

The Motherhood of God

Introduction

1. I could not tell whether the car coming towards me on the wrong side of the road was driven by a man or a woman, but I do know that she was breaking the speed limit! What a terrible sexist story. Such a matter of *“the sexes”* is very important to us in our society, and it seems as if we have dropped this term in favour of the term *“gender”*. I heard one speaker comment on this saying, *“There are only two sexes – male and female – but the word gender allows for three, male, female and neuter. The two we know very well but society is accommodating one other”*.
2. Yet gender is very important for us and although equality between man and woman has been achieved in many areas, there is still an obvious distinction. When it comes to considering the Bible many people have asked whether God is male or female.
3. But the question still remains; Is God male or female? In the Bibles the noun God is clearly portrayed as male. The reason for this is that both the Hebrew and Greek texts use male nouns for God. But what gender is God anyway? Does the Bible help us with this?
4. In my view God is neither male or female. Gender - or the two different sexes male and female - was created by God. In Genesis 1:27 we read, *“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them”*. Gender was something that God created. Gender did not exist until God made *“male and female”*. There is, therefore, no gender in the Godhead.
5. However, in our gender orientated world we need to use gender terms in our language. So, the Bible provides us with words which show God to be male. This is merely for our assistance so that we can understand God within our gender constructed universe. In the Hebrew there are only two genders – male and female. There is no neuter.
6. As a consequence, therefore, it is correct for us to attribute to God both male and female characteristics for God is neither male nor female. This is difficult to understand but we have to recognise that God is not a man – or a woman. He is not human. God is spirit; He is God.

7. It may seem a surprise to most readers that the Hebrew word for Spirit (רוּחַ *rûah*) is a feminine noun. In the NT "*Spirit*" is neuter, but here in the OT it is a feminine noun that is used. As I have already stated, there are only two genders in the Hebrew language, male and female; there are no neuter nouns. Questions about the gender of the Trinity are always being raised as it is assumed that as words like "*God, Father, Yahweh*" etc. are all masculine, so God, it is thought, must be considered to be a "*man*". But this is wrong. God is neither male nor female.
8. I do not believe that I have the final answer and I would not like to slip into the feminist camp and declare God to be female anymore than I would support the view that He is entirely masculine. It might be better, therefore, not to think of the Godhead in terms of gender although we cannot avoid using gender nouns when referring to the three members of the Trinity. Yet, it may be helpful to remember that the Hebrew noun for "*Spirit*" is female. It does seem to imply that within the Godhead there exists a female element, although I am not sure that we should think in terms of male and/or female in relation to the Trinity as this would not be theologically helpful. There could be one exception to this, and that is that there is, within the Trinity, an awareness of what it is like to be either male or female. God knows what it means to be male and female; characteristics of male and female are attributed to the Godhead. This surely should assist us in our response to God –whether we are male or female – knowing that He understands and is able to empathise with our situations, whatever our gender. He knows all about maleness and the femaleness.
9. Furthermore, it is in the Gnostic scriptures and amongst the Apostolic Fathers that the Holy Spirit is referred to as feminine. In the Eastern Church, the *Holy Spirit* was always considered to have a feminine nature. She was the life-bearer of the faith. Clement of Alexandria states that "*she*" is an indwelling Bride. Amongst the Eastern Church communities there is none more clear about the feminine aspect of the Holy Spirit as the corpus of the Coptic-Gnostics. One such document records that Jesus says, "*Even so did my mother, the Holy Spirit, take me by one of my hairs and carry me away to the great mountain Tabor [in Galilee].*"
10. A number of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts, such as the Gospel of Thomas and James, refer to the Holy Spirit as the "*Divine Mother*". Within orthodox Christianity, however, we cannot accept the Gnostic writings as inspired and hence these quotes are not acceptable as authoritative.

11. It is interesting to note that in most religions there exists a female deity. Baal has his consort, Ashtoreth, and the Babylonians their Queen of Heaven. Is this the reason for Roman Catholic teaching to contain so much emphasis upon the "*Virgin Mary*" as a Co-Redemtrix? Such a need for a female deity does not exist within the Bible or within evangelical orthodox Christianity.
12. Let us now consider two major areas:-
 - a. The Biblical teaching which attributes of "motherhood / female to God"
 - b. The significance of this teaching on the "motherhood / female of God"

1. The Biblical teaching which attributes female characteristics to God

- 1:1 Our first reference is found in two passages from the Psalms where God is presented as a "*midwife*". In Psalm 22:9-10 we read, "*Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you even at my mother's breast. From birth I was cast upon you; from my mother's womb you have been my God*". It reminds me of a current BBC series entitled "*Call the Midwife*". Whilst this is regarded as a Messianic Psalm, and one can, from this, picture the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, yet when originally written the Psalm had an immediate application to the writer himself and his own generation.
- 1:2 This takes us to Psalm 71:6 where a further act of midwifery is described, "*From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother's womb. I will ever praise you.*" This is not merely presenting God as One who has "*called me forth from the womb*" (Is 49:2, 5), but God as the midwife delivering the child from the mother's womb. For our purposes both passages portray God as acting, what would largely be, a female role, although today there are male midwives, yet in OT days this was specifically a female role.
- 1:3 Then we see God like a woman in the pains of child birth. Isaiah 42:14, "*For a long time I have held my peace; I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor; I will gasp and pant*". The context of this passage – beginning at vs 10 – displays God's promise of restoration for the nation from its exile in Babylon. During the exilic period God kept His silence, but now has come the time for Him to act on behalf of His people. He will let loose His emotions as He sets His people free. He will be like a woman in the pains of child birth until He sees Judah returned to its land.

- 1:4 We pass to a passage in which God is presented to us as a “*nursing mother*”. This is found in Isaiah 49:15 “*Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you*”. Again, the context of this passage is important for it describes God's future promise of restoration from exile in Babylon. It was typical of Judah in captivity to think that Yahweh had forgotten the nation. They felt abandoned and rejected because of their sin. This misconception led to misery, despair and depression. But God, through the prophet, has given assurance of His continued love for them and typifies it as a mother being unable to reject the child to whom she has given birth. This is a very moving passage of scripture.
- 1:5 Part of being a parent – mother and father – is the after care; that is the next eighteen years after giving birth, and that – every parent would agree - is the hard part! So, in Isaiah 66:13 we read, “*As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem*”. Here Yahweh is clearly presenting Himself as a “*Mother*”. This whole section of Isaiah chapters 40-66 deals with the matter of Yahweh's nature and the promise of territorial restoration. They are chapters which offer comfort and consolation to those who are dispirited. So, God wishes to assure this despondent people that He is in the process of giving comfort – even comfort typical of a gentle mother. Notice how the word “*comfort*” is also used at the commencement of this section, 40:1 “*Comfort, comfort my people....*”.
- 1:6 Something similar is found in Psalm 131:2 “*But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me*”. Obviously the Psalmist is thinking of God as the One from whom he derives his comfort. He feels like a small child just weaned from his mother's breast, finding warm comfort in God. He thinks of God as a “*mother*”.
- 1:7 I would also like to refer to the NT and point to a small passage which enables us to see the Godhead having motherly characteristics. It is when Jesus, as He approached Jerusalem wept over the city saying, “*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing*” (Matt 23:37). Jesus seems to liken Himself to a mother hen with her young chicks.
- 1:8 Jesus is seen expression a very emotional cry full of passion and feeling. His heart is being poured out on behalf of Israel. He describes Himself as a mother hen because He

wishes to convey the depth of tenderness that He has for Israel. In the incarnation Jesus took on humanity and was in the likeness of a man. Yet, in His Godhood, His deity, His equality with God the Father and Holy Spirit He is neither male nor female. The Person of Christ is represented as One single Person having two Natures – human and divine.

1:9 Finally, continuing with this imagery we come to Ruth 2:12. Within this story we read of Naomi returning from the land of Moab bringing with her, her daughter-in-law, Ruth a Moabitess. The Moabites worshipped Baal – the religious enemy of Yahweh. However, Ruth has come to adopt Yahweh as her God when she said, “*Your people will be my people and your God my God*”. Her new relationship to Yahweh is described in these pictorial words of Naomi when she said to Ruth, “*The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!*”.

1:10 Ruth has turned her back on her people and their god. She has come to Israel. She has also found comfort and rest in knowing Yahweh who is pictured as a mother bird under whose wing she has discovered peace.

2. The significance of this teaching on the “motherhood of God”

2:1 Before we progress it is important for us to remind ourselves that the Bible does not describe God as either male or female. The use of the male gender is given to us for our convenience. It is like those anthropomorphisms (figures of speech which attributed to God human body parts) we find throughout the Bible. This means that God is spirit, invisible without having a body. It would be impossible for us to understand God without these human pictures. So God is portrayed as having hands, eyes, ears, mouth etc. This enables us to picture God in our minds. But we must keep in mind what Numbers 23:19 states, “*God is not a man.....*”, Neither is He a woman. He is neither male nor female. As Genesis 1:27 states, “*male and female He created them*”, maleness and femaleness was “*created*’ by God.

2:2 This also opens up another area of thought, namely the use of metaphors in scripture. Again, Scripture comes to our aid in helping us to understand God by the use of metaphors with which to describe God. What is a metaphor? A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable. A *metaphor* is a way of describing someone or something by

showing their similarity with something else. For example, the metaphor "*a shining light*" describes a person who is very skilful or intelligent. We are not suggesting that this person is a lamp or torch, but that his intelligence and skill is brilliant. And again, "*he drowned in a sea of grief*" or "*she is fishing in troubled waters,*" .

2:3 Various metaphors are applied to God and Jesus such as - Shepherd; rock; bread; door; light; bridegroom. Also included in this list must be "*Father*" and "*Mother*". The true definition of a "*father*" is one who has given birth to a child through the mother, and likewise a mother. So, also the concept of the motherhood of God is a metaphor. It is a little more complex here because whilst the Bible does call God "Our Father", it does not call God "Our Mother". There are only characteristics of motherhood attributed to God.

2:4 But, what to us is the practical significance of the motherly attributes of God?

2:5 In the first place we are adding to the big picture of God. It must be in our interest always to explore the Bible's teaching on the nature and doctrine of God. When Isaiah said, "*Behold your God*" (Is 40:9) he includes everything that he has taught us – the Fatherhood of God and the Motherhood of God.

2:6 It is essential for us to obtain a complete and balanced picture of God. The Bible always gives us this balanced description of God. There are many facets to the nature of God that should always concern us and cause us to explore with excitement. This is our God; we want to understand Him.

2:7 Indeed, much of our failure as Christian people is that we do not understand God. We have formed pictures of God in our own minds which are often unbiblical and unbalanced. We lack the true picture.

2:8 Secondly, it is the Motherhood of God that enhances aspects of God's communicable attributes. By this I mean those attributes with which we can easily identify. These references to the female side of God bring out His tenderness, gentleness, compassion, warmth, affection and care.

2:9 By attributing these mother - like qualities to God the Bible is not suggesting that in His Fatherhood they are absent. As I stated before, we are given these descriptions to overcome our inability and weakness in trying to comprehend the kind of God that He

is. It is as if the Bible is prepared to go to great lengths to impress upon us important aspects of the nature of God. In our minds, given our own culture, we might see the care and sympathy of a mother outshining that of a father. This is the way we have been nurtured in society. The mother is portrayed as having a quality of tenderness that might be seen to be absent in the father. So, given the importance of understanding the true nature of God – especially in times of stress such as when Judah was in captivity and where most of the motherly expressions are found in those relevant Isaiah passages – the Bible gives us this female side of God. Yet we must balance this with such expressions as, “*As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust* (Ps 103:13-14).

2:10 This introduces us to a very important aspect of teaching in regard to the nature of God. Much ink has been spilt, and many words spoken about whether God can be described as passionate or impassionate. In other words, “*Can God feel? Does God have a heart? Is there emotion in the Godhead?*” There are those who say that God is “*impassionate*”, that He does not feel or have emotions and that all the Biblical expressions are merely anthropomorphisms that are expressions of emotions given to God so that we understand the invisible God just like the anthropomorphisms, but that in reality God does not feel emotions or experience passion.

2:11 It is a difficult issue to resolve as we must make every attempt to exclude from our thinking that God is human. Luther wrote to Erasmus in the Reformation and said, “*Your God is too human*”. And yet, we do need to understand the nature of God for our own benefit. For this reason we are given all these anthropomorphisms and anthropomorphisms and metaphors so that we can make communication with God in a manner that is commensurate with our own understanding. God is other-worldly, He is not like us, He is spirit, invisible, “*dwelling in unapproachable light*”. Yet, we are made in His image; we bear something of the divine in our constitution. The attributes of God which we call “*Communicable*” are designed to show us something of the likeness of God that we see in ourselves.

2:12 Without this passionate God we would find it hard to communicate. How can we pour our hearts out before a God who we think cannot empathise with our weaknesses? How can we call upon a God who we do not believe can understand our plight? In our deepest distress, how can we derive comfort from a God who does not show real meaningful tenderness warmth?

- 2:13 When the writer to the Hebrews said, “*Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need*” (Heb 4:16), he was not speaking hypothetically. There would be no inducement to come to the throne of grace believing that Jesus could not sympathize with us. We would have to re-read these verses to say, “*For we do have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses*”. The removal of the negative “*not*” would make these statement meaningless.
- 2:14 Whilst it might be possible to say that given Jesus’ time on earth He was able to understand human plight, we must still attribute the same to the Father (and the Spirit) because the Trinity is all One God. Indeed, Jesus made a fundamental statement in John 14:10 “*I am in the Father and the Father is in me*”. Whatever the Son experienced – His life and His death on the cross – so also was the experience of the Father (and the Spirit). This expression of Jesus is fundamental to our understanding of the atonement where we find that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself”. We reject the criticism of the Emerging Church when it argues that the penal-substitutionary teaching of the atonement is “Cosmic Child Abuse”. No, it is not, because all three Persons of the Trinity suffered when Christ suffered, “*I am in the Father and the Father is in me*” (see also Heb 9:14 “*through the eternal Spirit offered Himself to God*”).
- 2:15 Therefore, we must not dismiss these mother-like characteristics that are given to us in these Old and New Testament passages. We must realize that within the Godhead an intense level of tenderness, gentleness and affection which is found both in fathers and mothers. We must think of God like a midwife delivering a child (Psalm 22:9-10); like a nursing mother (Isaiah 49:15); like a comforting mother (Isaiah 66:13, Matt 23:37).

Conclusion

1. Why did Jesus die on the cross? What was the ultimate purpose of the atonement? Of course He died so that I might be forgiven; be justified and glorified. But there is something else we must realize which I believe should make a great difference to our lives. We are told in 1 Peter 3:18 "*For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God*". The ultimate end was to "*bring us to God*".
2. He died that we might have a relation with this God. He died so that we will eventually live with this God. He died so that we might know this God. It follows, therefore, that we must seek to know more and more about this great God. This statement in Daniel 11:32 will always stand as a great truth, "*but the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action*". I say again, many of our problems in the Christian life are due to the fact that we just do not really know God. There is a call for more biblical knowledge. We need to "*behold our God*".
3. If this is our God - having both Fatherly characteristics and Motherly characteristics – let us ensure that we respond accordingly. Let no man say, "*God does not understand what it is to be a man or a father*". Let no woman say, "*God does not understand what it is to be a woman or a mother*". Scripture provides for us a certain knowledge about God that He understands both sexes; both genders. He who created maleness and femaleness knows all about us.
4. Therefore, let us with confidence come frequently to the throne of grace, for there will approach One who fully knows us – whether we are male or female. Let the words of Jesus encourage us, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt 11:27). Is there a hint of motherliness in these words? Does He not speak as a mother would?
5. Then think of the words of Peter when he said, "*Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you*" (1 Peter 5:7). Is there not also a suggestion of the motherliness of God here? God is not distant; there is no Deism in God. He is a God who is near; always near to His people. He cares about them just like a mother and father care for their children. Indeed, when any of His children are hurt, He also is hurt. He said through the prophet, "*...whoever touches you touches the apple of his eye*" (Zech 2:8). That is tenderness and God expressing His feelings for Israel. When Jesus spoke to

Saul on the Damascus road He said, "*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,*" (Acts 9:5). Jesus identified Himself with the persecuted Church as He does today.

6. Perhaps one of the most moving of all passages of scripture which reveal the tenderness of God comes from Hosea 11. Look at the passion that is expressed in these words from the following verses, "*It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realise it was I who healed them*" (vs 3); "*I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them*" (vs 4); "*My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused*" (vs 8). Such expressions can come from either a father or mother, but may be there is a strong hint of the latter within these passages.
7. All of this combines to re-enforce for us the fact of a caring God. Indeed, a feeling God. It is so important, therefore, that we grasp a balanced view of God. It is this that will assist and help us as Christian people who living in a world where there is little care or tenderness.

Richard Lee. February 2014