The Feminine Imagery of God in the Hebrew Bible

The language incorporates the feminine principle into the very essence of God.

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Here are profound metaphors of God as feminine in the Hebrew Old Testament. On occasion this poetic imagery is allegorized literally as female; most often the feminine appears in the Hebrew Bible in metaphor and allegory, as in Deuteronomy 32:18b where God, here named Eloah, gives birth to Israel in groaning and travail as of a woman giving birth. In later Jewish writings in the midrashim, or stories, the Shekhinah, or Divine Presence, is depicted literally in female form.

In the Hebrew Old Testament itself, the feminine imagery is most often allegorical and poetic. Yet the feminine is there in the language incorporating the feminine principle into the very essence of God.

The foundation for thinking of God in feminine terms is in the prologue to Genesis, Genesis 1:1 to 2:4. Scholars call this poetic section the Elohistic account of Creation because of the divine name used predominantly throughout and consider it to be newer than the earlier Yahwist (another divine name) account of the creation of Adam and Eve in chapter 2. Many feel that in so much of the Bible, the inspired priestly poets, scribes, and prophets rearranged topics and verses.

The Hebrew writers were also obviously familiar with the mythology of the surrounding Canaanite culture, much as we are thoroughly familiar with the worldly, secular culture that surrounds us. However, the Lord inspired these writers of Scripture to reinterpret what they found.

For women, this introduction to Genesis has profound implications, which are being grasped as a growing number of scholars closely examine the original Hebrew text. Simply stated, God is described in both masculine and feminine imagery in the opening verses of Genesis. God (a masculine noun) creates by his Word, and life begins as the spirit (a feminine noun) of God hovers over the earth with her life-giving breath.

The Hebrew word for God in Genesis 1 is Elohim. So, in the beginning, Elohim created the heavens and the earth. For women, the significance is that the ruach Elohim of Genesis 1:2 is a feminine noun accompanied with a feminine-ending verb form, m’rechephet. Thus, the “spirit of God hovering” is a metaphorical allusion to the feminine in God. The verb m’rechephet is identical to the verb used in Deuteronomy 32:11 where God is compared to a mother eagle: God upholds Israel as an eagle hovers and spreads her wings. (It is not customary to use the pronoun She to identify the spirit, but in the Hebrew the Spirit cannot be identified with the pronoun He, according to many Hebrew scholars.)

Deuteronomy 32 was the Song of Moses, which many scholars consider to be a part of the earliest and most sacred of the Hebrew traditions. Since this was originally an oral tradition, the priestly poet writing down Genesis 1:2 may well have memorized and repeated over and over the verses from the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32.

I believe that Genesis 1:2 was a deliberate allusion to the ancient poetical Song. I view this allusion to the feminine in Genesis 1:2 as a brilliant synthesis. It also helps develop the argument that the feminine imagery is integral to the original Hebrew concept of God.

This allusion to the feminine in God builds in Genesis 1:26–27 where mankind, ha-adam, is made in the image and likeness of God, and ha-adam, male and female, is given dominion over all earth. This verse has often been interpreted to mean that man/male is the image and likeness of God; in recent years, however, many scholars are interpreting Genesis 1:26–27 as humankind, male and female, as the image and likeness of God.

These two passages in Genesis 1–2:4 are foundational to any concept of the feminine in God in the Hebrew Scripture. These include the parallel description of Genesis 1:1 of the masculine God Elohim creating the heavens and the earth, followed by the description in Genesis 1–2 of the ruach Elohim, or Spirit of God, in feminine noun and verb form with its allusion to God as a mother eagle in Deuteronomy 32:11. Second, it includes the description in Genesis 1:26–27 of ha-adam, mankind, male and female, as the image and likeness of God.

The poetic imagery of God in Genesis 1–2:4 spins in my mind in ever-widening circles of the concept of God in feminine form. God in Genesis 1 is Elohim, a masculine plural form most often used with a singular verb. According to the Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, the meaning of the word is unclear, but at times it can even refer to the council of the gods. It is derived from the ancient Ugaritic where God was El, the goddess was Elat, and the plural of the gods was Elohim.

These words for God come out of the ancient Near East, where Gods and goddesses abounded; Astarte and Baal are examples. Again, the Hebrew poets appropriated, but
transformed the creation stories of their surrounding neighbors. I personally believe this was part of their genius. They demythologized the gods of the surrounding Canaanite culture, revealing God as a more spiritualized concept. In so doing, they eliminated the fertility gods and goddesses, and they taught that God is One.

In their poetic imagery the god Elohim became singular-plural. Elohim was a masculine plural noun most often used with a singular verb. This word image of Elohim also incorporated the feminine as a noun concept, the ruach Elohim. This God was a plurality of oneness, the one including the many, the masculine and feminine combined, the two in one.

This is a brilliant use of language. If we truly believe this is the Word of God, then the Word is inspired by a God who loves word play and delights in symbolism and a sophisticated use of language. This is poetry. This is metaphor. This is imagery. It is not theology as I think of theology. It is poetic imagery of God. It allows for the unity of the married couple in our Christian sacramental teachings in which man and wife become two in one flesh. Further, it can be expanded into our ecumenical concepts of the ways in which people follow Christ. We are one in the Spirit. We are one in the Lord. It allows for our Christian concept of the mystical body of Christ: We are one breed. We are one body. God in the Hebrew vision was a plurality of oneness.

This God of the Hebrews was also demythologized. Sexuality was taken out of the literal performance of the fertility rites that were performed in pagan temple rituals to insure the productivity of the land; it was spiritualized and taken into the realm of transcendence and spirit. Sexuality of male and female was treated as allegory and symbol within the essence of God. Creation was by God’s Word when God said, Let there be light. Life began with the living breath of the Spirit of God, the ruach Elohim.

Although the feminine in God was transformed and lifted into the realm of spirit, it was not eliminated. Rather, it became described in allegory and metaphor. The Canaanites worshiped the goddess Elat. The Hebrews emphasized the ruach Elohim, identified with the mother eagle of Deuteronomy 32:11. Then even later in the Wisdom literature, including Proverbs and the apocryphal books of Wisdom and Sirach, this holy spirit of God was identified with Lady Wisdom (Prov. 1:20–22; 8:1–9:6; Wis. 1:6–7, 6:22–25).

In summary, in the first two verses of Genesis there is a parallel construction between the masculine and feminine. In the first verse, God, Elohim, creates the heavens and the earth. The noun is masculine and the verb ending is masculine. In the second verse, the ruach Elohim n’reephet, the spirit of God hovers. The noun, spirit or breath or wind, is feminine, and the verb ending is feminine. This ruach Elohim (Gen. 1:2) is identified with the mother eagle of Deuteronomy 32:11. Male and female are in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26–27). Wisdom is identified as She in the Protestant Book of Proverbs (8:24). The Holy Spirit is identified with the feminine spirit of Wisdom in the Catholic Apocrypha.

It has taken me a long time to come to this understanding—in fact, forty years of wandering through Scripture study groups, prayer meditations and graduate school. In the process I’ve had two books published, Woman: Image of the Holy Spirit and Elohim. Now, in my maturing years, it is all coming together.

I am now aware that there are many passages concerning God in the Hebrew describing God in maternal and feminine metaphor, including Deuteronomy 32:18b, where God groans and gives birth in an image of a woman in labor. My foundational concept of the feminine in God is in Genesis in the introduction, where God is described with both masculine and feminine nouns and verbs, as Elohim and ruach Elohim. I now have this awesome certitude that, as a woman, I have been defined in the Hebrew Scripture as made in the image and likeness of God.

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**Endnotes**

1. “Eloah” as a name for God is listed under “Elohim” in the Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible. It is also listed in the Encyclopaedia Judaica. I’m indebted to Ronald Pascale, then a divinity student at Harvard University, for the translation of Deuteronomy 32:18 when I attended the Theological Institute at St. Norbert College, De Pere, WI, in the summer of 1998.

2. Interviews with Rabbi Isaac VandeWalle, then head rabbi at Cnesses Israel Congregation, Green Bay, WI, summer 1978.


4. The Jerusalem Bible, commentary on Genesis.

5. Blenkinsopp, Joseph, contributor to The Jerusalem Bible; interview 1974.

6. Ibid.


15. Ibid.


