

Alleged Female Language about the Deity in the Hebrew Bible

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There are a number of alleged examples of female language about the deity in the Hebrew Bible, but, to my knowledge, there has been no systematic critique of such instances. They include passages where the deity Yahweh is said to be described as a human or animal mother, and other passages where language that seems appropriate only to women (e.g., of birthing and of midwifery) is used in reference to the deity. Twenty-two such passages are assessed here, with the conclusion that there is not a single instance of such female language. There are indeed two cases where the deity may be *compared* to a woman, but they do not mean that the deity itself is viewed as in any sense female.

There is a common belief among scholars and the Bible's wider public that in the Hebrew Bible there are a number of places where female language is used in reference to the deity Yahweh, suggesting that the deity is, at least sometimes, viewed as a female or that in some respect or to some degree this deity is "female" or "feminine." Support for this view can be found in the writings of many mainstream biblical scholars of the last decades such as Martin Noth, Carol Newsom, Norman Habel, John Goldingay, Peter Craigie, A. D. H. Mayes, Susan Ackerman, Marie-Theres Wacker, and P. A. H. de Boer as well as in popular volumes entitled *Is It Okay to Call God "Mother"?* and the like.¹

The conclusion is sometimes drawn, as in the classic statement by Phyllis Trible, that the vocabulary of female imagery for the god of the Hebrew Bible "tempers any assertion that Yahweh is a male deity."² As far as I know, no systematic

¹Reference to their work is made at the appropriate place in the course of the article.

²Phyllis Trible, "God, Nature of, in the OT," *IDBSup*, 368–69. See also her earlier "Eve and Adam: Genesis 2–3 Reread," *ANQ* 13 (1972): 251–58; and "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," *JAAR* 41 (1973): 30–48. Among voices generally supporting this position but not used systematically in this essay, I may mention Samuel Terrien, *Till the Heart Sings: A Biblical Theology of Manhood and Womanhood* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985). Marjo Christina Annette Korpel likewise identifies female aspects in the Hebrew deity in six biblical passages (*A Rift in the Clouds*:

review has been made of the passages adduced in support of these claims, and that is the purpose of this article.³ Whether the deity Yahweh is or is not male or female (or, for that matter, whether indeed such a deity has ever existed) is not my topic; it is simply whether the character Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible is ever represented as, to some extent, female or feminine.

I will consider some twenty-two passages and terms that have been thought to attest female language about the deity under the five topic headings of childbirth, midwifery, childcare, female household activities, and other female activities (including of nonhuman females), and under a final heading of relevant Hebrew terms (Shaddai and a term for mercy).

Childbirth

- 1. You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you [יִלְדָךְ];
you forgot the God [אֱלֹהִים] who gave you birth [מִחַיִּלְלֶךָ].
(Deut 32:18 NRSV)

What do the commentators say on this verse? I select three:

[God] is described as a mother, who *begot* and *delivered in pain* the Israelites.⁴

The verse may be understood to combine images of both fatherhood and motherhood.⁵

Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine, UBL 8 [Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1990], 241–43). See also Mayer Gruber, “The Motherhood of God in Second Isaiah,” *RB* 90 (1983): 351–59; J. J. Schmitt, “The Motherhood of God and Zion as Mother,” *RB* 92 (1985): 557–69; Julia A. Foster, “The Motherhood of God: The Use of *hyl* as God-Language in the Hebrew Scriptures,” in *Uncovering Ancient Stones: Essays in Memory of H. Neil Richardson*, ed. Lewis M. Hopfe (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 93–102; Helen Schüngel-Straumann, “The Feminine Face of God,” in *The Many Faces of the Divine*, ed. Hermann Häring and Johann Baptist Metz, Concilium (London: SCM, 1995), 93–101; Schüngel-Straumann, “God as Mother in Hosea,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, ed. Athalya Brenner, FCB 8 (1995; repr., London: T&T Clark, 2004), 194–218.

³A trenchant review of Tribble’s earlier work was offered by John W. Miller, “Depatriarchalizing God in Biblical Interpretation: A Critique,” *CBQ* 48 (1986): 609–16. Another critique was that of Paul V. Mankowski, “Old Testament Iconology and the Nature of God,” in *The Politics of Prayer: Feminist Language and the Worship of God*, ed. Helen Hull Hitchcock (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992), 151–75.

⁴Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 383 (emphasis added). Mothers do not “beget,” however; it is a term always used in English of the father.

⁵A. D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, NCB (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1979), 388. Mayes thinks it equally likely that יָלַד means “bear,” in which case “the imagery is of motherhood only.”

The verb יָלַד “describes only a woman in labor pains (e.g., Isa 51:2). God is such a woman, bearing Israel in travail.”⁶

How female is this language, in fact? First we should consider the word יָלַד, translated as “bore” in the NRSV. In English, only mothers “bear,” and the Hebrew verb is indeed usually applied to mothers. But Hebrew dictionaries also acknowledge its use in the sense of “beget” (of fathers); about one-sixth of occurrences are in this sense.⁷ In this passage the subject is Yahweh as the “Rock” (צוּר), which would appear to be a rather masculine image,⁸ so there seems little question but that יָלַד here means “beget” or “father” or “sire” (as most English versions, apart from the NRSV, translate it).

The second verb in this verse, חָיַל, however, is much more often used of a mother. In the *qal* it means “writhe” and so typically “be in labor” (of a mother), but in the *poel* (which we have here, in the form מְחַלְלֵךְ) it means either “bring to birth, bear” (of the mother) or “cause to be born” (of the father). Its subject can be feminine, as in the case of Sarah (Isa 51:2), mountain goats (Prov 39:1), and the wind (Prov 25:23), who “bear.”⁹ But it can also have a masculine subject, as it does when the Lord (אֲדֹנָי) causes the world to be born (Ps 90:2), and when the voice of Yahweh (the thunder, Ps 29:9)¹⁰ causes the female deer to give birth.¹¹ Since the

⁶Trible, “God, Nature of, in the OT,” 388b.

⁷If we consult *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, where all occurrences are listed, we find that in the *qal* (which we have here) the first sense is “bear, give birth to” (of the mother), occupying five columns; while the second sense, “beget” (of the father) occupies one column—a measure of the comparative frequency of occurrences (*DCH* 4:213–20).

⁸Samuel Terrien rather surprisingly thinks that “rock” is a feminine image (“The Metaphor of the Rock in Biblical Theology,” in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*, ed. Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998], 157–71). Perhaps that understanding of “rock” depends on a prior decision that the verse is about a female deity.

⁹In Zech 13:3, the participle יֹלְדֵי means “their parents,” that is, the one who fathered and the one who bore the child.

¹⁰We should note alternative readings of this verse: some emend אֵילֹת (“hinds”) to אֵילִים (“oaks”) and take יְחַלְלֵךְ (“he causes to give birth”) as “he makes to writhe, whirl” (thus creating a stricter parallelism in the verse, with both cola concerning trees); so RSV, NRSV, NIV, NJB, NET, CEB. Others seek to improve the parallelism by emending יְעָרוֹת (“forests”) to יְעָרוֹת (“kids”) and taking חֲשֵׁךְ (“strip bare”) as a new word חֲשֵׁךְ II (“bring early to birth”) (so G. R. Driver, “Studies in the Vocabulary of the Old Testament, II,” *JTS* 32 [1930–1931]: 250–57, here 255–56; followed by NEB). On this understanding, both cola would refer to animals.

¹¹Trible (“God, Nature of, in the OT,” 388b) says that a masculine subject is “inadmissible” (*God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, OBT 2 [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978], 70 n. 9; similarly Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* [New York: Crossroad, 1983], 16), but the examples above of a masculine subject in Ps 90:2 and 29:9 refute that. John D. Garr regards the translation “who fathered you” as a “particularly egregious example of outright mistranslation ... in order to obscure or remove feminine imagery” (*God and Women: Woman in God’s Image and Likeness* [Atlanta: Golden Key, 2011], 114). Carolyn Pressler calls this text “one of the relatively few texts in the Hebrew Bible that depicts God with female metaphors”

subject here is “God” (אלהים), which is never feminine, the verb should be translated “brought you to birth” (as in NEB, REB).¹²

Trible takes the view that in verse 18a it is the father who “begets,” and in verse 18b it is the mother who “bears.”¹³ It is nevertheless hard to believe that the one deity is within the same verse depicted both as father and as mother, when the subjects of the verbs are not differentiated by gender, and the two verbs are both masculine. It is irrelevant for this view that the terms *father* and *mother* occur side by side elsewhere when in such cases they refer to different people (as in Prov 23:22, 25; Job 38:28–29, cited by Tribble).

I conclude that this verse offers no support for the claim of female language in reference to the deity: the deity is masculine in both cola of the verse.

- 2. Will one strive¹⁴ with one’s Maker ...?
 - Does the clay say to the one who fashions it,
“What are you making?”
 - or “Your work has no handles”?
 - Will one say to a father, “What are you begetting?”
 - or to a woman, “With what are you in labor?”
 (Isa 45:9–10)¹⁵

Commentators:

To the very same extent that the God of Israel can be compared to a father the God of Israel can and should be compared also to a mother.¹⁶

Prophets often spoke of God as the people’s father ...; it is rare for the parallelism to be completed and for God to be compared to both father and mother.¹⁷

The text implies that God is all three figures, potter, father and mother.¹⁸

(“Deuteronomy,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary, Revised and Updated*, ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, 3rd ed. [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998], 88–102, here 102) (as so often, it is said that the verb “literally means ‘writhed in travail,’” but it is incorrect to claim that the meaning of the *qal* is the “literal” meaning of the *polet*; *qal* senses are in general not the “literal” meanings of the other voices).

¹²The translation “gave you birth” (RV, RSV, NRSV, NIV, NAB, NABRE, NET, NLT; CEB: “gave birth to you”) is inappropriate, since that is what a mother does.

¹³Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 63: “a woman in labor pains, and this activity the poetry ascribes to the deity. With labor pains, God gave birth to Israel.”

¹⁴I am accepting the emendation of הוי רב (“woe to one who strives”) to הִירִיב (“will one strive?”) in verse 9 and of הוי אומר (“woe to one who says”) to הִיאָמֵר (“does one say?”) in verse 10 (as also D. Winton Thomas in *BHS*, 746).

¹⁵Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

¹⁶Gruber, “Motherhood of God,” 354.

¹⁷John Goldingay and David Payne, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 40–55*, 2 vols., ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 2:36.

¹⁸Susan Ackerman heads her paragraph “God as Woman” (“Isaiah,” in Newsom, Ringe, and Lapsley, *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 161–68, here 167).

Nevertheless, what we have here is neither a simile nor a metaphor, but an analogy drawn from everyday life. The deity is not represented as a potter, and no more is the deity a father or a mother. The prophet's reproof here is to a possible objection by his hearers to the idea that Yahweh will use the Persians under Cyrus as his means of salvation for Israel. The objection is envisaged as raised by the clay the potter is using and by someone addressing a father and a mother. There is nothing to say that the someone is the child of the father and mother; indeed, it would be strange to imagine a fetus engaged in disputation with its female parent, and even if it could be, why would that fetus be asking what she is carrying? It is itself!

The prophet's reproof is directed against anyone who doubts the wisdom of what Yahweh is doing. He does not represent the deity as a woman.¹⁹

- 3. Shall I open the womb and not deliver? says the LORD;
shall I, the one who delivers, shut the womb? says your God
(Isa 66:9 NRSV)

A commentator:

[The comparison] stops just short of calling God mother.²⁰

Here is another passage associating the deity with the birthing of a child. But is it representing the deity as a woman? The context is the sudden rebirth of the nation (a land born in a single day, 66:8b). A few lines earlier Zion (not Yahweh) has been pictured as a mother giving birth with miraculous ease: "before she was in labor she gave birth" (66:7a). Such birthing is regarded by the prophet as all the deity's doing. It is Yahweh who is in control of fertility; it is he who opens and closes wombs, enabling a woman to conceive or preventing her from so doing, as in the case of the matriarchs in Genesis (20:18, 29:31, 30:22; cf. 20:18, 1 Sam 1:5).

The deity has this capability because he is a powerful male god; he can "deliver" the child, that is, bring it to birth (יָלַד *hiphil*), or "close [עָצַר] the womb" as he pleases. There is nothing female about his control of women's fertility. Nor are his actions those of the midwife: no midwife opens a womb, nor does she close any mother's womb. The deity is in charge of childbirth, but he does not effect it, for he is not a mother; in this verse he is not a woman, nor is he depicted as such.

- 4. For a long time I have held my peace,
I have kept still and restrained myself;
now I will cry out like a woman in labor,
I will gasp and pant.
(Isa 42:14 NRSV)

¹⁹As against Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 63.

²⁰Ibid., 67.

Commentators:

Her writhing is not a symbol of powerlessness, but of power to bring forth victory. She who labors is she who shouts the war cry.²¹

Yahweh compares his own acts of salvation with a woman giving birth.²²

God's anguish at the human failure to embody justice is captured in the image of a woman writhing, unable to catch her breath in the pain of her travail. Out of God's travail comes a new world in which the blind are safely led.²³

The context of this verse is Yahweh's announcement that he is about to act (in bringing Israel back from exile) after a long period of silence. His action will be accompanied by a broad soundscape: there is to be a "new song" in praise of Yahweh across the entire world (42:10);²⁴ the steppe land and its towns raise their voice, the Selaites singing and shouting from the tops of the mountains (v. 11). Yahweh himself goes out like a soldier, angry as a warrior, crying out and shouting aloud (v. 13), and now (v. 14) crying out like a woman in labor (בְּיִלְדָה), gasping and panting for breath.

Yahweh is not actually a warrior here: there is no warfare, and he is doing no fighting. He is "like" a warrior shouting, and he is also "like" a woman crying out in childbirth. But he is not a woman in labor;²⁵ he is not bringing anything forth, but just making as much noise as he can, in contrast to having for a long time held his peace, keeping still and restraining himself (v. 14a). The clue is in the preposition *like*: if Yahweh were a woman in labor he could not be "like" a woman in labor; only a person who is not a woman in labor can be "like" a woman in labor.

The prophet does indeed use the image of a woman in his depiction of Yahweh, but only in one respect: the loud cries of a woman giving birth. It is not a depiction of Yahweh as a woman or as a woman in labor. Nor does it refer to what Yahweh is about to give birth to or refer to him as creator of some new thing.²⁶

²¹ Sarah J. Dille, *Mixing Metaphors: God as Mother and Father in Deutero-Isaiah*, JSOTSup 398 (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 65–66.

²² Irmtraud Fischer, "Isaiah: The Book of Female Metaphors," in *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, ed. Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker, trans. Lisa E. Dahill et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 303–18, here 306; German original: *Kompendium: Feministische Bibelauslegung* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser-Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998), 248.

²³ Mollenkott, *Divine Feminine*, 15. The comment quite misunderstands the passage, in my opinion, leaving out of account as it does the chief point of the image, Yahweh's crying out.

²⁴ The sea does not "roar" in accompaniment, despite the RSV and NRSV.

²⁵ See, among others, Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 64, where she calls God "she"; Patricia K. Tull, "Isaiah," in Newsom, Ringe, and Lapsley, *Women's Bible Commentary*, 255–66, here 263; and Garr, *God and Women*, 118.

²⁶ Kathryn Pfisterer Darr rightly sees that the point of the simile is not a bringing to birth but the cries of the birthing mother ("Like Warrior, like Woman: Destruction and Deliverance in Isaiah 42:10–17," *CBQ* 49 [1987]: 560–71), though she fastens on the destructive aspect of the

- 5. Did you not pour me out like milk
and curdle me like cheese?
You clothed me with skin and flesh,
and knit me together with bones and sinews.
(Job 10:10–11 NRSV)

These lines are indeed about the growth of the human child in the womb of its mother, but not about Yahweh as mother.²⁷ Yahweh as creator is responsible for the development of the embryo, that is to say, but the creator has a different role from that of the mother. In bringing a child to birth mothers do none of these things (pour out, curdle, clothe with skin and flesh, knit together), and therefore Yahweh, who did these things, is not being depicted as a mother.

- 6. Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, “Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child” to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors?
(Num 11:12 NRSV)

Commentators:

Indirectly, Moses ascribes that activity [of becoming pregnant and giving birth] to God.... Implicitly ... Moses says that Yahweh conceived and bore Israel.²⁸

This extraordinary language indicates that Yahweh was indeed mother and nurse of the wandering children.²⁹

Yahweh himself is Israel's mother.³⁰

Moses objects to Yahweh that he is not responsible for Israel: they are neither his creation nor his child. Moses is here denying that he is Israel's mother, not affirming that Yahweh is.

Moses further objects that Yahweh has required him to carry Israel in his arms³¹ to the land of Canaan like a foster father carrying an infant. The Hebrew

deity's breath, whereas I think the issue is that of Yahweh's loud crying out as contrasted to his earlier silence.

²⁷ Contrast Mollenkott, *Divine Feminine*, 28.

²⁸ Trible, “God, Nature of, in the OT,” 369a; Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 69.

²⁹ Phyllis Trible, “Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation,” *JAAR* 41 (1973): 30–48, here 32.

³⁰ Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary*, OTL (London: SCM, 1968), 86–87; German original, *Das vierte Buch Mose: Numeri*, ATD 7 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 77–78: “Moses is not the people's mother.... Implicit in this is the very unusual idea that Yahweh himself is Israel's mother.”

³¹ The Hebrew idiom is “lift up into the bosom” (נשא בחיק) (נשא בחיק), but we should remember that a חיק, commonly translated “bosom,” is not equivalent to “(female) breast(s)” but means properly the fold of a garment above the belt, so that “in his arms” is a reasonable modern translation, although it abandons the original image.

certainly has נָחַם (“nurse”), the masculine form. It is used in four places in the Hebrew Bible of men, including of Mordecai, who was Esther’s foster father (Esth 2:7), while the feminine form נָחַמָּה is used twice, of Mephibosheth’s nurse and of Naomi as the nurse of Obed (2 Sam 4:4, Ruth 4:16). Tribble writes that, “although the word for nurse is masculine (*hāʾōmēn*), the imagery surrounding it favors a feminine meaning”³²—surely a piece of wishful thinking.³³ Moses is a male, and he believes what is being asked of him is to play a fatherly childcare role; he does not want that role, and he certainly has not been Israel’s mother (“Did I give birth to them?” Answer expected: No!).³⁴

- 7. Does the rain have a father?
Who fathers the drops of dew?
From whose womb comes the ice?
Who gives birth to the frost from the heavens?
(Job 38:28–29 NRSV)

A commentator:

Yes, the ice does come forth from a woman’s womb ... God is this mother.³⁵

Tribble calls this a “gynomorphic metaphor,” commenting, “From the divine womb came the ice and the hoarfrost.”³⁶ I think this is a misunderstanding of the text. The answers to these four questions are, in my opinion, first, No, and then, three times, No one.³⁷ That is because the rain and the other forms of moisture have no (mythological) father or mother. The language of begetting and birthing, of father and mother, reflects an older theogony, in which these physical phenomena were seen as the offspring of divine unions. The Joban poet is resistant to the idea that these beneficent features of the world were brought into being once and for all in a primordial time, as the language of begetting and childbearing might suggest. There is no father or mother in this verse, and Yahweh is neither.

Another approach to the interpretation of this verse is to wonder why Yahweh should ask “Does the rain have a father?” if indeed Yahweh is its father. Would he

³²Tribble, “God, Nature of, in the OT,” 369a. She adds that “an alternate [i.e., alternative] pointing reads *hāʾimmôn*, a hypocorism for *ʾēm*, ‘mother,’” citing P. A. H. de Boer, *Fatherhood and Motherhood in Israelite and Judean Piety* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 35 (it was no more than a suggestion on de Boer’s part). De Boer concludes that “Divine motherhood must have been well known in ancient Israel and Judah.”

³³The RSV, NRSV, NIV, NJPS, NEB, REB, NABRE, and CEB have “nurse,” disguising the gender of the foster father, while the NLT actually has “mother,” an indefensible translation.

³⁴On the childcare role of the father in the Hebrew Bible, see Brenda Forster, “The Biblical *ʾŌmēn* and Evidence for the Nurturance of Children by Hebrew Males,” *Judaism* 42 (1993): 321–31.

³⁵Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 68.

³⁶Tribble, “God, Nature of, in the OT,” 368b.

³⁷See David J. A. Clines, *Job 38–42*, WBC 18B (Nashville: Nelson, 2011), 1111–12.

not be more likely to ask, “Am I not the father of the rain?” Further, if Yahweh is the father of the rain, why would he be asking “Does the rain have a father?” He would know the answer to that, and Job would too, would he not? It is only if the question is a rhetorical question expecting the answer No! that it makes sense for it to be asked. The same applies to the question about the ice: it does not come from the womb of anyone, and therefore not from a womb of the deity.

Midwifery

- 8. Yet it was you who took me [יָגִי] from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.
On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.
(Ps 22:10–11 NRSV [Eng. 22:9–10])

Commentators:

Yhwh acted as midwife, first pulling the child out, then immediately setting it at its mother’s breast.³⁸

God adopts the midwife persona ... and is pictured as assisting in the birth of the psalmist and providing his neonatal care.³⁹

Do we not have here the image of a (female) midwife assisting at the birth of a child, and is not the deity therefore represented as a woman?⁴⁰

It would be best to start our review of this passage with the second line of v. 10, “you made me safe, or, kept me safe [מִבְּטִיחִי], when I was upon my mother’s breast.”⁴¹ This is not the action of a midwife, since it is hard to think of any danger

³⁸John Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3 vols., BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006–2008), 1:330.

³⁹John Makujina, “Male Obstetric Competence in Ancient Israel: A Response to Two Recent Proposals,” *VT* 66 (2016): 78–94, here 87.

⁴⁰So Trible, “God, Nature of, in the OT,” 368b; Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 60–61: “Although the poetry never explicitly calls God midwife and mother, its form and content disclose these metaphors.” Similarly Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Die Psalmen*, 3 vols., NEchtB 29, 40, 41 (Würzburg: Echter, 1993–2012), 1:149. See also L. Juliana M. Claassens, “Rupturing God-Language: The Metaphor of God as Midwife in Psalm 22,” in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld*, ed. Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 166–75; Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God’s Delivering Presence in the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 64–79.

⁴¹I cannot accept the proposal of some versions that it is a matter of the infant’s trust in Yahweh, as in the NIV “you made me trust in you even at my mother’s breast” (similarly RV, NLT), for it would be strange to attribute such agency to a newborn. Nor do I think that it is a matter of the infant “feeling” safe (as in the NET), but rather of actually *being* safe. The translation “who laid me at my mother’s breast” (NEB, REB) depends on G. R. Driver’s proposal that we have here

a midwife would be needed to save a child from when it is resting or nursing at its mother's breast (there might be wars and famines abroad, but midwives are not the obvious guardians from such dangers).

Evidently, the psalmist is in this line envisaging the deity as standing guard over him as an infant while he lay on his mother's breast. In real life, it is usually the mother who keeps her child safe; but here it is the deity keeping the child safe—not as a mother does but as a god does. There is no metaphor here.

If that is the meaning of v. 10b, it will be the same in v. 10a: in real life, there would no doubt have been a human midwife present at the birth, but both her assistant role and the mother's even more important role in childbirth are obscured by the psalmist's focus on the role of the deity: "you drew me, extracted me [the verb גָּחַח] from the womb." If the child is received from the womb by the hands of a human midwife, and the deity oversees or safeguards that process, that does not make the deity a midwife. The deity does not displace the midwife or become a midwife himself: his role is the supervision and safeguarding of the natural human process and its cultural accompaniments, as it is in the second line of the verse.

If the deity is not himself a midwife, he is not a female, nor does the verse hint at a feminine aspect of deity (the deity is actually addressed in v. 10 as אֱתָהּ, "you [masc. sing.]"). The background to the language of the verse must be the common concept referred to in #3 above: the deity "opens" and "closes" wombs, that is, is responsible for women's giving birth or failing to give birth. This is an exclusively divine activity, not corresponding to any human action of father, mother or midwife. Since the psalmist was in fact born, Yahweh must have opened his mother's womb; it is in that sense that Yahweh has taken him from his mother's womb.

This image of the supervisory role of the deity is continued in the next verse: "Upon you I have been cast from the womb, from the belly of my mother you are my God" (v. 11). Infants are in reality not "thrown" or "cast" or "abandoned" (שָׁלַח) to anyone at the time of their birth;⁴² the verb is a very strange one in this context, for it does not mean "be supported" or "be entrusted," as several modern translations suggest, but only ever "be thrown" and the like.⁴³ The psalmist expresses a

not the common בָּטַח ("trust") but a new בָּטַח II ("fall") and thus in the *hiphil* "lay" (Driver actually translated "thou hast laid me flat on my mother's breasts"; see his "Difficult Words in the Hebrew Prophets," in *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy Presented to Professor Theodore H. Robinson by the Society for Old Testament Study on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday, August 9th, 1946*, ed. H. H. Rowley [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1950], 52–72, here 59). The proposed verb בָּטַח II ("fall") is not at all probable here, though it is perhaps likely in some other passages (cf. *DCH Revised* 2:94b).

⁴² Unless perhaps they are exposed, a practice not attested for ancient Israel.

⁴³ See the twenty-four senses for the *hiphil* of the verb identified in *DCH* 8:395–99, and the five for the *hophal* (which is what we have here); none of them has a positive connotation. J. Cheryl Exum has correctly emphasized the proper meaning of שָׁלַח, especially in reference to Hagar's "casting" Ishmael away in Gen 21:15 ("Hagar *en procès*: The Abject in Search of Subjectivity," in *From the Margins 1: Women of the Hebrew Bible and Their Afterlives*, ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg, Bible in the Modern World [Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009], 1–16,

sense that he was abandoned by his mother and left entirely to Yahweh's care, "thrown" on to the deity. Such was probably not literally the case for any psalmist, we may suppose. The divine protection this psalmist has enjoyed all his life so fills his horizon that he expresses a most unfilial thought. His language of the deity's oversight of the birthing process, however pious, is at the same time deeply disrespectful of the mother's agency in giving birth to her child and nurturing it thereafter.

- 9. Upon you I have leaned from my birth;
it was you who took me [גוּחִי] from my mother's womb.
(Ps 71:6 NRSV)

To judge by some of the English translations, this would seem to be another version of what we have seen in Ps 22:10a. Thus, the NIV has "you brought me forth from my mother's womb"; REB: "you brought me from my mother's womb"; and NET: "you pulled me from my mother's womb." But the Hebrew verb is not גָּחַהּ, the verb we had in 22:10, but גָּזַח, which occurs only here and apparently means "cut" (cf. גָּזַח, "cutting [of stone]" and גָּזַח, "shear"), and certainly not "pull out." The recent translation the CEB hazards the guess that it means "you cut the cord when I came from my mother's womb"—which does sound like a midwife's task—but any connection with the previous phrase "I've depended on you since birth" would be hard to discern if that were the case.⁴⁴

Others think, faced with this rare verb for "cut," that we should emend the text. Some suggest reading גוּחִי ("the one who took me out"), from the same verb as in Ps 22:10, but again there is no proper connection with "I have leaned on you since birth." More commonly favored is an emendation to עוֹזִי or עָזִי ("my strength"), which makes better sense in the context (as in the NAB: "On you I depend since birth; from my mother's womb you are my strength"; similarly NET, NLT, NABRE), but it remains no more than a conjectural emendation.⁴⁵

Only if we accept the first emendation, to גוּחִי ("the one who extracted me") could there be any hint of a midwife in the text, but I already argued against that

here 12–13). Elsewhere the idea of being carried (סָבַל [Isa 46:4]; נָשָׂא [Isa 46:3, 4; 63:9]; סָמַךְ [Ps 3:6, 37:24]; תָּמַךְ [Isa 41:10]) by the deity throughout one's life appears, but that is not the meaning of שָׁלַךְ.

⁴⁴Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford sees midwife imagery here ("Psalms," in Newsom, Ringe, and Lapsley, *Women's Bible Commentary*, 221–31, here 227). Claassens goes further in understanding גוּחִי as referring to the task of a midwife who "cuts open the mother's womb to free the baby" (*Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 75–76); similarly, Goldingay, *Psalms*, 2:370 n. 19: "sounds more like a C-section than the cutting of the umbilical cord." In ancient times, however, such cesarean sections seem to have been used only when the mother was dead or dying, and no one to my knowledge has suggested that the text is envisaging such a situation.

⁴⁵H. Bardtke in *BHS*, 1151, thinks that we should "perhaps" make this emendation.

- 11. Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?
Do you attend the wild doe when she is calving?
(Job 39:1 REB)

A commentator:

God tends to the needs of these wild animals during the perilous period of gestation, birth, and delivery; he is their unseen midwife.⁵⁰

In this speech to Job, Yahweh is questioning him about his knowledge of the natural world. Some have thought that Yahweh is here portraying himself as an “unseen midwife” overseeing the gestation of these animals and the delivery of their offspring. The term שמר, usually “watch, keep,” is here translated by the REB as “attend,” perhaps to suggest the same understanding. But the Hebrew verb has a wide range of meanings, and it is used here in parallelism with the equally opaque verb ידע (“know”); so terms like “mark” (KJV, RV, NJPS) or “watch” (NAB, NABRE, NIV, NJB, NET, NLT) or “observe” (RSV, NRSV, CEB) would be rather more plausible translations.

It should be noted that the fact that Yahweh says Job cannot do something does not necessarily imply that Yahweh himself does it (the deity is not to be envisaged as walking in the depths of the abyss in 38:16, hunting prey for lions in 38:39, or being served by the wild ox in 39:9). Here in 39:1–3, Yahweh “knows” (ידע) the goats’ giving birth (MT the “time” of their giving birth),⁵¹ “observing” or “marking” (שמר) when they bear their kids, “counting” (ספר) the months of their pregnancy, and “knowing” (ידע again) the time of their delivery. All these actions could be said of a relatively detached observer, though perhaps they represent the concern of an involved carer. But that does not make the deity a midwife.

Childcare

- 12. I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child [גמל] with its mother.
(Ps 131:2 NRSV)

Many readers find here an example of female imagery about the divine. This seems a misunderstanding, for it is not a simile about the deity at all but about the psalmist.⁵² The most probable understanding of the verse is that a weaned child is not constantly demanding food from its mother as an unweaned child presumably is.⁵³

⁵⁰Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary*, OTL (London: SCM, 1985), 545.

⁵¹Reading אֶת־לֵדָת (‘‘the birthing’’) for MT עַת לֵדָת (‘‘the time of the birthing’’).

⁵²Contra Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 70: the verse ‘‘suggests a comparison between God and a mother.’’ DeClaissé-Walford rightly, in my opinion, thinks that the simile concerns the worshiper rather than the deity (‘‘Psalms,’’ 230).

⁵³Goldingay thinks this an ‘‘imaginative and complex conjecture’’ and proposes instead that

The NLT expresses this view exactly, with its explanatory translation “I have calmed and quieted myself, like a weaned child who no longer cries for its mother’s milk.”

- 13. As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you.
(Isa 66:13 RSV)

As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you. (NIV)

Yahweh is not here a mother comforting her child,⁵⁴ or perhaps rather her grown-up son (the word is **שׂוֹמֵר**, and not a term for a child such as **יָלֵד**),⁵⁵ but, arguably, *like* a mother doing so. A mother comforts and Yahweh comforts; both are the source of comfort. Yet the Hebrew strangely does not say that Yahweh is like a mother, but like a man (**כְּאִישׁ**), though it would have been simple to say **כְּאִמָּה** (“like a mother”). Even if we accept that this is female language about the deity, it does not suggest that the deity is viewed as female. He does not comfort the Jerusalemites in the role of a mother (he is not a mother). Does the prophet deliberately avoid saying that the deity is “like a mother”?

- 14. Can a mother forget the baby at her breast
and have no compassion on the child she has borne?
Though she may forget, I [Yahweh] will not forget you!
(Isa 49:15 NIV)

A commentator:

The Hebrew language boldly ascribes the human experience of motherhood to the psychology of God. It compares the deity to a mother who cannot forget the child she has borne.⁵⁶

This is an example not of female language about the deity⁵⁷ but of antifemale language about the deity. Far from presenting a female image of the deity, the text *contrasts* a human mother’s commitment to her child with the deity’s commitment to Israel. The rhetorical question with which the verse begins might lead us to offer the answer “No! A mother cannot forget her child.” But the prophet, against expectation, means “Yes! A mother *can* forget her child; even that is possible.” Yahweh, by contrast, is incapable of forgetting Israel. The point of the verse is that Yahweh is *not* like a mother.

⁵⁴גמל “refers not to the actual weaning of a child but to its having come off the breast at the end of a feeding (cf. Rashi)” (*Psalms* 3:537). But there is no evidence that גמל can mean this.

⁵⁴As thought by Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 22; Garr, *God and Women*, 118–19; Tull, “Isaiah,” 265.

⁵⁵I share R. N. Whybray’s doubt that שׂוֹמֵר can refer to an infant, Gen 4:1 and Job 3:3 notwithstanding (*Isaiah 40–66*, NCB [London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1975], 286).

⁵⁶Terrien, *Till the Heart Sings*, 151.

⁵⁷Garr, *God and Women*, 118; Tull, “Isaiah,” 263.

- 15. When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son ...
I drew them with human cords,
with bands of love;
I fostered them like one who raises an infant to his cheeks;
Yet, though I stooped to feed my child [על],
they did not know that I was their healer.

(Hos 11:1–4 NAB)

The last verse especially (v. 4) is very difficult. Some have translated “I was like someone who lifts an infant [על, “child,” rather than MT על I, “yoke”] close against her (but the word is not gendered in the MT) cheek; stooping down to [Ephraim] I gave him his food.”⁵⁸ There is no reason to suppose that the deity is being depicted as a mother rather than as a father.⁵⁹

- 16. Hearken to me, O house of Jacob,
all the remnant of the house of Israel,
who have been borne [עמס] by me from your birth [בטן],
carried [נשא] from the womb [רחם];
even to your old age I am He,
and to gray hairs I will carry you.
I have made, and I will bear [נשא];
I will carry and will save.

(Isa 46:3–4 RSV)

A commentator:

The imagery of this poetry stops just short of saying that God possesses a womb.⁶⁰

There are indeed references in v. 3 to the mother’s belly (בטן, translated by the RSV as “birth”) and womb (רחם), but the deity is not portrayed as the mother.⁶¹ The phrase “borne by me” means “carried [by me],”⁶² that is, throughout life; it has nothing to do with birth. The “house of Jacob” and the “house of Israel” have human mothers, but it is Yahweh who has “carried” or supported them throughout their life. Yahweh is their “creator” (עשה, “I have made,” v. 4) but not their mother.

⁵⁸ Mollenkott, *Divine Feminine*, 24.

⁵⁹ As against, for example, Marie-Theres Wacker, “Father-God, Mother-God and Beyond: Exegetical Constructions and Deconstructions of Hosea 11,” *lectio difficilior* 2/2012, http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/12_2/wacker_marie_theres_father_god_mother_god_and_beyond.html.

⁶⁰ Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 38.

⁶¹ As Mollenkott, *Divine Feminine*, 27. Fischer calls upon the Vulgate’s *qui portamini a meo utero qui gestamini a mea vulva* to find here a reference to the divine mother (*Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, 306).

⁶² The terms are עמסים and נשאים.

Female Household Activities

- 17. And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them.

(Gen 3:21 RSV)

A commentator:

The recital of *Heilsgeschichte* in Nehemiah 9 introduces Yahweh as seamstress.... The role of dressmaker is not unique to the God of the Wilderness. This same Deity made garments of skin to clothe the naked and disobedient couple in the Garden (Genesis 3:21). As a woman clothes her family, so Yahweh clothes the human family.⁶³

Because women are responsible for clothing their family, it is sometimes said that the deity is depicted in female terms.⁶⁴ I regard this view as far-fetched.

- 18. I will sprinkle clean water upon you,
and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses.
(Ezek 36:25 RSV)

A commentator:

Statements throughout the Bible about cleansing us from sin carry overtones of God's motherhood.⁶⁵

Cleaning is women's work, it is said, so when the deity makes persons and things ritually clean it might suggest that he is acting as a female. One has only to consult the word רחץ ("wash") in any concordance to see that overwhelmingly it is males who are the subject of the verb in the Hebrew Bible.

Other Female Activities

- 19. As the eyes of manservants look to the hand of their master,
as the eyes of a woman servant to the hand of her mistress,
so our eyes look to you, Yahweh our God,
until you show us your mercy!

(Ps 123:2–3)

⁶³Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," 32–33. In *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, on the other hand, while recognizing an image of the deity as tailor, Tribble does not envisage that role as female (134).

⁶⁴Mollenkott, *Divine Feminine*, 28; Paul R. Smith, *Is It Okay to Call God "Mother"? Considering the Feminine Face of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 55–56 ("God as a Seamstress").

⁶⁵Mollenkott, *Divine Feminine*, 27–28.

Commentators:

The feminine imaging of God here is striking.⁶⁶

[Yahweh is likened to a] benevolent mistress who cares for those who serve her.⁶⁷

There is a simile here, but it is not of the deity likened to a woman. The male servants look to the master, the female to the mistress of the household. If by comparison “our” eyes look to Yahweh for favor, it does not make Yahweh a male master or a female master. The deity is not compared to a woman.

- 20. I will attack them like a bear robbed of its cubs
and will tear open the covering of their heart;
there I will devour them like a lion,
as a wild animal would mangle them.

(Hos 13:8)

A commentator:

Perhaps because the image of God as a savagely angry Mother Bear breaks all our stereotypes of how a woman [especially a mother] ought to behave, it is an important image for our time.⁶⁸

Most English translations see here a female bear (so KJV, RV, RSV, NRSV, NJB, NJPS, NEB, REB, NET; only the NAB and its revision, NABRE, have an ungendered bear, “a bear robbed of its young”), and so the verse is often cited among alleged examples of female language about the deity.⁶⁹ There is no reason, however, for understanding דב שכול as a female. The word דב (“bear”) is usually masculine, and appears in only one of its twelve occurrences in the Hebrew Bible as feminine (2 Kgs 2:24); the adjective שכול (“bereaved”) is plainly masculine.⁷⁰

The phrase דב שכול occurs in two other places: 2 Sam 17:8, where David and his men are called warriors who are enraged, like “a bear bereaved of its cubs in the wild,” and Prov 17:12: “Better face a bear robbed of its cubs than a fool in his folly.” Even if דב is taken to be a she-bear, likening warriors or a fool to a she-bear would

⁶⁶J. Clinton McCann Jr., “The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” *NIB* 4:639–1280, here 1187.

⁶⁷DeClaisse-Walford, “Psalms,” 230.

⁶⁸Mollenkott, *Divine Feminine*, 49–53.

⁶⁹For example, Smith, *Is It Okay to Call God “Mother”?*, 70–71, 186.

⁷⁰The bear is parallel here to the lion (לביא), another male beast. In that case too there is a custom of supposing that the term refers to the female of the species (“female lion” in NJB, NEB, REB, NLT); against this view see David J. A. Clines, “Misapprehensions, Ancient and Modern, about Lions (Nahum 2:13),” in *Poets, Prophets, and Texts in Play: Studies in Biblical Poetry and Prophecy in Honour of Francis Landy*, ed. Ehud Ben Zvi et al., LHBOTS 597 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 58–76, here 71–75.

hardly suggest that there is a trace of the feminine in them. The same would be true when the deity is likened to a bear.

Hebrew Language Terms

•21. Shaddai

A commentator:

A wordplay between the epithet *šadday* (“mountains” [sic]) and the noun *šādayim* (“breasts”) connotes a maternal aspect in the divine.⁷¹

It is often claimed that the divine name Shaddai signals a feminine dimension in the Hebrew deity. Tribble writes:

Gen. 49:25 parallels the God of the fathers with the God Shaddai. These epithets balance masculine and feminine symbols. Cross holds that Shaddai had the original meaning of female breasts, a meaning that is preserved here through paronomasia. The God of the breasts gives the blessings of the breasts.⁷²

This is a misrepresentation, however. Cross’s view was that Shaddai means “the One of the Mountain”;⁷³ he compared the Akkadian *šadû*, a term for mountain. The implication was that the Hebrew divine name Shaddai came into Israel from Mesopotamia via Canaan and meant in Hebrew, as in Akkadian, “the One of the Mountain.”

Now Cross did allow that the Akkadian word *šadû* (“mountain”) was originally connected with a Semitic word for “breast,”⁷⁴ apparently because there is an evident similarity in shape between mountains and breasts; but Cross never suggested that there is any female connotation in the name Shaddai whether in or outside the Hebrew Bible. He thought Shaddai was a warrior god, identified with the Canaanite El, a male deity through and through.

Nevertheless, the claim that the name Shaddai properly or originally refers to breasts has become very widespread. The view lacks any scholarly foundation.

⁷¹ Tribble, “God, Nature of, in the OT,” 368b.

⁷² Similarly Smith, *Is It Okay to Call God “Mother”?*, 63–66. So too Garr, *God and Women*, 109–12: “the ancient name of God that was revealed to Abraham contained vivid feminine imagery” (109).

⁷³ See F. M. Cross, “Yahweh and the God of the Patriarchs,” *HTR* 55 (1962): 225–59, here 244–50; Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 52–60. Cross was following W. F. Albright, “The Names *Shaddai* and *Abram*,” *JBL* 54 (1935): 173–204, here 180–93, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3259784>.

⁷⁴ Though Albright mentioned a few possible Akkadian forms, today’s lexica such as *CAD* and *AHW* do not recognize any Akkadian analogs to *šadû* meaning “breast.”

As for the text in Gen 49:25, it is plain that the “God of your father” is no different from El Shaddai, and the blessings of abundance come not from a female deity of the breasts but from a paternal deity controlling natural and human fertility (as we saw earlier with the deity who opens and closes wombs).⁷⁵

•22. Language of the womb and of compassion

A commentator:

When God is spoken of as merciful, the semantic tenor of the word indicates that the womb is trembling, yearning for the child, grieved at the pain. What is being showered upon the wayward is God’s womb-love, divine love for the child of God’s womb.⁷⁶

Trible regards the language of the womb as a key component in her general argument about female language, giving it prime position in her *IDBSup* article. She begins with the noun רחם, a concrete noun that always designates the female organ, the womb, with reference to humans and animals and other entities viewed as female, such as dawn, the sea, and the deep. She then claims that the abstract noun רחמים, usually translated “compassion,” carries with it a feminine aspect, divine mercy being “analogous to the womb of a mother.” She calls this “uterine imagery”⁷⁷ and translates a sentence such as Jer 31:20, רחם ארחמנו, as “I will surely have motherly compassion on him [Ephraim].” Related terms, such the adjectives רחום and רחמני (“compassionate”) and the verb רחם (“be merciful, love”) have the same nuance, she argues.

She does allow, however, that when רחמים is used of a father it means “paternal love” even though she insists that its connection with רחם (“womb”) makes uterine love the primary sense; in her language that sense is a “semantic value from which a wide range of meanings extend.”⁷⁸ The claim to the centrality of “uterine love” is unprovable, but if רחמים can refer to fatherly or brotherly love when used of a male (e.g., Joseph’s רחמים growing warm for his brother in Gen 43:30), it is hard to see why it should mean motherly love when used of the deity. Tribble’s concession on this point seems to undermine her whole case for the female character of the term רחמים.

⁷⁵ There is probably a play on the similarity of sound between Shaddai and שד (“breast”) in Gen 49:25 (“Shaddai who will bless you with ... blessings of the breasts and of the womb”), as there is also between Shaddai and שד (“destruction”) in Joel 1:15 (“as destruction from Shaddai it will come”). But these are verbal plays, not indications of meaning.

⁷⁶ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 101.

⁷⁷ Tribble, “God, Nature of, in the OT,” 368; Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 31–59. Followers include Smith, *Is It Okay to Call God “Mother”?*, 56–58.

⁷⁸ Tribble, “God, Nature of, in the OT,” 368b.

There is indeed no reason why the meaning of the abstract noun should be determined or even influenced by the meaning of a cognate concrete noun. It is hard to believe that רחמים would be used so frequently of males (including the deity) if there was inevitably a hint of femininity about it (ancient Israel constructed gender rather stereotypically). In fact, there are seven examples of רחמים on the part of males, in addition to the thirty-one in reference to the deity. In only one case (1 Kgs 3:26) is it used of female compassion. It is difficult to believe that speakers of ancient Hebrew ever thought of the similar word רחם when they used the noun רחמים. Likewise with the verb רחם (“be merciful, love”): it is used forty-three times, once of a woman, four times of a man, and thirty-eight times of the deity.⁷⁹

Conclusion

My conclusion is that there is not a single instance of female language about the deity in the Hebrew Bible in the sense of language suggesting that the deity is viewed as a female, whether as a mother or a midwife or in any other typical female activity. There are indeed two cases where the deity may be *compared* to a woman (#4 about the woman in labor and #13 about the mother encouraging her son, though here the deity is not actually said to be like a woman, but like a man), and some may wish to call them cases of “female language about the deity.”⁸⁰ But I would continue to maintain that such cases do not suggest that the deity is in any way being represented as female; rather the contrary, for to say that the deity is “like” a female is actually to deny that the deity *is* female.

It can hardly be surprising that in the Hebrew Bible, which consistently represents the deity as male and everywhere employs the masculine pronoun “he” and masculine verb and adjective forms for the deity, there is no trace of a view that in some respect or to some degree this deity is “female” or “feminine.” Furthermore, even if every one of the items discussed here were truly examples of female

⁷⁹ Some authors add to the case of רחמים the Hebrew word מעים (“inner parts”; so Garr, *God and Women*, 116–18, in reference to Isa 63:15, Jer 31:20), which does sometimes refer to the womb, but is a general nongendered term for the internal organs, whether belly or intestines or womb; see further Dorothea Erbele, “Gender Trouble in the Old Testament: Three Models of the Relation between Sex and Gender,” *SJOT* 13 (1999): 131–41, here 139–40.

⁸⁰ It is commonly argued that similes such as that of Yahweh crying out like a woman in childbirth (#4) are actually a kind of metaphor—which might seem to call for a more sustained engagement with the theory of metaphor in general. However, the use of metaphorical language for the divine is hardly remarkable, since deities are usually very different from everyday realities, and their eyes and ears and speech—and everything about them—are inevitably metaphorical. If the Hebrew deity Yahweh happened to be said to be a “mother” it would be no different in principle from his being called a “king” or a “warrior”; my contention in this article, however, is simply that such female language is not used in the Hebrew Bible.

language about the deity, their force would be miniscule compared to the sustained language about a masculine deity throughout the Hebrew Bible.⁸¹

Nevertheless, the view I am resisting here has become a current orthodoxy, repeated by many mainstream scholars as well as by a host of more popular writers, despite the almost total lack of critical evaluation and debate that might have been given to it. It can only be supposed that its origins in earlier times of feminist writing accounted for its ready acceptance, and that both women and men committed to gender equality have adopted it because they would dearly love it to be true.

The fact is, though, that the Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible is a thoroughly male god,⁸² and there is simply no benefit in failing to recognize that fact and accept its consequences.⁸³ For my part, I regret the damage done to the feminist cause by the repeated claim that the Bible is less masculine and less sexist than it actually is.

⁸¹I refer to the massive 700-page compilation of similes and metaphors about the deity in Ugarit and the Hebrew Bible by Korpel, *Rift in the Clouds* (see n. 2 above). I note here also the recent article by James Gordon McConville, “Neither Male nor Female: Poetic Imagery and the Nature of God in the Old Testament,” *JOT* 44 (2019): 166–81, which is well nuanced but with whose conclusion—that “male and female metaphors for Yahweh do not bespeak either maleness or femaleness in the deity, but rather Yahweh’s identification with human experience broadly” (166)—I cannot agree. My present article concerns itself exclusively with lexical and exegetical issues in certain texts; extraneous considerations such as theories of metaphor, queer theory, and the ontology of the divine are outside its scope.

⁸²See further David J. A. Clines, “The Most High Male: Divine Masculinity in the Bible,” in *Hebrew Masculinities Anew*, ed. Ovidiu Creangă, HBM 79 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2019), 61–82. See also Susanne Heine, *Christianity and the Goddesses: Systematic Criticism of a Feminist Theology*, trans. John S. Bowden (London: SCM, 1988), esp. 26–30, concluding, “The biblical God is far from being deserving of the name mother. His masculinity is never in question” (29).

⁸³It is, in my opinion, equally incorrect to state that Yahweh is “beyond sexuality” or “neither male nor female” in the Hebrew Bible, as, e.g., Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 188–89; Tribble, “Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation,” 34; Brent A. Strawn, *What Is Stronger than a Lion? Leonine Image and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, OBO 212 (Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 2 n. 6.

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