

# Jesus' Feminine Self-Presentation in the New Testament

by Valerie Geer

It is a matter of Christian doctrine that God is neither male nor female; God is spirit. The Scriptures, however, use both male *and* female imagery to talk about God's identity and activities. At the same time, it is also true that God incarnate was a Jewish *male*. This means Jesus used only male imagery to reveal himself to us while he was on earth, right? Wrong.

Jesus inhabited a male body, but his self-presentation was not exclusively male. In fact, when we consider the female imagery of God from the Old Testament, it should not surprise us that Jesus, the image of the invisible God, revealed himself in the New Testament using both male and female imagery.

Let's consider four ways Jesus fulfilled and appropriated Old Testament mothering imagery of God in his New Testament self-presentation.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Jesus laboring on the cross is like the Old Testament portrayal of God as a woman laboring in childbirth.

In Isaiah 42:14 God declares, "For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back. But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant." In this text God is portrayed

as a woman getting ready to birth a new reality for her children, one characterized by light instead of darkness and smooth paths instead of rough ones (42:16). The imagery focuses on the intense, gut-wrenching pain of the woman in labor. Dr. Lauren Winner remarks that this text "was written in the wake of this catastrophe [exile], and the text aims to assure the exiled people that God has not abandoned them," but is laboring for them.<sup>2</sup> She goes on to explain:

Isaiah gives us this groaning woman as a picture of the sovereign God, the God who is in control of redemption: God chooses to participate in the work of new creation with bellowing and panting. God chooses a participation that does not fight the pain, but that works from inside the pain.<sup>3</sup>

When similar metaphors of a laboring woman are used elsewhere in the Old Testament, the emphasis is on trembling, writhing, crying, panting, or gasping, painting a picture of the extreme anguish of the times.<sup>4</sup> In Isaiah 42:17, the anguishing times and the agony of God have to do with Judah's exile to Babylon, but the overall tone is certainly one of salvation and restoration brought about by a laboring God through the Spirit-empowered, justice-bringing "servant" referenced in the first verse of the chapter.

*How committed is God to Israel? How much does God love them? What will God do to bring about their restoration and salvation?* The answers to these questions are, in part, found in the simile of a laboring woman who sacrifices her own body, laboring with much pain at great cost to herself, to deliver her child. The

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agony, self-sacrifice, and love demonstrated by God for Israel is like that of a laboring woman.

And the writhing, panting, laboring Jesus on the cross is the fulfillment of the redemption of God. Jesus as Redeemer in the New Testament is rooted in the mothering imagery of God in the Old Testament.

## **2. Jesus' ministry of comfort and compassion in the Gospels fulfills the mother God imagery of Isaiah 66:12–13:**

For this is what the LORD says: "I will extend peace to her [Jerusalem] like a river, and wealth of nations like a flooding stream; you will nurse and be carried on her arm and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem."

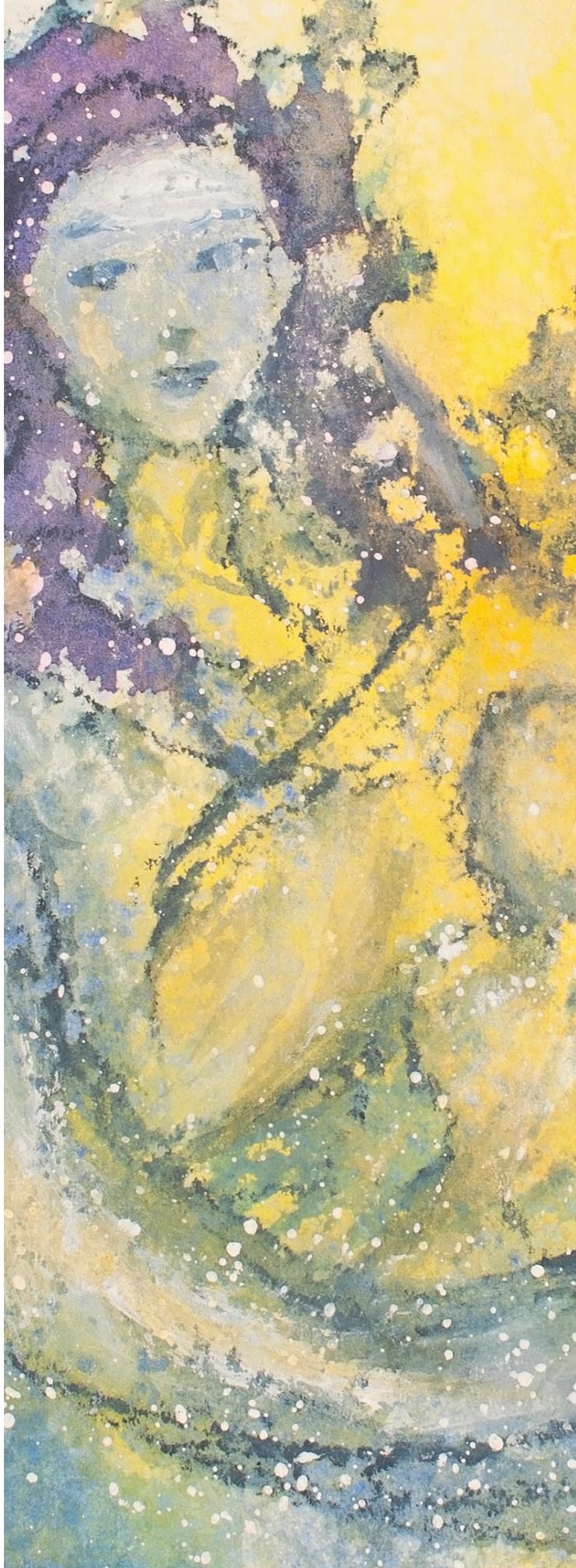
God's care for Israel can be seen through how God comforts, nourishes, carries, and brings peace to her, just like a mother does for her child. Does Jesus offer comfort and compassion? Yes. Take Matthew 9:35–36 as one of many examples. John Joon-Young Huh cites Jesus' healing of Jairus' daughter and the woman with the issue of blood as two examples of the comforting presence of God made manifest in Jesus' ministry.<sup>5</sup> He writes: "Jesus' mother-like composure allowed a safe space for the hemorrhaging woman and Jairus to overcome their anxieties and grow in their faith."<sup>6</sup>

Does Jesus bring peace? Yes. In Mark 4:39, he quiets the storm. In John 14:27, he says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." Colossians 1:20 reminds us that God reconciles all things to himself "by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." Does Jesus act like a mother toward her children, dandling them on her knee and delighting in them? Yes. In Matthew 19:14, he welcomes the children to himself.

Or, consider the many followers of Jesus in whom he expressed delight and pleasure, such as John the Beloved and Mary Magdalene. The compassionate, peace-bringing, comforting ministry of Jesus fulfills the female imagery of the God of the Old Testament.<sup>7</sup>

## **3. When Jesus commanded his disciples to eat his body and drink his blood at the Last Supper, he called upon the Old Testament imagery of God who nourished and sustained life like a nursing mother.**

Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! (Isaiah 49:15)



The mothering God of Isaiah 49:15 is one whose swollen breasts necessitate her remembrance of her baby's need for nourishment. In the same way, communion reminds us of our union with Jesus' body for nourishment. Jesus' own offering of his flesh and blood for the life-giving sustenance of the church is consistent with Isaiah's nursing mother imagery.

Jesus described himself in John 6:31-35 as the true manna, the bread that came down from heaven (a reference to Exodus 16), and told his followers that those who partake of him will never be hungry or thirsty again. Interestingly, rabbinic tradition often likened the manna God provided in the wilderness to breastmilk, pointing out that both have nourishing qualities.<sup>8</sup>

Later in John 6, Jesus also said: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them" (6:56). At the Last Supper in Luke 22:19-20, Jesus held up the bread, telling the disciples to eat it, saying, "This is my body given for you." Likewise, he held up the cup of wine and told them to drink, likening it to his blood that would be spilled for them.

The imagery of being sustained and nourished by someone's flesh and blood is a uniquely motherly metaphor that pregnant and nursing mothers experience. There is no time in human life when a person actually is nourished by the flesh and blood of another person, except in pregnancy and nursing.

Therefore, Jesus' self-presentation in communion is a distinctly female one.

#### 4. Jesus' self-presentation as a mother hen is uniquely female.

In Matthew 23:37, Jesus stands over Jerusalem and weeps, saying:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.

The agony and sorrow that Jesus expressed was at his own people's rejection of him as the Messiah.

Jesus feels distressed and worried, like a mother hen clucking around trying to gather her chicks, only to have them run away and be left vulnerable. A hen gathers her chicks for protection when a threat is imminent; she clucks and her chicks hear her voice and huddle under her wings for protection. The Jewish leaders and scribes of Jesus' time were like chicks who did not heed the clucks of mother hen Jesus and did not accept the salvation provided for them in Messiah.

In fact, Jesus' point was that the self-righteous, politically-minded Jewish elite had a history of rejecting and killing prophets of God. Now that the fulfiller of those prophecies, the Messiah, had come to them, like a mother offering salvation under her wings, they ran away. As Jesus stands over Jerusalem and uses the language

of a mother hen with a protective wing offered to her chicks, we are reminded of the protective wings of God in the Old Testament (Psalm 91:4, 36:7, 57:1, 61:4, 63:7, Deut. 32:11). The wings of God as a place of refuge and protection is not new imagery, but very familiar to the Jewish people. Jesus' self-presentation as a mother hen longing to gather her chicks under her protective wing is an appropriation of God's mothering activity in the Old Testament.

Jesus was most certainly *not* a woman, and God is most certainly *neither* male nor female, but spirit. Yet, Jesus most certainly *did* reveal God in female terms in the New Testament.

As people of God today, we can aspire to be like the numerous outstanding women of the New Testament because they are faith exemplars, gifted by the Holy Spirit, and effective in ministry. However, they are not our only feminine examples in the New Testament. We can also look to Jesus and find meaning in his fulfillment and appropriation of the feminine imagery of God from the Old Testament.



Valerie Geer is the executive director of the House of Ezer ([www.houseofezer.org](http://www.houseofezer.org)), a non-profit organization caring for female survivors of US domestic sex trafficking. She is currently enrolled in the Doctor of Intercultural Studies program at Western Seminary in Portland, OR. Valerie resides in Oregon where she loves outdoor adventuring with her husband of sixteen years and their four sons.

1. A few examples of the many instances of God depicted as a mother in the Old Testament can be found in Isaiah 42:14; 49:15; 66:7-13; Hosea 11:3-4; 13:8; Deut. 32:11-12; 32:18; and Psalm 131:2.
2. Lauren Winner, *Wearing God*, (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 135.
3. *Ibid.*, 140.
4. Hanne Loeland, "Gendered God-Language in Second Isaiah." *Wiener Jahrbuch für Theologie* 8 (2010): 396. Accessed June 1, 2016, [http://www.academia.edu/4210083/\\_Gendered\\_God-Language\\_in\\_Second\\_Isaiah](http://www.academia.edu/4210083/_Gendered_God-Language_in_Second_Isaiah).
5. John Joon-Young Huh, "Non-anxious Presence of Jesus Through Mother-like Composure," *Pastoral Psychology* 61, no. 4 (2012): 573-587, doi: 10.1007/s11089-012-0427-2.
6. *Ibid.*, 585.
7. Let us remember that God is also like a mother bear robbed of her cubs (Hosea 13:8). Similarly, the author affirms that men, not just women, exhibit compassionate and comforting qualities.
8. Winner, 174.