

Male and Female Images of God in the Hebrew Scriptures

Dale Launderville

This article by Dale Launderville OSB is a digest of a much lengthier scholarly paper presented to the faculty of the School of Theology, Saint John's University, where the author is a professor, and to the ISTI board. Fr Dale received his doctorate in Semitic languages from The Catholic University of America, DC.

To have the mind in the heart and the heart in the mind constitutes an important goal for a vital and healthy life. We know how much we are shaped by our environments and our personal histories, but the process by which we come to terms with our world finds us continually groping about for the right path. It is not merely a matter of analyzing ourselves and our world; the process also demands that we act our way into thinking as well as theorizing. The practices we engage in can help us to be more attuned to ourselves and to our world. But such practices demand that we wager our lives on a particular vision of ourselves and the world to which we will remain faithful. Our imaginations open up this world and play a vital role in sustaining us in it. A number of passages from the Hebrew Scriptures instruct us in ways to imagine a world in which humans interact not only with one another but also with God.

The Hebrew tradition remembers the repeated battles waged over the right way to imagine God. The majority of the images depict a male deity: e.g., a king, a husband, a father, a warrior. Even though the male metaphors shape our imaginations, the limits of such male metaphors are revealed in their opacity and awkwardness before the incomprehensibility and freedom of Adonai. Adonai is neither a male nor a female deity. Metaphors from both genders are needed to describe the richness and complexity of the ways that Adonai encounters us.

Because Israel was born with the command to serve only one God, the diversity of human life had to find its place in wholehearted devotion to Adonai. Oneness in God warred against the ever-present tendency to imagine a consort for Adonai to more adequately bring to expression the feminine in the divine world.

The preponderance of male images for Adonai leave the average reader with the impression that the God of Israel is a male deity. The authority of the Scriptures increases the power of the male images to shape the imaginations of those who read or listen to these texts. We cannot pretend that these

male images have no impact on our self-understanding or our perception of the world. At the same time, the biblical witness has brought us to the point of acknowledging the limitations of our knowledge of God, others, and the world; it provides the basis upon which we can move forward with both the heart and the mind engaged in the search for truth.

Male and female images for God within the following texts show the struggles of the Israelites to serve only one God:

1) Moses stumbles upon a burning bush while he was herding sheep near Mount Horeb in the Sinai (Exod 3:1-12). Bushes, of course, are usually consumed if they catch on fire. If a bush burns up, its ashes may in turn contribute to the new growth of a bush from its seeds. Such dynamism in the process of natural growth was divinized by the peoples of the ancient Near East. A god lived within the bush and caused it to grow; such an immanent deity was identified with natural processes which caused wonder and made life possible. But in Moses' experience the numinous event was a paradox: the bush burned but was not consumed. The deity who appeared transcended the typical workings of nature. The God of Israel comes into human experience as a transcendent God and is never absorbed within the human or natural spheres.

The God of Israel always exceeds our imaginations. No image - either molten or literary - can capture the One Who gives the self-identification of "I am Who I am." Note that such identification uses first person verbs where the category of masculine or feminine gender is transcended. The verbs in this identification stress the activity of God; God's presence is not a static reality but rather one that acts so as to be in relation to humans and to all of creation.

Moses' journey from Mount Horeb to Egypt and then back to Mount Horeb is a revealing example of how the Israelites came into relationship with God. In dangerous confrontations with Pharaoh and trying circumstances in the desert, the Israelites and Moses came to know this God Who appeared at the burning bush. This terrifying God is compassionate. Moses and the Israelites were asked to enter into relationship with this God Who is from a different order of being and to entrust their lives to this God Who is a protector.

2) A ritual celebration of this relationship in-the-making is highlighted in the meal which Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and seventy elders shared with God on Mount Sinai. The cryptic account of this meal in Exodus 24:9-11 highlights the way in Images, continued from page 4.

which the transcendent God came into relationship with the normal human activities. They saw God; they ate and they drank (vv 9-10).

An unusual feature of this account is that the humans are not harmed as

they looked upon God. The account accents the fact that God is enthroned on high and transcends human comprehension; yet it also refers to a meal in which a relationship between God and Israel is formalized. In this type of sacramental activity, the transcendent God is seen as the monarch in the communal life of the Israelites.

Because no image or series of images can ever provide us with more than metaphors about what God might be like, each image will have definite limitations and be most properly understood when those limitations are acknowledged. To speak of God as king of Israel is to locate the source of sovereignty in heaven and to anchor the political affairs of the nation in the transcendent realm. But to emphasize the literal identification of God as a male ruler who sits on the throne in some region vertically above the earth is to misread the function of the metaphor. God in God's Self transcends the categories of gender and the roles and structures of a political system. The people who try to relate to God and bring God into their day-to-day lives will use images that reflect their experience. In the early decades of the formation of the Israelite community in which exclusive loyalty was given to one God, the image of God as king served to highlight God's sovereignty and concern for the people (Exod 15:17-18). The God of Israel transcends gender distinctions. But the Hebrew language demands that nouns and verbs be either masculine or feminine. The masculine

images of God were dominant throughout the time of the formation of the Israelite tradition in oral and written stages. Even in the polytheistic systems of the ancient Near East, the head of the pantheon was regarded as king of the gods and was clearly a male deity. As Israel was born with the Exodus from Egypt, the theological battle was not whether God was to be seen as male or female, but rather whether worship of any deity other than Adonai would be tolerated.

3) Keeping focussed upon the Lord as sovereign and as the One in Whom they were to put their trust was an ongoing battle throughout the history of the Israelite people. While Moses is still on Mount Sinai receiving instruction from the Lord, the people are at the foot of the mountain worshiping the golden calf (Exod 32:1-29). After Aaron had fashioned the calf, he proclaimed to the people: "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you from the land of Egypt" (v 4). Then the following day they offered sacrifice to the golden calf and feasted. This story can be seen as a counterpoint to the story of the elders eating before the Lord on Mount Sinai (Exod 24:9-11). The reason supplied by the narrator in Exodus 32 for the molding and worship of the calf is that Moses was delayed and the people did not know what became of him. The failure of the early Hebrews to trust and remain faithful to a relationship to one God testifies

to the human propensity to create additional cultic objects which can be manipulated.

4) Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal and Asherah on Mount Carmel highlights the decision which the Yahwistic worshipers had to make when challenged by Baalism (1 Kgs 18:17-46). Elijah confronted all the assembled people: "How long will you accommodate both sides? If the Lord is God, go after him; if Baal is god, go after him. But the people did not answer a word" (1 Kgs 18:21). This episode highlights the precarious position of exclusive worship of Adonai; it is safe to say that monolatrous worship was constantly on the defensive in Israel's history. The unifying force of monotheism had to negotiate the diversity within human experience and challenge

the Yahwistic worshipers to bring all of their experiences before Adonai and not to look for support from other powers, whether they be gods or humans.

The biblical record shows that, in the efforts to restore worship of Adonai alone, sexual expression was removed from the sanctuary and from a place in the dynamics of the relationship between humans and the divine. Just as Adonai transcends gender so also Adonai transcends sexuality. If Israel has one God for whom the majority of images are male, then it would seem that a side effect of identifying Adonai as masculine is that the feminine is devalued. Even if one counters that all images and ways of speaking of Adonai are metaphors, one still needs to be aware that in practice these metaphors do communicate a male image of God and are often interpreted literally. It seems that the need to bring forth the feminine dimension of the divine came in the form of worship of Asherah, the Canaanite mother-goddess who may have been revered as the consort of Adonai

by many Israelites. We repeatedly read of the making and removal of the sacred poles as symbols of Asherah in 1-2 Kings (1 Kgs 14:15; 16:33; 2 Kgs 17:16; 21:3,7; 23:6-7). Why does Asherah-worship show such resilience? Is it due to the paucity of feminine imagery for Adonai?

5) A century later (c 750 BCE) in the northern kingdom, the prophet Hosea was railing against the worship of Baal. Hosea identified Israel as an adulterous wife (Hos 2:7). She had loved others besides Adonai. Hosea, like Elijah before him, champions the centrality of exclusive devotion to Adonai by the Israelites. He does not regard love as a dangerous force for Israel to avoid, but rather as a positive tendency to be channeled toward Adonai exclusively. The relationship with Adonai was to be understood as one of marriage.

Exclusive, faithful, intimate love of Adonai allowed Israel to come into harmony with the rhythms of nature. Adonai controls the rains in the

heavens which lead to the production of the essential agricultural products. It was not the Canaanite gods Baal and Asherah who provided these products; Israel was not to regard these gods as her lovers but rather Adonai. Hosea continued the call of Elijah: Israel must choose to love Adonai or not. Properly ordered love brings harmony into their communities. Hosea tried to keep Israel from being absorbed into the Canaanite environment which had been dominant in the land. He introduced not only the marriage metaphor for Israel's relationship to Adonai but also the covenant concept in order to keep Israel mindful of its distinctiveness over against its neighbors who did not adhere exclusively to Adonai. The question of identity, which surfaces in the use of the covenant concept, calls for a cautious, yet creative approach so that the living relationship of a people with one another, their environment, and their God is properly appreciated and nurtured. The marriage relationship emphasizes that the intimacy and the sexual drive of husband and wife are forces that can reveal to us ways that God chooses to relate to us. This relationship to Adonai is not contained by the natural forces inherent in human relationships but such a relationship weaves its way through and together with these human realities. So Hosea's use of the marriage metaphor values the positive character of sexuality but indicates that the critical factor is the way in which our love is directed.

So also with the covenant metaphor. It indicates that Adonai entered into a bilateral relationship with Israel in which Israel was bound to uphold certain stipulations if Adonai was to continue to love Israel. The concept of covenant provided a leverage point for Hosea to explain how Adonai was not simply to be treated as any other Canaanite deity and absorbed within the practices and ideology of the city-state. The divine-human love stands at the heart of Israel's identity: a love which carries obligations and blessings.

The gender of Adonai as male and of Israel as female communicates a hierarchy of gender in which the male is dominant. One essential response to such metaphorical identifications, although not a sufficient one, is the necessity of critically interpreting every metaphor so that what is not true in the identification of the terms is heard as well as what is true. For it is the case that Israel is not feminine and that God transcends the male gender. The prophet Hosea simply followed the Israelite tradition in identifying Adonai primarily according to male images.

6) Just as the priestly circles in the late eighth century formed the holiness School in order to deal with the immanence of Adonai in the day-to-day lives of the people, the wisdom thinkers in the late sixth century BCE complemented the priestly emphasis on the transcendence of Adonai with a picture of divine immanence in the figure of Lady Wisdom.

She has a whole array of functions which are as broad as life itself. She, like a prophet, actively seeks out those who would listen to her (Prov 1:20-22). The expected response from the people is that they will pursue her (Prov 4:7-9).

The identification of feminine images of God is a critical interpretative step in coming to terms with the Old Testament images of God. Even so, if we were to count the male and female images of Adonai, we would clearly have a preponderance of male images.

No image or metaphor for God is adequate. But a greater measure of understanding and approximation to the truth is made in the very activity of trying to interpret these biblical images. The biblical God is not a male deity; Adonai transcends gender.

Conclusion. The immanence of a transcendent God can only be perceived as a paradox. This all-powerful and all-loving God is One Who transcends the categories of our language and logic but yet is known convincingly by the reasons of the heart. The event of the burning bush tells of an experience that requires both the mind and the heart in order to catch a glimmer of its truth. Once we begin to talk about this God Who gives the Self-identification

of "I am Who I am," we are caught in the time-bound categories of our culture. Such efforts to describe God are essential, but they are most truthful when the descriptions are part of an on-going conversation, a living interpretive activity which is aware of its limitations in the face of the mystery of God.

A combination of critical activity and devotion is required in order to stand on the ground which can be called "holy." This searching for God with one's mind and heart is an effort to meet this God Who also comes to be pictured in creation as One Whose voice comes to us as Wisdom crying out in the market and in the streets. Our efforts are a response to an initiative by God.

The proper response to imbalances in appreciation of gender is to correct the imbalance rather than to dismiss the world and the tradition that have made us who we are. There is no guarantee that a new proposal will be sufficiently radical and creative unless we have searched to the roots of what actually exists.

This brief survey of some of the roots of monotheistic, Old Testament faith has shown how the exclusive devotion to one God resulted in priestly and prophetic groups championing the cult of Adoni over against the polytheistic fertility cults of their neighbors. The suppression of goddesses and of sexuality in this battle left these two realities of human experience without a referent or an analogue in the heavenly sphere. The advantage of the theology of these priestly groups is their insistence

on the insufficiency of human categories to describe Adonai.

The disadvantage is the inattentiveness of Yahwistic faith to essential aspects of human experience: the feminine and sexuality.

By contrast, the prophet Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55) frequently uses feminine images for God and thereby counters the practice of Jeremiah and Ezekiel to use almost exclusively male imagery for Adonai. Also we have noted how the sages spoke of Lady Wisdom as a way of communicating important

dimensions of God's being and self-revelation to humans.

The encounter with God and the presence of God with humans is an essential aspect of the integration of mind and heart within a person. Sexuality is a force within this dynamic of integration which finds its place within the larger reality of love. Love exists where God, others, the world, and self are attentive to each other and come into harmony. The biblical tradition provides us with sacred words to carry on the conversation in which we can encounter God, others, the world, and the self in spirit and in truth. DL