Does God Have Gender?

AIDA BESANÇON SPENCER

To speak about God is a dangerous venture. On the one hand, the Bible warns us that God is beyond our comprehension. As Elihu explains to Job, “Surely God is great, and we do not know him” (Job 36:26).1 Or David exclaims, “Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable” (Ps. 145:3). The Lord tells Isaiah, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:9). Paul tells the Romans, “Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom. 11:33), and he tells Timothy that God is “the King of kings and Lord of lords” who alone “has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see” (1 Tim. 6:16). God is immortal; we are mortal (e.g., 1 Tim. 1:17, 6:16). God is eternal; we are limited (Gen. 21:33). God is all mighty or all powerful; we are limited in power (Job 36:5, Jer. 32:17, 1 Chron. 29:11–12, 2 Chron. 20:6). God is all loving; we love only partially (1 John 4:8–16). God is all grace; we offer grace only partially (Exod. 34:6–7). God is all just; we are just only partially (Exod. 34:6–7, Deut. 32:4). God is creator of all; we only subcreate (Isa. 44:24, Jer. 32:17). God deserves an exclusive love; we love in a limited way (Exod. 20:5–6, 34:14). God is always compassionate; we are compassionate sometimes. God is always holy; we are holy sometimes (Lev. 19:2). Nevertheless, we have been created in God’s image as beings who are relational and have dominion or power over the earth (Gen. 1:26–28). We have been created with the ability to speak and to symbolize.2

When it comes to God’s gender, we can find a variety of perspectives. For some, God is male or masculine, and this view then seems to affect the self-understanding of males and females. For example, one scholar concludes that, if we agree that, for the most part, “God chooses to relate himself to us as masculine,” then we must have God the Father as “the controlling symbol” in worship, and, while the Bible allows women to be in leadership positions in ministry, husbands should normally have precedence in authority in the home.3 Thirty years ago, another author wrote, “The father is the head of the household; consequently, his wife must submit herself to him and reverence him (Eph. 5:22–24, 33). It is the husband’s headship and the wife’s submission that makes it necessary to address God as Father, not Mother.”4 A professor used a similar argument in 2009: “The First Person of the Godhead chooses to name himself ‘Father’ (and not ‘Mother’) to indicate the respect and honor that is due him, as he anticipates in the created order the role that he will give to earthly fathers as the leaders or the heads of their homes.”5 If God is male, is the male god?

For others, God may be viewed as female or feminine, and this view seems then to affect the self-understanding of females and males. For example, one asks, “Is it okay to call God Mother? It is not only okay but it is just and holy, righteous and necessary. Now is the time to break the conspiracy of silence about the feminine face of God.” Why? One reason is that “the abortion of the feminine from our language about God is the foundation of the war against women within the church.”6 If God is female, is the female god?

**What is gender?**

Commentators on God and humans are using different understandings of gender. According to Webster’s Dictionary, gender refers first to a grammatical class, second to sex, such as the feminine or masculine gender.7 Does “gender” simply refer to physical sexuality? Or does “gender” refer as well to some conception above and beyond physical sexuality—some kind of abstract concept? This idea could be derived from gender referring to those things that are socially learned as culturally prescribed expressions of masculinity and femininity,8 or some inner aspect that may have nothing to do with one’s physical aspect. For example, if “gender identity” is the private (or psychological) experience of gender role and “gender role” is the public (or social) expression of gender identity,9 then some authors who argue for the validity of the transsexual experience can contrast gender identity to anatomical or genital or biological sexuality.10 What my husband and I have noticed in the evangelical discussion over gender and God is that some hierarchist writers are using this same understanding of gender role and gender identity when it comes to God.11 They appear to presuppose that gender identity is a necessary prerequisite to gender role, and, thus, if God the Father models “masculine” gender roles, God must also have a male or at least masculine gender identity. In contrast, many egalitarians contend that physical sexuality has nothing to do with prescribed patriarchal social gender roles. We all agree that humans do have gender identity (the individual’s basic conviction or self-awareness of being male or female).12 However, especially for egalitarians, to speak of sexuality in regard to God is blasphemous. Therefore, egalitarians tend to emphasize God as being neither male nor female or both male and female.13 Thus, hierarchists and egalitarians today are coming to the same topic, but from different perspectives with different concerns.

**God transcends gender.**

Sometimes, commentators begin with what is implied by biblical terms (such as looking at the implied gender in metaphorical language) and then try to harmonize their findings with what is

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### Notes

1. Exod. 33:12–13
2. Tim. 1:17, 6:16
3. Exod. 20:5–6, 34:14
4. Eph. 5:22–24
5. Tim. 1:17, 6:16
6. Exod. 34:6–7
7. Deut. 32:4
8. Exod. 34:6–7
9. Deut. 32:4
10. Exod. 34:6–7
11. Deut. 32:4
12. Exod. 34:6–7
13. Deut. 32:4

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explicitly stated. In this essay, I want to begin with what is explicitly stated in the Bible, God’s revelation, human words that have been breathed into life by God (2 Tim. 3:16), and afterwards, using this basis, go on to look at what is implicitly stated. I think this is a foundational hermeneutic: begin with the explicit, then move to the implicit, with anyone, but especially with the God who is beyond our own understanding.  

God is Spirit and has no form.

Moses is very explicit to the Israelites about God’s nature:

Since you saw no form when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any figure—the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. And when you look up to the heavens and see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, do not be led astray and bow down to them and serve them, things that the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples everywhere under heaven. (Deut. 4:15–20)

This is a key passage. God does not have the form of any human, animal, or inanimate thing on earth. Therefore, we can not say, according to God’s own self-revelation, that God has physical gender—male or female. God has no “form” at all. Moses reminds the Israelites that they could see the mountain blazing and hear God’s voice, but they saw no form that was God’s (Deut. 4:10–12). To conceive God as having any earthly form is not only to displease God (Exod. 20:4–5), but also to misrepresent God.

Moreover, God is spirit, not material (John 4:24, 2 Cor. 3:17). Thus, to learn about God, we humans need to hear God’s self-revelations and observe the results of God’s work in the world (in other words, God’s actions) and use analogies to describe God from God’s formed creations. To paraphrase Jesus’ teachings to Nicodemus, we can observe the working of God’s Spirit, but we cannot see the Spirit (John 3:8). The metaphor of “wind” is an appropriate one by which to understand God. The wind can not be seen by the human eye, but its effects can be perceived by all the senses. God can be heard. God’s actions can be seen, as God explains: “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians” (Exod. 19:4).

Jesus’ birth form as a male does not reflect God’s essence.

That is why, even when God became incarnate as God among us (“Emmanuel,” Matt. 1:23) as a physical male, Jesus’ physical form did not describe God’s essence. According to Philippians 2:6–7, Jesus was in the form (morphē) of God before the incarnation. At the incarnation, Jesus, who always exists equal to God, chose not to retain the appearance on the outside of what he was on the inside (morphē), emptying himself of the Shekinah glory. Jesus took on the form (morphē) of a slave. The metaphor “slave” fully describes God’s loving, others-oriented character, dying even on a criminal’s cross so that humans could approach God. Jesus also

was born in human likeness (homoiōma, schēma; Phil. 2:7–8), literally, “Christ Jesus, who being in form (morphē) of God did not consider the being equal to God a treasure to retain, but emptied himself, taking on a form of a slave, having been born in human likeness and having been found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself, having become obedient to the extent of death, even of a cross-death” (Phil. 2:5–8, author’s trans.). The outward form was fully human. But, unlike other humans, Jesus never sinned (Rom. 8:3, 2 Cor. 5:21). Jesus was fully God and fully human. But, being human is not a full reflection of God. Jesus is “the image of the invisible (or unseen) God” (aoratos, Col. 1:15, 1 Tim. 1:17, Heb. 11:27). The God who is Spirit, who has no form, chose to become incarnate in human form.  

As a matter of fact, I noticed that the gospel writers are careful to note that Jesus never uses the Greek masculine term anēr (male) for self-description. Jesus always uses the generic or inclusive term anthrōpos (human). Anthrōpos may be used to speak of humans as opposed to God, Jews and Gentiles as opposed to a Jewish male only, and of a person representing a group. For example, the one mediator between God and humans must be both God and human. Therefore, Jesus is the “human Christ Jesus” in 1 Timothy 2:5 (author’s trans.). The New Testament writers do have a few instances where others describe Jesus as anēr, but each of these has a point. In three of these, “male” is used to develop a metaphor. In the gospels, John the Baptist describes Jesus: “After me comes a man (anēr) who came before me, because he was first” (John 1:30, author’s trans.). However, in the context, John has been continuing the imagery of Jesus as “the Lamb of God, the one taking away the sin of the world” (John 1:29, author’s trans.). John appears to refer to the Passover lamb, a year-old male lamb that gave protection to the firstborn children of Israel (Exod. 12:5, 12–13). One reason Jesus may have been born male was to remind people of the Passover lamb, a prominent symbol of his life’s mission. Paul describes Christ as the “one man” to whom the church is betrothed in 2 Corinthians 11:2, because anēr is the only Greek term for “husband.” Peter describes Jesus as a “man” in his speech at Pentecost to highlight Jesus’ humanity. He was a mere male, as it were, just like many in his audience, through whom God worked powerfully (Acts 2:22). Paul also uses anēr when speaking to the Athenians to highlight Jesus’ humanity and function as a judge (Acts 17:31). In the first-century Greco-Roman world, women could not be judges or legal witnesses (in contrast to Deborah, Judg. 4:4). Other than these very few references, anthrōpos or “human” is the term used in the New Testament to describe Jesus.

The Bible linguistically and theologically highlights the importance of understanding Jesus first and primarily as human. That he was male is also true, but that fact should never be said to reflect God’s sexuality. Jesus’ maleness was a limitation imposed on the incarnate God, not a reflection of God’s essence. We can only guess why Jesus became a male rather than a female. No where is the reason explicitly revealed. Possibly, he symbolized the male Passover lamb, as I suggested. Possibly, he became a free Jewish male in order to make a strong contrast between the usual
prerogatives for free Jewish men and the service he taught (Mark 10:42–45). That a free man should choose to use "slavery" as his central imagery is shocking since slaves were considered objects, property, with few rights. According to the Mishnah (the first written collection of oral rabbinic law), slaves, like women, were not eligible to be witnesses, and they were exempt from learning and obeying all the Torah. Possibly, Christ wanted to be more mobile in a traditional, ancient society. No woman could have taught in the male-only synagogue classes. Possibly, he symbolized the second Adam who would do all things right. But Jesus' outward maleness, humanity, ethnicity, and class did not reflect what he was inwardly: God-Among-Us.

"He" is part of grammatical, not natural, gender.

What about the Bible's use of "he" for God? Does that imply God is male or masculine? When "he, she, it" are used in English, they refer almost every time to natural (physical) gender, as in "the man, he fell," "the woman, she fell," and "the book, it fell." Therefore, when English readers see gender, they tend to project their own understanding of gender to language. But, if we begin with the revealed information that God has explicitly forbidden being represented as male or female, then we can easily understand such language to be grammatical, not natural, gender.

Gender simply refers to class or kind (genus). Most languages divide words into categories: masculine and feminine in Hebrew, and masculine, feminine, and neuter in Greek. Webster's Dictionary notes that the number of genders in different languages varies from two to more than twenty. Gender as a grammatical category, according to linguist John Lyons, is "independent of any particular semantic association that might be established between the gender of a noun and the physical or other properties of the persons or objects denoted by that noun." Also, the writer of biblical Hebrew "is not obliged to use the feminine ending either for the purpose of distinguishing the sex of animate objects" or as an indication of the (figurative) gender of inanimate things which are regarded as feminine" according to Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar. In Hebrew, the feminine is frequently used for names of countries or towns, including personification of nations and towns, a circumscribed space, instruments, parts of the body, natural forces, abstract ideas, titles of offices, collectives, a single example of a class, death, and the artificial. The masculine tends to be used for names of people, instruments for binding, names of heavenly bodies, and the natural. For example, a dog is masculine, but a bee, hare, dove, and stork are feminine. An ox is masculine, but so is a cow when pregnant. A bear is masculine, but so is a bear-mother bereaved of whelps. "Masculine" in Hebrew seems to refer to a big aggressive animal, whereas "feminine" seems to refer to a smaller animal that is not likely to attack if one leaves it alone. But no classification works completely. Oxen are masculine in Exodus 21:37 and feminine in Genesis 33:33. A camel is masculine in Genesis 24:63, but feminine in Genesis 32:16. The sun in the sky may be feminine or masculine. A mother eagle is described by a masculine pronoun (Deut. 32:10–14). A sword is feminine, but a girdle is masculine. A shoulder is feminine, but a nose is masculine. The feminine form in Hebrew is used for abstract ideas even if they refer to men. The masculine plural in Hebrew and Greek not infrequently refers to feminine nouns, as anēr (male) in the plural may include women, and "father" (patēr) in the plural may refer to parents.

In Hebrew and Greek, the generic form will often later become the masculine form when a second category, the feminine, is developed. In other words, the masculine can not exist until the feminine has been created. For example, the Greek word diakonos, "minister," is a "masculine" noun because of the os ending. However, in the New Testament, it is used of men and women, such as Paul, Timothy, and Phoebe (Rom. 16:1, 1 Tim. 4:6, Eph. 3:7). However, in the next two to three centuries, so many women became "ministers" that diakonos was given a feminine article and, eventually, a feminine ending, diakonissa, or "deaconess."

Patēr could refer to literal fathers, but the plural usually referred to "parents." The Greek language had no singular generic term "parent." Gonēus in the singular also referred to begetter or father. It emphasized the physical act of producing offspring. Yet, in English, we can use the term "parent" in the singular as a generic term to refer to a father or a mother.

Therefore, when we analyze language, we need to evaluate it in light of its function. If we are to take the grammarians and linguists seriously, God is not called "he" because God is a male or masculine. Rather, God is "he" because God is powerful and personal. In Hebrew, "Spirit" (ruah) is grammatically feminine because the word is a metaphor for "wind," a natural force. Grammatically, God is described by masculine (Greek theos), plural (Hebrew 'Elohim), singular (Hebrew yhwh), feminine (Hebrew ruah), and neuter (Greek pneuma) nouns. These nouns do not tell us about God's sexuality. They are simply classes or categories of grammatical substantives. God must communicate to us humans within the confines of our own languages. We should learn about God by looking at God's own explicit self-revelation, and in those self-revelations God clearly tells us that the God of the Bible has no form.

So, to summarize so far, we know God through God's self-revelation. As humans, we are unlike God, and yet we are also like God. God transcends gender because God is Spirit and has no form, male or female. This is God's explicit revelation. Therefore, God incarnate, Jesus, as a male does not reflect God's essence. As we would expect, Jesus does not use "male" for self-description. Masculine biblical language for God, as a consequence, refers to grammatical, not natural, gender.

God is source of all gender.

Even though God transcends gender, God also is the source of all gender. We are like God, as well as unlike God. God is the creator of the world: "the earth, humanity and the animals" (Jer. 27:5, Gen. 1).
Both genders are needed to reflect God’s image.

We are told that God created “humanity in his image,” “a male and a female he created them” (Gen. 1:27, 5:1–2). Thus, in order to understand God’s nature, males and females together are needed to reflect God’s image. Conversely, God uses the characteristics and roles of both males and females to help people understand God’s nature.

Masculine, feminine, and neuter images are needed to describe God who created males, females, and all creation. Most biblical metaphors are not clearly sex-specific. However, we can find in the Bible many metaphors and similes for God that must be female because only women can become pregnant, bear, and nurse children. To communicate God’s great love, power, righteousness, and uniqueness, God uses the extended metaphor of a mother carrying a child from before birth to death (Isa. 45:24—46:6). The power of God and the need to punish injustice are communicated by a dual image: a warriorshouting at his enemies and a pregnant woman shouting as her child moves through the birth canal (Isa. 42:13–17). The nine months of pregnancy are like the times of God’s patience, but the time of labor, coming suddenly, is like the sudden, unpredictable time of God’s judgment. The hope for the future is compared to a mother nursing. God will never forget God’s people, even as most mothers will not, even can not, forget they have a child to nurse (Isa. 49:14–15).

Phyllis Trible has given us numerous examples where “motherly-compassion” is embedded in what superficially looks to be abstract concepts. For example, God tells Abram, “I am God Almighty” (Gen. 17:1). “Almighty” (shadday) may come from shad, “female breast” (e.g., Lam. 4:3) or shod, “violence, havoc, devastation” (e.g., Isa. 22:4). The plural for “womb” (rechem) is also used to signify “compassion.” The womb is a synecdoche for the quality of compassion. God’s great power to help is likened to maternal nourishment.

“Father” tended to be used by the ancients metaphorically for the idea of conception and “mother” for the idea of labor and actual birth. For instance, God as “maker” (yashar), “potter,” is compared to both a father and a mother. The father “begets” (yalad), the mother “is in labor” (hul) in Isaiah 45:9–10. These same two verbs were used by Moses in his song: “You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you (yalad); you forgot the God who gave you birth” (hul) (Deut. 32:18). Yalad may refer to a father or mother. However, hul refers only to a woman in labor. Trible also concludes that Deuteronomy 32:18 presents either “complementary or identical parental metaphors. In the first instance, the Rock is the father who beget, and God is the mother who withred at birth.”

God is like mothers, and all females, in that God has the capacity to bear burdens, to produce life, to save, to perform the inexplicable, to be decisive, to be thorough and careful, to be constant, to be compassionate, to calm, to comfort, to care, to protect, to help, to love, to bring joy, to command fear and immediate response, to intimidate, to destroy, to guide, to educate, to feed, to preserve, to develop, to rule, and to be merciful. Not only does the Bible use images of motherhood (human, eagle, lion, bear), household management, and queen, but these female images are also both powerful and caring. They may be found throughout the Bible, possibly as early as Genesis 1:2 with the Spirit “hovering over” the waters and Exodus 19:4 with the eagle carrying her young on her back, and “hovering over” her young (Deut. 32:11). Thus, when God’s Spirit “hovers over” the “face” of the earth, we learn that God’s relation to creation was intimate and loving as a mother hen protecting her chicks, a metaphor that God, when on earth, will repeat (Luke 13:34).

God, of course, is not a mother hen or an eagle. God has no form. But God is like a hen or an eagle in some ways, being caring and protecting. God is also unlike a hen or an eagle. Their intelligence is limited; God is not. Their care and protection may be more a biological than a conscious desire. All metaphors and similes are like and unlike the concept they claim to explain. How, then, could God be “male” or “masculine”? One reason some people propose is that, in the New Testament, God is called “Father.”

What does God as “Father” mean in the Bible?

First of all, the term “father” is no less a metaphor than “light” or “bread” or “shepherd.” God is not a literal father or a literal mother. God has no body. God does not conceive children through intercourse. Many ancients did think that Zeus, who was also called “father,” did have a body and could literally conceive children. Zeus himself had Titan parents: Cronus and Ops. Pallas Athene sprang from Zeus’s head completely armed. Zeus was quite a busy father, but not much of an example of monogamy. He sired Hephaestus and Ares (with Hera), Phoebus Apollo (with Latona), Aphrodite (with Dione), Hermes (with Maia), Dionysus (with Semele), and the Muses Calliope, Clio, Euterpe, Melpomene, Terpsichore, Erato, Polyhymnia, Urania, and Thalia (with Mnemosyne). So when Zeus or Jupiter was called “Father,” the Greeks literally meant father. When the Bible uses the term “Father” for God, it is not intended in the same literal sense.

Since the Greeks did not have any noun that served in the generic singular as “parent,” the very few rare occurrences of gones before or during New Testament times all serve as synonyms for human “father.” Only in the plural does gones (as well as patér) include mother and father.

Nevertheless, in the New Testament the verb gennaô, “to bear,” which is used of God, is mainly employed of a mother “bearing” a child, as from Mary came Jesus (Matt. 1:16), Elizabeth will bear a son (Luke 1:13), wombs that do (not) bear children (Luke 23:29, Matt. 19:12, John 16:21). Nicodemus uses gennaô to refer to birth from the womb of a mother. Jesus responds that birth from a watery uterus is not enough, but that “birth” is also needed from out of [the womb of] the Holy Spirit (John 3:5–6).

How frequent is the metaphor “father” used for God in the Bible as compared to other metaphorical terms? I have compiled a tentative list of all the New Testament images. (See chart on page 10.) In my study, “Father” is the most frequent term used for God in the New Testament only because of its prevalence in the Gospels of John and Matthew. But, outside these two gospels, “Lord” is the most frequent metaphor for both God and Jesus.
That indicates that a relationship of obedience and submission is key to understanding people's relation to the God of the Bible. The metaphor "Lord" shows that God is outside of oneself and superior to any female or male.

If we were to interpret the metaphors of the Bible merely quantitatively, then all of us would need to use the synecdochical "name" more frequently. Metaphors such as "Most High" and "One who is" are also hardly used in the United States, but they occur in the New Testament. How many of us call God "I will be who I will be" (Exod. 3:14), even though God told Moses that these words were God's name? Jesus as "head" certainly is used more frequently in the Western world than the total references warrant. Of course, all such thinking is ludicrous. God is not literally any one of these metaphors. God is both like and unlike all of them. On the other hand, we should not say that to use any biblical metaphor is wrong. What is wrong is to use the metaphor literally and exclusively. In other words, to treat God as a literal father, lord, name, savior, high one, and judge, or to treat Jesus as a literal lord, son, name, light, lamb, savior, rock, food, life, shepherd, bridegroom, face, word, king, or head—that is idolatry. How is this idolatry? Although God is real and exists, God, unlike a father, has no sexual organs. God, unlike a lord, allows freedom of choice. God, unlike a name, is alive. God, unlike a savior, has no sword or gun. God, unlike a high one, is not limited to one space. God, unlike a judge, needs no chair, no gavel, and no jury. To treat God literally as any one of these metaphors limits God to the earthly equivalent, making a false image of God: an idol.

If "father" is indeed a metaphor, in what way is it like and unlike the reality "God"? Literally, "father" refers to a man who can conceive children, as Herod was the father of Archelaus, Zebedee the father of James and John, and Zechariah the father of John. "Father" also is a synecdoche, one person who came to represent someone who begins something, such as a nation, or someone who had been the father of one of one's ancestors, such as Abraham, the "father" of Israel, or David, Jacob, or Isaac, past covenant partners with God.

In ancient times, the roles of a father had some similarities to today's father in industrialized societies, but, as well, some differences. God, like any average good father of then or today, teaches (John 6:45, 8:28), has an occupation ("works" in John 5:17 and "farms" in Matt. 15:13 and John 15:1), receives glory when the children do well (Matt. 5:16), loves when obeyed (John 10:17), disciplines (Heb. 12:7–11), forgives (Ps. 103:13), provides and protects (Ps. 68:5–6), appreciates thanks (Col. 1:12, 3:17), and is unique (Matt. 23:9). Everyone has only one natural father.

But God is more than the average human father. God as "father" creates the world, gives only good gifts to children, and knows what people need before they ask. When Jesus exhorts his listeners to be perfect or fully mature, as their heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48), the term "perfect" is no understatement to describe the image of God as "father." Josephus said that Zeus was called "ominally Father, but in reality" was "a tyrant and a despot" (Against Apion 2.33 [241]). But God as "father" is both powerful and tender.

Unlike most fathers today, "Father" God is a ruler of a vast reign, a judge, with heirs. Ancient rulers could have armies; appoint ministers of state or "friends"; give rewards of robes, crowns, and money; expect obedience; and have heirs. Their ambassadors or "friends," with whom they had intimate conversations, could represent the ruler. Similarly, the "Father" of the Bible has a kingdom with an army (of angels) and is a judge. The heir or "Son" is Jesus Christ, who represents the king, and who intimately communicates with the king. God as ruler has a will that should be obeyed, gives rewards, and grants peace. But God, unlike human rulers, is not limited to national interests. God as Father has an impartial love, loving and caring for friends and enemies alike. God as judge does not want even one person to be lost (2 Pet. 3:9).

Thus, when the Bible uses the metaphor "Father" for God, many good qualities are implied: creation, education, working, appreciation, love, forgiveness, generosity, perception, power, justice, communication, and mercy. But human fathers, unlike God, can not create the world. Human rulers, unlike God, need allies, and these allies are often equals and sometimes superiors. Human rulers expect loyalty from their allies. God expects total love (John 15:12–13). A human ruler must be concerned with the nation and the large mass of people or the powerful citizens. God is concerned for everyone, and especially the powerless, because God created everyone: as Malachi 2:10 notes: "Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us?" Since women were rarely inheritors among Jews, the metaphor "mother" would not include the double image of father-ruler.

The metaphor of a father and a son goes back to the prototype David. God tells David, "I will be to him as a father, and he shall be to me as a son." What does that mean? That means that David's inheritance is guaranteed. The covenant line will not be removed. Even in New Testament times, among the Romans, the father/son metaphor was used to indicate the formal adoption and the loving care of an heir. For example, the Roman Emperor Gaius promised his cousin that he would be "more than a guardian, a tutor and a teacher." About Tiberius Gemellus, he said, "I will appoint myself to be his father and him to be my son." His metaphorical language communicated to his listeners that Gaius intended to instruct Tiberius, prepare him for leadership, and give him full power. The father/son metaphors communicated to ancient listeners the intimacy, love, and care of a parent and the power of a ruler. So, one can see that "Father" is part of a constellation of connotations: the everyday parent, the all-powerful Parent, and the intimate but powerful ruler.

Since God is Spirit, the Bible has a great variety of metaphors to describe God. Isaiah, for example, has many contrasting images standing side by side to bring out the paradoxically manifold nature of God: from the rejected parent, rejected lover, frustrated farmer, and vineyard owner with no yield, to the master farmer and builder, powerful feller of trees, and strong mother. God is described as a potter, seamstress, businessperson, judge, sweeper, ironsmith, washer, doctor, winemaker, and warrior. God is also described by nature: storms, thunder, earthquakes, great noises,
### Figurative Properties and Comparisons

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<th>Attributes and Titles in the New Testament</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td><strong>God</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. father 42 4 29 117 3 29 10 6 15 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. lord (kurios) 18 7 38 2 42 82 24 10 18 11</td>
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<td>5. (most) high 1 7 2 1 11</td>
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<td>6. above 4 4 6 1 2 14</td>
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<td>7. savior 1 1 1 1 1 6</td>
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<td>8. one who is 6 6</td>
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<td>9. seated one 6 6</td>
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<td>10. hand(s) 1 1 2 1 5</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. light 1 1 2 4</td>
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<tr>
<td>16. master (despotés) 1 1 1 1 1</td>
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<td>17. root 4 4 4 4</td>
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<td>18. grace 3 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>19. one 1 1 1 1 1</td>
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<td>20. planter 2 1</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Jesus</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<td>2. son (huios) of God 14 6 12 28 2 12 1 7 24 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. name 11 4 8 12 30 7 3 1 2 3 5 8 86</td>
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1. Metaphors, similes, personifications, and synecdoches. Parables are not included. These figures are based on my Treasury of New Testament Images (unpublished manuscript). They are approximate numbers. A metaphor is an implied or implicit comparison between two things of unlike nature that yet have something in common, so that one or more properties of the first are attributed to the second. It is a shorter form of simile, according to Quintillian, the first-century Roman orator and rhetorician. Every metaphor has two components: The "literal term or referent" or "tenor" is the concept being discussed, and the "figurative term or image" or "vehicle" is the thing to which the concept is compared. George Caird suggests that comparisons have varying degrees of correspondence and development. The degree of correspondence is the extent of the likeness between a referent and an image. The development of a metaphor is the extent to which the author develops the ramifications of a certain comparison. A simile is an explicit comparison using a word such as "like" or "as" between two things of unlike nature that yet have something in common, so that one or more properties of the first are attributed to the second. A synecdoche occurs when the whole (a more inclusive term) is known from a small part (a less inclusive term) or a part from the whole. To personify is to invest abstractions (qualities, ideas, or general terms), inanimate objects, or nonhuman living things with human qualities or abilities, especially with human feelings. Aída Besançon Spencer, Paul’s Literary Style: A Stylistic and Historical Comparison of II Corinthians 11:16–12:13, Romans 8:9–39, and Philippians 3:2–4:13 (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1998), 196, 202, 207, 209.

2. Under the category “God” are references to God the Father, God the Trinity, and whenever a person of the Trinity was unclear. I excluded all vocative references to “lord” as no longer metaphorical. I did not include God: “action toward Jesus, activity among humans, intention, presence of, means toward, teaching,” and Jesus: “activity among humans, allegiance to, commended, communication with Father, death, incarnation, message about, mortality, resurrection, relation to Father and words.”
tidal waves, whirlwinds, tempests, wildfires, rocky mountains, heat, shade, streams, dawn, darkness, and bright light. God can also be symbolized by animals, such as a lioness or a bird. All these metaphors and similies teach us that God is indeed majestic, just, righteous, and powerful, but also compassionate, patient, perceptive, and protective. These figurative terms certainly do not teach us that God is a father, mother, tempest, or bird. Metaphors are accurate only insofar as they are not stretched beyond their intentions. To what or to whom, then, will we compare God? God is like, and unlike, many images on earth.

Conclusion

My topic has not been simply about what language we should use for God. This larger question has to do both with what is consistent or inconsistent with Scripture and what is customary for the church or individual. I do, though, want to suggest some basic guidelines.

First, we should reclaim all the variety of biblical imagery about God that can help us understand God much more. Second, we should keep in mind some dangers: (1) If we overuse “he” for God, we may forget that “he” in the Bible is a generic nonsexual term. (2) If we begin to use “she” for God, we may begin to think that God is a female. (3) If we begin to use “he” and “she” interchangeably for God, some people might understand the terms to refer to two gods, whereas we believe in one God of three equal, completely harmonious persons who can meet all human needs.

My topic has been, rather, to ask if God has gender. People sometimes form an image in their mind for God and, if we challenge that image, to their mind, we commit blasphemy. But they need to remember that God transcends gender, because God is Spirit and has no form, male or female. Jesus’ maleness is not what reflects God’s essence. Masculine biblical language for God refers to grammatical, not natural, gender. God is the source of everything, including gender. Therefore, males and females are both needed to reflect God’s image. Consequently, God is identified with a variety of characteristics and culturally gendered roles of both females and males, identifying with both genders.

To whom will we compare God, or what likeness will we compare with God? (Isa. 40:18, 25). No one and all. Then, does God have gender or gender identity? Definitely no—God has no sex. God is in God’s own class.

Notes

1. All Bible quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.
4. “The masculine terminology” for God as “Father” and for the Holy Spirit and Jesus becoming a man “has significance because God has given the man authority in the family (husband) and in the church (elder), rather than the woman.” Susan T. Foh, Women and the Word of God: A Response to Biblical Feminism (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1979), 151, 161.
11. John Cooper argues that God is a “spiritual masculine person,” partially on the ground that sex refers to “anatomy and reproduction” while gender refers to “personhood;” Our Father in Heaven, 185–86.
12. E.g., Richard Green, Sexual Identity Conflict in Children and Adults (New York, N.Y.: Basic, 1974), xv.
13. For example, R. K. McGregor Wright explains, God “is neither male nor female, nor a combination of both. Notions of a gendered God are intrinsic to a variety of paganism, but are absent from a fully biblical Christianity”; “God, Metaphor, and Gender,” Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy, ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2005), 300. Rebecca Merrill Groothuis agrees that “the view that God is both masculine and feminine confuses and distorts the image of God in humanity. It requires that the divine image be divided between women and men, such that women image God’s feminine aspects and men image God’s masculine aspects. This sexualizing of spiritual attributes renders men and women spiritual ‘opposites,’ creating a need to compartmentalize aspects of spiritual life and ministry into separate masculine and feminine quarters”; Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1997), 98. In contrast, Maria Clara Bingenexplains, “The divine being that created, saves, and sanctifies us does not identify with one gender more than the other. . . God’s faithfulness to the people in spite of their infidelity and sin, comes from God’s motherly heart. . . . There exists a feminine principle in the divinity which makes it possible to believe, worship, and love God not only as the strong Father who creates us and liberates us with his powerful arm, but also as a Mother, full of tenderness, grace, beauty, and receptivity, who accepts the seed of life and feeds it in her womb, so it may become a full being in the light of day. . . . God is a strong, protective Father and at the same time a loving, eternal Mother.” She cites Julian of Norwich: “God was happy to be our Father, and God was happy to be our Mother.” She also cites patriarchal Clement of Alexandria: “The Father’s loving breasts supply milk.” “Reflections on the Trinity,” Through Her Eyes: Women’s Theology from Latin America, ed. Elsa Tamez (New York, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989), 56–57, 63, 67–69, 80. For further examples of feminine images for God used throughout Christian history by men and women, see Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female (New York, N.Y.: Crossroad, 1983), 8–13.
15. In contrast to John Cooper’s summary of the inclusionists’ arguments, I refer to the Bible’s explicit revelation, not merely “the doctrine of divine genderlessness”; Our Father in Heaven, 182, 187.
16. Not all self-revelations of God are metaphors, such as “God,” and “merciful and gracious” (Exod. 34:6–7), loving, faithful, forgiving, etc., whereas John Cooper states that “inclusionists” who embrace the figurative theory about language “fail to maintain the distinction between figurative and nonfigurative uses of language”; Our Father in Heaven, 177.
17. Even humans at the resurrection will have spiritual bodies and therefore will not marry, but will be like angels in heaven (Matt. 22:30, Mark 12:25, Luke 20:34–36, 1 Cor. 15:44–46, 53–54).


23. Midrash Ber. 33, Hag. 11, Sukk. 2:8, Ros. Has. 18.

24. “Adam” or “one human” appears to represent persons who sin knowingly (Rom. 5:12–14), whereas “ EVE ” represents persons who sin because they were deceived (1 Tim. 2:13–14, 2 Cor. 11:3, Gen. 3:6 vs. 2:16–17). It is also possible that Adam and Eve are treated as “a human being” one entity (1 Cor. 15:21–22, 45; Gen. 1:27).


33. As in Prov. 23:22, 25; Gen. 41:8; Enoch 22:20, Malch. Jacob also calls God “Rock” and “Shepherd” (Gen. 49:24).

34. Trible, Rhetoric, 62–63.


37. Diodorus of Sicily, 4.30; 17:2; 36:16.


39. “Father” for God occurs about 192 times in the gospels (117 in John and 42 in Matthew), but 66 times in the rest of the New Testament (total 258 times). “Lord” for God occurs 252 times (65 times in the gospels and 187 times in the rest of the New Testament). The term “Lord” is used for Jesus about 236 times. This supports Wright’s point that “the terms Father and Son do not tell us about the masculinity of God; rather they tell us about the Second Person of the Trinity being sent from heaven to redeem fallen humans, and the fatherlike actions of the First Person of the Trinity toward both the incarnate Son and those whom he has redeemed to become his children,” Discovering, 295.

40. “Name” is the third most frequent term (synecdoche) for God in the New Testament.

41. Even though Bruce Wade says “God is not in essence male, so also is it true that neither the eternal Father nor the eternal Son is male; neither the divine essence, nor the eternal Persons of the God-head are gendered, literally and really,” yet he treats “Father” as God having a masculine gender identity. “Could Our Savior Have Been a Woman?” 3–4. Similarly, when John Cooper contends that, when I write “Jesus taught us to pray, ‘Our Parent who art in heaven,’” I assert “a straightforward falsehood,” he implies that God is essentially masculine. Although he states that God “ontologically” is “genderless,” yet he also holds that God is “a spiritual masculine person” or “anthropomorphically masculine” (even though the Bible is careful never to use the masculine sexual organ to describe God). Moreover, he ignores the difficulty of translating patēr from Greek, a language without the singular generic term “parent,” into a language that does have the singular generic term (English). See Our Father in Heaven, 199, 169, 185, 271–72.


43. Matt. 6:8–9, 32, 7:11, 11:25; Jas. 1:17.

44. 1 Mac. 2:18, 3:38–39, 6:8–15, 7:8–9, 10:19–21.


46. Mishnah B. Bat. 8:5.

47. 2 Sam. 7:13–16; 1 Chron. 17:13, 22:10, 28:6; Ps. 89:26–37.

48. Philo, Embassy to Gaius IV.

49. Joseph refers to himself as a “father to Pharaoh” because Pharaoh has placed him over his household and the land of Egypt (Gen. 45:8).


52. Isa. 31:4–5, 40:22.

53. See Spencer, Goddess Revival, 126–29; and Linda A. Mercadante, Gender, Doctrine, and God: The Shakers and Contemporary Theology (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1990), 61–73. Wayne Grudem mentions that “God’s self-revelation in Scripture is his own chosen way of revealing his identity to us, and we should not tamper with that or add to it by calling God names the Bible never uses and carefully avoids using,” Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism? (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2006), 230. Nevertheless, the first name for God, “a God of Seeing,” was given by a human, Hagar, and, since it aptly summarized one aspect of God’s nature, it was acceptable to God. Aída Besançon Spencer, “The God of the Bible,” The Global God: Multicultural Evangelical Views of God, ed. Aída Besançon Spencer and William David Spencer (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1998), 25.

54. R. K. McGregor Wright aptly summarizes this point: “The divine nature of Jesus did not become male nor did the human nature become divine.” Discovering, 291.