

God and Maternal Imagery

A recent resolution about maternal imagery for God at the LCA convention at Bond University has to be described as a foolish attempt to curry favour with the “feminist lobby.” It is fatuous, because there are only about four passages in the Bible that compare God with a mother. Three passages in Isaiah say things like “Though a woman forget her suckling child, yet the Lord would not forget His people.” There is the parable of the woman looking for the lost coin in Luke 15, and Jesus’ words about wanting to gather Jerusalem’s people as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings. That is about all.

It is a mistake to emphasise these comparisons as though they were profoundly significant, for two reasons. First, if Jesus taught us to believe and speak of God in any specific way, surely it is that God is Father. Secondly, it will give the green light to such people as the tertiary chaplains to refer, as Richard Strelan recently did, to the Holy Spirit as “she / he”. The push for the ordination of women is probably in the background, too, on the unspoken assumption that if God can be described adequately in maternal imagery, it is appropriate for him / her to have “priestesses”, too.

In Hebrew a word that is either masculine or feminine is used with verbal forms that are either masculine or feminine (with the exception of first-person forms, which are common). I do not think I have ever encountered the tetragrammaton, the Hebrew word for “Lord”, “Yahweh”, used with a feminine verbal form.

In addition, suffixes in Hebrew, meaning “his” and “your” on both verbs and nouns are either masculine or feminine (with the exception of first person suffixes). I do not think I have ever seen a feminine suffix on a verb or noun that refers to God.

In addition, attributive and predicative adjectives must be in agreement when the nouns they refer to are either masculine or feminine. I do not think I have ever seen a feminine form of an adjective that refers to God.

In the current talk about imagery I suspect faulty logic has come into play. For one thing, people who are talking about maternal imagery are not giving many examples. Imagery includes language that suggests the senses of sight, hearing, feeling, smell, and taste, and often works with similes and metaphors. Take the following example:

Since his wife died, John Brown has mothered his children very well on his own. The imagery “mothered” works as a simile “like a mother” or even as a metaphor, (he has been a mother to them). In other words, he has shown qualities that are often, but not exclusively, as the example suggests, associated with a woman, compassion, care, neatness, love, affection, etc. It is illogical to argue from imagery to sex (gender).

It all reminds me of the trinitarian debates of the later fourth century. The Homoeans (people who refused to say that the Son was of the same substance as the Father) said that the Son was like the Father. To be “like” there needs to be a resemblance in only one respect. “Snow is like milk” and, conversely, “Milk is like snow” (both are white). In other respects they are different. It cannot be inferred from “Milk is like snow” that milk is always cold, or from “Snow is like milk” that snow runs all over the place like spilt milk. A comparison does not necessarily say anything about composition, essence, or other qualities (in this case, colour). To say that because the Lord is compassionate the Lord may be thought of as a woman is illogical, and worse. Not only women are compassionate, anyhow. Psalm 103 says that the Lord pities those who fear Him like a father.

When God speaks of the unfaithfulness of His people Israel, it is regularly the aggrieved husband, as I understand it. I don’t think ever, the aggrieved wife.

Actually the word “Father” is used fairly sparingly in the Old Testament, probably because of the frequent temptation to Baal worship. But there are similes. The imagery of “Father” is used in Deut. 1:31: “There you saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place.” Malachi 2:10 asks, “Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?” This last passage shows that the word “father” was associated closely with the concept “creator”, as also in the Creeds. If Jesus taught one thing prominently, it was that God is Father, and that we are children of our Father in heaven. Monkeying around with a “mother” concept is blasphemous.

Encouraging the use of maternal imagery is theologically incompetent and contrary to general biblical precedent. Still worse, even blasphemous, would be any references to God the rather as Father / Mother.

Equally clearly, Jesus was male, and any suggestion of gender-neutral language for Him is blasphemous. Jesus wanted to gather the people of Jerusalem as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings (Mt 23:37, Lk 13:34) (*ornis* is a bird). Usually the mother bird puts the young birds under her wings, not exclusively. Here, though the word “*ornis*”, bird, is common, Jesus uses the feminine possessive with it, “her”, though some male birds share the rearing of their young. But the one who said this, Jesus, was masculine. How much genuinely maternal imagery is there for Jesus, anyhow? There is the parable of the lost coin, Luke 15, parallel to the

parables of the lost sheep and the lost son. Hardly anywhere else is God referred to as a woman. In any case, the point of the comparison is not the sex of the one who searches and rejoices, but the search and the joy. Parables are like similes in this respect. The point of the comparison should not be pushed beyond its intended focus. I have heard it suggested that the parable of the woman seeking the coin may be there as a suggestion that the church has a duty to seek and rejoice, as God does. I admit I am not fully convinced that the parable does refer to the church. Jesus told the parable to defend Himself from attacks that he was the friend of sinners.

Trying to refer to the Holy Spirit as “she” or, as was done recently, “s/he”, is probably an illogical extension of the fact that “ruach”, the Hebrew word for “spirit” is a feminine word. But that fallacy confuses grammatical gender with gender in the sense of sex. It is as foolish as saying that because in German “Hund” is masculine, all German dogs are masculine. In any case, in Greek the word for “spirit”, “pneuma”, is neuter, and in Latin the word for “spirit”, “spiritus”, is masculine. Grammatical gender has nothing to do with sex. In the Johannine discourses (14-16) Jesus used “ekeinos” (he, masculine) for the Holy Spirit even though grammatical agreement might have suggested a neuter form, “ekeino”.

In Psalm 139:7 “your Spirit” is parallel to “your presence.” The suffixes that mean “your” are, of course, masculine. Verse 8 says, “If I go up to the heavens, You are there”, and of course, the word for “you” is “Attah” (masculine), not “Att” (feminine). The more the case is investigated, the more you have to suspect some special pleading and wool being pulled over the eyes. It is a horse that won’t run. Worse, it is a soul-destroying blasphemy throughout that vainly tries to acquiesce in the spirit of the militant feminism of our age.