

MALE AND FEMALE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD?

ZOE BENNETT MOORE



IMAGINE YOU ARE SITTING IN ONE OF THE GREAT CATHEDRALS OF OUR LAND, ATTENDING AN EVENING SERVICE AT WHICH A GOOD FRIEND IS BEING INSTALLED AS THE ONLY WOMAN CANON CURRENTLY IN THAT PLACE. You breathe in the beautiful surroundings and the uplifting music; you observe across the aisle your friend, her husband, and her teenaged sons. A gentleman rises to the lectern to read the first lesson, and you are treated to a story of men behaving badly, of male brutality and sexual irresponsibility – a story which implicates God as aiding and abetting of all this, and in which the woman is explicitly depicted as nagging and manipulative. The story ends with the accusation, “If you had not ploughed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle” (Judg 14.18), and with Samson’s wife being given away to his best man.

That such passages exist in the Bible is not so much the problem. It is good to have all human life, including the frivolous and even the brutal bits, told within the overarching story in which God’s story is entangled with our human life and history. There is, however, even here a problem in relation to how God appears to encourage the “men behaving badly”, and how that bad behaviour is taken up into the wider story of Israel’s salvation, which becomes for Christians part of the story of *our* salvation. This is Samson we are talking about, the man whom God chose to defeat the Philistines.

On this occasion, however, as so often, the problem was the context in which this passage was read. In the immediate situation it was utterly embarrassing and stunningly inappropriate. This was read as the Word of Lord, as we celebrated the ministry and vocation of a woman in the presence of her friends, her husband and her sons. I was not the only person who felt angry and ashamed.

At a more subliminal level this passage shows how insidiously damaging such sacred readings could be. We will laugh at, get angry about, or ignore such a choice of readings according to our conscious level of concern. But what is going on underneath? What about legitimising sexual double standards, of macho behaviour, of the stereotype of women as nagging and manipulative? What are our sacred Scriptures encouraging us to internalise? What does it mean to be male and female in our daily lives, and in our Christian tradition, shaped as it is by the Bible?

I have taken a negative example. I am going to briefly take a few more before I turn to a more positive view. I do this not because I believe the overwhelming thrust of the Bible for men and women and their relationships is

negative, but because I believe that contemporary Christians who take the Bible seriously have in the main *grossly* underestimated how damaging the Bible can be. It is imperative that we open our eyes to the extent of the problem.

I teach an MA module entitled *Feminist Perspectives on Pastoral Theology*. In a recent class, five students each explored a biblical passage, analysing the gender issues that arose. One took Judges 14 – our story from the cathedral. The other passages were Ephesians 5, on submission and marriage; Numbers 12, on Miriam, Moses and the Cushite woman; Luke 10.38–42, on Martha and Mary; and John 8, on the woman taken in adultery. All of these passages were chosen because they were of significance in the lives of the students. Out of these we explored amongst other things: how male headship operates in Christian families, and how it may be Christianly contested; how women have been submerged in our scriptural tradition; how gender issues are complexly related to issues of ethnicity; how sin gets located and symbolised in women; what role Jesus plays in stories which explore or reflect men’s and women’s roles. The feminist perspective that seeks explicitly to lay bare problematic issues for *women* in a patriarchal context, also unearths issues of class and ethnicity, and furthermore brings to our attention the need to examine issues for men – sex and strength, violence, male roles in family and church.

We need to examine what meanings are given in our Christian tradition to having a male or a female body, to being a man or a woman, a boy or a girl. Riet Bons-Storm states the task well: “To acknowledge gender and sex in the pursuit of pastoral knowledge and practice means analysing the different meanings given to having a male or a female body, and trying to find out what it means for a person to live faithfully as a sexual and embodied human being.”¹

As we ask what it means to live faithfully as a Christian woman or man, we must also ask how the Bible shapes and informs this living. This is not a question of starting with a clean slate and asking what the Bible teaches. We are *already embedded* in a tradition and its practices. The context of church, of Christian family and, indeed, still in some ways, of wider society, is shaped by the Christian tradition, and we are a product of these as much as we are actors with conscious choices. Our enquiry about our personal lives, our family lives and our church lives should ask as much about what influences have already shaped them, as it asks about

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NOTES

1. R. Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman: Listening to Women's Silences in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, p. 3.
2. In Britain we are not used to thinking the Bible has much influence in public life, but in, for example, the USA or South Africa the story is very different.
3. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction*, p. 1.
4. E. Tamez "Women's Rereading of the Bible", in V. Fabella and M.A. Oduyoye (eds.), *With Passion and Compassion*, p. 176.
5. K.E. Børresen, (ed.), *The Image of God: Gender Models in Judeo-Christian Tradition*.
6. World Council of Churches, *Living Letters: A Report of Visits to the Churches During the Ecumenical Decade – Churches in Solidarity with Women*.
7. This mosaic is on the cover of my recent book *Introducing Feminist Perspectives in Pastoral Theology* to which the reader is referred for further discussion of these issues, particularly chapter 3 on the Bible.

► how we will deliberately take on board fresh understanding. As women and men, we all wrestle with the legacy of families where male and female roles, which may be held to on a biblical basis, have already shaped us for good and ill. We worship in churches where the lectionary or the choices of those in leadership have already determined what bits of the Bible will be read and what the content of the sermons will be. We exercise our ministry in church and society according to what those in our church traditions believe to be appropriate for women and men.

The Bible is a double-edged sword. For some it has been a source of oppression, both externally and internally. It has been the source both of subordination and suffering, and of redemption and emancipation. How we connect the Bible with our lives depends on our context. It depends on how the Bible is and has been used and abused – towards us personally, in the churches, and in wider public life.² Specifically, in respect of gender roles, the Bible has legitimised women's oppression. In 1885 Elizabeth Cady Stanton asserted, in the context of the fight for women's emancipation in America, that, "women as well as men have internalised Scripture's misogynist teachings as the word of God".³ In contrast, Elsa Tamez, a Liberation Theologian from a contemporary Latin American context, writes of, "the [Bible's] central message, which is profoundly liberating" and of "the gospel's spirit of justice and freedom".⁴

In biblical terms, our understanding of what it means to be male and female often begins with Genesis, which says male and female are made in the image of God (Gen 1.27). There is much dispute among exegetes of the Bible whether the third part of this verse, "male and female he created them", belongs primarily with the idea of the image of God or with the following verses about being fruitful and multiplying and subduing the earth.⁵

This exegetical choice obviously affects our interpretation. If we believe that male and female is not part of the image of God, then we will emphasise the idea of God being beyond gender. This is helpful insofar as it encourages us not to identify either men or women more particularly with God. Most unfortunately, however, even those who hold this *in theory* tend actually to identify God more with the male than the female *in practice*. For example, Augustine held that though men and women were both made in the image of God, they were made so in a complementary way;

the man was the rational soul part of the image, while the woman was the bodily part. This clearly signals that the man is "more" in the image of God; indeed, Augustine held the man alone was in the image of God whereas the woman was only in the image of God as part of the complementary partnership with the man.

I can also give examples, from more recent popular thinking, such as the bishop who described God as "like a very big bloke"; the clergyman who told me that God was biologically Jesus' father because God created a sperm in Mary; or the teenager who said, "if God is not a man, everything I have always believed is wrong". It would seem that a "God beyond gender" does not appeal to the human imagination, and gets constantly subverted in real life.

Suppose, on the other hand, we take male and female as part of the image of God. This has the advantage of locating our sexual nature in God, that sexual nature which is so much part of what it means to be human. We are acknowledging that all language about God is metaphorical or analogical. We are not saying that God is "a man" or "a woman". Rather, we are thinking of our maleness and femaleness as belonging in God, as reflecting some of what it means to be God, encourages us to look at a wide range of images for God in the Bible, not only the more "masculine" ones, such as lord, warrior, or father, but also the more "feminine" ones, such as being in labour, a mother hen, or a woman looking for lost coins.

For some people there is a problem here. While they are entirely happy to use a range of images for God, they feel, rightly, that the Christian tradition has "authorised" some of these as having special significance and appropriateness. The clearest example is "Father", which is given a particular status as the word by which Jesus taught us to call God. The question then arises, is there a gendered overtone to this way of addressing God? Does it make God in any sense "masculine" rather than "feminine"? And even if we believe in theory it does not, does it in *practice*?

I believe it does slip into suggesting a belief that God is more appropriately thought of in masculine than in feminine terms. This is reinforced by the fact that Jesus, God's Son, was a human male.

This is a matter of real difficulty and seriousness because of the problem of ideology. Briefly stated, the point is that religious belief, human language and human practices are all deeply intertwined. We use our beliefs

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about God to legitimate what we do. And what we do is reflected in our religious beliefs, so we make God in our image as well as seeing ourselves in God's image. This means, to be blunt, that if there are vested interests in keeping a certain status quo in our human relationships this will drive how we think about God. This is then used to prove that we should conduct our human relationships in a certain way.

Given that, globally, we currently live in patriarchal societies, and given that the societies in which the Bible was written were also patriarchal, I am frankly suspicious that the tradition which identifies God with the masculine has more to do with maintaining patriarchal power than with true belief about God. This issue is made all the more serious by the fact that globally today women and girls have worse health care, worse access to food and education, and suffer gendered violence which is often theologically legitimised.⁶ If we believe God to be more identified with the male it is no coincidence that the female is less valued.

In my brief exploration of the Bible in relation to what it means to be male or female, I have looked at some of the roles played by men and women in the Bible and at ways in which God, in whose image men and women are made, is spoken of in the Bible. I have tried to look at these things in the context of the real lives of Christians struggling to take seriously both the biblical tradition and also their problematic experiences. I am deeply aware that much more needs to be examined. The famous mosaic window in *Dominus Flevit*, the church that is halfway down the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, depicts Jesus Christ as a mother hen, with her chicks under her wings, looking out over the city of Jerusalem: "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing" (Mt 23.37 NRSV).⁷ The riches of the Bible speak to us of a God who cannot be categorised, but can be expressed in earthy and earthly images, a God who weeps over the refusal of human beings to see their folly and to come to God for succour and, above all, a God who loves us and yearns for our welfare. ■