Culture

Priscilla and Aquila instructed Apollos more perfectly in the way of the Lord. (Acts 18:26)

God as Motherly Father and Fatherly Mother

Joshua Robert Barron

In 1998 as a seminary student, I was assigned Elizabeth Johnson's *She Who Is*, which is now regarded as a classic Christian feminist theology text.[1] Before reading the book, I admit that I was troubled by that feminine pronoun, "She." My culture had taught me, even if only implicitly, that God is "He." Of course, Italian Renaissance artistic depictions of God the Creator as an old (if still ruggedly muscular) man with a long white beard are anthropomorphic (or perhaps merely andromorphic) and not to be taken literally. But what does it mean to refer to God as "She"? Was Johnson implying that God as revealed to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (and to Sarah, Rebekah, and Leah) and who became incarnate in Jesus is a goddess? Did this represent an embracing of pagan mother goddess and fertility goddess imagery? That, I thought—and still believe!—is incompatible with Christian faith. But I failed to reflect on the converse. What are the implications of insisting that God is "He" but never "She"? Logically, if referring to God as "She" implies a female goddess with female sexuality, then would not the use of "He" imply a male god with male sexuality?

Among English-speakers, many Christians find the prospect of applying feminine pronouns to God liberating and inclusive. Insistence, often by patriarchists, that God can only be addressed with masculine pronouns has often served to devalue women and to further exclude them from both theological discourse and from Christian leadership. Such an insistence reinforces the pagan idea from Greek philosophy that women are inherently inferior to men in essence and being. Thus, in the fourth century, Augustine of Hippo misinterpreted 1 Cor 11:7 as meaning that "not the woman but the man is the image of God" and later reiterated that woman "is not the image of God" apart from man.[2] This exegetical error is not a reflection of meditation upon biblical texts, but of the predominant Roman-Greco culture of his day. Elsewhere in the same epistle (1 Cor 15:49), Paul "recognized that all Christians were being conformed to God's image in Christ"[3] (see also Rom 8:29 and 2 Cor 3:18). In no place does Paul contradict the teaching of the Torah that humans equally, male and female, reflect God's image and likeness (Gen 1:26–27). In 1 Cor 11:7,

> Paul's reference to men *existing in the state of* (ὑπάρχων) God's image does not exclude women: both men and women exist in the state of bearing God's image. Paul does ruminate that Man reflects God's glory whereas Woman reflects Man's glory. This could mean that [in this context] men (and not women) reflect God's glory OR that men reflect God's glory and women reflect both God's glory AND man's glory.[4]

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While the language Paul uses in this verse can make it seem as though his "purpose is to prove the subordination of woman to man," this most emphatically "is not his conclusion"—Paul is simply insisting that men and women are not, and should not be, indistinguishable from each other.[5] Augustine, however, imports from pagan philosophy an eternal distinction between men and women that is ontological (that is, of inherent essence and being). Due to Augustine's unparalleled influence in Western Christianity, this unbiblical and anti-Christian idea that women are inherently inferior and of less value than men has continued to have currency in Christian circles. The suggestion that God can perhaps be conceived of as "She" reminds us that male humans and female humans are equally created *as* God's image and likeness[6] (Gen 1:26) and that "there is neither male nor female" (or, perhaps, "there is not male *versus* female") because we "are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). Learning that the "dividing wall of hostility" (Eph 2:14), not only "between different ethno-cultural and linguistic groups" but also between the male and female sexes, "is broken down within the Church" is liberating.[7]

But many English-speaking Christians are especially uncomfortable with applying feminine pronouns to God. Sometimes this is for the same reason that I was first troubled by the book title *She Who Is*. Sometimes it is simply because of tradition—"but that's not what I'm used to!" Sometimes it is because it threatens the power of patriarchalism. This debate brings us to an important question. Is God gendered? Yes and no. God Godself transcends human sexuality. "God is Spirit" (John 4:24) and as such is neither male nor female. In Num 23:19, God gives a message to a prophet that "God is not a man" nor a human (whether male or female).[8] But words for "God" are grammatically gendered in many (though not all) languages. Most European languages have, or historically had, grammatically masculine and feminine pairs, such as the English equivalent of god/goddess. Moving to Western Asia, in Armenian, "no grammatical gender exists, and a single pronoun covers both 'he' and 'she'."[9] (Armenia is especially significant in Christian history, as in AD 301 it became the second political entity, after Edessa, to officially adopt Christianity.) In African languages, the word for "God" is sometimes masculine, sometimes feminine, and sometimes neuter. I will return to African examples below.

When we turn to the biblical languages, we find that in the Hebrew OT the primary words for "God," *El* and *Elohim*, are grammatically masculine. This is so even when referring to Asherah, a fertility deity whose female sexuality was emphasized. Since biblical Hebrew lacks a feminine counterpart for the word "god," the Hebrew of 1 Kings

reads, "Asherah, the *elohim* (god) *of the Sidonians*" (11:5, 33). English versions, however, regularly render the text: "Asherah, the goddess of the Sidonians." In Greek, there is a masculine/feminine pair: *theos/thea* ("god/goddess"). In the NT and the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the OT), only the masculine form, *theos*, is used to refer to the God of Israel,[10] who was revealed in Jesus, who was of course incarnate as a human male. Due to this, and due to God's taking to Godself the name "Father" in both Jewish and Christian revelation, some have (wrongly) developed the idea that God is inherently male in essence and being. This mistaken idea has caused some to fervently argue that God can only properly be referred to with grammatically masculine pronouns.

Much feminist theology is rooted in the need to reject this error. There is also, of course, much feminine imagery for God in the Bible, such as God comparing Godself to a woman giving birth (Isa 42:14), a mother carrying her child (Isa 42:14), a nursing mother who cannot forget the infant at her breast (Isa 49:15), and a midwife (Pss 22:9–10, 71:6; Isa 66:9). Jesus compares himself to a mother hen protecting her chicks (Matt 23:37; Luke 13:34).[11] Certainly, there are masculine attributes of male humans and feminine attributes of female humans which can be traced to masculine and feminine attributes of God, as both male and female humans are created in God's image. The church should remember that both fatherhood and motherhood are rooted in God. This can be done without falling into various mother-goddess heresies and idolatries. A striking example is found in the Syriac *Odes of Solomon* 8.14 and especially 19.1–11, which build on Isa 49:15 to speak of God the Father's breasts being full of milk.[12]

Apart from the obvious theological value of such feminine imagery for God in biblical texts, the arguments for the position that "only masculine pronouns should be used for God" demonstrate an equal ignorance of how languages work and of the history of Christian thought. The OT Hebrew word for God's Spirit, *Ruakh*, is grammatically feminine. So, a literal translation of the OT would need to translate pronouns (or pronominal suffixes) referring to God's Spirit as "she." In the Greek NT, *Pneuma Hagion* ("Holy Spirit") is grammatically neuter; a literal translation of the NT in English would render pronouns referring to the Holy Spirit as "it." In Latin, *Spiritus Sanctus* ("Holy Spirit") is grammatically masculine. In the first centuries of Christianity, multitudes of Christians spoke Syriac, a language closely related to biblical Aramaic. Like Hebrew, in Syriac, *Rukha* ("Spirit") is grammatically feminine.[13] Thus, for several hundred years, Syriac-speaking Christians and theologians comfortably referred to the Holy Spirit with the feminine pronoun equivalent to "she" in English. This was true in the oldest translations of the Bible into Syriac and in other Christian writers through the first centuries of Christian history. Sebastian Brock notes that:[14]

> (1) In the earliest [Syriac] literature up to about AD 400 the Holy Spirit is virtually always treated grammatically as feminine. This is the norm in the three main monuments of early Syriac literature: the Acts of Thomas and the writings of Aphrahat and Ephrem.

> (2) From the early fifth century onwards it is evident that some people began to disapprove of treating the Holy Spirit as grammatically feminine; accordingly, in defiance of the grammatical rules of the language, they treated the word *ruha*

as masculine wherever it referred to the Holy Spirit. Perhaps this shift in practice was in part due to the ever increasing prestige of the Greek language (though of course pneuma is neuter, rather than masculine).

> (3) From the sixth century onwards what had been only sporadic practice in the fifth century now becomes the norm: ruha, referring to the Holy Spirit, is regularly treated as masculine. Even so, the original feminine was not completely ousted, for it can still occasionally be found, chiefly in liturgical texts and in poetry (where some poets use either masculine or feminine, depending on which best fits their immediate metrical requirements).

Even as this change of pronoun use was beginning to take place in the Syriac East, in the Latin West the theologian Jerome (c. 343–420) writes that no one should be scandalized by feminine imagery or pronouns for the Holy Spirit. He points out that while in Hebrew "Spirit" is grammatically feminine, it is grammatically masculine in Latin and grammatically neuter in Greek. He then concludes what we should all repeat: "In divinity [*or*, deity] there is no sex."[15]

Many African languages lack the gendered difficulties of contemporary English. When it comes to pronouns, Kouya,[16] a Niger-Congo language spoken in Côte d'Ivoire in West Africa, does not have grammatical gender at all. Instead, one singular third-person pronoun refers to humans (translated as he/him or she/her in English) while another third-person singular pronoun refers to non-humans (in English, he/him or she/her or it). For their Bible translation, Kouya Christians assign the pronoun for humans to Jesus and to God the Father, but insist that the pronoun for non-humans is necessary for the Holy Spirit.[17] In Maa, the Nilotic language spoken by the Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania in East Africa, all nouns are grammatically gendered as masculine, feminine, or neuter. The gender is indicated by the articular prefix, that is, by a prefix which functions roughly like "the" or "a" and "an" in English. The Maa word for "God" is *enkAi*; the *enk-* is a feminine prefix. Grammatically feminine names for "God" are common in many other Nilotic languages as well (e.g., Kipsigis, NgaTurkana, and Sampur).[18] Interestingly, in some Bantu languages in East Africa (e.g., kiKamba, Gikuyu) the name for God is *Ngai*, a word borrowed from the Maa *enkAi*. But though feminine in Nilotic languages, in Bantu languages *Ngai* is grammatically neuter, neither masculine nor feminine—this is perhaps appropriate "for a being so hard to imagine."[19]

As a result, the Maasai have no difficulty ascribing feminine characteristics to God. Among the traditional Arusha Maasai of Tanzania, *enkAi* is thought of as being "like a mother and a father," and women beseeching God for children sometimes address *enkAi* as *Yieyio ai*, "my Mother."[20] Yet the Maasai do not envision *enkAi*/God as a sexualized goddess. Likewise, Christian Maasai can pray to *Papa enkAi te shumata* (Father God in heaven) without envisioning a being with male genitalia. Indeed, when it is suggested to Maasai that *enkAi* as Father is male or, given that *enkAi* is grammatically feminine, is female, the response is invariably either incomprehension of the question or incredulous laughter at the thought.

When the Maasai mock the idea of God having either a male or female sexuality, they are supported by no less than Gregory of

Nazianzus (c. 329–390), who in his day mocked those who drew from the assignation of a masculine pronoun to God (on the grounds that *theos* is grammatically masculine) that God was therefore male.[21] Instead, the Maasai recognize that God (*enkAi*) is neither male nor female but has both masculine and feminine attributes. What is seemingly contradictory need not be mutually exclusive. As African theologian Charles Nyamiti reminds us, "God, being Spirit, is neither male nor female, so that there can be no question of literally applying sexual characteristics to God."[22]

The Maasai are also untroubled by the question of whether it is more appropriate to refer to God as "he" or "she." Indeed, for the Maasai "the question whether Enkai is He, God, or She, Goddess, or It, is a non-question."[23] Admittedly and as noted above, the grammatically masculine pronouns he/him/his are frequently applied to God in biblical Greek and Hebrew. But as both Jerome and Gregory of Nazianzus have shown, the use of the grammatically masculine pronoun does not mean that God is inherently male. The Maa language only has one third-person singular pronoun, *ninye*. It is not gender-specific, regardless of whether it is referring to a man, a woman, or to God. When Maa translations of the Bible need to refer to God with a pronoun, *ninye* is the only option. Maasai Christians who think in Maa but speak in English, however, will quite comfortably refer to God as "she," in grammatical agreement with the name *enkAi*. The same is true for other Nilotes in East Africa, including the Turkana, Karamajong, Samburu, and Kalenjin. Drawing on African traditions from all over the continent, Mercy Amba Oduyoye confirms that "the African mind contains an image of a motherly Father or a fatherly Mother as the Source of Being."[24] This is also a fitting description of the Maasai theological worldview as traditional Maasai recognize that *enkAi* is "the source of everything."[25]

Different cultural and linguistic perspectives provide different angles to consider. In Eph 3:10, Paul struggles to describe the nature of God's wisdom. He cannot find a word in the Greek language that will do God's wisdom justice. So, he made up a new word. In the Septuagint, Joseph's multi-colored or variegated garment—I picture something like the royal Kente fabrics from Ghana—is called *poikilos*. Paul takes that word and adds the multiplying/intensifying prefix *polu-* (from which we get *poly-* in English), creating a new word, *polupoikilos*, to describe God's wisdom—the multi-variegated, multi-colored, multi-faceted wisdom of God. Because God's wisdom—and God's very nature—is so multi-faceted it is impossible to see all of it from one cultural-linguistic perspective. American, British, Chinese, Dominican, Ecuadorian, Filipino, Ghanaian, Hungarian, Indian, Jordanian, and Kenyan perspectives—each can bring something new (and yet something true) to Christian theology. Each should be valued and each should be willing to be corrected by the others. When the Maasai refer to God as *ninye*, I as a native English speaker am reminded of the wisdom of Gregory of Nazianzus and Jerome: God is neither male nor female. When English-speaking Maasai refer to God (*enkAi*) as "she" or "her," I am reminded that this is just as correct as my customary usage of "he" and "him" when I refer to God.

Conclusion

English-speaking Christians would do well to learn from ancient theologians such as Gregory and Jerome, as well as from the Maasai Christians of East Africa today. Paying attention to Christians from fourth-century Asia and Europe and from twenty-first-century Africa can help Christians worldwide grow in theological maturity and to become more deeply rooted in Scripture. From the examples above, it is clear that grammatical gender is not able to speak unequivocally about the nature of God. God is neither male nor female. While humans, female and male, are created as the image and likeness of God, God is not created either as or in our image and likeness. Unlike us, God does not have a sex. Whether pronouns that grammatically agree with the name for "God" are masculine or feminine or neuter is a matter of linguistic accident and varies from language to language. While Christians should not idolatrously imagine God as a sexual entity, Christians should be free to refer to God with both masculine and feminine pronouns. The use of masculine pronouns points to God's masculine characteristics, which are inherently inclusive of males. The use of feminine pronouns points to God's feminine characteristics, which are inherently inclusive of females. We should expand our theologizing in ways which befit God's character—both as fatherly masculine and as motherly feminine—while avoiding the sexualized errors of both a patriarchist male god and a fertility female goddess. Ancient patristic and contemporary African Christian imagery of God as "motherly Father" and "fatherly Mother" may provide a way forward.

Notes

Portions of this article were previously published in the author's article, "My God is *enkAi*: a Reflection of Vernacular Theology," *Journal of Language, Culture, and Religion* 2/1 (2021) 1–20.

1. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (Crossroad, 1992).
2. Augustine of Hippo, *On the Trinity* 12.7.10, trans. Arthur West Haddan, NPNF, 1st Series, ed. Philip Schaff, 3:17–228 (T. & T. Clark, 1956). I briefly discuss Augustine's exegetical error in my article, "Mutual Submission, Mutual Respect: Reciprocal *enkanyit* in Ephesians 5 in the Maasai context," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 7/1 (2021) 7–8. See also Kathlyn A. Breazeale, *Mutual Empowerment: A Theology of Marriage, Intimacy, and Redemption* (Fortress, 2008) Kindle locations 585–601.
3. Craig S. Keener, *1–2 Corinthians*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge University Press, 2005) 93.
4. Joshua Robert Barron, "Mutual Submission, Mutual Respect," 8.
5. Jerome Murphy O'Connor, *1 Corinthians*, NTM 10 (Michael Glazier, 1979) 108.
6. Carmen Joy Imes persuasively argues that we humans are created *as* God's image and makes this the thesis of her recent book, *Being God's Image: Why Creation Still Matters*, foreword by J. Richard Middleton (IVP Academic, 2023). See especially her argument that the prepositional prefix בְּ (b-) in Gen 1:26, usually translated *in* ("*in* our image"), should be translated *as*, 4–6.
7. Barron, "Mutual Submission, Mutual Respect," 8.
8. The Hebrew terms are *ish* ("man, husband, male human") and *ben-adam* ("son-of-Adam," a gender-neutral idiom meaning "person"; while the singular can, depending upon context, be specific to a given male person, the plural includes both male and female humans). Interestingly, the Greek OT translates *ish* as *anthrōpos* (a grammatically masculine but sex-neutral term meaning "human person"; both a man and a woman are

equally *anthrōpos*) and *ben-adam* as *huios anthrōpou* ("son of-a-human-person").

9. Sebastian Brock, "The Holy Spirit as Feminine in Early Syriac Literature," in *After Eve: Women, Theology and the Christian Tradition*, ed. Janet Martin Soskice (Marshall Pickering, 1990) 73–88, text available at https://syriacstudies.com/2016/02/26/the-holy-spirit-as-feminine-in-early-syriac-literature-sebastian-brock/.

10. Interestingly, the pious Egyptian Jewish translators of the OT into Greek translated *elohim* when referencing Ashtoreth in 1 Kgs 11 not with *thea* ("goddess") but with *bdelugma* ("abomination").

11. For a convenient list of other examples of feminine imagery for God, see Mimi Haddad, "What Language Shall We Use? A Look at Inclusive Language for People, Feminine Images for God, and Gender-accurate Bible Translations," *Priscilla Papers* 17/1 (2003) 4.

12. James H. Charlesworth, trans., *Odes of Solomon*, OTP 2:742, 752–53.

13. The Syriac word for "Spirit," *Rukha*, is sometimes transliterated as *Rucha* or *Ruha*.

14. Brock, "The Holy Spirit as Feminine."

15. Jerome, *Commentariorum in Esaiam* ["Commentary on Isaiah"] 40.9, in *S. Hieronymi Presbyteri opera* ["Works of St Jerome the Presbyter"], *CCSL* 73, 459. Some would translate the final phrase as "there is no gender." But as an English professor at my alma mater used to say, "Words have gender; people have sex."

16. Sometimes Kuya or Kowya.

17. Eddie Arthur, "Pronouns for God: If Someone Doesn't Know How Languages Work, THEY Should Probably Not Pontificate on the Subject," *Kouyanet* (28 Jan 2022), https://kouya.net/?p=13567.

18. See Aloo Osotsi Mojola's discussions on this in "Bible Translation and Gender, Challenges and Opportunities—with Specific Reference to Sub-Saharan Africa," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 39/1 (2018) Article 1820, 9 pgs.; and "The Power of Bible Translation," *Priscilla Papers* 33/2 (2019) 3–7.

19. John Lonsdale, "Kikuyu Christianities: A History of Intimate Diversity," ch. 6 in *Christianity and the African Imagination: Studies in Honour of Adrian Hastings*, ed. David Maxwell with Ingrid Lawrie, 157–97, Studies of Religion in Africa (Brill, 2002) 168, citing Stanley K. Gathigira, *Miikarire ya Agikuyu* (Nairobi: 1934; Sheldon, 1959) 29.

20. Doris Wagner-Glenn, *Searching for a Baby's Calabash: A Study of Arusha Maasai Fertility Songs as Crystallized Expression of Central Cultural Values* (Phillip Verlag, 1992) 129.

21. Gregory Nazianzen, *The Fifth Theological Oration: On the Holy Spirit (Oration 31)*, trans. Charles Gordon Brown and James Edward Swallow, NPNF, 2nd Series, 7:439–43 (Eerdmans, 1952). See also Gail Ramshaw Schmidt's discussion in "De Divinis Nominibus: The Gender of God," *Worship* 56/2 (1982) 117–31.

22. Charles Nyamiti, "The Doctrine of God," ch. 6 in *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, ed. John Parratt, 57–64, 2nd ed., International Study Guide 23 (SPCK, 1997) 62; this chapter is an excerpt from Nyamiti's monograph, *African Tradition and the Christian God* (Gaba, 1980).

23. Jan Voshaar, *Maasai: Between the Oreteti-tree and the Tree of the Cross*, Kerk en Theologie in Context/Church and Theology in Context (Kok, 1998) 136.

24. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa*, Theological Reflections from the South (Regnum Africa, 2002) 95.

25. Zephania Shila Nkesela, *A Maasai Encounter with the Bible: Nomadic Lifestyle as a Hermeneutical Question*, Bible and Theology in Africa 30 (Peter Lang, 2020) 32.

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