



Women, monotheism and the gender of God¹

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Abstract

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God is experienced in heightened awareness that can only be represented in images and symbols. According to the Old Testament there was one male God, Yahweh, imaged as a father, king, judge, shepherd and more. Since God-images are cultural creations related to the time and place in which they were conceived, the male character of God is a natural reflection of the patriarchal culture of the ancient Near East. Twenty-first century women have difficulty relating to the male God-image and patriarchal church language, both of which justify the subordinate position of women in church and society. Investigation into Old Testament religion reveals that the way Israelite women dealt with the single male God opens the way for contemporary women to do likewise and create images of God with which they can identify.

Opsomming

Vroue, monoteïsme en die geslag van God

Die verhewe ervaring van God kan slegs in beelde en simbole uitgedruk word. Volgens die Ou Testament is daar een manlike God, Jahwe, uitgebeeld as vader, koning, regter, herder en so meer. Omdat Godsbeelde kultuurskeppings is wat gebonde is aan die tyd en plek waar hulle ontstaan het, is die manlike aard van God 'n natuurlike refleksie van die patriargale kultuur van die ou Nabye Ooste. Vroue van die een-en-twintigste eeu vind dit moeilik om aanklank te vind by 'n manlike Godsbeeld en die patriargale kerktaal

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wat die ondergeskikte posisie van die vrou in die kerk en samelewing regverdig. 'n Ondersoek na die godsdiens van die Ou Testament het aan die lig gebring dat die wyse waarop die Israelitiese vroue met die enkele manlike God omgegaan het, vir hedendaagse vroue die weg baan om hulle na te volg en beelde van God te skep waarmee hulle kan identifiseer.

1. Introduction

People experience God in heightened awareness that can only be represented by images and symbols. Each culture has its symbols, words and images for God. But the point is that many, if not all of the images we have of God are of a male figure. This is understandable, because human beings, when speaking of God, quite naturally choose language which will project onto the divinity the highest values that they hold. In a patriarchal society such as Old Testament Israel, therefore, the image of God would be cast in male language, males being from the powerful male ruling groups of society, more highly valued than females.

Religious images and symbols are immensely powerful and inspiring, but they can also be sadly misleading. The male images of God have become increasingly problematic for women since they typically justify the subordinate position of women in church and society. This problem, which goes hand in hand with the tyranny of patriarchal language and a certain view of the authority of the Bible, is introduced in the first of three parts of this article. In the second part, the history of ancient Israelite religion is explored in order to ascertain the context of the male monotheistic image of God in the Old Testament. Once we understand its context and the way in which women in Old Testament times, who also had difficulty in relating to a single male god, dealt with the problem, we conclude with suggestions for a way forward for today's women with their Bible and their God in a male-dominated world.

2. The problem of God and the hierarchy of male over female

There is a close correlation between women's views of God and their identities. Our view of God not only influences our faith experience, it also has a profound effect on the way we see ourselves. To grasp this, one should for a moment imagine oneself in a tradition with a female God-image to realise how completely different one's general outlook and religious experience would be. Dreyer (1998:546) points out that if God is experienced as a judgmental figure who lays down rules and laws that must be obeyed, a person who lives in a close relationship with God will constantly feel like an accused in the dock. The identity of such a person

will develop into that of someone who feels inadequate and bound by guilt. In this regard, Dreyer (1998:544) cautions counsellors and pastors counselling women who have been abused within a patriarchal home situation or workplace against the further harm that they can cause by indiscriminately confronting these women with, or referring them to a male God as their Ultimate Counsellor and Pastor. Subject-related literature confirms that the Father God-image does not evoke love and devotion from those women (as well as men and children) who know what it is to be victims of a molesting father or of broken marriages with absent fathers. Schüssler-Fiorenza (1996:9) is convinced that wife-battering, child-abuse, sexual exploitation of women and many more injustices against women can directly be related to a patriarchal religion and power-oriented language for God.

Language is inherently political and powerful. According to Vorster (1995:404) “[f]eminism ... has made us acutely aware of the political dimensions of the pronoun ‘he’ and the ways in which this word has been embedded within power structures”. The Old Testament God as king, father (the head of the patriarchal family), master, warrior and judge, tend to not only justify the dependency of women in society, it also legitimates the exclusion of women from the roles of religious leadership by which the religious tradition maintains itself. God is seen as the creator of the church order and those in power are representatives and agents of God.

Ultimately male language for God implies that men are more like God or closer to God’s image. If we see God as a man or more like a man or more properly named in male language, we tend to think of men as more like God, and women less like God. Mary Daly (1973:19) captured the essence of this problem with the well-known phrase: “If God is male, then the male is God.”

It is not only in relation to God that the male image is dominant. Anyone listening to our pulpit language, liturgies, creeds and hymns, can only conclude that the vast majority of church people are male since references to women are few and far between. It is taken for granted, no doubt, that “man” includes “woman” and “mankind” includes “woman-kind”. But is this fact present for the most part in the minds of worshippers? Dreyer (1998:550) reminds us of the Afrikaans hymn (Gesang 258, *Psalms en Gesange*, 1976) in which the faith community (women included) is called upon to conduct themselves “manlik, sterk en moedig”. The hymn writer stereotypes men as strong and women as weak, and to be a good Christian one should be strong like a man.

2.1 The current debate

Women react differently to exclusive God-language. Women theologians and biblical scholars are concerned that the male images of God support the superior position of men and the power of “male as norm” on generations of women schooled in its image. Children are educated early into the tradition that describes God in male terms. Since the male has been presented as normal and universal with the female as marginal and deviant, women internalised male language and identify – against themselves – with the male experience. This is called the *immascultation* of women (cf. Tolbert, 1990:18). The following remarks, typically made by women who deny God’s exclusive maleness while subconsciously endorsing it, illustrate the immascultation process: “God is neither male nor female, *He* is in fact spirit”, or “God being exalted above all sexuality, is part of *His* transcendence”.

There are women who claim that the images for God have become *irrelevant* since the legal, social and economic status of women have changed and the images are no longer part of their daily experience. We no longer relate to kings and shepherds, we call nobody “master” and warriors belong in ancient adventure stories.

And then there are women who find Christianity so steeped in male dominance that they bid farewell to the church and the Bible.

Others accept the male God and add that, according to the Bible, the man was created first and the woman sinned first, so it is clear that men are meant to lead and women are meant to be subservient. According to Paul, they say, women are not allowed to be leaders in the church and since the Bible is the inspired Word of God, it contains an inerrant, true description of God and God’s way with us and the church of today. This is a fundamentalist view of scripture which becomes a problem if the Bible and the tradition have a damaging effect on the lives of some of its readers and believers. That is, if it prevents any person from living an authentic life as a full human being before God. This view of scripture is alive and well in our churches and in the minds of Christians. The biblical text is understood as binding for all times and all situations without taking into account the historical context and nature of male God-language.

These fundamentalist assumptions uphold the problem and are directly responsible for the hesitancy of churches to refer to God in other than male images and pronouns. These assumptions need to be put into perspective before we can proceed towards solutions.

2.2 The culture and history of male God-images

Before rejecting the church and dismissing biblical God-images on face value as hurtful or irrelevant, we must examine the history of ancient Israelite religion which gave birth to the images of God millennia ago in a culture very different from our own. It is essential that any concept or belief be studied within the context of its own cultural world. The Bible books grew out of the socio-cultural world of the ancient Near East and reflect the social structures, political ideologies and religious commitments of the world where they came into being, and the time when they were written down. What were binding and relevant then are not necessarily binding and relevant for us today. Ignoring this, inevitably results in distortions in understanding and teaching which in turn are fed into church and social structures.

2.3 Readers make meaning

Texts do not have meanings that readers proceed to discover. Each reader of texts, be it a newspaper or the biblical text, brings her or his cultural and personal prejudices, biases and presuppositions to the act of reading (cf. Tolbert, 1990:16; Vorster, 1995:406). As Maher (1991:19) puts it: "There can be no objective interpretation of the Bible, but what we hear from the text will always reflect where we are when we do our listening". Our human interpretation mediates between the biblical text and our situation. What it means is that authority is not embedded *in* the Bible, but occurs in the present experience of the reader while searching the pages of the ancient books for ways of living as full human beings. In this article I consciously view the Bible from a gender perspective, that is from my situation as a gendered being; as a women with concerns and issues pertaining to my gender – not that it can be avoided in any way, because our gender is who we are.

A gendered reading of the Bible implies that we read *against the grain of the texts*, with a *suspicious* view toward how the male author, subscribing to a patriarchal ideology, wants us to read. This reading strategy does not allow the text to set the agenda. It exposes the strategies of the author, by asking whose story is told more fully than those of the other characters; whose agenda is fulfilled in the story; which characters are approved of and disapproved of by the narrator and whose agenda supports the social order. Once the male ideology has been peeled away, readers with a gendered interest can "uproot *her* story from *his* story, telling about the dreams, secrets and desires of the female characters who are suppressed in *his* stories", as Bach (1999: xxiv-xxvi) phrased it.

However, one should heed against falling into the interpretive trap of stereotyping either male or female characters in the text. Qualities of compassion, tenderness, gentleness, as well as bravery, violence, anger and cruelty are not inherently gender based. This is an important consideration when reflecting on new ways of talking about God.

2.4 The nature of religious language

Human language cannot deal absolutely with absolutes, hence the most humans can do is to say: “God is like” In other words, all language about God, that is, all religious language or language of faith, is of its very nature metaphorical (cf. Van Huyssteen, 1986). In fact, language *per se* is symbolic, because although it *refers* to reality, it does not *represent* reality. Vorster (1995:404) reminds us that language is a human and cultural construct and with every word people use, the attitudes, values and relationships of the society in which it is used, are evoked – which is why it is imperative to examine the culture which gave birth to the biblical God-images in order to understand why it was handed down to us in the form presented in the Bible (cf. Deist, 1994:327-342).

If images and metaphors are rooted in human experience, and the world of humans is forever changing, images and metaphors cannot remain static. As people’s experience change, old metaphors resound with new meanings in new circumstances, or they die because they no longer produce the response they used to in the group where they originally found expression. We referred to today’s women who find the ancient biblical God-images irrelevant and meaningless for the time we live in. If these images are rigidly retained in their original form in church language and liturgy, their metaphorical character is lost and they are understood in a literal way as describing God’s being. These are the images that women find hurtful. With the problem on the table, we now turn to the history of the monotheistic God we worship.

3. Text and reality: Female deities in ancient Israel’s family religion

The books of the Old Testament, written over a period of a thousand years, testify to the formation and development of the religious ideas of ancient Israel. However, *no religion is an island*. Religions shape and influence one another and Israel did not escape the cross-cultural conditioning that took place among the cultures of the ancient world to which she was a relative latecomer. The archaeological recovery of the great civilisations along the *fertile crescent* made it clear that Israel’s religion grew from the cultures of the ancient Near East. All these cultures practised polytheism, a religious system worshipping multiple

gods and goddesses. Ultimately, however, Israel developed a monotheistic religious system, different from any of the great Near Eastern systems – one which proclaimed the importance of only one God, Yahweh, and the irrelevance or nonexistence of all other gods. Monotheism became the central feature of three world religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Christianity depends upon the Hebrew Bible for its monotheistic patriarchal God, modified through interaction with New Testament experience into God as Father, Christ and Spirit (Ruether, 1986:161).

No religion is a monolith either. There is within every religion an internal plurality or diversity of religious ideas, values and practices. These internal “layers” are not separate entities but aspects of one religious system. Two layers of ancient Israel’s religion are distinguished: the *official religion* of the state which was monotheist and the *family religion* in which women took the lead in worshipping female deities alongside the official god, Yahweh, to attend to their particular needs (Albertz, 1994:19; Schroer, 1998:165-166; Van der Toorn, 1996:1-6).

3.1 The polytheistic religion of Israel’s neighbours

Polytheism is by definition a nature-oriented religious system in which all the elements of nature are in the hands of the gods. Human myths and rituals enable humans to take part in the system so that they can collaborate with the various gods in order to ensure agricultural fertility or the wellbeing of individuals and society.

Goddesses as well as gods were an integral part of ancient Near Eastern religion and thought. Goddess worship was not a separate religion – men as well as women worshipped the goddesses (Schroer, 1998:166), and their stories were part of the mainstream literature of the ancient East. Goddesses represented women in society with the same positions in the pantheon that women had in the human world and in their families. They served as divine models for women’s own social roles (Frymer-Kensky, 1992:12).

Many Mesopotamian goddesses were portrayed as *mothers*. They sang lullabies to their children and educated them in the ways of their culture. Ninlil lay awake at night worrying about her warrior son and Nun-barshegunu advised her daughter on courting and sexual strategies to guide her safely into marriage. They were also *household managers*. Uttu inspired ordinary domestic women by brewing beer, weaving cloth and making pottery (Frymer-Kensky, 1992:15-31). However, it was the great *mother goddess* (to be distinguished from the *goddess as a mother*) known in all world religions (cf. Gimbutas, 1996), whose

assistance and support were essential to women at this time. Her domain was the netherworld, from which things grew and to which they returned, where even humans were fashioned before birth and to where they returned after death. She was a Mother Earth figure, mistress of bearing. Human pregnancy and the stages of childbirth were in her hands. She was in charge of the growth and development of the foetus in the womb, the timing of birth and the entire birth process: the cutting of the umbilical cord and the gathering of the placenta. Considering the danger of childbirth and the frequency of miscarriages and stillbirths in ancient times, the importance of this goddess speaks for itself (Frymer-Kensky, 1992:46-49). In Job 1:21 (cf. also Psalm 139:15) we find traces of *terra mater* in Israelite thought: "Naked I came from the womb, naked I shall return whence I came." Since one cannot return to a human womb, the author must have had *terra mater* in mind.

3.2 "The" religion of ancient Israel

The Bible sketches an uncomplicated picture of the origin of Israel's religion: God brought Israel out of Egypt, revealed Himself at Mt. Sinai, made a covenant with the people in which they promised to worship God alone, and gave Israel its religious laws and cultic rituals. According to the historical books, Israel then entered Canaan bearing this pure monotheistic faith. Contact with the religion of the Canaanites continually tempted the people into apostasy and into adopting foreign practices and beliefs to create a syncretistic religion. For their idolatry they were accused by the prophets of having caused the fall of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms.

We must, however, keep in mind that the biblical authors stood in the service of a monotheistic movement within the literate, male, upper classes of society. A careful reading of the text and growing information from archaeological research show that the people of Israel, especially in the early stages of biblical religion, also worshipped the multiple gods of the Canaanites. What is presented as idolatry, was actually the customary forms of early Israelite worship (cf. Dijkstra, 1998:67). Jeremiah 11:13 reveals the true situation in his statement: "For you Judah, have as many gods as you have towns", the reason being that not all the people experienced the sojourn in Egypt and the event of the exodus. Some of Israel's ancestors had been living among the Canaanites for generations and their religious tradition included the pantheon of the Canaanite religion. When Israel became a state with her own kings, the religious thinkers gradually emptied the heavens of all other deities and declared Yahweh the sole national god of the state and the people (Van der Toorn, 1996:278; Dijkstra, 1998:76). Pure monotheism eventually

became the dominant religion during the exile in the sixth century BCE (Gnuse, 1997:177-228).

3.3 The role of God in a monotheistic dispensation

Monotheism demands the exclusive worship of only one god: no other god counts, no other god has any claim over Israel. This was a radically new idea. All the roles previously performed by the many nature deities, now had to be performed by the one God of Israel (Frymer-Kensky, 1992:88). No longer could Israel play off one god against another or ask one god to intercede for another. What is more, the one God who was to be worshipped, was understood to be a *male* god who now had to absorb all the characteristics and functions of the female goddesses.

Since no other god could be invoked, Yahweh had to oversee the vital function of supervising pregnancy and childbirth. God's powers over procreation are repeatedly referred to in the Bible. Children are seen as a gift of God. He oversees the process of childbirth, forms and shapes the child in the womb, cares for it there and calls it into service from there. God is midwife, bringing on the labour and bringing forth the child (Frymer-Kensky, 1992:98).

3.4 Israelite women worship female deities

Monotheism is very abstract, for the one God cannot be seen or imaged. The first of the Ten Commandments impresses the severity of God's solo mastery and the responsibility of the people to either keep God's commandments or forgo his blessings. The relationship between the people and Yahweh is described in terms of a covenant which stipulated that because Yahweh saved Israel from slavery in Egypt, they owed him exclusive loyalty. The responsibility demanded from the people was almost unbearable, for failure could result in disaster. Such a theology places the responsibility for fertility on human beings, but it provides no ritual to help assure fertility and no rite by which to celebrate the mystery of regeneration. It seems impossible that the people of Israel could have adhered to a system so lacking in symbols and emotional outlet (Frymer-Kensky, 1992:153).

The answer is that they did not. In their homes and at private cult places, family religion thrived and was accepted by the ordinary people as legitimate alongside the dominant Yahwistic faith. The all-male writers and propagandists of the state religion treat this issue with silence or harsh condemnation.

What did family religion imply? One aspect was the possibility that Yahweh may not have been the sole god of ancient Israel, but that He was perceived as having had a consort at his side.

3.4.1 God's wife? The inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud

In the ruins of Kuntillet 'Ajrud, an ancient caravanserai in northern Sinai, a collection of fascinating inscriptions and drawings from the eighth century BCE were found in 1975. In two inscriptions on large storage jars, Yahweh "and his Asherah" is referred to. Asherah was a prominent goddess from the much older Canaanite mythology from northern Syria. There she is depicted as the consort or wife of *El*, the High God of the Canaanite pantheon. In three Kuntillet 'Ajrud inscriptions, which served as letterheads, she is coupled with Jahweh of Israel. One reads:

A report from the K[ing]:
tell Yehal[el] and Yo'asah.
May you be blessed by YHWH
of Shomron (Samaria) and his ASHERAH.

In another letterhead-inscription, the greeting comes from *YHWH of Teman and his Asherah*. What are we to make of these inscriptions? Israel's *official religion*, as presented in the First Testament, denies Asherah the role of Yahweh's consort, which is understandable in the light of monotheism being of its very nature intolerant towards other gods. The Kuntillet 'Ajrud inscriptions must be seen as expressions from the *popular religion* which believed that Yahweh was attached to certain places like Samaria and Teman, and which thought of Yahweh as a God with a goddess as his consort (Stern, 2001:21-19; Boshoff, 2000:100-106).

A suspicious reading of the books of Kings reveals that Asherah was also worshipped in the state cult until at least the seventh century BCE during the reign of Manasseh and Josiah when there was a conscious effort to eradicate her influence (1 Kings 15:13; 1 Kings 18:19; 2 Kings 23:4-7).

There must be a reason for the lingering influence of this goddess. We mentioned that monotheism was so intolerant that not all Israelites could cope with it. Women in particular had a deep-seated yearning for the blessings of a mother goddess. It was not easy to trust the one male god, Yahweh-El, with fertility and protection during pregnancy and child-birth (Korpel, 1998:105; Schroer, 1998:130). Asherah, the honoured Canaanite mother goddess was perfect for the role.

3.4.2 Female pillar figurines

Archaeology also revealed evidence of the private worship of ancient Israelite women in the form of thousands of pillar figurines in female form that were excavated in Israel from the end of the eighth century and through the entire seventh century BCE (Schroer, 1998:128). The body of the figurine is usually solid, in the shape of a small column. The emphasis is on the face and full breasts offered by bent arms for feeding. This typically symbolises the *dea nutrix* or nourishing goddess (Keel & Uehlinger, 1998:326).

The pillar figurines were mostly found in Judean private homes or in graves – sometimes grouped with miniature model beds and lamps. The purpose was to mediate blessings, such as motherly closeness, peaceful rest, light and warmth. This goddess offered blessing and protection to the family and bestowed her motherly closeness even to the deceased lying in the grave (Keel & Uehlinger, 1998:333). She was a kind of touchable, visible prayer for fertility and nourishment in the absence of a female divine presence in a world dominated by an invisible, male God. If it is possible to assign a name to the goddess represented by the pillar figurines, Asherah instantly comes to mind. We know of one more goddess who was worshipped by the women of ancient Israel.

3.4.3 The Queen of Heaven

From the book of Jeremiah we learn that the women of early sixth-century Judah devoted themselves to the worship of a goddess called the Queen of Heaven. In Jeremiah 7:17-18 the prophet scorns the women of Jerusalem for their worship of the goddess:

Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem? Children are gathering wood, fathers lighting the fire, mothers kneading dough to make cakes in honour of the Queen of Heaven.

It seems as if the cult of the Queen of Heaven had a domestic character and that the whole family took part in supporting the women who baked sacrificial cakes for the goddess.

In Jeremiah 44 the prophet confronts the people of Judah who fled and settled in Egypt during the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. As a representative of the monotheistic belief system he blames the idolatrous practices of the people for the catastrophe that brought an end to the independence of the kingdom of Judah. This is the people's reaction to the prophet's warnings (Jer. 44:16-19):

We are not going to listen to what you tell us in the name of the Lord. We intend to fulfil all the vows by which we have bound ourselves: we shall burn sacrifices to the Queen of Heaven and pour drink-offerings to her as we used to do, we and our forefathers, our kings and leaders, in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. Then we had food in plenty and were content; no disaster touched us. But from the time we left off burning sacrifices and pouring drink-offerings to the Queen of Heaven, we have been in great want, and we have fallen victims to sword and famine. All the time we burnt sacrifices to the Queen of Heaven and poured drink-offerings to her, our husbands were fully aware that we were making cakes marked with her image and pouring drink-offerings to her.

Whatever the identity of this goddess, we know that she was a fertility goddess and a goddess of war. Before the Babylonian invasion, while she was openly worshipped in Jerusalem alongside Jahweh, the people knew no hardship for they had ample to eat and lived in peace. The goddess ensured fertility of the soil and the people, while using her military powers to keep the threat of enemy hostilities at bay. When they were forced to suspend their devotion to her, probably during Josiah's reform programme in 630 BCE (2 Kings 22 and 23) when the cult of Judah was purged of "foreign" elements, they fell victims to the hardships of the Babylonian attack. They believed that the Queen of Heaven had more power to avert disaster than Yahweh; thus in the country of their exile they once again took up worshipping the queenly goddess (Becking, 1998:156).

There is a parallel between what happened here and the theme of my article. Evidently the patriarchal God of Israel was not acceptable to all the women of Israel. Consequently they chose to serve a goddess who complied with their needs. The problem presented in my article is similar: the same patriarchal God, or rather, *image* of God, has become a problem for women of today, and we, likewise, are faced with the choice to adjust our God-image.

4. Revisioning the male God-image tradition

Should Christians now worship God the Mother, or Asherah? That would be a false conclusion to draw from the foregoing because it loses sight of the valuable from the Christian tradition that has inspired and sustained Christians for many centuries up to this day. What is more, envisioning God exclusively as a woman excludes men just as women have been excluded all along. The male images of God should be retained while female images are recovered from Scripture. But more importantly, new images are needed that transcend gender. Before doing that, it is imperative that the following is made clear.

4.1 The mystery of God

No-one knows God's name or has succeeded in capturing God's being in words. The author of Exodus 3:14 comes close to capturing the fleeting essence of God's being in a story of an encounter between God and Moses at a burning bush in the desert of Midian. On a question from Moses as to God's identity, God answered: "I am who I am." The nature of Hebrew grammar allows a range of meanings for this phrase based on the verb "to be" (היה), including "I will be who I will be" (cf. Brown, Driver & Briggs, 1979:225). If the latter reading is accepted, it means that God is incomplete and open to the future, continuously happening and coming into being. The conversation about God is never closed and images for God must always be interpreted anew because God constantly remains several steps ahead of human speculation. To select one and bow down to it, is idolatrous (Wren, 1989:132). The exclusive usage of the male gender for God comes close to doing just that.

We learnt that women in biblical times defined their god(s) in female form and terms. It did not free them from patriarchy, and in their culture it was not their concern, but we live in different times and in a different world where women are no longer content to be defined by male language that perpetuates the polarisation of the genders. To neutralise the overwhelming maleness of church language, it is particularly important for women that inclusive language and female and gender neutral metaphors are used *along with* traditional male images.

4.2 Feminine images for God

With the suppression of the goddesses in the religious world of ancient Israel, the female element lived on in Yahweh, the male god. Unlike the male gods of the polytheistic religions like Ba'al and Zeus, Yahweh displays several characteristics that are elsewhere only associated with goddesses. There are several examples of God's mother role and role in procreation. In Jeremiah 31:20 we find one example:

Is Ephraim still so dear a son to me, a child in whom I so delight that, as often as I speak against him, I must think of him again? Therefore my heart yearns for him; I am filled with tenderness towards him (REB).

The Hebrew word translated with "heart" (מעים) in the last sentence generally means "bowels", but can also mean "womb" (Brown *et al.*, 1979:589) as the seat of life and compassion. The prophet sketches God as a mother who is moved at the thought of the child from her womb.

However, we said that by using exclusive feminine imagery for God, the problems of God-language are not resolved. Feminine images are meaningful and should be used, but they will not reverse the effects of several thousand years of male God language. In the Christian tradition the word *God* calls to most people's mind a male image, because for years they have heard God named "he" and seen God portrayed as a man in art and other symbols.

Furthermore, by describing God the Mother as safe, warm and gentle and God the Father as tough and demanding, would be perpetuating stereotypes. Not only can mothers also be merciless and fathers gentle, but this suggests that women are more like God when they are mothers, while men are like God in most of their activities because God is also depicted in male roles like judge and king, not linked to fathering (cf. Japinga, 1999:67). To call God *both* Mother and Father or Parent, reminds us of the limitations of human language, prevents us from thinking we have God neatly categorised, and helps us to get beyond seeing God as having gender.

Preachers, as well as counsellors working with abused women, have a duty to inform, in the case of the former, male and female members of their congregations, children included, and in the case of the latter, the women concerned, that there are images for God in the Bible with which women can identify. It would also not be grammatically incorrect to repeat the word "God" in a sentence, instead of making use of male pronouns: "God promised to keep watch over God's people." God-images is not the only factor at stake here. When "the faithful" or "the child" is mentioned in pulpit language and these persons are subsequently referred to as "he" or "him" as if all faithful people and children are male, or as if women and girls ought to take it for granted that they are included by male pronouns, the legacy of androcentrism is perpetuated. The plural can be used (the faithful = they, or children = they) or the habit to say "he/she" at all times can be cultivated out of respect for the fifty per cent and more women in the pews. The ideal option however, is to use *various* images for God.

4.3 The need for many names to describe God

Using many names for God is valuable, because each name, while saying something true about God, also has its limitations. The more names we use, the more likely we are to encounter the fullness and mystery of God. In the Bible the entire created world serves as a source for images able to explain something about God and God's relation to creation. In the Old Testament God is compared to a shepherd, potter, mother bear, rock, wall and more. A gender neutral metaphor well suited

for our time, is that of *friend*, as in John 15:13,15 (Dreyer, 1998:562-563).

5. Conclusion

The essence of the problem submitted in this article is that in the Christian tradition, the male images for God in the Bible are equated to the being of God. Women have built their (non)identities, their lives and their relationship with God on this structure. Hopefully this article exposed our God-images as human constructs from a male world which may be adjusted to our time and needs.

In conclusion we have to ascertain the ultimate value of our discussion on God-language. It lies therein that it reminds Christian believers of the vastness and mystery of the being we call God – a lesson well illustrated in this story from the East (De Mello, 1987, quoted in Maher, 1991:96):

The mystic was back from the desert.
 'Tell us', they said, 'What is God like?'
 But how could he ever tell them
 what he had experienced in his heart?
 Can God be put into words?
 He finally gave them a formula – inaccurate, inadequate –
 in the hope that some might be tempted to experience it for themselves.
 They seized upon the formula. They made it a sacred text.
 They imposed it on others as a holy belief.
 They went to great pains to spread it in foreign lands.
 Some even gave their lives for it.
 The mystic was sad. It might have been better if he had said nothing.

We have to use formulas, images and metaphors to express who God is for us – mother, father, friend, rock. But it should not be necessary to protect these formulas and turn them into dogmas. As Maher (1991:96) aptly remarks: "Attempts to protect them, or crush them, misses the point that these words are formulas and images, not God".

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Key concepts:

family religion in the Old Testament
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God-images in the Old Testament
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male God-language

Kernbegrippe:

gesinsgodsdienste in die Ou Testament
feministiese hermeneutiek
godinverering
godsbeelde in die Ou Testament
manlike taalvoorstellings van God

