

Book Review

Women and the Gender of God by Amy Peeler (Eerdmans, 2022)

Reviewed by TODD EDMONDSON

For those willing to take an unflinching look at the history of the church, it is difficult to ignore the reality that Christianity has a long and troubling record of misogyny, ranging from the passive neglect of women's gifts within communities of faith, to the active silencing of women's voices in the worship and work of the church, to the violent abuse of women within spaces that should be not only safe, but sacred. However, we may still disagree about the root causes of such a shameful history. In her recent book *Women and the Gender of God*, Amy Peeler argues that misogyny in the church is not exclusively or primarily an anthropological problem, but a theological one. When we allow misogyny to pervade the church, or when we prop up misogynistic systems within the community of faith, this is not simply because we have gotten something wrong about humanity, but because we have gotten something fundamentally wrong about God. While orthodox Christian belief has long upheld the conviction that God is beyond gender, this has not prevented many in the church from presenting what Peeler refers to as "the underlying belief that God is male" (2), if not in explicit statements about God, then in assumptions and the actions that flow from those assumptions. Far from being a purely academic matter, Peeler asserts that, when we allow such a belief to shape us, it becomes easier to view as inferior that part of the population—women—whom we believe to be less like God because they are somehow not fully created in the image of God. It is not too much of a stretch to see how misguided beliefs about God and gender can bear rotten fruit in the myriad ways that women are mistreated in the church every day.

Among the greatest strengths of this book is Peeler's recognition that any attempt to address our harmful misconceptions about the maleness of God must be rooted in a story central to Christian doctrine, the incarnation. Her argument rests on her examination of that narrative and on the primary characters at work in the narrative: Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and Mary of Nazareth. In Peeler's words, this story, and these characters, "reveal that the heart of the Christian narrative rejects the damaging assumptions of God's maleness" (4). In this grouping, Mary is seen not as coequal with the persons of the Trinity, but certainly in cooperation with them to accomplish God's purposes in a wholly unique way, which will ultimately demonstrate the truth of Peeler's primary claim: that the God revealed in this narrative of incarnation "harbors no preference for males because God the Father is not male and God the Son is male like no other" (4).

In establishing the first part of that claim, that God the Father is not male, Peeler draws from sources ancient and modern, non-

Christian and Christian, to show a wide range of possibilities that the evangelists could have employed when it came to explaining a divine-human unity that resulted in pregnancy and childbirth. Given a plethora of options, from the rape motifs found in stories of Zeus and other gods to tales of divine-human conception occurring at a touch or through the breath of a deity, it is notable that Matthew and, especially, Luke choose the path of narrating the incarnation in a way that avoids any coercive, sexual, or even explicitly physical activity. As Peeler states, "In the virginal conception, God causes the birth of a son, even provides what a male normally supplies, but in a non-sexualized, divine, and even triune way" (30). This places them firmly in an ancient perspective through which "creating life and even fathering a child could be performed by a god in the ancient world without that God being thought of as male" (28).

If Mary's agency in the story of the annunciation is necessary to demonstrate that the God depicted there is not coercive or sexual in bringing about the incarnation, so too is Mary's presence and participation necessary in arguing the second part of Peeler's claim, that the Son is male like no other. Here, her assertion takes up the long-held position within the Christian faith, professed by Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Cyril, and others, that Jesus took his flesh solely from Mary (45–46). Peeler has no desire to "erode the male image of Jesus" (145) by claiming, as some theologians have done, that Jesus was androgynous or that his sex was unimportant. Rather, Peeler argues that Jesus's maleness is crucial: "if he were not birthed as a male, he would not include male bodies in his recapitulation." Equally important, however, is the particular way in which Jesus was birthed as a male: "If he were not *birthed and conceived from a woman alone*, he would not include female bodies in his recapitulation" (145, italics Peeler's). Thus, just as it is important to reject the maleness of God the Father, the maleness of the Son must be affirmed and reconsidered in light of the uniqueness of the incarnation, in order to demonstrate the mysterious fullness of God's work of salvation.

Much more could be said about the many remarkable qualities on display in this book—Peeler's deftness at bringing voices from across the centuries and across disparate streams of the Christian faith into a rich conversation about Scripture, or the charitable and thoughtful way she engages with opponents and potential critics of her position. I would be remiss, however, not to address the book's conclusion, where Peeler compellingly demonstrates the implications of her argument for the life of the church, particularly what it says about women in ministry.

Having addressed what for many might be a significant, if unspoken, obstacle to the affirmation of women in leadership, the misconception that a male God somehow prefers males, she turns her attention to positive images of women serving in ministry of various kinds. While the biblical examples offered by the stories of the incarnation, the annunciation, and surrounding events afford the opportunity to highlight women like Mary and her cousin Elizabeth in the ministries of parenting and proclamation, roles that will extend, for Mary, from the Magnificat to Pentecost and beyond, I was equally moved by the way Peeler connects her theological assertions to her own experience in ministry. While she acknowledges that not every tradition will see her claim—that this God who is not male values women and men equally—as a strong enough reason to give women a voice in ministry, she does not shrink from the reality that these truths, that she is created in the image of God and that God the Son was born of a

woman, give her the strength to stand at the table each week to bear Christ in the Eucharist. For all of us, both men and women, who seek to serve the church in all kinds of ministry, Peeler's invitation to see ourselves as God's beloved can provide the joy and the hope necessary to do the work of God's kingdom. For this, and for so many other reasons, I am thankful for this book.

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Book Review

Three in One: Analogies for the Trinity by William David Spencer (Kregel Academic, 2022)

Reviewed by CHRISTA L. MCKIRLAND

I was recently at the Evangelical Theological Society conference scouring the book booths for an ideal text to use in my course on the Trinity. Personally, I enjoy reading books on the nuances of the doctrine's historical development, or detailed accounts of the metaphysics of consubstantiality, simplicity, and inseparable operations. However, "joy" is not how most of my undergraduate students have felt in engaging these texts. Frankly, most of my students want to know why this doctrine even matters. On the other hand, I have found accessible texts that make a case for the doctrine's relevance to the Christian life but often fail to: seriously engage primary texts, show sensitivity to global perspectives, substantiate gendered language for God, or value partial pictures of the Trinity. Finally, across both the erudite and the conversational forms of books on the Trinity that I have read, most Western Trinitarian scholars do not consider their own positionality as they come to this doctrine. After all, "why should who I am matter if I am talking about a mind-independent reality such as the Trinity?"

In addition to benefitting my students, William Spencer's book is of value to readers of *Priscilla Papers* for at least three reasons: It gives insight into the use of gendered language for God. It adds another expert's voice to the discussion on the absence of hierarchy in the Trinity. It gives context to debates about these and other questions. That is, we are better able to understand focused discussions when we also study the broader doctrine within which those discussions happen.

Fortunately, I was recommended this book by a friend who recognized the needs I perceive as I encounter scholarship on the Trinity. Dr. Spencer's introduction lays out his own cultural heritage and why he wrote this book. While the Trinity is the focus, his students are his audience. And they are not a passive audience, for he weaves their multi-cultural voices throughout the volume. Many of these students know English as their second or third language, and thus Spencer garners forty years of teaching experience to make accessible this critical doctrine. Given that experience, Spencer also knows the ways the Trinity has been weaponized in some sectors of evangelical thought, and he is attuned to theologies of subordination and how they are wielded against women. Such attunement is also shown through the use of "Godself" instead of always using "he" and by concluding with insights about gendered language for God (including affirming the value of such language).

Given his multi-cultural context, Spencer's valuation of voices beyond the European theological genealogy is another strength of this book. He pulls from Kenyan, Native American, Cuban, Australian, Finnish, and South Korean scholars as his contemporary sources while also engaging with many primary source texts from the early church. Knowing his audience may be completely unfamiliar with Trinitarian terminology and concepts, Spencer defines load-bearing terms in simple and clear ways. Finally, as the title says, the pivot point for the entire book is the use of analogies for understanding this doctrine.