

# OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN

Tina Ostrander

The Bible is rich with metaphor. For instance, through the biblical imagery of husband and wife, bride and bridegroom, we come to understand the intimacy, fidelity and love our relationship with God demands.<sup>1</sup> The language is *symbolic*. It is not intended to be taken literally, but rather to convey a spiritual truth in a way that we can understand.

Perhaps the most pervasive metaphor in Scripture (especially the New Testament) is that of God as *Father*: While this too constitutes symbolic language, it is often interpreted literally. In the popular imagination, “God the Father” is not infrequently understood as “God the male,” with stereotypically male traits including initiative, provision, protection, leadership, authority, and discipline. To be sure, all of these characteristics are true of God. Yet surprisingly, scriptural use of “Father” in reference to God has nothing whatsoever to do with “maleness.” Significantly, though the cultural setting of the Bible is “thoroughly patriarchal, one never encounters an explicit appeal to the masculinity of God for any purpose whatever.”<sup>2</sup>

Recent feminist theology has pointed out the way the metaphor of divine Fatherhood has been misused in order to legitimate abuses against women both inside and outside the Church.

The symbol of the Father God, spawned in the human imagination and sustained as plausible by patriarchy, has in turn rendered service to this type of [patriarchal] society by making its mechanisms for the oppression of women appear right and fitting. If God in “his” heaven is a father ruling “his” people, then it is in the “nature” of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male-dominated.<sup>3</sup>

According to this line of thinking, the use of masculine language and symbolism for God reinforces destructive gender hierarchies. God is interpreted as a male whose full representatives must also be male.<sup>4</sup> One way to level the male-dominated power structures of our society is to change the way we talk about God, a process one feminist has called a *castration* of language.<sup>5</sup> In this manner, the Fatherhood of God is rejected altogether.

What contemporary biblical Christians must ask is whether the metaphor of God as Father is meaningful for us, and if so, *what does it mean?* Why is God called “Father” rather than “mother” or “parent”? In light of the abuses the

image has spawned throughout church history, has the image of “God the Father” lost its relevance in our post-modern era? In order to answer that question, we must first look at how the Bible itself presents the “Father” symbol.

## *THE FATHER OF ISRAEL*

There are only a handful of references to God as Father in the Old Testament. In each case “Father” is not used in a personal sense, but is used to describe a relationship between God and the nation of Israel (Jer 31:9).<sup>6</sup> In many instances, God’s fatherhood is described in the context of caring and compassion, stereotypically feminine traits:

There you saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a father carries his son... (Dt 1:31)

Your tenderness and compassion are withheld from us. But you are our Father... our Redeemer from of old is your name (Is 63:15-16).

As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him (Ps 103:13).

A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling (Ps 68:5).

The fatherhood of God in the Old Testament is also related to creation:

Is he not your father, your Creator, who made you and formed you? (Dt 32:6)

You deserted the rock, who fathered you; you forgot the God who gave you birth (Dt 32:18).

Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand (Is 64:8)

The Old Testament also utilizes rich maternal imagery to describe God:<sup>7</sup>

...He shielded him and cared for him... like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young... (Dt 32:10-11)

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! (Is 49:15)

As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you (Is 66:13).

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*Tina J. Ostrander received an M.A. in Theology from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and currently teaches adult education in the Episcopal Church and computer science at a community college near Seattle, Washington.*

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 (Is 43:14).

As God's children, we acknowledge God as our source and origin (1 Cor 8:6). Because we are created by God in God's image, we possess something of God's nature. We are intimately connected to our maker.

While feminine images are used to describe God, God is not referred to as "mother" in the Old Testament. This is largely due to the Hebrews' calling to separate themselves from their pagan neighbors. In ancient Israel, "Mother language" connoted the fertility goddesses of surrounding religions: Ishtar of Babylonia, Cybele of Phrygia, Astarte and Asjerah of Syria, Anath of Canaan. "To worship them was to accept the supremacy of nature. This meant that sexuality was at the centre of life and that sexual rites became an important part of religious observance."<sup>8</sup> The God of the Hebrew Bible transcended nature and sexuality.

For Israel, mother-goddess language "threatened not only the purity of the faith, but also the humanity of women, for in a religion in which the inherent dynamism of nature is worshipped as the force which procreates life, and always more life, women are inevitably considered as only fulfilling a sexual role."<sup>9</sup> In the pagan cultures surrounding Israel, women were often debased into mere sex objects.

#### THE FATHER OF OUR LORD

In the New Testament, "Father" is the image most often invoked to describe God. Fatherhood in this context is almost universally used to describe *Christ's* relationship to God. God is *the father of our Lord Jesus Christ*, and our father only insofar as we are in Christ. Fatherhood is a relational term. Father-Son language describes a familial relationship. It is Jesus alone who prays to God as Father and invites us to do the same (Mt 6:9).<sup>10</sup>

None of Jesus' contemporaries would have dared to use the term "Abba" (daddy) to speak to Almighty God. Yet Jesus himself invites Christians to share in his relationship of close personal intimacy with his father.

Jesus brings to all men and women an invitation to become his partners in this life with the Father. He offers us a share in that communion.... We owe it to Jesus that we can pray "Our Father," not only because he taught us the prayer, but also because he invites us to join the family of his Father.<sup>11</sup>

Thus we are *bold* to pray, "Our Father." For only in Christ may we approach our Creator with such confidence and intimacy.<sup>12</sup>

The knowledge of God as *our Father* is revealed only through Christ, in whom the fulfillment of God's covenant promises took place. God and Jesus, as Father and Son, are

one. As the Son, Jesus "addresses certain people called Christians as his brothers and sisters, manifests God to them as their Father too, calls upon them to call upon God as Father, and confronts them inescapably with this reality and truth."<sup>13</sup> In Christ, we may become united with God. This is why our ability to address the almighty God as "Abba, Father" is inextricably linked to our relationship with Jesus.

In Gnosticism, a post-Apostolic religious movement which incorporated, but redefined, Christian symbols, the Holy Spirit is identified as "Mother." Gnosticism taught a dualism between an evil world of matter, and a good world of spirit. "Gnosticism had, as it were, a place for woman in heaven as participating in creation, and a place in hell as the temptress responsible for man's imprisonment in sexuality. It had, however, no place for her as a person, as a human being on earth."<sup>14</sup> As a result of this popular heresy, the early church "was profoundly suspicious of all gnostic tendencies, and especially of any attempt to use feminine or maternal symbols for God."<sup>15</sup>

#### OUR INHERITANCE

Perhaps the most significant reason why Father language is used in the Bible is because it serves to illustrate a fundamental truth about our relationship to God: We are his "firstborn sons," adopted as heirs to his kingdom. Only by understanding the culture from which Scripture derived can we understand this important reality.

According to Old Testament law, a firstborn son received a double portion of his father's property upon the father's death (Dt 21:17).<sup>16</sup> In addition to this rich inheritance, the birthright of a firstborn entitled him to claim preeminence and authority (Gen 27:29; 49:3).

In Israel's history, "God occasionally set aside the 'birthright,' to show that the objects of His choice depended not on the will of the flesh, but on His own authority. Thus Isaac was preferred to Ishmael, Jacob to Esau, Joseph to Reuben, David to his elder brethren, Solomon to Adonijah."<sup>17</sup> The Old Testament sets a precedent: Firstborn status is granted to those whom God chooses, not necessarily to the eldest. God calls Israel his firstborn son, an indication of her chosen status and favor with God (Ex 4:22). Yet believing Gentiles are also granted the right of firstborn sons, while unbelieving Jews forfeit their birthright, as did Esau (Gen 25).

Esau sacrificed God's spiritual blessing in order to satisfy his immediate physical needs. To sacrifice his birthright was to turn away from God, for God's covenant promises to Abraham were included in the birthright. The author of Hebrews writes, "See that no one... is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son" (12:16).

Jesus is "the firstborn over all creation" (Col 1:15). "For by him all things were created.... He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of

the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy” (Col 1:16-18). Christ’s status as the firstborn of God indicates his priority to and authority over all of creation and his eternal relationship with the father (cf. Rom 8:29, Heb 1:6, Rev 1:5).

Miraculously, as believers in Christ, both men and women are granted the rights of the firstborn:

“But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the Living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to *the church of the firstborn*, whose names are written in heaven” (Heb 12:22-23, italics mine).

We come into our inheritance through adoption (Eph 1:5). Adoption implies that we’ve been granted a status that we do not naturally possess. Christ is God’s “natural” son, the “appointed heir of all things” (Heb 1:2). Believers are adopted as “firstborn sons” by grace through faith, becoming “heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ” (Rom 8:17; cf. Gal 3:29, 4:7; Tit 3:7). Our inheritance is our birthright, which we possess by adoption as God’s children, not as a reward for our deeds or accomplishments.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be *adopted as his sons* through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves (Eph 1:3-6, italics mine; cf. Gal 4:5).

Through our belief in Jesus, we are marked with the Holy Spirit, “who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession” (Eph 1:13b-14). Our “promised eternal inheritance” (Heb 9:15) is *salvation* (Heb 1:14) and *eternal life* (Mt 19:29, Rev 21:6-7). We have become children of the King, adopted as royal heirs of his kingdom, which has been prepared for us since the creation of the world (Mt 25:34, Col 1:12).

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Pet 1:3-5).

God reveals himself to us in the context of human culture. In other words, God conveys truth using human language and human analogies. We must therefore interpret

biblical language in light of biblical social structures. Because Israel’s inheritance rights were patriarchal, the Father-Son language of the Bible is uniquely able to convey the reality of Jesus’ relationship to God and our relationship to God through Jesus. Father symbolism reveals the fundamental truth that by grace, through faith, a believer is adopted as God’s own precious child, entitled to a rich and everlasting inheritance (1 Jn 3:1).

#### OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN

The Holy Spirit indwells us and reunites us with our Creator when we enter into relationship with Jesus Christ. We abide in him and he in us. We become the very dwelling place of the infinite God! In prayer, we are invited by Christ himself to invoke God as “Abba, Father” because we have become his children.

As a fish can breathe only in water and not on dry land, so Christians can live only as they drink from the fresh spring of free grace which is not natural, which cannot be won, but in which it pleases the Father continually to love his people and to call them his children.<sup>18</sup>

The fact that we have been adopted as heirs of his eternal kingdom ought to inspire in us a great sense of awe, thanksgiving and praise. God has reached out and embraced us as his children.

Christians are those who find that the world and they themselves are loved in all the unbridgeable distance from God which God himself has bridged, so that now they too can and may and should love him in return—they who are far from him, him who is near to them, crying “Abba, Father” to him...<sup>19</sup>

It is truly astonishing that we have been invited by Jesus to call God “Our Father” in spite of the infinite gulf that exists between Creator and creation.

As God’s children, we are united as one body of believers. God is not only *my* Father, but *Our* Father. God is the Father not just of me, but of all who believe in Jesus, so that we are all brothers and sisters to one another. We are related, a family. As a family, we are responsible and accountable to one another in our unity, none of us independent of the other. Our hearts are bound together by our recognition of God as Father, and by our common adoption as God’s heirs.

#### CONCLUSION

Rather than justifying male dominance, the Father-metaphor calls it under judgment.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, God the Father “did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all” (Rom 8:32). God became a man and took the role of a

servant (Mt 20:25-28). He humbled himself and poured himself out *for our sakes*.

The true God is not in fact the omnipotent monarch whose glory the religious attempt to reflect, but One who divests himself of power, who hides himself under the opposite of what the world recognizes as omnipotence.<sup>21</sup>

God himself—the Mighty One of Israel, the heavenly King—sent his Son and heir to be a scapegoat, a victim. God emptied himself of power in order to overcome the powers of this world. “He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things... so that no one may boast before him” (1 Cor 1:28-29).

Rather than legitimizing patriarchal power structures, Jesus turned them upside down. He treated women with dignity and respect, not as second-class citizens or as property. Jesus preached not domination, but mutual submission, compassion, gentleness, and love. Jesus did not claim power and lord it over his subjects but rather “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant... He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:7-8).

To Jesus, sonship meant not power but obedience and his life among men was an overwhelming demonstration of freely accepted humiliation... he not only identified himself with people, but even with the most powerless among them. His resurrection, his ultimate victory, is indissolubly linked with his crucifixion.<sup>22</sup>

Christ relinquished power and took the status of a servant in order to bring us into communion with God, into our inheritance. In him “there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female” (Gal 3:28). As King, Christ wills to dwell with his people, to “wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev 21:4).

Masculine language for God and Christ points to a radical shift in power. Susanne Heine writes, “A woman could not represent the humiliated because she herself is already where these people are. [Vicarious] representation involves the voluntary renunciation of power and privileges.”<sup>23</sup> The image of a suffering female would not challenge the powers of this world because she would be just another victim. Indeed, “a change in gender would obscure precisely that aspect of the biblical message most needed in an age sensitized by feminist and liberationist critiques: the ironic reversal of power—including masculine power.”<sup>24</sup> God was willing to become powerless, to accept humiliation, in order that we might come to know his intense love for us.<sup>25</sup>

God is infinite spirit, both masculine and feminine, both Father and Mother. God’s Fatherhood *has nothing to do with gender*.

God transcends the difference of the sexes. We call him Father because Jesus has taught us to do so, and to cease

so to call him is to cease to pray as Jesus enjoined us. To refuse to use any reference to God as ‘He’ and to choose terms such as ‘the divine being’ or ‘the Deity’ is to depersonalize God. The fatherhood of God is however not a closed or exclusive symbolism. It is open to correction, enrichment, and completion from other forms of symbol, such as ‘mother’, ‘brother’, ‘sister’ and ‘friend’. The Bible itself gives us... sufficient indication of this openness to allow us to speak of maternal traits in God.<sup>26</sup>

Those who have interpreted God’s Fatherhood in terms of maleness, both feminists and patriarchalists, have missed an important paradox. The God of the Bible is not a sexist God, but “the God of the gospel who saves men and women from their sin and liberates them for love, discipleship, and joyous fellowship...”<sup>27</sup> Christ has set us free to be children of God. At the heart of the gospel is God’s love for his people, manifest in the suffering servant on the cross. If we try to eliminate the symbol of the Father from the gospel, we destroy its very meaning.<sup>28</sup>

As biblical Christians, we must focus not on worldly misinterpretations of God the Father. Rather, we must look at the understanding Scripture gives us. Through a true understanding of God’s Fatherhood we are brought to a greater comprehension of God’s nature and of our true relationship to God and to other believers. Far from being oppressive or repressive, God’s Fatherhood calls us into freedom as his equally cherished and beloved daughters and sons. Therefore, let us approach the throne of grace with confidence (Heb 4:16), that we might enter into the abundant blessing the Lord has for us as his precious children.

1 Jer 3:20, Hosea, 2 Cor 11:2, Eph 5:23-32; Rev 22:17

2 Garrett Green, “The Gender of God and the Theology of Metaphor,” in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*. Ed. Alvin F. Kimel, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 62.

3 Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 13.

4 Elizabeth Johnson, *Consider Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 101.

5 Daly, 9.

6 See, for instance, Ex 4:22, Dt 14:1, Is 1:2, Is 63:16, Jer 3:19.

7 See also Is 31:5, Pr 1, Job 38:28-29

8 W. A. Visser’t Hooft, *The Fatherhood of God in an Age of Emancipation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 130.

9 *Ibid.*, 130-131.

10 Lk 22:42, Mt 26:39, 42, Mk 14:36, Lk 23:34, 46, John 11:41, 12:27f., Jn 17:11, 24, 25

11 Visser’t Hooft, 120-121.

12 Why doesn’t Jesus refer to God using the generic Greek word *goneus* (“parent, begetter”) rather than *pater* (father)? One reason is that the term is less personal and intimate than “father” or “mother,” just as “sibling” is less personal than “sister” or “brother.”

13 Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV, 4, Lecture Fragments*, translated by Geoffrey W. Bomiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 65.

14 Visser’t Hooft, 132.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Parallels to this practice come from Nuzi, from Larsa in the Old Babylonian period

and from Assyria in the Middle Assyrian period. NIV Study Notes, Gen 25:5.

17 *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, Ed. W.E. Vine, M.F. Unger, W. White (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 67.

18 Barth, 78.

19 *Ibid.*, 59.

20 Green, 63.

21 Martin Luther, quoted in Visser’t Hooft, 126.

22 Visser’t Hooft, 124-25.

23 Susanne Heine, *Matriarchs, Goddesses, and Images of God: A Critique of Feminist Theology*, translated by John Bowden (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 138.

24 Green, 62.

25 Visser’t Hooft, 125.

26 *Ibid.*, 133.

27 Alvin F. Kimel, Jr., “The God Who Likes His Name: Holy Trinity, Feminism, and the Language of Faith,” in *Speaking the Christian God*, 208.

28 *Ibid.*, 1.