fundamental truth that "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; ***male and female he created them***" (Genesis 1:27) will cherish, honor, and promote equally the qualities inherent in both woman and man. Then the life experiences of both women and men can provide us with reflections on the divine nature itself.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1976), pp. 68-80; *Of Mind and Other Matters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 71-77; Goodman and Catherine Elgin, *Receptions in Philosophy and Other Arts and Sciences* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1988), pp. 16, 17; Israel Scheffler, *Beyond the Letter: A Philosophical Inquiry Into Ambiguity, Vagueness and Metaphor in Language* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 118-130; Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), chapter 111.

2. Biblical texts are from the New International Version, unless otherwise indicated.

3. It has been a source of some amused reflection that man (2:7) and beasts and birds (2:19) were made of the coarse materials taken from the ground, but woman was made of living, vital flesh and blood. In a satirical piece by Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Adam Was Only a Rough Draft," appearing in a *Catholic Reporter* a few years ago, she has some fun proposing that since women were created from human flesh, they were more suited to the finer, more spiritual tasks of society, including the ordained priesthood, and that since men were created from dirt, their cruder and heavier physical frame marked them for the physical tasks of society, such as digging ditches, mending roofs, and the like. Her intent, no doubt, is to turn the tables on arguments that would exclude women from certain functions in our corporate life simply on the grounds of origin and gender. However, the serious point to be made here is that man's "suitable helper" was one like himself—not a distinct order of being, but one who stood as his equal by the very side from which she was taken.

4. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), p. 75.

5. The headings "Beloved" and "Lover" are additions to the text made by the translators of the New International Version to identify the respective speakers. Their choice of terms is questionable in the sense that "beloved" suggests one who is a passive recipient of love and "lover" suggests an active giver of love. It is clear from a reading of the whole book that being passive recipient and active giver are roles shared by both the man and the woman.

6. While it is idolatrous to regard a symbol in the same way as that which it symbolizes, nevertheless, the network of associations a symbol possesses forms the metaphoric applications that have characterized its past usages. As a metaphor for God, the symbol of the male lover to some extent carries the connotations associated with that usage. Typically, the man, and God, are described as "famous," "chief," "coming . . . as a conqueror to be crowned," "victorious," "radiant, ruddy and the fairest of ten thousand." Similarly, the woman, and the church, are described as "humbly conscious of her defects," attempting "to flee from the grand king whose glory makes her more aware of her imperfections," "a plain field flower," "immature," one who "in time will develop into a maturity worthy of marriage," and shy. These descriptors are taken from an article by Gordon Christo, "Here Comes the Bridegroom!" *Adventist Review*, 165 (July 28, 1988), pp. 9, 10.

7. In the history of religions, the symbolism of the moon has often been associated with the cyclic and regenerative powers of woman, while the sun has been linked with masculine concepts of kingship and supremacy. See Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Rosemary Sheed, trans. (New York: New American Library, 1958), chap. III and IV. But here in the Song of Songs, the Lover finds the qualities of both sun and moon in the Beloved. With this as part of its associative network, the metaphor suggests that God can be understood in terms of both male and female.

8. See, for example, Jeremiah 3; Ezekiel 16 and 23; Hosea; Revelation 17.

9. For further elaboration of the imagery of the Song of Songs, see Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) and Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine*, pp. 69-73.

10. If the offering of Jesus' flesh and blood for our spiritual nurture can be understood in the terms of the

serving of food for our physical nurture, it is ironic to regard women's hands as unworthy or inappropriate for handling the sacramental bread and wine in the Communion service.

11. Ellen G. White notes in *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1905), p. 302, "It takes thought and care to make good bread; but there is more religion in a loaf of good bread than many think." Mary E. Hunt, "Food, Glorious Food" *Waterwheel,* 2 (Fall 1989), pp. 1, 2, suggests that such tasks *do* what theology *talks* about—among other things, they nurture, nourish, and occasion celebration.

12. Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine,* p. 62.

13. In the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1956), vol. 5, p. 816, the argument is given that in the parable of the lost coin, "the element of pity is lacking. The woman had only her own carelessness to blame for the loss of the coin, and her desire to reclaim it was based exclusively on her personal interest in it. . . . the coin could not be blamed for losing itself."

14. Some commentators, noting that a woman portrays one of the searchers, have suggested that Jesus may merely have been trying to catch the attention and interest of women in the audience. (See, for example, the *SDA Bible Commentary,* vol. 5, p. 816.) In relation to this suggestion, in *The Divine Feminine,* p. 64, Mollenkott comments, "That's true enough, of course—but it overlooks the fact that Jesus was also affirming and empowering human females by allowing them the same privilege accorded males: to see their own nature represented in the godhead."

15. However, interpretations of the bakerwoman episode have been ambivalent, in part because of her connection with leaven. Leaven, or yeast, has been symbolic of evil and at Passover every trace was to be removed from the homes of the Hebrews. Furthermore, Jesus had warned his listeners of the "yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matthew 16:6, 12; cf. 1 Corinthians 5:6-8). However, a symbol may be used to refer to a number of different things on different occasions. For instance, *SDA Bible Commentary,* vol. 5, p. 409, notes that both Satan (1 Peter 5:8) and Christ (Revelation 5:5) are symbolized by a lion. Thus it is not inconsistent that, in the recipe of the bakerwoman, the leaven is a good thing, without which the loaf (and metaphorically the church) would be spoiled.

16. Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine,* p. 21.

17. Cf. 1 Peter 2:2, 3; John 7:37, 38; 1 Thessalonians 2:7-9; Psalm 34:9; 131:1, 2; and Hosea 11:4.

18. For further discussion of *El Shaddai,* see Caleb Rosado, *The Role of Women and the Nature of God: A Socio-Biblical Study* (Loma Linda, Calif.: Loma Linda University Press, 1989), chapter 8.

19. The relatively modern phenomenon of sentimentalizing motherhood has not served women well. Whatever psychological benefits it may have for husbands and children, for women it has tended to limit their socially acceptable roles to child-bearer and child-minder and to isolate them from the other affairs of life—the hierarchy of the church, the body politic and economic, the academy, the arts, and much more.