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Neither male nor female: Poetic imagery and the nature of God in the Old Testament

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Abstract

The article considers the relationship between the metaphorical language for God used in the poetry of the Old Testament, especially female metaphors, and the Old Testament's portrayal of the nature of God. It considers two opposing views: first, that female imagery, such as birth imagery, suggests that Yahweh has a 'female aspect', and, second, that such language notwithstanding, Yahweh is indefeasibly male. The argument employs cognitive linguistic theory and suggests that male and female metaphors for Yahweh do not bespeak either maleness or femaleness in the deity, but rather Yahweh's identification with human experience broadly. While the Old Testament emerged in a world dominated by masculine perspectives, it also transforms received concepts, especially in relation to God. This transformative character of the Old Testament can become a model for contemporary readings of the Bible in relation to the contentious area of gender and language for God.

Keywords

Cognitive, father, female, God, male, metaphor, mother, poetry

1. Female language for God

The aim of the following is to consider in what way Old Testament language that uses female or male imagery in relation to God has a bearing on the ways in which God is portrayed in the Old Testament and imagined by its readers. It is argued that while God 'is' not male or female, the use of gendered metaphor in the Old Testament has a direct bearing on the ways in which the God of the Old Testament is conceived and presented to the reader's understanding.[1]

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In contemporary attempts to think and speak about God, nothing is so central and unavoidable as the biblical language itself, and especially its adoption of male and female imagery. The suggestive, and dangerous, power of such language is memorably expressed in Mary Daly's dictum: 'If God is male, then the male is God'.[2] The saying exposes the capacity of the language to go to the heart of human experience and sense of self. It also identifies the preponderance of male language for God as the problem, with its potential effect of making female readers feel marginalized.

The attempts of female writers to mitigate such effects are by now well-known and have entered the mainstream of discourse in Old Testament theology and interpretation. Phyllis Trible led the way, with her re-reading of Old Testament texts so as to uncover male bias in their reception[3] and also by pointing to the range of imagistic Old Testament language that she claimed suggested a female aspect in God. For her, such imagery 'tempers any assertion that Yahweh is a male deity'.[4] Trible has been followed by a large number of writers who have in some measure espoused the view that biblical language validates a conception of the biblical God as female. For some, the biblical language supports such formulations as the 'motherhood of God' or the 'feminine face of God' in the deity.[5]

Claims that some biblical language implies a feminine aspect of deity have not convinced everyone, however. Objections to it take different forms. Elizabeth Achtemeier writes,

... by insisting on female language for God, the feminists simply continue to emphasize the nonbiblical view that God does indeed have sexuality.[6]

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2. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973), p. 19; also in 'The Qualitative Leap Beyond Patriarchal Religion' in *Quest* (Women and Spirituality) 1 (1974), p. 21.

3. Trible's identification of Gen. 1.26, with its 'image of God, male and female', as the centre of Old Testament theology, and her reading of Genesis 1-3, with its rendering of האדם as the (ungendered) 'earth-creature' are very widely cited; *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 1-30, 72-75.

4. Phyllis Trible: 'God, Nature of, in the Old Testament', in Keith Crim (ed.), *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplementary Volume* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1976), pp. 368-69.

5. For example, Julia A. Foster, 'The Motherhood of God: the Use of חיל as God-language in the Hebrew Scriptures', in Lewis M. Hopfe (ed.), *Uncovering Ancient Stones: Essays in Memory of H. Neil Richardson* (Winona Lake, IL: Eisenbrauns, 1994), pp. 93-102; Helen Schüngel-Straumann, 'God as Mother in Hosea', in A. Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), pp. 194-218; *idem*, 'The Feminine Face of God', in Hermann Häring and Johann Baptist Metzger (eds.), *The Many Faces of the Divine* (London: SCM Press, 1995), pp. 93-101. See also Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: the Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (New York: Crossroad, 1988); A. Groenwald, 'Theology Chronicle: Images of God in the Old Testament: Yahweh, Loving Father and Mother' in *Verbum et Ecclesia* 27 (2006), 534-47; L. Juliana Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God's Delivering Presence in the Old Testament* (Louisville: WJK, 2012).

6. Elizabeth Achtemeier, 'Exchanging God for "No Gods": A Discussion of Female Language for God', in Alvin F. Kimel ed., *Speaking the Christian God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leominster: Gracewing, 1992), pp. 1-16 (4).

On the contrary, David Clines argues that the Hebrew Bible 'consistently represents the deity as male',[7] and indeed that it everywhere reflects and exhibits thoroughly male values, which are projected on to the God of Israel.[8] These contrasting views show that there are elements in the discussion that need to be disentangled. One is at least implicitly theological or confessional, concerned to derive a view of God from the language of Scripture. For some, the issue is ultimately about the continuing validity of confessional formulae (God as 'Father', 'Son'[9]). The other is more narrowly linguistic. Clines expressly declines to engage with theological or hermeneutical claims that may be derived from his observations about the maleness of the Old Testament God[10] and aims to focus only on what the Old Testament texts actually say. It is a question, however, whether the subject is capable of discussion in abstraction from precisely such claims. At stake is not only what the Old Testament may be taken to disclose about the nature of God but also the effect that linguistic usage about God may have on human experiences of self and power.

At the heart of the matter is what kind of connection exists between language concerning God and what is being articulated about the nature of God. Regarding female language for God, a number of texts feature regularly in the debate. Mayer L. Gruber names four texts in Isaiah, namely Isa. 42:14; 45:10; 49.15, and 66.13, as referring unequivocally to God as female.[11] These all make a comparison of some sort between God and a mother. Clines allows that two of these are 'female language about the deity' (Isa. 42.14; 66.13).[12] Certain other texts also regularly appear because they employ a 'feminine' metaphor, especially birth. Deuteronomy 32.18 is the most important of these. More peripheral to the discussion are texts in which qualities of God are expressed in language that are said to have feminine roots. Thus, the term

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7. Clines, 'Alleged Female Language About the Deity in the Hebrew Bible', https://www.academia.edu/26598665/Alleged_Female_Language_about_the_Deity_in_the_Hebrew_ Bible, p. 22 (accessed, 08/01/2018). 'For my part, I regret the damage done to the feminist cause by the repeated claim that the Bible is less masculine and sexist than it really is', p. 23. He had addressed the topic earlier in David J. A. Clines, 'What Does Eve Do to Help? And Other Irredeemably Androcentric Orientations in Genesis 1-3' in *idem*, *What Does Eve Do to Help: And Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament* (JSOTSup, 94; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), pp. 25-48 (45). In it, he writes of Genesis 1 that it 'is indefeasibly androcentric. No more than Genesis 2-3 can it be "redeemed" from its patriarchal or sexist stance.' The paper was first read at SBL in 1987.
8. This was the topic of his Ethel Wood Lecture for 2015, 'The Scandal of a Male Bible', posted at https://www.academia.edu/10977758/ The_Scandal_of_a_ Male_Bible (accessed 08/01/2018). In this essay, he aims to show how deeply ingrained masculine language and concepts are in the Hebrew Bible, and claims that 'the Bible is deeply compromised by its ubiquitous adherence to specifically male values' (p. 1).
9. Achtemeier, 'Exchanging God for "No Gods"', exemplifies this concern, as do other contributors to the same volume.
10. He declares this intention in his first footnote, expressly precluding attention to such writers as Clement of Alexandria and Teresa of Avila, who found a female aspect in the deity; Clines, 'Alleged Female Language', 1, n. p. 1. For a brief account of such writers, see Mollenkott, *Divine Feminine*, pp. 8-14.
11. Mayer L. Gruber, 'The Motherhood of God in Second Isaiah', in *Revue Biblique* 90 (1983), pp. 351-59 (357), also cited by Roland M. Frye, 'Language for God and Feminist Language', in Kimel (ed.), *Speaking the Christian God*, pp. 17-43 (29).
12. Clines, 'Alleged Female Language', p. 22.

רחמים, signifying God's 'compassion', is linked lexically to רחם, 'womb'.[13]

Clines reviews in detail the texts that have been appealed to in this way and finds them wanting. For example, the claim that God is portrayed as female can simply be based on misreading texts. In Isa. 45.9-10, God is not, *pace* Susan Ackerman, 'potter, man and woman', but rather the text draws an analogy between Israel objecting to certain purposes of God and unlikely scenarios drawn from life.[14] On the birth-image in Deut. 32.18, what is decisive is the subject of the action, namely צור, Rock, and אל, God. Since אל is always masculine, the phrase must refer to the action of a father in begetting. צור too he takes to be a masculine image.[15] In Isa. 42.14, Yahweh is merely 'like' a woman in labour, in the particular aspect of crying aloud in contrast to previous silence; he is not actually a woman in labour.[16] Similarly, in Isa. 49.15, the rhetorical question, 'Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?', far from depicting the divine faithfulness as feminine, affirms precisely the reverse: a woman *may* forget, but Yahweh, in contrast, will not.[17] Regarding the lexical link between רחמים ('compassion') and רחם ('womb'), he objects that there is no reason to think that an abstract noun must carry over nuances from a cognate concrete one. This is especially the case since, apart from its use in relation to God, רחמים is almost exclusively applied in the Old Testament to men.[18]

For Clines, therefore, the 'female' language used in texts about God simply does not express a female aspect in the deity. The assumption of maleness in the deity is always intact.

2. Yahweh as male?

If Clines is right that feminine language in texts concerning God does not immediately point to a feminine aspect in God, does it follow that the God of the Old Testament is simply male?

It is widely recognized that certain leading metaphors for God in the Bible are male ones. The most important metaphors for Yahweh are 'king' and 'father'. Kingship is directly predicated of God in a number of places (1 Sam. 8.7; 12.12; Isa. 44.6) and implied in the extended metaphor of suzerainty deployed in Deuteronomy.[19] Yahweh's

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13. Trible, 'God, Nature of', 368; *God and the Rhetoric*, pp. 31-59.

14. Clines, 'Alleged Female Language', pp. 4-5, citing Susan Ackerman, 'Isaiah', in Carol Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (eds.). *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), pp. 161-68 (167).

15. Clines, 'Alleged Female Language', pp. 2-3. He also takes צור to be a masculine image, although this is not self-evident to all interpreters.

16. Clines, 'Alleged Female Language', pp. 5-6.

17. Clines, 'Alleged Female Language', pp. 14-15.

18. Again, Clines' leading interlocutor is Trible, and he refers in this case to her 'Journey of a Metaphor', in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, pp. 31-59; Clines, 'Alleged Female Language', pp. 21-22.

19. In the now well-established recognition that Deuteronomy resembles the form of suzerainty treaties, Yahweh emerges as the 'great king', as per the title of Meredith Kline's seminal work, *The Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963). For a study of the metaphor see Marc Zvi Brettler, *God is King: Understanding an Israelite Metaphor* (JSOTSup, 76; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989).

fatherhood of Israel is also asserted in a number of places. In Deut. 32.6, he is simply 'your father, who created you' (NRSV). And in Isa. 64.8, Yahweh is 'our Father', perhaps also intimating creativity, because of the parallel with the image of the potter who fashions the clay. The idea of Yahweh as father is present too when he stands over against the Pharaoh of Exodus, in which Israel is cast as Yahweh's 'firstborn' in contrast to all the firstborn of Pharaoh and Egypt (Exod. 4.22-23). If Israel is 'son', or 'sons', in this and other contexts (cf. Deut. 14.1, Isa. 1.2), then Yahweh is tacitly 'father', rather than the modern, inclusive 'parent'. To these leading male metaphors, others may be added, such as judge, husband, and master.[20] Other kinds of language too suggest maleness, as when Yahweh speaks to Moses 'face to face, as a man speaks to his friend' (פנים אל פנים כאשר ירבד איש אל רעהו, Exod. 33.11).

Clines goes further and speaks of 'the sustained language about a masculine deity throughout the Hebrew Bible'.[21] This consists partly in the grammar surrounding Yahweh, in verb, pronoun, and adjective, and also in characteristics of the deity that he takes to be expressly male, such as strength, proneness to violence, honour, holiness, and even size.[22] Strength as a male attribute is illustrated, for example, by Isa. 40.10, 26, 29, 31, in which Yahweh is depicted as going forth to war with great power.[23]

While one might query how safe it is to suppose all such characteristics to be exclusively masculine, the predominance of masculine language for God in the Old Testament must be granted. However, in asking what the Old Testament says about Yahweh, it is necessary to distinguish between at least two different kinds of question. The first concerns the ways in which the people of Old Testament times may have thought about him and how such ways of thinking leave their mark on the text, and the second considers how the Old Testament writers thought of Yahweh and how they went about articulating this. These two questions may lead to quite different answers.

Regarding the first, the call of prophets like Elijah and Hosea to choose between Yahweh and Baal, or 'the baals (הבעלים)' (1 Kgs 18.20-40; Hosea 2), is instructive. Those who 'limped between two opinions', in the words of Elijah (1 Kgs 18.21), may have thought the choice before them was between deities that were rather similar. Popular concepts of Yahweh almost certainly included the idea that he was a male god. Support for this is widely found in the inscriptions from the monarchic period discovered at Kuntillet 'Ajrûd in NE Sinai and at Khirbet el-Qôm in the southern Judean hill-country, in which blessings are invoked 'by YHWH of Samaria and his Asherah', although it remains uncertain whether 'his Asherah' refers to Yahweh's female consort.[24] People in Israel, therefore, apparently shared with other ancient

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20. Achtemeier identifies 'five principal metaphors' for God in the Bible, namely 'King, Father, Judge, Husband and Master', 'Exchanging God for "No Gods"', p. 5.
21. Clines, 'Alleged Female Language', p. 22. For the 'sustained language about a masculine deity', he refers to the massive listing of similes and metaphors for God in Marjo Christina Annette Korpel, *The Rift in the Clouds: Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1990), but without assessment of these; *ibid*., p. 1, n. 2; p. 22, n. 87.
22. Clines, 'Scandal of a Male Bible'.
23. Clines, 'Scandal of a Male Bible', p. 2.
24. See F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, J. J. M. Roberts, C. L. Seow and R. E. Whitaker, *Hebrew Inscriptions: Texts from the Biblical Period of the Monarchy with Concordance* (Cambridge, MA/London: Yale University Press: 2005), pp. 283-98. One of the four inscriptions found at Kuntillet 'Ajrûd, on a jar

people the belief that deities were or could be gendered. It is striking that Elijah did not offer his hearers a theological discourse to make his point, but in effect a trial of strength.

The language of the Old Testament for Yahweh has its roots in the religion of the ancient Near East. In terms of religious history, the worship of Yahweh emerged out of concepts that prevailed in the biblical world. The names for God in Genesis furnish one example of this, in which the God who encounters Abram and the patriarchs bears the name El in various forms, which strongly suggests the god El who presided over the Canaanite pantheon.[25] In the theologizing of Genesis, some sort of identification between El and Yahweh can be discerned.[26] Other texts, such as Psalm 82, show vestiges of the 'divine council' idea, in which Yahweh presides over the assembly of the gods. In the adoption of such images from the ancient world, Yahweh is presumably presented as the chief god and male. Masculine language for Yahweh and the use of the masculine pronoun are rooted into this history.

In patriarchal ancient Israel, it is not surprising that Yahweh should very often be depicted as having recognizably male characteristics. But in pursuing the question whether Yahweh is simply male, we now shift the focus from how ancient Israelites may have conceived of Yahweh to the ways in which he is depicted by biblical writers.

3. Yahweh and poetic imagery

The conceptions of the Old Testament thinkers and writers concerning Yahweh can be pursued on at least two fronts, though we shall find that they are closely connected. First, in the realm of language and imagery, where male characteristics are often accentuated, we have moved into the same area in which Yahweh has been found by many to have female characteristics. In addition, in the discrepancy between popular and prophetic perceptions of the nature of Yahweh that we have observed, a further avenue is opened up, namely the theologizing conducted in the Old Testament's inner dialogue with received or ambient conceptions of the divine. These two fronts deserve exploration.

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fragment, KAjr 18, dated to C8 on palaeographic grounds, reads: 'Say to Yahil[yaw] and to Yawʻasa and to [PN...] I hereby bless you by YHWH of Samaria and his Asherah', pp. 289-90. Regarding the nature of the Asherah, the authors say: 'In this inscription (as at Khirbet el-Qôm), the asherah is probably the cult-object personified as a hypostatic presence of YHWH', p. 292. Clines rightly takes issue with Mark S. Smith on this, and his view that the references to Yahweh's Asherah amount to 'a major shift in the scholarly understanding of the femaleness of the Divine in ancient Israel': Mark S. Smith, 'God Male and Female in the Old Testament: Yahweh and his "Asherah"', *Theological Studies* 48 (1987), pp. 333-40; Clines, 'Alleged Female Language', p. 1, n. 2. The large number of monarchy period female pillar figurines discovered in Judah may also indicate devotion to a female deity, though their purpose is uncertain; see R. Kletter; 'Between Archaeology and Theology – the Pillar Figurines from Judah and the Asherah', in A. Mazar (ed.), *Studies in the Archaeology of the Iron Age in Israel and Jordan* (JSOTSup, 331; Sheffield Academic, 2001), pp. 179-216.

25. See F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 1-75.

26. See R. W. L. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

To begin with language, what is the relationship between linguistic expression and what it signifies? The question raises the major issue of the nature of metaphorical language. In simple definition, metaphor expresses one thing in terms of something else. This means observing some similarity between two thoughts or linguistic phenomena, which, when brought together in a metaphor, produce new meaning.[27] In recent thinking, metaphorical language, far from being merely decorative, has the power to shape our view of reality. Marc Zvi Brettler, following Max Black, and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, calls it 'the cognitive theory of metaphor'.[28] In it, metaphor is not based simply on conceptual or linguistic similarities, but belongs inseparably to processes of cognition.[29] If this is so, it means that linguistic choices have a direct bearing on the substance of what is said. Brettler and others take the point to apply also to the Old Testament's language about God, which therefore cannot be detached from its concept (or concepts) of God.[30] And this may begin to explain why the biblical writers chose to make extensive use of poetic imagery for God in the first place.

With this in mind, we return to one of the texts noticed above and the question of male or female imagery:

You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you;

You forgot the God who gave you birth (Deut. 32.18 NRSV).

There are legitimate questions about the precise meanings of the verbs in this verse. Clines showed that the verbs ילד (qal) and חיל (polel) could refer to a father 'begetting' children. For him, this was the preferred reading in each case, on the grounds that the subject is, respectively, צור, 'rock', and אל, 'God', and that these are both masculine. Many modern translations take the same view, such as NIV, with 'the Rock, who fathered you'. However, this overlooks the important question as to what the image of a rock has to do with birthing at all. Plainly, a rock neither begets nor bears. NIV neatly surmounts this difficulty by depriving the 'rock' of its function as a metaphor, and making it in effect a soubriquet for God, and a male, 'fathering' God at that.

27. See Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982). For Janet Martin Soskice the elements in the metaphor are, not individual words, but networks of meaning, which when brought together produce something new; Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), e.g. pp. 15-16.
28. Marc Zvi Brettler, 'Incompatible Metaphors for YHWH in Isaiah 40-66', *JSOT* 78 (1998), 97-120 (101). He cites George Lakoff and Mark Johnson: '(Metaphors) have the power to define reality', in *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 26, and similarly Max Black, *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962), p. 40.
29. This postulate is now undergirded by psychological research, in which knowledge is inex- tricably linked to sense perception. For Mary Therese DesCamp and Eve Sweetser, vision plays a major part for the learning child in knowing how to construct the world: 'seeing co- occurs with knowing'; Mary Therese DesCamp and Eve Sweetser, 'Metaphors for God: Why and How Do Our Choices Matter for Humans? The Application of Contemporary Cognitive Linguistics Research to the Debate on God and Metaphor', in *Pastoral Psychology* 53(3) (2005), pp. 207-38 (216).
30. Brettler, 'Incompatible Metaphors', 101; Descamp and Sweetser, 'Metaphors for God'.

This move, however, simply deprives the language of its force.[31] The poem leading up to v. 18 is full of vivid imagery from nature depicting Yahweh's care for his people, including the eagle that 'stirs up its nest and hovers over its young' (v. 11) and the 'feeding' and 'suckling' (וינקהו) of Israel with honey and oil and milk and fat (vv. 13-14). These images of the sustaining of the young by the parent are part of the poem's variation on the deuteronomic theme of Yahweh's provision of the good things of the land. Here, in contrast to the typically prosaic deuteronomic rhetoric, however, the language is adventurous and fearless of illogicality. Children are not 'suckled' with honey from the crag, nor is olive-oil obtained from rock (צור, v. 13). In this context, it would be odd to argue for the masculinity of the eagle that hovers over its young or to make much of the unvarying grammatical masculine of the verbs. The image of 'suckling' from a crag (מסלע) is not bound by the masculinity either of Yahweh or of the crag. The language invokes the plenitude of nature to speak of the care and bounty of Yahweh, and it does not invite enquiry into the maleness or femaleness of the players.

This is the context in which we encounter the 'rock' (צור) in a birth-image in v.18. Rather than being a mere cipher for God, it is one among a series of striking metaphors. Soskice reads the preceding context back to v. 6 and, taking the birthing in v. 18 as a feminine image, notes the contrast with the 'father' image in Deut. 32.6 (where Yahweh is 'your father who created you') and says, 'Paternal and maternal imagery in quick succession effectively rules out literalism, as does the astonishing evocation of a parturient rock'.[32] For her, the power of the image is self-evident, and she has deftly drawn attention to the capacity of the language to operate at the level of impact and suggestion. Indeed, this capacity of the poetic language may be presumed to be the reason why it has been chosen to do this kind of work. It is important too that she has brought a somewhat extensive literary context to bear on the meaning of the image in v. 18.[33]

Is this also relevant for other texts that have been alleged to indicate a feminine aspect in God? Isaiah 42.14 is one of two that Clines allows 'is female language about the deity':

כיולדה אפעה אשם ואשאף יחד

Now I will cry out like a woman in labour, I will gasp and pant (NRSV).

For Clines, the word 'like' is crucial here: Yahweh is not actually a woman in

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31. I notice, with a little chagrin, that my own translation in my commentary of 2002, adopted the same strategy; *Deuteronomy* (AOTC; Apollos: Leicester/Downers Grove, 2002), p. 445. I do note there, however, that the 'stirring up' of the nest in v. 11 'perhaps refers to the mother eagle's encouragement of the young to fly, along with her care that that they do not fall' (p. 455).

32. Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (Oxford: OUP, 2007, 2011), p. 2.

33. This is in line with her view that metaphors consist in linguistic complexes, and not in individual terms; see above n. 27.

labour, but merely 'like' one, in the specific respect of crying out. Indeed, being 'like' one logically rules out actually being one.[34] But this again raises the question why such language is chosen and whether it is appropriate to apply rules of logic to its interpretation.[35] A first question, in this case, is whether the use of a simile to express the likeness of Yahweh to a woman in labour is different in reality from that of a metaphor.

The distinction between simile and metaphor has been found significant by a number of scholars in addressing the present question. For Achtemeier, 'the few instances of feminine imagery for God in the Bible all take the form of a simile and not of a metaphor, and that distinction is crucial'.[36] Her reading of Isa. 42.14 is exactly the same as Clines'.[37] Seen thus, the biblical attribution of 'father'-language to God is metaphorical, while female language for God takes the form of similes. Thus, while fatherhood is directly predicated of God, motherhood is not.

However, the relationship between metaphor and simile is not one of simple distinction. Soskice, taking issue with Max Black, finds that the disparagement of simile in contrast to metaphor is often pressed by invoking bland similes (such as 'the sun is like a golden ball'). In fact, she argues, the use of 'like' in comparative figures is but 'an aspect of superficial grammar', and '... simile shares much of the imaginative life and cognitive function of its metaphorical counterparts'.[38]

In cognitive linguistic theory likewise, there is little substantive difference between them. Both involve the 'blending' that results from the convergence of linguistic domains.[39] The point is borne out by a consideration of actual similes and metaphors in the Old Testament. For Hosea, Yahweh is 'like' a lion, a leopard, a bear (Hos. 13.7-8), a juniper-tree (Hos. 14.9[EVV8]), a moth (5.12), and the dew (14.6[EVV5]). As for metaphors, he 'is' a shepherd (Ps. 23.1), or indeed a 'rock' (Deut. 32.4). While these figures are formally different, they are in practice hard to disentangle from each other. In Hos. 5.14, Yahweh is 'like a lion to Ephraim, and like a young lion to the house of Judah', but then immediately the term 'like' is dropped, and Yahweh speaks *as* the savage beast:

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34. Clines, 'Alleged Female Language', p. 6.
35. On choices of metaphor, see DesCamp and Sweetser, 'Metaphors for God'.
36. Achtemeier, 'Exchanging God for "No Gods"', p. 4.
37. Achtemeier, 'Exchanging God for "No Gods"', p. 5. See also Roland M. Frye, 'Language for God and Feminist Language', in Kimel (ed.), *Speaking the Christian God*, pp. 17-43; Alvin F. Kimel Jr., 'The God Who Likes His Name: Holy Trinity, Feminism, and the Language of Faith', in Kimel (ed.), *Speaking the Christian God*, pp. 188-208 (originally in *Journal of Bible and Theology* 45 [1991], pp. 47-58).
38. Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), pp. 58-59. She cites Max Black, 'More About Metaphor', in Andrew Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge; CUP, 1979), pp. 19-43 (31-32).
39. DesCamp and Sweetser, 'Metaphors for God', p. 212, n. 13. They think that the distinction between the two is often maintained by conservative scholars who want to minimize the implication of a feminine aspect in God. See also Brettler, 'Incompatible Metaphors', 100, n. 11, who follows Soskice on the point, and Sarah J. Dille, *Mixing Metaphors: God as Father and Mother in Deutero-Isaiah* (JSOTSup, 398; London/New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), p. 48, n. 33.

I myself will tear and go away;

I will carry off and no one shall rescue (NRSV).

Similarly, Yahweh is 'like' a tree, but then follows 'from me your fruit comes' (ממני פריך נמצא lit. 'is found', Hos. 14.9[EVV8])', where he adopts tree-likeness into his speech about himself, at the same time invoking a play on the name Ephraim.[40] Metaphors are often implicit in an image, as when Yahweh 'heals' (Hos. 14.5[EVV4] Jer. 30.17) or 'roars' (Amos 1.2)—in this case, the lion-likeness needing no 'like'—or digs ground and plants a vineyard (Isa. 5.1-2; cf. Ps. 80.9-10[EVV8-9]). They can often pervade a text, as when the 'shepherd' image is carried through Ps. 23, though ceding in the end to one of hospitality (Ps. 23.5). There can be complex metaphors, as when Israel is depicted as a garden (Hos 14.6-7[EVV5-6], with simile again flowing into metaphor[41]), flourishing in the 'shade' of Yahweh, who is thus evoked as some overarching tree (Hos. 14.8[EVV7]), so embracing Israel and Yahweh in their respective parts within the same image.

It follows from this that simile and metaphor both play their part in the Hebrew Bible's formidable linguistic armoury, and it is difficult to see much daylight between them as regards their function in speech about God. Simile can be as bold as metaphor in what it implies. The comparison of Yahweh to a juniper-tree (Hos. 14.9[EVV8]) has attracted emendations because of the alleged unlikelihood of such an attribution to Yahweh.[42] Both simile and metaphor depend for their effect on the power of language to suggest and provoke. Both suggest likeness in certain respects (with implicit unlikeness in others), the manner of the likeness being usually not spelt out but left to the reader to judge. It will not be based on logic, but rather on experience, analogy, and a sense of the context. In this respect, poetic effect and the sound of the words often play a part.

The linguistic image in Isa. 42.14 belongs within a passage that poetically evokes Yahweh's resolve to bring about justice and deliverance for his people. In an image developed over the two lines of the preceding verse (v. 13), he is portrayed as a mighty warrior, כגבור, and a 'man of wars' (איש מלתמוח), who cries out and shouts aloud (יצריח יריע אף) and prevails over his enemies. 'Prevails' is יתגבר, the final word of the verse echoing יהוה כגבור at the beginning (another case of simile melding into metaphor). The

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40. The name אפרים occasions numerous plays on words in Hosea, e.g. 8.9; 4.16-17; 9.16; 11.3; cf. Macintosh, *Hosea*, p. lxiv. Brettler also notes the mixing of metaphor and simile in, for example, the *wasf* in Song 5.10-16; 'Incompatible Metaphors', p. 11, n. 11.

41. '... he shall blossom *like* the lily, he shall strike root *like* the forests of Lebanon. His shoots shall spread out...'.

42. Brigitte Seifert, *Metaphorisches Reden von Gott im Hoseabuch* (FRLANT, 166; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), pp. 251, 259, 262. A number of scholars see Hos. 14.5-9 (4-8) *in toto* as secondary. Macintosh, for example, finds it 'most unlikely that Hosea would be inclined to make such use of the simile', A. A. Macintosh, *Hosea* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), pp. 576-77; see E. Ben Zvi, *Hosea* (FOTL, XXIA/1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 301, for a range of scholarly views.

picture then switches to the image of the woman in labour, which likewise occupies the two lines of v. 14. Verse 14a first expresses a silence and holding back, with alliteration and onomatopoeia (החשיתי מעולם אחריש אתאפק), and then gives way to the force of the birth-image, again with onomatopoeia and alliteration (אפעה אשם ואשאף חיד כיולדה). Here too, the likeness to the woman in labour is taken into the language that Yahweh uses of himself in the three first-person verbs that follow it.[43]

The relationship between the metaphors of the warrior and the birthing mother in this context has been well observed by a number of scholars. Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, in her study of Isa. 42:10-17, found the essential point of the juxtaposition of the images to lie in their 'auditory character', with the language used in the birthing image having further connotations of Yahweh's destructive force.[44] Brettler, following Darr, finds in the same juxtaposed images an example of 'incompatible metaphors', which, 'though they are literally contradictory, may coalesce on the metaphorical level'.[45] And Sarah J. Dille supports the interplay between them by adducing a series of texts from the Old Testament and the ancient Near East featuring their overlapping use.[46] Her study shows how the image of the birthing mother, applied in some places to cities under siege, is capable of transformation in new contexts. Here, applied to YHWH and in tandem with the warrior image, it carries connotations of creative power and 'undermines any implications of the *yoledah* being a figure of powerlessness'.[47] In this under- standing, applications of images may variously foreground or de-emphasize aspects of their 'associated commonplaces'. They also satisfy the criterion of metaphoric coherence, by interacting with each other to articulate something new, in this case something new about God.[48]

Can we say, then, that this text testifies to a feminine aspect in Yahweh? We have seen that the likeness to the woman in labour is more than a passing similarity, but

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43. Sarit Kattan Gribetz has recently written of the female body as a metaphor for conceptualizing time. Regarding Isa. 42.14, she supports the idea of the imagistic language expressing aspects of the nature of God's response to the crisis in question, namely, 'the anguish of labour, the power needed to sustain such suffering, and its occurrence at a specific time'; Sarit Kattan Gribetz, 'Women's Bodies as Metaphors for Time in Biblical, Second Temple, and Rabbinic Literature', in Jonathan Ben-Dov and Lutz Doering (eds.), *The Construction of Time in Antiquity: Ritual, Art, and Identity* (New York: CUP, 2017), pp. 173-204 (181).

44. Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, "Like Warrior, Like Woman: Destruction and Deliverance in Isaiah 42:10-17," *CBQ* 49 (1987), 560-71 (567-70), and cf. Darr, *Isaiah's Vision and the Family of God* (Louisville: WJK, 1994), p. 105.

45. Brettler, 'Incompatible Metaphors', p. 118.

46. Dille, *Mixing Metaphors*, pp. 58-66.

47. Dille, *Mixing Metaphors*, p. 67.

48. Dille, *Mixing Metaphors*, pp. 67-68. Dille lists here seven 'associated commonplaces' that the figure of the birthing woman shares with that of the warrior. Thus, while Dille follows Darr in her view that the image of the birthing mother is transformed in the present context, she allows for a wider range of possible connotations than the former. Darr excludes connotations of fear and panic on Yahweh's part in the image, appealing to a distinction between simile and metaphor for the purpose of such a limitation; 'Like Warrior, Like Woman', 564-67. Dille expressly differs from Darr on this; see above, n. 39. The distinction is redundant, in my view, when it is recognized that connotations of metaphor can in any case be limited in a given con- text through the notion of 'associated commonplaces'. Determining which of these operate in a text is a matter of literary interpretation, rather than of technical definition of the trope.

becomes a vehicle for Yahweh's self-expression. It is part of a familiar Old Testament phenomenon in which human language is adopted, often emotive language, to disclose something of the nature of Yahweh. Hosea 11.8 is a parade example of this, with its depiction of Yahweh deeply affected by his need to act in accordance with both judgement and mercy. The Old Testament, it seems, cannot dispense with language that portrays Yahweh in human-like ways.[49] This point holds true for both feminine and masculine language, as we have observed not least in Isa. 42:13-14.

In response to Clines' view that the feminine imagery says nothing about a feminine aspect in Yahweh, I have suggested that that view underestimates the way in which such imagery functions in the Old Testament's portrayal of him. The kind of language favoured by the Old Testament's poets is not adventitious, but has its inspiration in the challenges of speaking about Yahweh at all. Their use of imagery, both masculine and feminine, apparently functions to meet these challenges. While masculine modes of representation may predominate, there is nevertheless a parity of kind between masculine and feminine tropes as used to disclose something of the nature of the deity. The linguistic evidence does not suggest a contest between masculine and feminine characteristics, nor an amalgam, nor a compromise, nor a kind of alternation. So what does it suggest?

It may suggest, again with cognitive linguistic theory, that human beings find it hard to think or talk about God apart from their own experience, cultural, emotional, and intellectual. The existential freight of the topic is evident in the passionate nature of some of those writing about it, in the need of some, for example, to be able to call God 'Our Mother'.[50] However, there are indications in the biblical poetry that its forms of expression arise from issues inherent in speech about God.

The leading example of this is the book of Hosea. Here, if anywhere, one might find evidence for a 'male' God, given the extended figure in the opening three chapters by which Yahweh is depicted as 'husband' of Israel. Hosea's relationship with unfaithful Gomer[51] becomes a prophetic sign of Yahweh's relationship with Israel. The trope of Yahweh as 'husband' is explicit, for example, at Hos 2.18[EVV16]:

תקראי אישי ולא תקראי לי עוד בעלי

Call me your husband; no longer call me your 'ba'al'.[52]

The attribution of the noun אישׁ, 'husband', 'man' in the sense of male, is striking.

However, this is but one strand leading into the web of figurative language for God in Hosea (some of which we have noticed above) and which poses the question

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49. Brettler remarks on the irony in Isaiah 40-66 that the 'incomparable' YHWH is depicted so pervasively in anthropomorphic terms; 'Incompatible Metaphors', pp. 97-98.
50. See above, n. 4, and Mollenkott, p. 116.
51. I offer no comment here on the question whether Hosea 1-3 portrays a single relationship of the prophet with one woman.
52. The line involves a play on the capacity of the word בעל to mean both 'husband' and the god Baal.

precisely in what way human language can speak truly about God. Most importantly, the assertion in Hos. 2.18[EVV16] that God is אִישׁ is undermined by Yahweh's statement, in the heat of his expressed dilemma between judgement and mercy:

כי אל אנכי ולא איש

For I am God (a god) and not a man (i.e. a male, husband; Hos. 11.9b).

At this point of impassioned self-disclosure on the part of Yahweh, the capacity of human language to bespeak God is both affirmed (in the anthropomorphisms of revulsion and compassion, v. 8) and has its limitations exposed, because the leading anthropomorphism in the book is negated. The effect is to suggest not just that human language is unavoidable in the attempt to disclose something of God, but also that this author at least is keenly aware of both the possibilities and limitations inherent in the project. Enmeshed in human language, it is also predicated on the differentness of God.[53]

4. Gendered imagery and the one God Yahweh

These observations about the limitations of language lead to a further question, namely the extent to which an understanding of the Old Testament's poetic expression of the divine is governed by the nature of Yahweh in particular. That is, how far is our topic a matter of religious language, and how far a function of the Old Testament's theologizing about the God of Israel?

We saw above that people in Old Testament times may have conceived of Yahweh in all kinds of ways, because of conceptions about the gods that prevailed in their times and places. However, in considering the language of Hosea, we have already moved on to the next question, not what ancient Israelites en masse may have thought about Yahweh, but what the Old Testament articulates about him. We have observed that the Old Testament contains evidence of the emergence of its beliefs about Yahweh from its religious environment. But now we are focusing on the ways in which it developed fresh understandings of God. The most obvious element in the re-thinking of God is its belief that Yahweh alone is God. Yahweh is announced in the Old Testament without either image or consort. These factors mark a radical break from other ancient concepts of the divine, which are inseparable from the iconography of male and female images. Mono-Yahwism and aniconism make deep cuts in the imagining of God.

Indeed, the Old Testament is fundamentally transformative. Not merely a record of a people's beliefs, it always mediates what has been received into something new. This is true both in relation to the environment external to Israel and to its own traditions. Examples of both abound. In the case of humanity as 'image of God' in Gen. 1.26, it has been well argued that, for the Priestly writer, this involves a translation of the wood and stone 'images' that ubiquitously signalled the victories and presence of

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53. Cf. again Brettler, on the irony of the book of Isaiah's theology of the incomparability of YHWH yet its extensive use of anthropomorphism; 'Incompatible Metaphors', 97-98.

deities in the ancient Near East into the flesh and blood of the human being, male and

female.[54] The text is evidently a reflection, in the context of a critical dialogue with concepts from the wider religious milieu, on the way in which God may be imagined, and it is significant that while it stops short of a representation of the divine appearance, it associates the divine 'image' with the human in both sexes. Similarly, the crossing of the Reed Sea (Exod. 14-15) is set against the background of mythological battles between deity and Sea (e.g. Marduk and Tiamat, Baal and Yam), transforming the polytheism of the former into a narrative of the historical deliverance of Israel by the one God Yahweh.[55] This topos also illustrates the Old Testament's capacity for inner transformation, with the crossing event, already doubly remembered in Exod. 14-15, finding new expression in Joshua 3-4 and in Isa. 43.14-21. This last text openly expresses its readiness for Yahweh to act in radically new ways (Isa. 43.18-19).[56]

At the heart of this tendency for re-presentation is the question of the nature of God. In the exodus narrative, Moses asks Yahweh what he shall say in answer to the people's question, 'What is his [God's] name?' (Exod. 3.13). It is a crucial juncture in the Genesis–Exodus deliberation on the relation of Yahweh to the God of the patriarchs, and behind him, the gods of Canaan. The well-known answer, אהיה אשר אהיה (Exod. 3.14), is an unparalleled formula for the re-apprehension of deity in the course of a history yet to unfold.[57]

It would be mistaken to think that the Old Testament's readiness to re-conceive Yahweh purges him of all residual gendered connotations. Even in the 'new things' text in Isaiah, Yahweh declares himself to be 'your king' (Isa. 43.15). The Old Testament's discernment of Yahweh out of the ancient Near Eastern mix is not even or systematic. However, in its theological reflection on the nature of Yahweh, all previously existing conceptions are, in principle, put in question. Everywhere there are signs of contention between what has been thought and what may be thought. In Isa. 43.15, the idea of Yahweh as king is not essentially connoting maleness, but rather asserting a claim over against that of Babylonian Marduk to kingship, in the context of a revolutionary vision of creation and history. In Exod. 33, the cameo of Yahweh and Moses speaking 'face to face' is immediately contested by the mysterious vision of Exod. 33.17-23, in which Moses may *not* see Yahweh's 'face', for that would lead to death (v. 20). Something similar occurs in Exod. 24, where a vision of Yahweh enthroned (24.9-11) is succeeded by the shrouding of Yahweh's glory in a cloud, the person of Yahweh distanced from the onlooker by boundaries both visual and linguistic ('the appearance of the glory of the LORD', 24.16; cf. Ezek. 1.26-28).

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54. The text has, unsurprisingly, been crucial in the feminist re-framing of Old Testament theology, led by Phyllis Trible: *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (see above, n. 3). Among the voluminous literature on the *imago dei* may be mentioned Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: the* Imago Dei *in Genesis 1* (Brazos Press: Grand Rapids, 2005), not least for his establishment of the point just made (pp. 204-212). I have set out my own thoughts on the subject in *Being Human: an Old Testament Theology of Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), pp. 16-24.
55. This point was made effectively by Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, pp. 137-38.
56. I have treated this point more fully in *Being Human*, pp. 81-87.
57. See the insightful treatment of this by R. W. L. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), especially pp. 5-35.

In the Old Testament's thinking about the nature of Yahweh, language and theology come together. For Irmtraud Fischer, linguistic imagery is an essential aspect of the Old Testament's emerging theology. She derives from the Old Testament's *increasing* monotheism the premise that all qualities of deity, as evinced by male and female gods in the ANE, must be embraced within the one Yahweh. Thus,

> YHWH can be imaged not only as a man but also as a woman ... Metaphorical language about God can and must include female *and* male images to insure that YHWH transcends every human experience and condition, even innermost realities, which can become points of comparison for metaphors of God.

The prohibition of (male) images of God finds a counterpart in the abundance of linguistic imagery 'that simply does not allow fixation on and enforcement of one image alone'.[58]

5. Conclusion

The foregoing essay arose out of a contemporary question, prompted by the impulse to re-read the Old Testament so as to include feminine categories, especially in its conceptualizing of the deity. To the voices that have claimed to discern a feminine aspect of deity in the Old Testament was counterposed the view, championed by Clines, that the Old Testament is indefeasibly male. I have drawn the following conclusions.

First, masculine language and concepts, in both human and divine realms, undeniably predominate in the Old Testament and its world. The prevalence of such concepts is an inescapable product of the historical givenness of the Bible, and especially of its emergence in patriarchal societies. Yet it does not follow that *all* biblical language and concepts are masculine. The female language and imagery has real communicative power.

Second, an important distinction was drawn between the conceptions of God that may be supposed to have prevailed among people of Old Testament times and the conceptions that may lie behind the uses of language adopted by the biblical writers to speak about God. While it is possible to document the overwhelming preponderance of male language and concepts concerning God in the Bible, it is also potentially reductive to confine writers within thought-patterns that are constructed chiefly lexically. This can occlude the nuanced reading of texts according to their unfolding sense or inner logic.

Third, the biblical writers are engaged in the theological project of speaking about the deity. This both explains their frequent resort to poetic language and suggests pointers to the reading of such language. Their use of poetry was an attempt to meet the inherent challenges to human language in undertaking to speak about God. Linguistic choices and forms are inseparable from epistemology. Poetic imagery is not

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58 Irmtraud Fischer, 'Isaiah: the Book of Female Metaphors', in Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (eds.), *Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012; orig. 1998), pp. 303-18 (314).

merely decorative, but functions actually to disclose meaning. It also wrestles with the limits of the power of language to speak of God. At these limits, it both discloses and does not disclose. There was no essential difference between metaphor and simile in this regard. Both these modes have the potential to enable certain kinds of mental conception.

Fourth, it follows that both masculine and feminine imagery for God participate in the Old Testament's disclosure of aspects of God. To this extent, it is true to say that certain texts suggest a female aspect of the deity. When modern female readers find language that appeals to their own experience and contributes to their conception of God, this does not merely arise out of their existential situation, but has real anchors in the biblical text. However, the effect of this is not to distinguish between male and female aspects of deity or set them somehow over against each other; rather, the male and female language functions to express an inclusive divine association with the human.

In the 'otherness' of the biblical language for God modern readers are faced with a decision about how to relate to it. On the question whether male language for God in the Bible entails a conception of God as masculine, modern writers divide. Sallie McFague finds the particularity of masculine formulae unacceptable and so offers a reconstructed concept of Jesus as 'paradigmatic' of the relationship between God and the world.[59] Marianne Meye Thompson, on the contrary, has argued that the language of Christian formulae, such as God as Father and Son, makes no affirmation about the gender of God, but rather that it serves to locate the user within a religious tradition. Thompson chooses to embrace the particularity. For her, '... it is impossible to reconstruct the biblical narrative so as to completely eliminate its particularism'.[60]

The biblical text, as a thing in itself, cannot be made into something that it is not. However one reads it, the sheer otherness of its language and cultural worlds is unavoidable. Yet in the 'world before the text', good readings know and understand the gulf that lies between this world and those. Where the Bible is read with an interest in what it may say about God, it is an engagement with something that stands over against our own world and is not assimilated by it. The acts of reading and hearing invite identification and assent. Yet they depend too on processes of 'translation' both overt and implicit. In this way, the 'interested' reading of the Bible, in 'the world before the text', embraces the paradox of involvement and alienation. As we have observed, the biblical authors were themselves engaged in negotiating received concepts and language and did so in ways that have left the marks of transition and transformation. Modern readers may see in their reading something analogous to this.

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59 McFague finds the 'root-metaphor' of Christianity in 'a new quality of relationship, both toward God and toward other human beings', and offers, ultimately, the concept of 'God as friend' as a 'model' that is in line with her own view of the real root-metaphor of Christianity; *Metaphorical Theology*, pp. 108-11 (108), 147.
60 Marianne Meye Thompson, *The Promise of the Father: Jesus and God in the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), pp. 165-66. On this particularity, she cites McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), p. 46.