
Imaging God As Mother

NANCY VAN WYK PHILLIPS

Introduction

Professor Wilterdink's lifelong interest in the tensions inherent in Calvin's doctrine of God has led him to an historical study of God as "Tyrant or Father?" in Calvin's thought. Is God primarily sovereign and omnipotent, or compassionate and loving? Does the irresistible power of God's grace cancel out human freedom, responsibility, and faith? And finally, if God is immutable and changeless, how can God also be viewed as a loving and responsive father?

Professor Wilterdink resolves these questions by pointing to the primacy of the fatherhood of God in Calvin's writing. While many other commentators have singled out Calvin's emphasis on the sovereignty of God as the determining mark of his theology, Wilterdink rightly points to the important place which Calvin gives to God's loving and beneficent fatherhood. Discipline may be a part of God's fatherly role, but it is always a loving discipline with nurture and growth as its object. Thus, while the tension between sovereignty and fatherhood is not dissolved, but is allowed to remain a paradox buried in the mystery of God's secret will, the important thing for us to know is the disposition of God toward us. This immediately takes us out of the realm of speculative theology and polemics, and into the realm of piety: "that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces."² Sovereignty may figure large in any systematic summary of Calvin, but Calvin was first and foremost the pastor for whom the practical knowledge of God must take precedence. If fatherhood and sovereignty must be weighed against each other, then let God's fatherly warmth take the lead.

The questions dealt with in Professor Wilterdink's dissertation are interesting ones to look at in turn from a feminist point of view. Women in theology are looking hard at the image of God as father: some see in this image the roots of patriarchy as an oppressive human institution while others see it as only one image which may be helpfully retained alongside other names for God. Women in the Calvinist tradition in particular may be led astray, as they try to critique the God/Father metaphor, by the popular conception of Calvin's God as a stern, icy, and remote father whose warm heart has been strangled by the grip of sovereign power. Such a Father God would need to be countered by a Mother God who embodies nurturing love. Professor Wilterdink's thesis, however, does the valuable service of clarifying Calvin's view of the fatherhood of God. In Wilterdink's summary, Calvin's God is begetter, disciplinarian, nurturer, the source of all good, and a responsive father. Against this warmer and more humane picture, a feminist critique is left with slightly altered questions: if God as father can embody compassion, then does the imaging of God as mother add anything to our view of God, and if so, what? What biblical warrant is there for such an image, and what psychological warrant? And finally, if the image of God as father

carries with it the inherent tension between grace and freedom, immutability and responsiveness, and sovereignty and loving fatherhood, might there not be a different, but parallel, sort of tension involved in imaging God as mother?

God as Mother — Biblical Evidence

For Calvin, the fatherhood of God rests on the witness of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit. We call God father because this is what Christ called him and taught us to call him. There may be evidences of God's fatherly favor to us throughout the created order, but without the lens of Scripture we are unable to read this evidence at all. Scripture presents us with Christ and the cross, and indeed, as Calvin says, "to neither angels nor men was God ever Father, except with regard to his only begotten Son."³ This knowledge is sealed in us through the witness of the Spirit, who gives us the assurance that we have been adopted as "sons."

An investigation of God as mother would seem to founder right here. Since Jesus did not refer to God as mother but as father, what choice do we have, if we listen to Scripture, but to do the same? Calvin too sets us the example of looking only through the lens of Scripture for a view of God. He does not suggest that we look at human fathers and enumerate their good points, which can in turn be projected onto God, but pointedly warns us that we will get nowhere if we proceed this way.

If we proceed in the way that Calvin suggests, however, some amazing things begin to open up. When we are reminded that we cannot proceed from human fathers to God as father, we begin to remember that God-as-father is a metaphor, rather than a reified idol, and that the meaning of that metaphor must be grasped from within Scripture. In Wiltedink's view, "the very center of divine fatherhood for Calvin is God's mercy toward his fallen creation."⁴ In other words, having called God "father," Calvin does not jump immediately to examples of patriarchal power in society in order to flesh out what God's fatherhood means. Instead, he tries to read the meaning from the Old and New Testaments, and what he reads there is that fatherhood is equivalent to mercy. In the words of Psalm 103, "as a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him."

Two Old Testament scholars have shed some interesting light on the meaning of the Hebrew word *rechem* which is translated as "pity" in the Revised Standard Version in the example given above from Psalm 103. In other places it is translated as "compassion," and it is one of the primary words used in the Old Testament to describe God's attitude toward God's people. According to Phyllis Trible, the root of this word is "womb," so that the word itself might be translated as "motherly compassion." The metaphor embodied in this word is not a trivial one. In Trible's words, "this semantic journey from the wombs of women to the compassion of God is not a minor theme on the fringes of faith. To the contrary, with persistence and power it saturates Scripture. Moreover, along the way, other passages (join) this journey to depict Yahweh poetically as a deity who conceived, was pregnant, writhed in labor pains, brought forth a child and nursed it."⁵

In Tribble's mind, the prevalence of this metaphor does not point to a glorification of women, or an identification of God with the female sex, any more than passages which use father metaphors are meant to glorify men or identify God with the male sex. She points, for example, to Isaiah 49:15, in which Yahweh asks, "Can a woman forget her sucking babe?" and then claims that "even these may forget, but I will not forget you." God's womb-compassion is illuminated by a mother's compassion for her child, but nevertheless surpasses the human example.

That the word for God's compassion derives from a root word meaning "womb" is something which has been completely obliterated in English translation. A few other examples of mother-imagery have survived (for instance, Isaiah 66:13, "as one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you"), but they have in the past been easy to dismiss as isolated bits of poetic fancy. In Phyllis Tribble's reading of Scripture, the imagery gains coherence and force, and Yahweh appears to us in the form of mother as well as father — and yet different from either.

A second Old Testament scholar who has worked in this area is Samuel Terrien, whose book *Till the Heart Sings* is an exploration of mutuality between male and female in Scripture. Like Tribble, he points to the array of words derived from the root *rechem* as all carrying a connotation of-motherly compassion, or womb compassion. In addition, he illuminates another word by telling of a conversation he had with a *sheikh*: when Terrien asked the man why his she-camels were making eerie shrieking noises, the man explained that they were yearning for their young, who had been forcibly weaned and taken from them. The word the *sheikh* used to express this maternal yearning was the Arabic cognate of the Hebrew verb *chanan*, commonly translated as "to be gracious." A second common description of God's attitudes, then, proves to be rooted in a description of maternal love.⁶ Turning to Psalm 103 again, and looking at verse 8, we see the two words together: "The Lord is merciful and gracious," in the RSV translation, or, reading the nuances, "The Lord shows womb-compassion, and cries out in yearning for her young."

Terrien would agree with Tribble that there was no intent in the minds of the authors of Scripture to portray God as female — any more than there was an intent to portray God as male. Still, the Hebrew poets consciously endowed God with the "moral attributes of both motherhood and fatherhood."⁷ When Jesus, then, called God *abba*, he did so within the context of the history of Israelite faith and Scripture, and called on a God of compassion in whom previous prophets had recognized both motherly and fatherly characteristics. His emphasis was not on naming God as male progenitor, but on naming God as personal and loving. When the poets of the Old Testament tried to express this personal and loving nature of God, they borrowed the words of human flesh and blood, both male and female.

Jesus himself used language in a like manner to describe his own yearning love when he cried out over Jerusalem, "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" (Luke 13:34, RSV) If we think again of the important place which Calvin gave to the fatherhood of God, we might ask whether his intent was to reify God as male, or whether he was simply trying to follow the words and example of Jesus. If the latter, then he too was primarily seeking to express the

grace and compassion of God, a grace and compassion which go beyond human reality and yet are best expressed in poetry that is grounded in male and female flesh.

Mother as God — Psychoanalytic Evidence

From the biblical evidence, there does not appear to be any difficulty with imaging God in female-based as well as male-based language. To take a step beyond biblical language to a more systematic presentation of God as Mother, however, is another matter: there are riches to be mined from such a conception as well as opposition to be faced. A bridge between the two approaches may be found in an inquiry into the role of mother in psychoanalytic theory.

Freud's critique of religion is notorious for its harshly reductive quality. We do not come to know God through the father-like compassion that God demonstrates toward us; rather, we create a father God out of our own need for comfort in the face of death, and out of our own awe-filled response of fear, anger, and guilt toward the power and sexual potency of our human fathers.

While the critique is harsh, if handled rightly it can be illuminating. Freud unfortunately suffered from a tin ear where theology was concerned, but others have been able to transform his interpretations of the psyche into tools which open up, rather than shut down, religion. Paul Ricouer, for example, finds layers of meaning moving between "daddy" and "Father God," or between primitive guilt and a highly ethical approach to life, so that the archaic is not denied but spirals upward and outward in new meanings. Such an approach assumes, with Freud, that the task of maturity is to "debunk" our childish identification of father with Father, so that we can move from wishes to reality and survey the vastness of the universe through adult eyes. Beyond Freud, however, there is a further assumption that a renewed scrutiny of childish wishes can unlock treasures: the longing that arises within our hearts and minds is answered by a reality that exists outside.

While Freud's critique revolved around father concepts of God, the work of some of his followers casts light on mother concepts. The object relations school of psychoanalysis was pioneered by the work of Melanie Klein, who looked to early infant-mother interaction for clues to psychological development. In her view, the infant does not struggle with impulse or instinct control, as does the older child, or with id/superego conflicts. The infant's attention centers instead on the breast for which the infant feels a ruthless hunger, a breast which seems to the infant to be inexplicably divided into a good breast which satisfies hunger and a bad breast which fails to do so. Because the infant is unable to control the external environment, the images of the good breast and bad breast are internalized in an effort to gain mastery in the psychological realm. As the infant grows, the fact that there is a basic ambivalence in the world — a good breast and bad breast, satisfaction and frustration, safety and risk, a good mother and a mother who fails to provide — must finally be dealt with. The good and the bad must be integrated, and accepted as belonging to the same person or object, so that the world does not need to be divided into black and white. To this basic acceptance of ambivalence in the world belongs as well the ability to own and admit one's own aggression and the pain one causes others. Klein referred to this as the "depressive

position," and felt that it was more a stance to be continually reverted to, than a stage to be conquered.

Looking first to the early relationship with the mother rather than to the Oedipal relationship with the father is a common thread running through the theories of all the members of the object relations school, as is the tendency to count relationships between the self and others of more central weight than issues of instinct control. In the words of Fairbairn, "the goal of the libidinal ego is the object."⁸ The mother-centered and father-centered approaches can be elaborated rather differently on an ethical level as well.

Roughly, the difference between Freud's and Klein's theories as they relate to ethical development might be characterized in this way: For Freud, ethical development springs directly from the Oedipal conflict, in which the little boy's love for his mother leads to murderous hatred for his father. His guilt over hating the father who he simultaneously loves, and his fear of reprisal, result in his abandonment of the mother as a love object and the incorporation of the father into the boy's psyche as the basis of his superego. The superego functions in a prohibitive way, by telling the boy what he may not do, but also provides him with an ego ideal, the admired and identified-with father. The authority of the patriarchal superego is projected back into society and culture, with various institutions (such as the church, or the image of God the Father) receiving the projection.

A Kleinian approach, on the other hand, has less to say about the super-ego, or pleasing an idealized parent, and more to say about feelings of accountability to others. Klein herself felt that the death instinct was inherent in human beings, and that the rage and envy felt by the infant derived from this; others, like D.W. Winnicott, Harry Guntrip, and W.R.D. Fairbairn, felt that rage resulted more from the experience of frustration of needs, and thus could be mitigated by good mothering. In any case, the consensus among these theorists on the issue of moral development is that the child, in learning to accept ambiguity, realizes that his or her own aggression toward the bad breast, or bad mother, inevitably targets and hurts the good mother as well, since the good and bad are aspects of one person. The child does not want to hurt the good mother, not because of a sudden development of an ability to be unselfish, but because the destruction of the good mother would mean being left alone and uncared for. In this way the acceptance of ambivalence forms the basis of the growth of "ruth" or concern for others, where once there was only ruthless hunger.⁹

While a successful negotiating of the Oedipal crisis would tend to lead one on toward the formation of a combination of powerful judge and admired ideal as the twin spurs to ethical development, arrival at Melanie Klein's "depressive position" would tend to give one a view of the fundamental ambiguity of existence, coupled with a realization of the destructive potential of one's own hungry aggression. While the instinctual energies of sexuality and aggression must be dealt with in either case, the flavor of the theories is different: in the one, there is mastery through distancing; in the other, there is acceptance of what is, and sorrow over the wounding nature of existence.

If God is looked at through the lenses of a father-based or mother-based approach to psychoanalysis — whether we look at God reductively, as Freud did, seeing nothing but a father-or-mother-complex writ large; or whether we follow Ricouer in elaborating depths of meaning spanning from the archaic father to the religious Father — we find that God looks

very different to us depending on which parent we started with. For Ricouer, there is only one place to start:

Why does the father figure have a privilege that the mother figure does not have? Its privileged status is no doubt due to its extremely rich symbolic power, in particular its potential for "transcendence." In symbolism, the father figures less as a begetter equal to the mother than as the name-giver and the lawgiver . . . Through sublimation and identification the symbol of the father was able to join with that of the lord and that of the heavens to form the symbolism of an ordered, wise, and just transcendence . . .¹⁰

In contrast, mother-symbolism has more often been tied to the earth than to the heavens. Mother symbolizes for us the one toward whom our first infantile hungers and rages were directed. As Dorothy Dinnerstein says, "What makes female intentionality so formidable — so terrifying and at the same time so alluring — is the mother's life-and-death control over helpless infancy . . . It is also the mother's power to foster or forbid, to humble or respect, our first steps toward autonomous activity."¹¹

The mother reminds us of our early helplessness, of the original lack of differentiation between our body and spirit, of our entrapment in flesh — in short, of our death. Dinnerstein cites the work of Melanie Klein as psychoanalytic evidence of the early — and lasting — rage toward the mother. In her opinion, it is only when men share in child care and become themselves associated in human symbolism with flesh as well as with spirit, that mothers will "stop serving as scapegoats for human resentment of the human condition."¹²

It would seem, however, that there may be another way out of the dilemma (although Dinnerstein's scheme of shared parenting is in itself helpful.) Does the psychoanalytic evidence not speak of a resolution of rage and the growth of an ability to tolerate — and even accept responsibility for — ambiguity in the world? Can woman not be associated with a Mother God who teaches a compassionate acceptance of the ambiguity in life and in ourselves? The fear of flesh, of limitation, of helplessness, and of death have made of the mother a dark symbol, a symbol to be raged against, but isn't there more? Do we really need to be afraid? Surely there is something of the holy to be recovered here.

"And God saw everything that God had made, and behold, it was very good." (Gen. 1: 31, RSV) Who feels more keenly than the mother who has given birth that this created being, this child of hers, is good — no matter the imperfections seen by others? Life, even bounded as it is by death, is good. From the relationship with the mother we learn also an ability to tolerate some of the good and bad around us, to hold it together in a whole instead of splitting it into a half to be worshiped and a half to be destroyed. We learn that our hunger may bring us what we need, and may at times become a wounding aggression toward others, and thus we learn the beginnings of mutuality and sharing. Finally, we learn that anger can be repented of, again and again: "Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from God's fierce anger, so that we perish not." (Jonah 3:9, RSV)

To look at God in this way is not to exalt the human female, no more than sounding the depths of father-imagery for God should — if handled rightly — serve to exalt the human male. To look at either type of imagery exclusively, however, is to invite an attitude of idolatry. God becomes frozen in the merely human, instead of being the One in whose image we are created, male and female, the One who shows us what it is to be human and yet who

is more than we are. God who is exclusively identified with the father becomes symbolically tied to transcendence and lawgiving and power over the creature, in such a way that tension is created, and effort must be exerted, when one attempts to recover the compassion of God (as is evident from the continual misunderstandings of Calvin's image of fatherhood). It is not that fathers are not compassionate, but that our poetry about God cannot be limited without a loss of resonance.

When mother-imagery is added to father-imagery, the attempt to see God as compassionate becomes less forced. In the psychoanalytic theories of Guntrip and Winnicott, the role of the mother is to support "being." The ego of the infant develops "in an object-relation which the infant cannot yet experience as an object-relation but can experience as symbiosis, identity with (in favorable cases) a stable object, the good enough mother; making possible the beginnings of the experience of 'being,' or 'security,' and of 'self-identity.'" ¹³ Winnicott further underlines the mother's role as a mirror: "What does the baby see when he or she looks at the mother's face? I am suggesting that, ordinarily, what the baby sees is himself or herself. In other words, the mother is looking at the baby and *what she looks like is related to what she sees there.*" ¹⁴ When the mother's face is responsive to the infant, the infant gains a sense of self by gazing into the mother's face and eyes and seeing the pleasure or love or amusement or concern which well up in response to the signals given by the infant; when the mother is unresponsive, the infant learns to look at things, but does not learn to be a self in relation.

This is not to say that the father and siblings have no mirroring role in relation to the baby: they play an important role. Nor does it mean that in all cases the mother will mirror in a better way than will the father: indeed, there are men who "mother" better than some women do. In the ordinary course of things, however, the nursing mother is the first and closest mirror the infant will experience, and thus the first to cultivate or harm the infant's ability to "be." Thus at the level of symbolism it is the mother's smiling or tender or love-filled gaze that represents acceptance in the fullest sense, acceptance of who the child is, and the initiation of personal relationship.

Of Mother God and Goddess Religions

Samuel Terrien's *Till the Heart Sings*, which, as we noted earlier, makes much of the fact that compassion and grace are words with roots in imagery deriving from the womb and from maternal yearning, makes some surprising criticisms of the image of God as mother. On the one hand, Terrien argues that the masculine gender of God derives purely from grammatical considerations. When the Hebrews took the word *EI* from the Ugaritic language, they changed its meaning from that of a proper name of a particular deity to a generic term for deity. It is because *EI* is a masculine noun that God is referred to in Scripture as masculine, not because the Hebrews thought of God as a man. "In its whole sweep, the masculine gender of the biblical literature by which God is designated does not at all signify that the Hebrews considered Yahweh as a deity with male genitals. Likewise, the motif of divine fatherhood, which was used most sparingly, never implied that Yahweh was a progenitor in the sexual sense." ¹⁵

So far, so good. The other side of the argument comes across less well, however. Why not refer to God as mother? Because, Terrien claims, "several writers" have "appeal(ed) to the studies of C.G. Jung, E. Neumann, and others on the Great Goddess of classical antiquity, while they misread or ignore the biblical evidence. They confuse monotheism and pantheism. They are unaware of the meaning of transcendence. They do not see that the worldwide myth of the Great Goddess represents a deification of Nature with a capital *N* in its two primary manifestations: life and death, sexuality and mortality, *eros* and *thanatos*."¹⁶ Terrien may be right about those who would use the myth of the Great Goddess as evidence that God is, at heart, our Mother. He does not appear to be able to shake himself loose from the historical context of the opposition of the Yahweh-faith to the surrounding fertility cults, however, and thus is unable to ask whether mother-imagery (which his own research finds in Scripture) leads automatically to a pantheistic worship of Nature.

This question is terribly important to women in religion today, and deserves far greater consideration than Terrien gives it. "The prophets and other Hebrew poets ascribed to Yahweh the moral characteristics of human motherhood, but they never deified the feminine reality."¹⁷ If this means that they never saw God as an exalted human female, this is true, but no more or less true than the fact that they never considered God a male. Terrien seems to be saying more, though, as again in a sentence in which he comments that Jeremiah observed among his fellow exiles "a new manifestation of devotion to the feminine principle."¹⁸

"Feminine reality" and "the feminine principle" are for Terrien a way of referring to magic rites which deal with sexuality in an attempt to control the powers of life and death, and thus are linked psychically with fear of, and rage toward, the woman. As we have seen, the mother does symbolize that which is closer to being than to lawgiving in human development. However, "the feminine" does not need to symbolize that which is dark and mute and terrible; and "mother" does not have to symbolize for us the oppressive power of a woman over a helpless infant. The fertility cults which surrounded the Hebrews may have made such use of the feminine, and the Hebrew prophets may have done well to contend against them in the name of Yahweh. Nevertheless, to explore the imagery of God as mother is not necessarily to participate in a fertility cult or in magic, and to suggest that this connection is inevitable is to reinforce cultural misogyny.

The exploration of God as mother leads to a greater acceptance of being, of the created order, humanity as well as the whole earth and its creatures. The exploration of God as mother leads to a renewed understanding of God's pronouncement over creation, "it is good." It does not, however, lead to a worship of deified Nature, since woman is no more (and no less) identical with nature than is man.

The exploration of God as mother may lead to a different emphasis in ethical style, an emphasis on mutuality and on the care that must be taken not to wound others, rather than on the pursuit of ethical ideals.¹⁹ This does not mean that law disappears in an attempt to return to a lawless state of nature. It does mean that beneath our efforts to distinguish bad from good must lie a solid layer of tolerance for the unresolvable ambiguities of life, a wholistic acceptance for what IS in this world, in all its limitations, or else our ethical strivings will veer dangerously toward intolerant crusades.

God as Father and Mother, and More

We return to the questions with which we began. If the fatherhood of God can be elaborated in a well-rounded way, why try to add the image of motherhood? What does it add, and how can it be justified from the biblical or the psychological evidence? This paper has tried to demonstrate several things: that there is biblical evidence that metaphorical language for God must span imagery arising from both male and female embodiedness; that human growth in relationship to the mother is rich with implications for our lives as people in relationship to each other and to God; and that sexually-truncated poetry leads eventually to idolatry. In response to Calvin's emphasis on the compassionate fatherhood of God, we can say that he did well to emphasize this aspect of God's nature, and that mother imagery can help us, in our time, to better understand God's compassion.

Is there a tension involved in imagining God as mother, a tension equivalent to that found between grace and freedom, immutability and responsiveness, and sovereignty and fatherhood? There is — and the tension revolves around the fact that mother imagery brings us closer to the creature, to the body, and to the world as it is. Tolerance and mutuality join transcendence as ways of relationship to self and to others.

If mother imagery is used alone, God may disappear in nature, just as when father imagery is used alone, patriarchal oppression of women, of people of color, and of the earth are the result. To fear mother imagery, however, and to be convinced that it leads inevitably to pantheism and magic, is to indulge in fear of the woman and to reject what our mothers can teach us about what is holy. God is Mother and God is Father, and human life in its sexual concreteness points to the God who is all this and more.

FOOTNOTES

- Garret Wilterdink, *Tyrant or Father? A Study of Calvin's Doctrine of God* (Bristol, Indiana: Wyndham Hall Press, 1985).
- ² John T. McNeill, editor, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), Book I, Chapter 2, Section 1.
- ³ *Ibid.*, Book II, Chapter 14, Section 5.
- ⁴ Wilterdink, *Tyrant or Father?*, p. 17.
- ⁵ Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 201.
- ⁶ Samuel Terrien, *Till the Heart Sings: A Biblical Theology of Manhood and Womanhood* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 57.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- ⁸ Harry Guntrip, *Psychoanalytic Theory, Therapy, and the Self* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), p. 95.
- ⁹ Harry Guntrip, *Schizoid Phenomena, Object Relations and the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1969), p. 57.
- ¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 542.
- ¹¹ Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976). p. 164 - 165.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 234.
- ¹³ Guntrip, *Schizoid Phenomena, Object Relations and the Self*, p. 248.
- ¹⁴ D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971), p. 112.
- ¹⁵ Terrien, *Till the Heart Sings*, p. 64.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 62.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 62.
- ¹⁹ Carol Gilligan makes a similar claim from a different starting point in her book, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).