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## EXPLORATIONS AND RESPONSES

### THE SEX OF GOD

Until recently it has generally been assumed in the Judeo-Christian tradition that the gender of deity has always been masculine. Embedded in the Western mind is a figure that resembles the bearded Creator which Michaelangelo painted in the Sistine Chapel. But now a closer examination of ancient texts reveals that there was a wealth of feminine as well as masculine imagery pertaining to God in the biblical culture.

The biblical writers, who lived approximately five to ten centuries before the Christian era, received much of their vocabulary from people who lived in Western Asia long before the Genesis patriarchs. The earliest writings from that area are the recently excavated tablets at Ebla which date back more than 4,000 years. A prominent masculine God in that ancient Syrian city was El. Canaanite texts disclose that this El was presumed to be the head of a pantheon. That high god consorted with Elath (also called Atherat in Ugaritic, and Asherah in Hebrew) and produced many sons and daughters. Anath and Astarte were among the female offspring, whereas Baal and Mot were among the male. In popular Canaanite religion the parental deities were honored as remote creators, but they were believed to be unable to respond effectively to the annual fertility needs of mortals. As gods emeriti, El and Elath were similar to Uranus and Gaea of Greek religion.

Out of this early mythology came *'lh*, the root for the name of deity that is found in several Semitic cultures. Well known is Allah (*al-ilah*, the God) of the Koran. In the Hebrew Scriptures El is sometimes treated as the deity worshipped by the Israelites. However, there is a definite preference for Elohim, which appears to be a composite term for deity. It may have been developed through combining El with Elath and adding a plural ending. In any case "Elohim" was a term which designated the essences of individual male deities that had been incorporated into a single divine person. In the Old Testament Elohim was used some 2,500 times to express the unified totality of godness, and thus the term is usually accompanied by a singular verb. Since Elohim was the generic term for deity, it had a female as well as a male reference. Thus the Israelites called goddess Ashtoreth (Astarte) an *elohim* of the Canaanites (1 Kings 11:5, 33).

Recognizing the androgynous nature of Elohim shines much light on the difficult Genesis 1 passage that tells of human creation. There Elohim said, "Let us make humans in our image, after our likeness." Accordingly, "Elohim created humans male and female in the divine image." Since this deity is inclusive of the good personal qualities found in both sexes, it would be just as faithful to the Genesis affirmation to say that God made females in *her* own image as to say God made males in *his* own image. Yet it has taken male interpreters of the Bible

thousands of years to recognize this momentous truth. Matilda Gage, a nineteenth-century feminist, made this profound observation:

All the evils which have resulted from dignifying one sex and degrading the other may be traced to this central error: a belief in a trinity of masculine Gods in One, from which the feminine element is wholly eliminated. And yet in the Scriptural account of the simultaneous creation of man and woman, the text plainly recognizes the feminine as well as the masculine element in the Godhead, and declares the equality of the sexes in goodness, wisdom, and power.<sup>1</sup>

The Song of Moses gives another example from the Pentateuch of the androgynous nature of the God whom the Israelites worshipped. Contained in Deuteronomy 32 is one of the few images in Hebrew Scripture of God as a male progenitor: "Is not he your father, who created you?" However, that same song extols the motherhood as well as the fatherhood of God. In Deut. 32:18 praise is given to "the God who gave you birth." The Hebrew verb here refers to a woman in labor. Thus, the Song of Moses says, in effect, that neither maleness nor femaleness should be considered a defining characteristic of God. Parental metaphors are symbols and should not be used to stereotype the divine nature. Even so, paternal and maternal analogies serve to convey that God is the source of existence and the one on whom humans depend for their nurture.

In another division of the Hebrew Bible there are additional insights on the relationship between gender and the divine. Isaiah is rich in word-pictures pertaining to God. Utilizing the marital analogy introduced by Hosea, the prophet declares, "Your Creator is your husband" (Is. 54:5). But Isaiah also portrays God as a suffering and sympathetic woman. Wishing to convey to depressed Jewish exiles that they were not god-forsaken, he proclaims in God's name, "I will comfort you as a mother comforts her child" (Is. 66:13). Also, as God's spokesperson, Isaiah describes the pangs attending the rebirth of the people of God: "I will cry out like a woman in labor; I will gasp and pant" (Is. 42:14).

Isaiah hoped that his theological poetry would be taken seriously, but not literally. Frequently, on behalf of God, he asks, "To whom will you liken me?" The implied answer to this rhetorical question is that God is beyond exact comparison. Even though human figures are intended to convey something about the divine nature, they are only pointing signs. Isaiah satirized idol-makers who presumed that the transcendent God could be identified with objects of human experience.

Prior to the Christian era another feminine theme was prominent in Jewish theology. In the book of Proverbs wisdom is personified as a woman, called Hokmah in Hebrew, or Sophia in Greek. In a soliloquy (Prov. 8:11-31) she tells

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<sup>1</sup>*History of Women Suffrage* (Rochester, 1889), vol. 1, p. 796.

of being God's constant companion at the creation of the world. The Wisdom of Solomon gives this fuller description of Sophia (in 7:25-8:1):

She is a breath of the power of God and a pure revelation of the glory of the Almighty. . . . She is a reflection of the everlasting light, a spotless mirror of the activity of God. . . . Herself unchanging, she renews everything. In every generation she enters into holy persons, making them friends of God and prophets. . . . She is more radiant than the sun. She reaches from one end of the earth to the other, and orders all things well.

Given this religious heritage it is understandable that the New Testament writers associated Sophia with the founder of Christianity. The apostle Paul designated Christ as *Theou Sophia*, God's Wisdom (1 Cor. 1:24). According to that first Christian theologian, the lowly Jesus personified Sophia who functioned to make intimate the lofty Ultimate. The Gospels state that Jesus viewed John the Baptist and himself as inspired by Sophia. After pointing out that differing prophetic voices have their place in the divine scheme, he concludes, "Sophia is proved right by all her children" (Luke 7:35). With respect to the revolutionary ferment growing in his nation, Jesus indicated that he saw his role as a peaceful "hen gathering her chicks." He was no strutting and fighting cock.

Jesus compared God to a searching woman and to a forgiving father in two parables that Luke joined together. It is evident, therefore, that Jesus did not think of God in exclusively male images. His frequent references to God as father were to stress the closeness of the divine-human bond, not to emphasize that the Creator of humankind was masculine. Jesus' God was more like a compassionate daddy (*Abba*) than like a stern judge or a remote monarch. His perception was like that of the psalmist who wrote: "As kind as a father is to his children, so kind is the Lord to those who honor him" (Ps. 103:13).

This sampling of significant passages from the classical Judeo-Christian literature shows that androlatry (to coin a word) was not pervasive in the biblical literature. God was frequently not conceived of as a supermale father, husband, king, or lord. Accordingly, those who are made in the image of the androgynous Elohim should use female as well as male metaphors to express their devotional, artistic, and theological convictions.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>For a full listing of and commentary on biblical imaging of the divine in female terms, see Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979).