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*Foreword by Scot McKnight*

Rediscovering  
Scripture's Vision  
for  
WOMEN

*Fresh Perspectives  
on Disputed Texts*



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# An Androcentric Story?

*Men Everywhere!*

AT ONE OF OUR RESIDENTIAL TEACHING weeks at my college, a female faculty member invited students to the front to represent different characters in the Bible. They got to choose the character they wished to represent. She then put them in the order they appear in the Bible, lined up in front of us, making the point that you and I are at the end of the chronological line. We are incorporated into the grand narrative of the Bible that is the story of God's people. It was a great illustration, and I appreciated it for what it was—a point about how we all have joined a long story reaching back over hundreds and even thousands of years.

However, something else struck me as the students went up one by one saying who they had chosen to be. What left an impression on me was the number of women who went up to the front saying that they were representing a man: Moses, David, Daniel, Peter, and so on. There were men at the front also representing men, and there were women representing women: Deborah, Esther, Elizabeth, Mary . . . I really enjoyed the fact that so many of our female students took part in the exercise. (It was about half men, half women even though more male characters were represented.) I also noticed the ease with which the women adopted the male persona. This sparked two further thoughts.

First, it is a normal process for female readers of the Bible to identify with the male characters in the Scriptures. We listen to their stories; we are privy to their relationship and conversations with God, their struggles, and

their triumphs. The male characters speak to us, and by and large we don't exclude ourselves from the narrative. Second, men don't seem to identify with the women in the same way. This fun exercise at our residential illustrated to me how differently men and women relate to the stories in the Bible and probably always have done. The truth is that women have very little choice but to relate to both an androcentric and patricentric faith. Androcentrism and patricentrism are in the fabric of the Christian faith.

I wish to focus on two questions in these first two chapters. The first is, What is the significance of the maleness of Jesus to what we know of the nature of God? The second is, What is the significance of the maleness of Jesus to our understanding of the salvation story? What I hope to demonstrate is that it is important to distinguish between these two questions because they have different answers, and the way that we answer those questions will, in turn, have an impact on our understanding of how women relate to God.

### A MALE NARRATIVE?

It appears, as far as we know, that the Bible was written by men, and throughout the whole course of Christian history the majority of Bible readers have also been men. This means, therefore, that the majority of the interpreters of the Bible have largely been men—at least the ones who have written down their interpretations and passed them on to subsequent generations. Our sacred texts have been written, disseminated, taught, and interpreted by men.

In the Old Testament we have male priests and the twelve tribes of Israel who were given their identity from the twelve sons of Jacob. In addition to this, we have a male Savior who chose twelve male disciples to found the faith and to whom he passed on the role of establishing the church. We address God as Father, and even the Holy Spirit is normally referred to as “he.” In the living expressions of the faith, we encounter androcentrism and patricentrism everywhere. The Catholic and the Orthodox Churches still have a male-only priesthood, and Catholic priests are referred to as father. Certain Protestant denominations exclude women both from pastoring and from teaching or preaching altogether. Others allow women to lead if

a man is placed over her or permit women to teach only women and children. In many churches of the world, a woman would never be seen at the front.

How women deal with this, approach it, and appropriate it (or not), varies from one person to another. I think it is true to say that some do not particularly care. Others continue to view this as somehow right and proper. Still others have rejected the Christian faith because of it, and this is true of some men as well. Many women and men are somewhere in between these two polar opposites. They notice and they care, but instead of seeing it in unrelentingly negative terms, they make an effort to highlight and forefront the role of women in the faith, whether from the Bible or from church history, thus encouraging women to believe that their presence in the story is more prominent than might first be supposed. It is interesting that despite the androcentrism and patricentrism of the Christian faith (and most religions for that matter), it is generally true that women are more religious than men, and worldwide there are more Christian women than Christian men. This appears also to have been true of the early church, where it was known that Christianity appealed more to women, slaves, and children.<sup>1</sup> There must be multiple reasons for this, but, in my view and my experience, one of the reasons for the deep attraction and appeal of Christianity to women is rooted in a profound instinct that we are not really excluded after all, despite what outward circumstances tell us.

This prominence of male figures and masculine imagery and language in the Scriptures and the church was once famously described by John Piper as lending a “masculine feel” to the Christian faith. In some ways it is hard to dispute this. What is in question, however, is whether this is a reflection of a God-ordained order or whether there is another message altogether woven into this supposedly obvious message? Are the prominence of the androcentric and patricentric narratives in the Bible an

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<sup>1</sup>Rodney Stark has documented the fact that there were many more women than men in the early church (by which he means the first five hundred years), and that these were not only poor women but included many wealthy and influential women. Rodney Stark, “Reconstructing the Rise of Christianity: The Role of Women,” *Sociology of Religion* 56, no. 3 (1995): 229-44. For further more in-depth commentary on the predominance of women in the early church from a sociological perspective, see Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

unequivocal endorsement of patriarchal structures in the church, the home, and society, or are there other narratives within the texts that would lead us to conclude that the Bible subverts these patriarchal structures, offering alternative ways of relating for men and women?

### SEEING A DIFFERENT STORY

One of the ways of seeing alternative narratives in the Bible is either to tell the women's stories or to tell the stories from the point of view of the women. This is an invaluable exercise for both male and female preachers, and it is incumbent on all teachers of the Bible (preachers, theologians, Bible study leaders, youth workers, and children's workers) to focus as much on the stories of women as they do on the stories of the men. It is not just the girls and the women who need to hear the stories of women in the Bible. The boys and the men need to hear them too. They have mothers, grandmothers, sisters, daughters, wives, girlfriends, aunts, nieces, female friends, and colleagues. Hearing the story of how God includes women in his big story will help women and men to see the women around them in a different light and open up possibilities in our imaginations for how women may be used by God in influential ways. When we see this in the ancient stories, it fires our imagination for how God works today. There are so many women to choose from throughout the Bible, and some great books have been written that focus on these women, their presence, their perspectives, and their stories.<sup>2</sup> In addition to that, notice when women are there in the story but silent or silenced: the Levite's concubine (Judges 19), Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11–12), Tamar (2 Samuel 13:1–22). These are all heart-breaking stories about women who were cruelly abused by men. What is

<sup>2</sup>Among these books are Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Kenneth E. Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011); Lynn Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009); Lynn H. Cohick and Amy Brown Hughes, *Christian Women in the Patristic World: Their Influence, Authority, and Legacy in the Second through Fifth Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017); Paula Gooder, *Phoebe: A Story* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018); and Jenni Williams, *God Remembered Rachel: Women's Stories in the Old Testament and Why They Matter* (London: SPCK, 2014). For women's perspectives on the Bible see also Catherine Clark Kroeger and Mary J. Evans, eds., *The IVP Women's Bible Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001); and Carol Newsom, ed., *The Women's Bible Commentary* (London: SPCK, 2014).

this telling us about the “role” of women in a man’s world? What mirror does it hold up to us about how the world tolerates the abuse of women?

This book, however, is not specifically about the *stories* of the women themselves, although I will refer to specific women at times. Studying the women’s stories shows us God’s focus on women and to some extent reveals his heart for women, which is why we should pay attention to them. However, in this book I look first at wider questions regarding the doctrine of God and how our view of God affects our perspectives on other issues. I then go on to discuss how specific texts can be read in different ways and from different perspectives in order to yield yet different, perhaps surprising results.<sup>3</sup>

### READING WITH NEW LENSES

There was a woman who undertook the task of studying the Scriptures to see what story they told about women and for women. She was born over a hundred years ago, was a medical missionary to China, a formidable Bible scholar, and social activist. In 1921 she published a book, *God’s Word to Women*, in order to refute the idea that there is a scriptural argument for the supremacy of the male sex. In her view, if women equipped themselves with biblical languages and scholarship, they would see clearly that the Bible offers them a different story. Katherine Bushnell was convinced that the Bible spoke a liberating word to women, that it was a book that set women free. She believed that the ability to see this would soon dawn on the church.<sup>4</sup> Drawing an analogy with the abolition of slavery, she wrote,

We may take courage. Up to very recent times a slave class was looked upon as a necessity and slavery as legitimate. Some men were born, it was supposed, to be slaves; others to be their masters; and the world could not go on without the two classes. That misconception was exploded, and the world

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<sup>3</sup>I am only one of many people who have already undertaken this task, and I have included a bibliography at the end of the book that includes books that contain much more detailed research into certain issues for readers to pursue. The value of the same topic being revisited by numerous scholars is that each one brings her or his own perspective to the conversation, and each one will express what they see in slightly different ways.

<sup>4</sup>For a wonderful account of Katherine’s life, thought, and work see Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *A New Gospel for Women: Katharine Bushnell and the Challenge of Christian Feminism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

goes on quite comfortably. So long as slavery existed, men thought they found warrant for it in the Word of God. But the number who thought so came to be a decreasing number. Just so, the number of those who imagine they find, in the Word of God, warrant for the Dominion of the male over the female, is an ever-decreasing number.<sup>5</sup>

For many reasons, Katherine's voice was squeezed out of the conversation in the church and in the academy. Male scholars had little time for a feminist medical missionary and social activist. The then new Christian feminists rejected her conservative stance on sexual ethics. Her voice got lost. It is clear to me, and many others now, however, that Katherine was a prophet, and like most prophets, her words were destined not to be heard by her own generation. There are countless Christians in the world today who, like Katherine, take the Bible seriously, view it as authoritative and inspired by God. They take what we would call a high view of Scripture. She was confident that one could retain a high view of Scripture *and* find in its words the freedom for women to lead. Many others have followed in her footsteps. Here is just one example.

R. T. France, a British New Testament scholar and principal of a conservative evangelical Anglican college in Oxford saw the seeds of change being sown in the ministry of Jesus and the early church, seeds that he believed were meant to grow and blossom into a full-blown message of equality for women in the church. He writes, "The early church as it appears in Acts remained a male-dominated movement, but one within which the seeds of greater equality of the sexes and a more prominent role for women which we saw planted in Jesus' ministry were beginning to grow."<sup>6</sup> In his view, Jesus himself planted the seeds that would set in motion an "irreversible turning of the wheel which set the Jesus movement on a new course with regard to the respective roles of men and women."<sup>7</sup> However, it was not *forsaking* the Scriptures but studying the Scriptures more deeply that led this man to change his mind about women in ministry. More than this,

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<sup>5</sup>Katherine C. Bushnell, *God's Word to Women: One Hundred Bible Studies on Women's Place in the Divine Economy* (Minneapolis: Christians for Biblical Equality, 2003), \$166.

<sup>6</sup>R. T. France, *Women in the Church's Ministry: A Test Case for Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 81.

<sup>7</sup>France, *Women in the Church's Ministry*, 78.



France acknowledges that sometimes we are persuaded, as new things come to light, to change our minds. In some cases, this is the right thing to do. “I would like to suggest that to change one’s mind is neither an unprecedented nor a reprehensible thing to do.”<sup>8</sup>

What has led so many to be so divided on this issue? There are, and always have been, men and women who were sure that they were reading the texts aright in the first place when they assumed that God gives women the freedom to lead if so called and freedom not to be under male authority in any shape or form. Others have come to change their minds, having been taught one thing about what the text says and then discovering another, either for themselves or as a result of new teaching. Still others are convinced that the Bible says the opposite. First, therefore, I will address the question of what we understand of the apparent maleness of God and how this affects our assumptions about the place of women in the Christian story. The reason for beginning here is that hierarchicalists often claim that the masculine feel of the nature of God and the predominance of the male in the story of salvation provides a warrant for male dominance in the church and the world. Is it both possible and right to argue from the seemingly obvious preference of God for the male that men should lead and women should follow?

### IS GOD MALE?

One of the complex and complicating factors in this discussion is that God chose to reveal himself to the world through a man! Jesus is the God-*man* and humanity has a male Savior. This has contributed to the view that Christianity endorses the preeminence of men and raises numerous questions for which there are not always simple answers. We begin first, therefore, by considering some related questions pertaining to revelation. In what ways and how has God revealed his nature to us? How do we know what we know about God? And what part does Jesus Christ play in this?

***The revelation of God through Christ.*** How do we know anything at all about God and what he is like? On the one hand, it is absolutely right to claim that Jesus Christ is the key to our knowledge of God. Hebrews refers

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<sup>8</sup>France, *Women in the Church’s Ministry*, 16.

to Jesus Christ as the “exact imprint” of God’s being (Hebrews 1:3). Jesus himself claims, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Ian McFarland writes, “Jesus is the unique and unsubstitutable touchstone against which all talk about the nature and character of God (that is, all claims to know God) must be tested.”<sup>9</sup> This much is true. However, McFarland goes on to say that the claim regarding the uniqueness of Jesus as the touchstone for our knowledge of God is different from saying that Jesus “is the *only* source of such knowledge.”<sup>10</sup> We know, for example, that we are given revelation about the nature and character of God through the whole Bible, including the Old Testament. In some way, this has to be included as a revelatory source in what we claim to know about God. We will look at some of the descriptions of God we find there. Further, our claim that Jesus is the key to our knowledge of God does not entail that our knowledge of God is complete in this life. There are also aspects of Jesus that we are incapable of knowing fully or perfectly. McFarland cites the story of the transfiguration as an example of the hidden depths of revelation, even in the person of Christ.

When Jesus takes Peter, James, and John to the top of the mountain and is transfigured before them, they see Jesus transformed into a glorious being before their very eyes. A cloud envelops them all, and a voice from heaven proclaims, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” (Matthew 17:5). In Matthew’s version the disciples fall on the ground, terrified by what they have witnessed. This powerful revelation caused them to see Jesus in a whole new light. We might say there is more to Jesus than meets the eye. What are we seeing of God when we see Jesus? Not only have we not yet received the full revelation of God, as that is yet to come, but we ourselves are also limited by our own sin, frailty, idolatry, and desires, which all conspire to prevent us seeing God in all his glory. McFarland concludes, “We therefore need to take care to represent Jesus in such a way that the Logos [Word] who comes *in* the flesh is not reduced *to* the flesh.”<sup>11</sup> In short, we know for now that we only know in part and see

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<sup>9</sup>Ian A. McFarland, *The Divine Image: Envisioning the Invisible God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 51.

<sup>10</sup>McFarland, *Divine Image*, 52.

<sup>11</sup>McFarland, *Divine Image*, 46.

as through a glass darkly. There will always be more to God than we know now.

**God as Spirit: Three in one.** So, despite the truth that God has chosen to reveal himself to us through and in a first-century Jewish man, we cannot claim that what we see of this Jewish man is able to tell us *everything* about all that God is, because God is also a mystery and our understanding is too limited. God reveals himself through a man, but he is not, of course, merely a man. What more do we know of God that persuades us that this is the case? First, we know that God is spirit (John 4:24), and, second, we know that God is triune. So as well as all that we know of God through Jesus Christ, these two great claims about the essence of God must also govern what we say about God's nature. When we read the whole Bible, including the Gospels, we encounter multiple pictures of God that serve to explain to us the nature of this divine being we worship.

Let's look, for example, how the two pivotal truth claims about God—that he is spirit and that he is triune—might affect our reading of the Old Testament. This is an important consideration in the debate about the maleness of God and why God is so often perceived in male terms in addition to the maleness of Christ. In the Old Testament we frequently encounter God described in anthropomorphic terms as if he had human attributes just like us. But how does this anthropomorphizing of God accord with our claims that God is spirit and triune? What do we do with the references to God looking and acting like a human being with human body parts, human emotions, and human reactions? How does this fit with our divine, trinitarian God whose essence is spiritual and not physical?

In classical theology, these anthropomorphisms are understood as purely symbolic, telling us something about God, but nothing that could or should be taken literally. John Calvin famously described the idea that Scripture ascribes to God “a mouth, ears, eyes, hands, and feet” as “easily refuted.” He goes on, “For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to ‘lisp’ in speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge

of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness.<sup>12</sup> We see clearly here the relationship of revelation to human apprehension or understanding. Calvin makes the point that as we are limited and flawed human beings, our ability to understand will also be limited. Thus, God gives revelation of himself to the writers of the Bible in ways that accommodate our limited capacity and in terms that we will best understand. We cannot, therefore, claim that what we read in isolated verses about God is the sum total of all we can know of him.

Quite simply, if God is spirit, he does not have feet, hands, arms, and a backside. Moreover, if God is triune, we cannot understand language describing him as a person in the same way that we are people. The God we worship is one God as three: Father, Son, and Spirit. His very makeup is not like ours at all. It is beyond our ability to understand. God's nature is in essence what is sometimes called ineffable or inexpressible. To imagine this one-in-three God as having bodily or material capacity is absurd, and so imagining his being as gendered must be equally so.

So, on the one hand we acknowledge that the revelation of God has come to us through and in a male human, who is just like us (but even more like us if we are male!), and on the other we need to acknowledge that there is an essence of God (God in Godself) that is beyond ascriptions of sex because this God is disembodied. Classical theologians reject the idea that God in himself is embodied, which in turn must mean that God is without an assigned sex. I personally take this view. Having said that, though, the Bible does refer to God at times in embodied terms, and there are some who claim that this tells us more of God's essence than a classical theologian might want to concede. What if we do follow this thinking? Where does it take us?

**God as a "he"?** We might not want to be dismissive of anthropomorphisms *tout court*. Even if we understand that God is not in a body just like ours, if God is described in a certain way in the Bible, should we not take note of it? What might this be communicating to us? Here I want to address the assumption that many people work with, that is, that the dominating language for God is male-centred and so that must be telling us something

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<sup>12</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 1.13.1.

about the essence of God's nature. What do we do with God as Father and God as "he"?

To my mind, there are a number of significations of this language. The first is that it tells us deep truths about the fact that God is personal and relational. Anthropomorphisms are the biblical writers' way of telling us that God is one who relates to human beings in a personal fashion. He forms covenants, speaks, listens, embraces, protects, warns, disciplines, and above all loves with a love that is both fierce and compassionate, even if we do not know exactly what this love entails. All this we see in Jesus, and it is crucial to what we understand of the nature of God. So, as much as classical theologians might want to focus on the unchangeable and ineffable mystery of God, we cannot lose this personal and relational aspect of God as well. But because so much of this personal and relational language has a male cast to it, does this mean that we see this personal and relational God as male? The answer to that must be no. Why?

First of all, as much as we might want to say that human language ascribed to God is meaningful (which it is), we cannot say that it is literal. It is not telling us something literal about God. We know this if we think of words such as God as a rock, a brooding hen, or a fortress. God is not literally these objects, but all those objects point to something about God from what we know to what we cannot fully grasp. So first, we have to acknowledge that all language for God is metaphorical and figurative because of both the nature of language and the nature of God. We are attempting to describe the indescribable. On the other hand, we want to acknowledge that these metaphors also point to something real and meaningful. If they are, is there something about this metaphorical language that points to a *masculine* God? No—not in reality. Even if we want to claim that the biblical language fixes something essential about God, we will tie ourselves in knots if we think it points to a gendered being, because we also find an abundance of metaphors for God that refer to God as feminine. For example, on multiple occasions, we find God described in maternal terms. Margo Houts notes the following: God is

- A mother suckling her children and responsible for their care (Numbers 11:12)

- A mother who gave birth to the Israelites (Deut 32:18)
- A woman in labor whose forceful breaths are an image of divine power (Isaiah 42:14)
- A mother who births and protects Israel (Isaiah 46:3-4)
- A mother who does not forget the child she nurses (Isaiah 49:14-15)
- A mother who comforts her children (Isaiah 66:12-13)
- A mother who gave birth to the Israelites (Deuteronomy 32:18)
- A mother who calls, teaches, holds, heals, and feeds her young (Hosea 11:1-4)
- Other maternal images can be found in Psalms 131:2; Job. 38:8, 29; Proverbs 8:22-25; 1 Peter 2:2-3, Acts 17:28.

From this we see that the writers of the Bible clearly describe God relating to us as a mother and a father. Similarly, Houts lists where we find God described in terms of women's cultural activity:

- A seamstress making clothes for Israel to wear (Nehemiah 9:21)
- A midwife attending a birth (Psalms 22:9-10, 71:6; Isaiah 66:9)
- A woman in authority, to whom her servant looks for mercy (Psalm 123:4)
- A woman working leaven into bread (Luke 13:20-21)

Scripture also speaks about God using the imagery of a female bird or animal:

- God acts like a female bird protecting her young (Psalms 17:8, 36:7, 57:1, 91:1, 4; Isaiah 31:5; Deuteronomy 32:11-12)
- Like an eagle (Deuteronomy 32:11-12; Exodus 19:4; Job 39:27-30)
- Like a hen (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34; cf. Ruth 2:12)
- Like a mother bear (Hosea 13:8)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Margo G. Houts, "Images of God as Female," in *The IVP Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Catherine Clark Kroeger and Mary J. Evans (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 356-58.

One of the most fascinating references to the feminine in relation to God's being is the portrayal of Wisdom as a woman (Proverbs 1:20-33, 8:1-9:12). This can partly be explained by the fact that wisdom is grammatically feminine in Hebrew, but most commentators on the Bible will admit that there is more meaning in this female personification than just grammar, even though the precise nature of that meaning is not exactly clear. There is no fixed reading of what or who this person of Wisdom is. However, Irenaeus identified the Sophia figure with the Holy Spirit in the same way that he identifies the Logos with the Son, claiming that Wisdom/the Spirit was instrumental in the forming and perfecting aspects of creation.<sup>14</sup> Irenaeus locates Wisdom as an aspect of God's being and not some kind of intermediary figure. The reason for this is that in Proverbs 8 we find Wisdom claiming that she was "brought forth" and "given birth" from the Lord. Hence Wisdom is understood by Irenaeus to have come from the being of God before the existence of any creaturely forms and to have been present at creation, as was true of the Logos/Son. Others have identified Wisdom with the Logos and not the Holy Spirit, and still others as an aspect of God's nature. In truth, there are no definitive answers as to whom or what Wisdom is and where she fits in. However, the fact that she is there and described in the way that she is, so that Irenaeus is able to identify her with the being of God, stands as a challenge to those who think that we can pin down all the mysteries of God.

The existence of male and female figures and language in relation to the being of God is something we have to become accustomed to, but is not describing an essential aspect of God's nature. In addition to this, coming from a charismatic tradition, as I do, where we place an emphasis on the experience of the presence of God, the idea of God's nearness, protection, watchfulness, and even embrace is common parlance. Familial and personal language about God helps us to articulate our knowledge of God as close, personal, loving, caring, nurturing, and so forth. However, we need to resist the idea that this tells us about any embodied, gendered, or sexual Godhead. What we have been discussing points to the idea that the

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<sup>14</sup>Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against the Heresies*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers 1*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989). See 3.24.2; 4.20.3-4.

predominance of male imagery for God in the Old Testament is not actually pointing to anything *masculine* in God, just as the feminine imagery is not pointing to femininity in the Godhead in the way we understand this in human terms. What else in the Bible speaks to us of God's very nature?

***Humanity in God's image.*** An important text, and one we will return to in subsequent chapters, is Genesis 1:26-27 where we read that men and women both are made in the "image of God." There is so much that we could say of the rich and varied discussions about what exactly is meant by humanity as made in the image of God, but I cannot detail that here. What is relevant for our discussion is the claim that male and female both, and both together, reflect and embody something of the essence of God.<sup>15</sup> Crucially, for our purposes in this chapter, it means that we are able to say that if man and woman have their origins in the being of God, then woman is not other to God but intrinsically connected to his being and image. If woman too bears the image of God then what woman *is*, is derived from the essence of God's being.

In sum, anthropomorphisms and masculine and feminine language for God connect us to God in ways that are not possible without such language. It serves a crucial purpose in the process of revelation and in how we understand our relation to God. It is important to remember, however, that these pictures of God are metaphors, symbols, and pictures that point to reality and not to be taken as literal representations of his being. What of the New Testament and the Father-Son language that we encounter there?

***Father-Son language.*** It was not until Jesus came to earth and began his ministry that the worshipers of Yahweh began to understand their God not just as one but as triune. Jesus introduces his followers to God as Father, *his* Father, who himself refers to Jesus as his beloved Son. In addition to this, Jesus refers to the Spirit who is prominent in the Old Testament, who is

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<sup>15</sup>I am aware that by constantly referring to male and female as made in God's image and occasionally referring to both male and female together as made in God's image, this language excludes those who see themselves as neither male nor female. Whereas I am in agreement that we should understand the picture in Genesis as telling us that it is *humanity* that is made in the image of God, and that this is a preferable expression, this book is dealing with a very specific situation in which expectations of differences in forms of ministry and roles in heterosexual marriage for men and women are rooted in assumptions about differences in sex and gender between male and female. Thus, I will continue to use this language, despite its limitations, to address this particular situation.



present in and with Jesus and who will come after him as the continuation of God's presence on earth after he has ascended. Father-Son language tells us something profound about the nature and character of God, but it still functions in a metaphorical capacity because God the Father is not the literal father of God the Son. There was no procreation with a mother, and Jesus was not conceived in the way that human sons are conceived, or born in the way that human sons are born, just as Wisdom was not really birthed. In addition to this, as well as the idea that the Son and the Spirit have their origins in the Father's being and are sent by the Father into the world, we also have to hold together that the Son and the Spirit are one with the Father and are also God. Father-Son language is a rich and generative metaphor for God. It tells us of how the first and second person of the Trinity relate to one another. It tells us of how we too can relate to God (we will come to this). At the time, it would have spoken to Jesus' Jewish disciples and his hearers of the covenant relationship of Yahweh to Israel and specifically of God's relationship to David (where we find Father-son language) from whom they believed the Messiah would be descended.

We see again how metaphor functions in relation to truthful revelation. The picture of the Father and the Son tells us something profound, true, and meaningful about God, but it does not and cannot tell us *all* that we can know. The fact that the Father, Son, and Spirit are all also one tells us something equally profound, as does the fact that male and female are made in his image. This leads us to the next question: What is the significance of the maleness of Jesus to our understanding of the salvation story?

### THE MALE JESUS AND HIS MALE DISCIPLES

This question entails a different answer. In many ways the maleness of Jesus and his disciples *is* important in the salvation story because of the context into which Jesus was born, both as a Jew and in the particular time God chose to come to earth in the Son. There is significance to Jesus and his disciples being men because of what they symbolize and represent in their male bodies within the Jewish faith. This then extends to the Christian faith because we have our roots in Judaism. In many ways, we find in these narratives the most glaringly obvious androcentrism and patricentrism, but

here we also get taken into the realm of symbol and typology, where people stand as signs pointing to something more than just themselves. Jesus and the twelve disciples, as well as being real people and individuals, also represent and stand for something bigger. They are people who represent and embody wider and broader concepts, and the people around them would have understood this. On the typology of the twelve male disciples, William Witt writes,

Jesus chose *male* apostles for the same reason that he chose *twelve* apostles and *Jewish* apostles. Insofar as Jesus' followers represent the new Israel, Jesus' twelve apostles typologically represent the twelve tribes of Israel, and, specifically, the twelve patriarchs (sons of Jacob/Israel) from whom the nation of Israel was descended.<sup>16</sup>

Witt makes the point that the twelve male apostles supply typological continuity and fulfillment to the story of Israel. He also adds this, which will come out in later discussions of what it means to be re-formed in Christ, "The twelve had to be free Jewish males, and not slaves, women or Gentiles, in order to fulfill the symbolic function of their typological role."<sup>17</sup> The Logos comes to earth to assume human nature, and as he does he enters an existing patriarchal system. In some crucial ways, he conforms to many expectations already enshrined within the system. Jesus stands as a representative for the nation of Israel, on the one hand, and the whole of humanity, on the other, and this choice of a male figure to stand as a representative would have been wholly expected within the context of the time. In 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5, Paul chooses the figure of Adam as the representative of the whole of sinful humanity and Jesus as the one who represents redeemed humanity.

Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. For

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<sup>16</sup>William G. Witt, "Concerning Women's Ordination: The Argument from Symbolism Part 1 (God, Christ, Apostles)," *William G. Witt* (blog), July 8, 2016, <http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-the-argument-from-symbolism-part-1>. Witt has published a series of essays on women's ordination that are impressive in their detail and level of research. I highly recommend his work. I understand Witt is forming his comprehensive series of posts on the ordination of women into a book, but I am currently not aware that this has been published.

<sup>17</sup>Witt, "Concerning Women's Ordination."

just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous. (Romans 5:18-19)

For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. (1 Corinthians 15:21-22)

We see then that the male figures in our salvation story fulfill a symbolic and typological function. Does this indicate that God somehow prioritizes man over woman or endorse the idea of the preeminence of the male?<sup>18</sup> Whereas it seems impossible here to refute the evidence that male figures feature most prominently in the story at this point, it is also important to note where and how female figures feature, and to explore the implications of this for women. Does the fact that the men stand for the rest of us place women at a disadvantage in some way? On the surface yes. It is easy to read the story superficially and assume that women have been excluded in some way. However, despite the prominence of men in the salvation story, it is not actually at the expense of women. Women also feature in prominent and meaningful ways and also point to significant truths about God, who he is, and what he endorses.

## JESUS AND WOMEN

One of the damaging aspects of many of the texts we will explore and how they have been received traditionally is that they have sent messages to women throughout the ages that man alone is the image and glory of God, that woman has a borrowed authority and is a potential source of shame, that she should remain quiet or silent and in the background, and that she is the head of no one. It is frighteningly easy for a woman in the church to

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<sup>18</sup>Witt makes the point that Paul also refers to women as representative figures. Paul uses Hagar and Sarah in Galatians 4 as representatives of the “two covenants of Sinai, the old covenant (‘present Jerusalem’) and the new covenant (‘Jerusalem above’). Nothing in Paul’s typology suggests that either Hagar or Sarah are representative because of their sex. Moreover, that Paul uses female figures as typologically representative undercuts the claim that there is in Scripture a pattern in which male figures are representative of humanity and female figures are not.” William Witt, “Concerning Women’s Ordination: The Argument from Symbolism (Part 2: Transcendence, Immanence and Sexual Typology),” *William G. Witt* (blog), August 1, 2016, <http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-the-argument-from-symbolism-part-2>.

absorb a message that she is lesser, inferior, and lacking in some way. I fully understand, in the light of this, that it can be harder for a Christian woman who studies the Scriptures to see herself portrayed as equal to a man, but it is possible to see in different ways.

For the most part, as I said, I have not chosen to focus on Jesus and women; this book is about revisiting contentious exegetical issues, and I don't believe there is any real argument about how Jesus favored women in an unusual and even radical way. I finish this chapter, however, on reorienting ourselves around his person. I know that this Dorothy Sayers' quote is well known by now, but I never tire of it, so I make no apologies for reproducing it here.

Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man—there had never been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, who never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as 'The women, God help us!' or 'The ladies, God bless them!'; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously, who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no ax to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unselfconscious.<sup>19</sup>

In Luke 24, Luke tells the story of the large group of women who turned up at the tomb only to find it empty of Jesus' body. Instead, they find two angels beside them explaining that what Jesus had already told them would happen had now happened. He rose from the dead and is alive! This group of women, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and others (we are not sure how many) hurried back to tell the (male) apostles of the greatest act of God in history. But the apostles did not believe them because "their words seemed to them like nonsense." Bauckham writes, "women are given priority by God as recipients of revelation and thereby the role of mediators of that revelation to men. Is this not part of the eschatological

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<sup>19</sup>Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Human-Not-Quite Human," in *Are Women Human? Penetrating, Sensible, and Witty Essays on the Role of Women in Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 68.

reversal of status in which God makes the last first and the first last so that no one might boast before God?”<sup>20</sup> This is a powerful story, both for what it tells us of the role of women in salvation history and for what it tells us of how they were treated at the time. All of us, men and women, should take care not to underestimate the pattern in history of women’s words being cast as nonsense or a woman’s perspective being dismissed or belittled. Let us go on to see that a closer look at the story shows us how women are also featured in the history of salvation.

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<sup>20</sup>Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, 269.

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