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THE BIBLICAL WITNESS TO OUR MOTHERLY FATHER.

Alan E. Lewis.

In May, 1982, amid bubbling controversy, and lively media interest, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland invited its Woman's Guild "to appoint a small study group to consult with the Panel on Doctrine on the theological concept of the Motherhood of God". In May, 1984, amid volcanic controversy, and feverish media interest, the General Assembly formally received the resulting Report, but resolved "to depart from the matter" forthwith, without debate. As always in such settings many non-theological factors were undoubtedly operating in this de facto rejection by the Assembly of a study it had itself commissioned; and it is no purpose of the present article to make reply even to those adduced grounds for rejection which were theologically substantive, and bore upon the implications of the Group's findings for the faith, practice and worship of the Church today. The Report in any case incorporates a variety of views, and both minority and majority conclusions, rather than arguing one partisan case. /1

However, from the start, the Study Group construed its essential task as simply one of scriptural investigation; and few of their Report's critics (who have actually read it!), have queried its claim to be a properly biblical enquiry, which abides by Reformed principles of authority. Indeed the results of the enquiry have been more frequently characterised (both in support and disparagement), as un-revolutionary and slight than as momentous and subversive - a mouse, not an elephant. There seems, therefore, no danger, and perhaps a little merit, in the tranquility as well as the pain of defeat, in laying out the scriptural evidence once more, in a fresh form and context, and asking again about its implications for Christian life, thought and prayer, within but also far beyond the shores of Scotland.

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Whatever interpretation is put upon the hostility and upset which the very mention of "the Motherhood of God" engenders in some quarters (both male and female); and whatever judgment is made upon the history and possible future of its currency in the Church, there can be little objective doubt that there exists a strand of biblical testimony which bears upon it, and which has been widely ignored, not least by those whose criterion and cause is sola scriptura. The growth of knowledge and sensitivity will have been served if what follows helps in a small way to redirect "biblical Christians" to a neglected and rarely excavated stratum in the foundation of their own faith. /2

II

What is God like? Where should creatures look if they would see their transcendent Creator, or at least a form of him adapted to their finite vision? Scripture's ultimate answer is that God is like Jesus Christ, and that when we see him we see God, his Father (e.g., Jn.14:7-11). There is a concealing of God in Jesus (Jn.20:29); but through the hiddenness of his incognito there is, for faith, a revealing and disclosing of God's own person, character and purpose. Upon Jesus, God's own nature has been stamped; in Jesus, God's likeness, with its glory, grace and truth, has been beheld (Jn.1:14; 2 Cor.4:4; Col.1:15; Hebs.1:3). What conceals this revelation, what makes perception of God in Jesus impossible to those who rely on "flesh and blood" and see only with the senses (Mt.16:17), is, of course, his own flesh and blood, his total humanness "in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom.8:3). Confounding all that Greeks consider wise, and Jews reverent, the gospel scandalously perceives the wisdom and power of God himself in the weak and foolish cross of a man (Cor.1:18ff)

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On the other hand, Scripture surely does not allow us to exaggerate the paradoxes in this mystery of God enfleshed in humankind. If Jesus does reveal the truth about God as he really is, then it cannot be unnatural, or contrary to his own truth, for God to be thus "human", thus humbled, thus infinite in condescending, slave-like love. And if Jesus, fully human, is the locus of God's presence, then it cannot be contrary to the truth about us that we should bear resemblance to, and provide fit dwelling for, our Creator. Which is to say that, however unheard-of, mysterious, and "foolish", the incarnation of God among us does not contradict, but expresses and extends, the prior relationship between himself and us. God can become human only because God and humanity are already partners: one man can be the image and likeness of God because all humanity is made in that image and likeness. A primordial resemblance and reciprocity between Creator and creatures is the presupposition - though neither cause nor explanation - of the final unity of a creature with the Maker.

On a Christian reading, the entire OT narrates the covenant history by which God draws ever closer to his human partners, through one elect people, in preparation for this identifying with one Jew of Nazareth. But it is upon a declaration which the Church and Israel gladly receive and repeat in common, that our faith in the correspondence and partnership between God and humanity is founded. That is the affirmation - which nothing in the succeeding story and long history of sin and corruption quite cancels out - that "God created human beings, making them to be like himself" (Gen.1:27GNB). Not so much from this text, as text, as from its truth, derives all else that the Bible declares about the dignity and destiny of

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humankind, and about God's costly struggle against sin, disease, injustice and death, to restore and complete our likeness and nearness to him.

What is, of course, so striking in the present context and striking in relation to the lesser value placed on women than men in the Ancient Near East, and in some other parts of the OT - is the positive exclusion of any variance or priority between women and men in this stupendous and determinative affirmation of human likeness to God.

Then God said, "And now we will make human beings; they will be like us and resemble us..." So God created human beings, making them to be like himself. He created them male and female (and) blessed them. Gen.1:26-8(GNB)

Unlike the Yahwist version of the creation story, which many would regard as secondary as well as second, and certainly dependent on anthropomorphisms which lack the transcendent grandeur of the first, there is no hint in the Priestly account that woman is subordinate, or that her humanity is derivative, and dependent upon the male, in a way not symmetrically true of him to her.

Clearly in this story sexual differentiation belongs to the essence of humanness and creaturehood, since it is not as neuter nor as androgynous, but as male and female, that we are created by God in his likeness. Yet it is in their conjunction and togetherness as distinct partners, and not in separation and disjunction as graded partners, that woman and man identically bear the gifts, rights and duties of the imago dei. Of course, not even in the NT is this equality and equilibrium of male and

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female in relation to their Creator and Saviour always preserved with such unarguable simplicity as in Gen.1. Paul, for example, employing typically rabbinic exegesis, draws inferences from the details of the Yahwist creation narrative for the subordinate status and deferential behaviour of women (e.g., 1 Cor.11:7-12; 1 Tim.1:11-15). Nevertheless, in this process Paul himself is quite capable of reversing the priorities of Gen.2 (since the derivation of Eve from Adam is now matched by the birth of man from woman (1 cor.11:12), and of affirming the mutuality and interdependence of the sexes in the Lord, in whom "there is neither male nor female" (1 Cor.11:11; Gal.3:28). In this last declaration Paul is clearly not wishing to contradict the Gen.1 statement that we are created male and female, any more than he sees or foresees an end to the distinction between Jew and Gentile, and between slave and free citizen. Rather it is the removal of all advantage and disadvantage, of superiority and inferiority, and of all rank and order, friction and hostility between the sexes, classes and races, which baptism accomplishes; and thus, in the case of male and female, a return to the mutuality and equality of our creation in the image and likeness of God

Now given this fundamental assertion that women and men share equally and together in a creaturely resemblance to their Maker, it might seem inconsistent to proceed to stress the significance of this for one sex more than the other. Yet does not the sad narrative of theological and ecclesiastical history, in which, despite Gen.1:27, the subordination of one sex to the other has been practised and exegetically defended, require and justify now some re-tipping of the hermeneutical scales? It may well be that to satisfy the

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properties of orthodoxy, interpretation of the text in question, which plays a foundational role in all theological anthropology, must observe a scrupulous equilibrium between men and women. But is it possible to meet the exigencies of orthopraxis in the contemporary situation, and against our actual historical background, without reading the text also as a criticism of our male-dominated past and present, and as a challenge to the Church to articulate and promote the full humanness of women in God's own likeness? When for so long and for so many the correspondence and analogy between the male of the species and the Almighty has functioned as a priori (in the doctrine and practice of ministry, for example), the Bible's truth for the present moment is surely that women too, and in particular, stand in this awesome and intimate relation to the transcendent. As the Report puts it:

Against a history in which the Church has often limited to men the privileges of representing and symbolising God....it needs saying that whatever it means for human beings to be in the image of God, that mysterious and unspeakable honour is not one whit less enjoyed, or in any way differently, by women compared to men . We must say of every woman, with no more and no less astonishment and boldness than of a man, that she is "like" God, and that her humanity images and resembles the very Creator of all things. /3

The submission is that at this point we have already taken a significant tack in the voyage of biblical discovery towards "the motherhood of God". If in answer to the question "what is God like? we are directed with finality and decisiveness to Jesus of

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Nazareth, the possibility of discovering God's image uniquely in one member of the human race cannot be isolated from the prior reality that the whole human race, uniquely among creatures, is in God's image, and thus like him. For our own time, the Bible declares with special clarity, that we may look to female humanity for a creaturely representation and mirror of the Creator and his ways. We are directed by God's own Word, not only to mothers but to all women, just as much as to fathers and all males, for living, embodied analogies of God's own personhood, power and love.

III

Before we examine some further OT texts which develop this revealed analogy, it is worth recalling that in both Testaments specific female characters, both historical and symbolic, play their part alongside men and male figures, in the unfolding revelation of the divine being and nature. In Naomi, for example, we glimpse God's steadfast faithfulness; in Ruth, his bursting of ethnic barriers; in Wisdom, orderly yet life-promoting discipline of God (e.g., Prov.8); in a harlot, even, that divine compassion which is willing to relinquish a precious son for the sake of life and love (1.Kings 3:16-28). /4

Although the NT naturally centres upon one man (the significance of whose maleness we shall ponder later, and perhaps not unnaturally for its times, focusses upon the males among those who first followed and then proclaimed him, women are by no means absent or inconspicuous in the disclosure of God which took place in and through him. If that disclosure was ultimately a Person it was also an event, and it was only through events, in deeds,

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encounters, happenings and relationships, that the identity of the Person was expressed and recognised. What was recognised by faith was the arrival of the Anointed One and Son in whom the final reign of God the Father was beginning; and since that was a reign in which new, dramatic things would happen, as blind were made to see, and sinners pardoned, it was through concrete acts and relations with just such human beings that Jesus' Sonship was signified (cf. Mt.11:2ff.; Lk.4:16ff.), and the revolutionary nature of the messianic kingdom indicated.

Scandalously for that culture, remarkably, perhaps, even for ours, women feature repeatedly in these revelatory relationships. At home with Mary and Martha; befriending Mary Magdalene; understanding and defending extravagant "feminine" gestures of love from other women of sin (Mk.14:3ff.; Lk.7:36ff); protecting an adulteress (Jn.8:3-11); reaching out across all the barriers of race, religion and sex to the woman of Samaria (Jn.4:7-29); appearing first to women on his day of Easter glory (Mk.16:1-13); in all these ways and others, Jesus fleshes out his Father's kingdom and his own place in it, with and through a series of female contacts and associates. Without the biblical record of Christ's relationships with women how impoverished would be our understanding of God, as he who rules with compassion, sensitivity and grace, and with a disturbing bias towards the humble, the outcast and the fallen.

By his dealings with them, in a social context of their inferiority and exclusion, and by his receptivity to their instincts, feelings and gestures which so often contracts with the hostile behaviour of men towards him, Jesus shows not only that women have an equal place under God's reign,

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regardless of how they fare in the kingdoms of the world , but also that we could not understand and express the quality of the God we encounter in the NT were we restricted to language and concepts drawn from conventionally "masculine" roles and attributes. In which connection, we may also note that in the Book of Revelation a key role in the drama of the last days is given to a woman, a "woman clothed with the sun", so closely associated with God that he takes to himself the male child she bears, and gives her a resting place he has specially prepared for her (Rev.12:1-6). Eschewing speculation about the meaning of such symbolism, we can at least say that once more Scripture refuses to depend solely upon male characters and symbols for the humanly impossible task of imaging and illuminating the nature of God's kingdom, and of his eschatological lordship over heaven and earth. /5

One last female character in the NT who is clearly of central importance to this enquiry, yet equally clearly the focus for much of the unease and controversy which surrounds the entire question of "the motherhood of God", is Mary, the mother of our Lord. The Study Group, divided on many things, was uniformly appalled at the popular confusion of the concept of "the motherhood of God" with the mariological figure of "the Mother of God" - as if to have, and to be , a mother were one and the same! It would not be appropriate here to rehearse the limited discussion in the Report of the phenomenon of mariolatry, and of the inferences to be drawn, from the veneration of Mary by Roman Catholics and her relative neglect by Protestants, for the place of women and feminine spirituality in their respective traditions. /6 What is relevant is the biblical witness to a woman of history who plays a unique and major role in the "Christ-event", but

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whose significance in the NT, Reformed Christians, for polemical reasons, have often found hard to examine objectively. Clearly the Gospels, even those which tell of her virgin conceiving, understand Mary to be a person of ordinary history, as good, as fallen, as simply human, as any. Far from investing her with idealised sinlessness or regality, Jesus himself treats his mother with remarkable asperity (Lk.2:49; Jn.2:4), and seems to lose no opportunity in contrasting his ties with her and the rest of his family after the flesh, with those relations of faith and the spirit which could make anyone his "brother and sister and mother" (Mt.12:46-50; Lk.11:27ff.;cf.Jn.19:25ff.).

On the other hand, in a manner which cries out not for veneration but certainly for recognition and honour - that honour which Scripture itself joyfully accords her (Lk.1:42ff.) - Mary is given and obediently accepts a unique responsibility in the moment of salvation history which inaugurates the kingdom which will never end (Lk.1:32f.). From one perspective her female sexuality is incidental to this responsibility: biologically required, but theologically inert. As Luther was to observe later, the ear - that is, her faithful hearing of the Word - rather than the womb, was the real organ by which Mary offered herself as the handmaid of the Lord. Nonetheless, she is a woman, and the unique prototypical role which is given to her in the incarnation, distinct from all subsequent believers who, hearing God's Word, become spiritually pregnant (cf.Gal.4:19), is one not open to males. Must the biblical history of Mary of Nazareth, who bore in her womb, fed at her breasts, and nurtured in her home, the Son of the Most High, not be interpreted today as another powerful critique both of Church dogma and church practice, as these have conspired

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to belittle the peculiar gifts and aptitudes of women in the Church, and to circumscribe the scope of their leadership and authority?

IV

From recognising woman's place in God's kingdom, and her participation in the event of its proleptic unveiling, to the address or description of God in the language of "mother" is, of course, no small step. It is time to return to the elemental affirmation that male and female are made in the image and likeness of God, and to consider the largely poetic use of images and likenesses, similes and metaphors, with which our Scriptures add detail and depth to this mutual correspondence of God and his partners. Of course, this is a correspondence-in-radical-otherness. The Hebraic conception of divine transcendence is very different from the dualism of Platonic ontology; yet nothing in the relationship of correspondence and partnership between God and humanity diminishes the awesome gulfs of holiness and eternity, aseity and creativity, which set them apart. Indeed it is the presupposition of the Creator's utter transcendence which makes the declaration of our creaturely resemblance so staggering. And the attention drawn in that declaration to our sexual differences as man and woman is doubly breath-taking, since nothing more vividly encapsulates the radical transcendence of the eternal Creator than the absence in him of that sexuality which marks us as creatures of generation, and thus of temporality and dependence. As crystallised in the First Commandment, and dramatised in the history of Israel's wavering resistance of the seductions of Baalism, the OT constitutues a sustained polemic against the "other gods". Their worship is idolatrous because they have

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been made, unlike the one God who, unmade, has himself made all things. And that polemic identifies the transcending of biological generation as a critical distinguishing mark of the one true God, over against the pagan deities which inhabit nature and give it life and fecundity through a quasi-sexual impregnation. Neither by the potency of male seed, nor the fertility of the female uterus, is God the author and saviour of life, the provider of rain and harvest:

Has the rain a father,
or who has begotten the drops of dew?
From whose womb did the ice come forth,
and who has given birth to the hoarfrost
of heaven? Job 38:28f. (RSV)

The house of Israel shall be shamed:
they....their priests and their prophets,
who say to a tree, 'You are my father,'
and to a stone, 'You gave me birth' .
...Where are your gods
that you made for yourself? Jer.2:26-28(RSV)

In this context, where so much is at stake in securing the otherness of Yahweh, it is wholly natural that the OT should exercise a vigilant reserve in its anthropomorphisms for God. And it is all the more impressive, not to say astounding, when its authors find the courage and freedom to break through their own reticence with striking similes for the divine being and character drawn precisely from those areas of human life to which sexuality is overtly or latently intrinsic: human love in general, human parenting in particular. Naturally most human language, especially poetry, is far too allusive and oblique for us to imagine that whenever the OT applies to God a word or image whose root

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meaning is biological or sexual, that primal connotation is an active, intended ingredient in the description being hazarded. Still, without compromising Yahweh's transcendence, and fully aware that they are groping to describe the indescribable, the OT writers do exercise the liberty to make comparisons between God, and that love which human beings share and exchange as sexual partners.

Such semblances are perhaps most frank and explicit in the Song of Songs and Hosea, where words such as ahab, meaning at root, "love between the sexes" (and hence embracing, significantly in our context, the love of woman for man, as well as the reverse), are repeatedly applied to Yahweh. /7 Equally bold is the use for God of the verb raham and its cognates: a concept of family love and care which appears in the context of both paternal and maternal love, is often translated "to have compassion, or pity", but derives from the root word rehem, the female womb./8

If, despite such biologically specific roots, this is a likeness for God drawn from a human kind of love which is interchangeable between women and men, there are occasions when the activity and attitude of one parent rather than the other is invoked for the audacious, poetic imaging of the unseen God. Of course, the comparative rarity of God's address as Father in the OT (e.g., Is.63:16; Jer.3:19 or description as a father Jer. 31:9; Mal.1:6), provides a fundamental axis of contrast between our Testaments. On the one hand it reflects the concern of the Hebrew faith to distinguish the transcendent Creator from the divine genitors of paganism; and on the other it highlights the originality and daring of Jesus' conception of God. And yet there are startling moments when the OT anticipates the intimate, paternal-filial relationship between God

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and his people to which Jesus later gave such full expression, and even risks the element of procreation and generation which underlies that analogy at its human pole:

Woe to him who says to a father

'What are you begetting?'

or to a woman, 'With what are you in travail?'

...Will you question me about my children,
or command me concerning the works of my
hands?

I made the earth, and created man upon it.

Is.45:10-12(RSV).

Have we not all one father? Has not one God
created us? Why then are we faithless to one
another?

Judah..has married the daughter of a foreign
God. Mal.2:10-11(RSV).

It is not remarkable that both these passages adduce the analogy between God and procreative human parent, precisely with the purpose of affirming the awesome power and radical claims of the Creator, whose aseity so separates him from the "human" gods which are as creaturely and begotten as those who worship them? /9.

Clearly, then, it is understood that Yahweh, though comparable from some perspectives with a male parent, the begetter of children, is himself emphatically not a male, quasi-biological deity (any more than female), but wholly transcendent of sexuality. It is equally clear, upon examination of the "father" references to God in the OT, that his father-likeness is not exhausted by those roles and attitudes which our Western conventions have for centuries past assigned to "masculinity" rather than "femininity". If strict, yet loving, discipline should by those traditions be deemed the prerogative of

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masculine parenting, the Yahweh's fatherhood would on occasion exhibit just such a masculine trait:

When the Lord corrects you, my son, pay close attention and take it as a warning. The Lord corrects those he loves, as a father corrects a son of whom he is proud.

Prov. 3:11-12 (GNB) (CF. Deut.8:5).

Yet on the whole, by these (from our perspective, rather questionable), standards, God the Father in the OT is quite un-masculine, and remarkably feminine in his unstinting provision of love, nourishment and support:

He fed you with manna....Your clothing did not wear out upon you, and your foot did not swell, these forty years....You shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the Lord your God.

Deut. 8:3,4, 10.

As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities them who fear him. Ps.103:13.

With weeping they shall come,
and with consolations I will lead them back..,
in a straight path in which they shall not
stumble;

for I am a father to Israel. Jer. 31:9.

It was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them up in my arms;.....
I led them with cords of compassion,
with the bands of love,.....
and I bent down to them and fed them.

Hos. 11:3-4(RSV)

Here we are on the threshold of this enquiry's ultimate goal: the Bible's explicitly motherly

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images, alongside those of fatherhood, for the expressing of God's inexpressible love. Hesitant - for reasons already indicated - to adopt metaphors of divine paternity, the Hebrew Scriptures are more cautious and discriminating still about comparing Yahweh to a mother. Yet there are moments, all the more amazing for their infrequency and riskiness, when that is exactly the resemblance to which the poetry of faith and worship finds itself drawn.

For this to occur, the OT must reverse its own instincts and habits, which identify not God, but God's people as feminine. Characteristically it is Israel which is the bride, wife and daughter of Yahweh, often with the latter as Husband or Groom./10. That Jewish precedent is, of course, perpetuated in the NT and the Christian tradition, above all in the image of the Church as the Bride of Christ and the mother of believers. Where feminine figures are applied so consistently and intuitively to the human pole of the relationship between God and the people, there naturally little room left, either in the Bible, or many would still say, in subsequent theology and piety, for the application of maternal conceptuality instead to the relationship's divine partner. Yet, apparently unnoticed by many, the OT does, in flashes of exquisite poetry, venture just this inversion, and sets its own biblical precedents for circumspect imitation.

Now quite clearly it would be a clumsy misuse of the category of metaphor, and the genre of poetic literature, to elicit systematic or dogmatic inferences from the haphazardly scattered motherly similes for God found in the OT. Only in order to highlight the range, variety and beauty of these figurative gems is it legitimate to gather them into an orderly spectrum, and show that collectively they cover the scope of both animal and human mothering,

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and in the latter, every stage in the biological sequence of maternity, as well as the principal indirect female involvements in the birth and nurturing process.

At different times, then, Yahweh is compared to mother birds protecting their young, and specifically to the mother eagle:

Like birds hovering, so the Lord of hosts
will protect Jerusalem;
he will protect and deliver it.
Is.31:5(cf.Ps.17:8; 36:7; 91:4)

Like an eagle that stirs up its nest,
that flutters over its young,
spreading out its wings,.....
the Lord alone did lead him;
Deut. 32:11-12(cf.Ex.19:4)

and to the midwife and nurse, assisting in parturition at one remove:

Thou art he who took me from the womb;
thou didst keep me safe upon my mother's
breasts.
Upon thee was I cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me thou hast been
my God. Ps. 22:9-10.

....Did I bring them forth, that thou
shouldst say to me, 'Carry them in your
bosom, as a nurse carries the suckling
child....'? Num. 11:12

But above all, God is likened to woman in the actual experience of motherhood, from conception:

Did I conceive all this people? Did I bring
them forth...? Num. 11:12.

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to pregnancy:

Hearken to me, O house of Jacob,...
who have been borne by me from your birth,
carried from the womb;
....I have made, and I will bear,
I will carry and will save.
Is. 46:3-4 (cf. 49:15)

to labour and birth:

I will cry out like a woman in travail,
I will gasp and pant.
Is. 42:14
You were unmindful of the Rock that begot you,
and you forgot the God who gave you birth.
Deut. 32:18

to breast-feeding:

Can a woman forget her suckling child,
that she should have no compassion on the
son of her womb? Is. 49:15
Like a child quieted at its mother's breast;
like a child that is quieted is my soul.
Ps. 131:2

to motherly comfort:

As one whom his mother comforts,
so I will comfort you;
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.
Is. 66:13 (RSV) /11

Finally, a passage of unrivalled poignancy and pathos, and of painful contrast with all this beauty, warmth and intimacy of motherly affection, likens Yahweh to the broken-hearted

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mother lamenting the children of her womb, now taken from her, who cannot be consoled:

The Lord says,
"A sound is heard in Ramah,
the sound of bitter weeping,
Rachel is crying for her children;
they are gone,
and she refuses to be comforted."

Jer. 31:15 (GNB) / 12

Of course, even when gathered in such a sequence, these anthropomorphisms, which attempt to illuminate the being and act of God by poetic reference to the physiological and psychological experiences of female life and mothering, still represent only a minor strand of the witness of God's Word from the OT. None of it amounts to the direct address of Yahweh as Mother; all of it exhibits the most delicate fusion of courage and discretion; and we have still to ask how precisely a similar courage and discretion might guide contemporary Christians who thought to follow up the precedents thus set. But at least there is given to us here enough to silence those who dismiss the motherly God as wholly pagan and unbiblical; and to fill the rest of us with some awe at Scripture's willingness to engage woman's body, the female psyche, and the whole mystery and miracle of human child-bearing, in the humble task of giving creaturely word to the ineffable love and power of God our Creator.

Returning to the NT, where the conception of God is naturally quite dominated by the revelation of God's Fatherhood, which has at its heart Jesus' innovative use of Abba, the witness here to a divine motherliness is, at least on the surface, even more circumscribed than in the OT. We have already drawn

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attention to the central role which women and female figures play in the NT's disclosure of God; but only one text explicitly adopts a maternal simile comparable to the OT sequence just examined. On the other hand, its own intrinsic appeal, and the fact that it shares the same dominical authority as the regulative affirmation of God as Father, perhaps gives the Son of God's one self-description as a mother-bird an impact disproportionate to its numerical significance. It is not only Christian women who down the ages to the present day have drawn special comfort and insight from the motherly tears of Jesus:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem!.... How many times have I wanted to put my arms round all your people, just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not let me! Mt. 23:37 (GNB).

As the Report puts it:

The free and unaffected manner in which Jesus associates himself with the protectiveness, and the sorrow, of a mother, must at the very least acquit of blasphemy those who subsequently, with a cautious daring, have spoken of the womanly and motherly qualities of our Lord. /13

And why should we be limited to the direct and the explicit? Beneath the surface, those willing to think through the language and the substance of Scripture's revelation of God in Christ may glimpse many aspects of the gospel, and the gospel's God - Father, Son and Spirit - which evoke compelling reminders of female human experience, and require maternal motifs for their full expression. Indeed it may be asked whether it is possible for us - or was even possible for Jesus and the NT writers - to

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describe the saving power of God without the use of conceptualities which are at root quite obviously feminine. After all, what is the gospel about, if not new life: the promise that in Jesus Christ we may be born again and become the children of God, fed and nourished by his Spirit? Granted, the Spirit adopts us as the sons and daughters of the Father, to whom we cry Abba: yet this dynamic relation to the Father is expressed in the NT through a sustained idiom of infancy, in which motherhood is naturally presupposed. Salvation is a movement from the womb of birth, to the breasts of milk and nourishment, to the weaned maturity of solid food.

Now of course, this extended motif, which conceptualises believers in Christ as the developing children of a mother, is only a metaphor. It is not to be taken literally. That was the mistake of Nicodemus: "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (Jn.3:4 (RSV)). Yet it is significant that when Nicodemus stumbles over the motherly idiom, Jesus does not withdraw the metaphor but perseveres with it and insists upon it - Nicodemus must be "born again" (v.7) - distinguishing only between a fleshly and a spiritual, an earthly and a heavenly birth (vv.6,12). Return to the womb, for a rebirth of the Spirit, remains the condition of entry to God's kingdom. Thus it is that, largely suppressed from consciousness, the organ and process of female reproduction have supplied the Church with its primal metaphor for that Christian existence which is initiated through faith and baptism.

Is it impossible that in a yet more sublimated fashion, the Fourth Evangelist, who introduces the figure of "regeneration", and later has Jesus adopt

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the characteristically Johannine address of believers as "little children",¹⁴ is thinking in partly motherly terms when he presents Christ as the source of food and nourishment which gives true life and leaves no one hungry (Jn.6:25-65)? Certainly the female breasts and their lactation become an explicit image of Christ's quite tastable love, for Peter and the author of Hebrews, as they depict the (sometimes impeded), growth of spiritual life, from new-birth, to babyhood, to maturity:

You have been born anew...So put away all malice and all guile... Like newborn babes, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up in salvation; for you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.

1 Pet. 1:23; 2:1-3 (RSV).

Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of God's word. You need milk, not solid food; for every one who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a child. But solid food is for the mature.

Heb. 5:12-14 (RSV).

Paul employs the same set of maternal images, casting himself as the female nurse (1 Thess.2:7) - as well as the father (2:11) - but above all as the mother, to his infant congregations. He is in the travail of labour to bring Galatians to new birth (when, he daringly reflects, Christ will in turn be conceived and formed within them) (Gal.4:19) and likewise he has breast-fed the Corinthian babes, and must continue to do so, until they are ready to be weaned from milk to solids (1 Cor.3:1-2). Of course, in these instances it is to the apostle, and not to God, that the language of womb and breast is applied

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Yet is there any doubt in Paul's mind, notwithstanding his own mediation in their birth and growth, that it is in Christ himself that his infant charges have found new life, and from the Son and his Father that there flows the milk of spiritual nourishment?

VI

Perhaps this potentially disturbing juxtaposition of feminine metaphors for the divine love and power with the NT's dominant and dominically authenticated male analogy for God, brings us to the very heart of the issue before us. Precisely in what way is the God who sent Jesus for our sakes his and our Father? The Study Group's Report, intended for non-specialists, devotes considerable space to explaining the indirectness and incompleteness of theological language, including that of Scripture.¹⁵ Although not shut up in silence before the ineffability of God, theology is engaged in communicating the incommunicable; and the tools at its disposal - pictures, metaphors, narratives, parables, statements, concepts - are all at best oblique and fragmentary expressions of the truth, which fall short of their transcendent Object.¹⁶ Even the most authenticated analogies revealed to us preserve and protect, as analogies, the distance between the parties compared. Finite analogies inevitably contain some elements which are inapplicable to the Infinite, and others which apply more, or more fundamentally, to the Infinite than to our finitude.

To this linguistic and epistemological principle of analogical distance, our Scriptures give their own particular content. Thus, in the normative NT analogy of "father", it is clear that some aspects of human fatherhood are not operative in the

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comparison with God, while from another perspective God is the only true and complete father, indeed the source of fatherhood (Eph.3:14f.), from which its human counterpart derives and of which it accomplishes at best mere fragments and shadows. Is it not obvious - despite massive popular misconceptions - that even, or supremely, as "Father", the God of Jesus is not "a man", or even "male"? Gender and biological differentiation is surely foremost among those determinants of human fatherhood which are inert and inoperative when first Scripture, and then we ourselves, adopt "father" as the appropriate analogy for God's being and act. As we have already seen, the transcendence of the God of the Bible, which sets him apart from other gods, turns upon his surpassing, as unoriginate, of creaturely, biological generation. Likewise, as the source of all, it is the fullness of human life, not its partiality as we experience it from one side or other of our sexual divide, which he embraces and thus transcends. To put it with risky brevity: as our God, God is both male and female; as our God, he is neither.

Jesus, of course, is unalterably male! That God has revealed himself in all the scandalous particularity of a man of history is a non-negotiable datum of Christian affirmation. And those who take the incarnation seriously, acknowledging the man Jesus as the eternal Word enfleshed, in whom the unseen Father can be seen (Jn.14:9), may be tempted to infer from the maleness of Jesus that his heavenly Father is likewise "male". The current controversy has certainly elicited many testimonies that believers, both male and female, find only male language and conceptuality for God appropriate and "comfortable", because Jesus was a man and a son.

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Although, however, it is psychologically natural for many, without thinking, to assume that the Father of this man and Son is as male as he, does the maleness of Jesus in fact modify any of our linguistic and substantial grounds for denying all gender and sexual distinction to God? The man Jesus names God "Father", commanding his followers to do likewise; and reveals that Father to us. But he does not reveal God thereby to be male, or even more male-like than female, any more than Christ's ethnic particulars identify the God he embodies as a Jew, or more Jewish than Gentile. Jesus surely is the revelation not of divine maleness, but the revelation in or through human maleness of divine otherness. And of course it remains an open question to what extent the sex of Jesus is theologically significant in the first place. That God was incarnate in a concrete person of history, who to be truly human needs be of one time and place, one sex and race, rather than another, is central. Yet these particularities in themselves are surely secondary to the humanity they express and guarantee; and the uniqueness of Jesus as one human being must always be held in tension with his universal humanness as the "Second Adam". In this one, male, first-century Jew, the Creator has assumed the flesh of his many creatures, women and men of every race and age; and it is clothed with the humanity of all of us that Jesus the Son sits now at his Father's right hand.

This obliquely trinitarian reference prompts consideration of another, more sophisticated, defence of the putative "maleness" of God. The argument is that whereas the Bible offers us a myriad of literary metaphors for God, at one point - the event of Christ - there is disclosed an analogy, which is more than a poetic image of the

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unimaginable, but an ontologically-grounded revelation of the way God actually is - namely that in his own essence he is Triune. The concept of the Trinity is "only" an analogy, a refined human construct ill-fitted for total comprehension of the mystery to which it refers: yet what has been given to the human mind to perceive of God in the history of his dealings with us, and supremely in Christ, is grounded in and corresponds to, the truth of God as he is in himself. Eternally and immanently, God is three Persons, "Father", "Son", and "Spirit". The maleness of Jesus is therefore not accidental, nor the "sonship" of the one sent from heaven metaphorical: for both participate in and reflect the eternal being and inner relations of the Godhead. Ontically, the source of that Godhead is "Father", and may only be humanly conceived and acclaimed in correspondingly paternal, ie male, terms.

Now setting aside all the other questions which in some quarters would be put to so "high" a doctrine of the Trinity, it is surely imperative to ask whether even in the ontological Trinity, the eternal Fatherhood of the Father and Sonship of the son denote quasi-biological gender. We scarcely know whereof we speak when we use human terms like "Father" or "Son" (or "Person") in such a context; but we are extrapolating from the known father-son relationship to an unknown but proportionate relation in God: a corresponding identity-through-reciprocity in which the Father is who he is not in isolation but only as the Father of the Son, and likewise the Son, only as the Son of the Father. And however little we understand what that relationship might be like in itself, one thing orthodox theology is certain of, surely, is that relation's uniqueness and incomparability. The analogical proportion between the divine relation and the human in no way

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modifies its otherness from the human.

In the latter, the son is temporally subsequent to the father, socially and psychologically subordinate and dependent, genetically and physiologically separate and independent, and descended from him by sexual propagation. In the divine relation, by contrast, the two "Persons" are co-eternal, equal in power and glory, of one substance, and bound in a relation of begetting emphatically other than that of procreation, for which the distinction of male and female is a condition.

This is to say that even when we affirm, by way of analogy, that God is Father and Son, a "transformation of meaning" takes place, as theology, at its most doxological, reaches out gropingly towards the transcendent mystery of that which is to be conceived. /17. Not to recognise this transformation - for example from a male father to the "Father" beyond sexuality and gender, is to misunderstand "theo-logy", by misconceiving the nature of both language and God. So it was that Athanasius accused of doing "mythology" rather than "theology", the Arians who treated literally, not analogically, the names and relations of the trinitarian Persons, thereby refusing a priori to conceive a generation in which the off-spring is not creaturely, temporal and subordinate. Likewise the Tropici prove poor students of language, and "treat God as man", when they rigidly apply to the Spirit's procession the model of human origins, thus making the Spirit the brother and the son of the Word, and turning the Father into the Spirit's grandfather. /18

This abstruse controversy is highly relevant in the present context, since it demonstrates both the damage which literal thought inflicts, and the

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freedom which analogical thought offers. Athanasius crystallises the folly of the Tropici's literalism by asking how it is possible to be a human father without first being a son and having a father, or to be a son without potentially having a son and becoming a father also. To conceive a Father who is only a Father and never a son, and a Son who is only a Son and never a father, is to engage with a reality beyond understanding a description, and thereby to encounter the only true, simple "Father" and "Son", who, unlike their shadowy, partial human analogues are exclusively what they are, whole and undivided. Conversely, to impose upon God the limitations and admixtures of finite father - and sonhood would reduce the Creator to creaturelieness, and his worship to idolatry. /19

The argumentation seems quaint; but might we not, in our case, predict the same consequences when the human limitations our closed minds impose upon the Father and the Son are those of gender and sexual identity?

On the other hand, once it is grasped that the Father and the Son are not "a father" or "a son", nor male, theology is set free to use a range of human terms and experiences which, if taken literally, would compromise God's transcendence, but when understood analogically actually protect it, and indicate its breadth. So it is that the early Fathers, incongruously but deliberately, used the language of creaturely generation to affirm, against those who would make the Son a creature, that he was uncreated and eternal. The most familiar example is the Nicene affirmation that the Son is "begotten, not made". By describing the Son as "only-begotten", the NT had already indicated the uniqueness of the relation between this Son and his Father; yet in themselves

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begetting and being begotten are thoroughly creaturely relations and modes of origin. If we "beget" living beings, and "make" inanimate objects, those so begotten are no less creatures, and no more divine, than the things that we make. Nonetheless, because they understood theological analogy, the Nicenes dared to use as biologically a tainted term as "begotten" in order to affirm that the Son was not a creature, but eternally and consubstantially united with the Father by a generation wholly antithetical to biological procreation.

Yet more bold, and more relevant, is the recently much-quoted, and perhaps unconsciously humorous; pronouncement of the Council of Toledo of 675 AD, that the Son is born de utero Patris (sc. out of the Father's very being and essence). /20 Here, simultaneously, there is affirmed the Son's eternity and uncreated equality with the Father, and that Father's radical transcendence of biology that is so complete that the free juxtaposition of feminine imagery - of the most biological sort - with male, merely confirms the inapplicability of either, and the collective inadequacy of both for expressing the God who embraces but transcends all human life.

VII

Such transcendence, which does not sever, but rather encompasses, before it surpasses, the full spectrum of human experience, leads directly to one last question about the "Father" of the NT. If it be agreed that neither the historical manhood of Jesus, nor the analogical fatherhood of God, mean that God is exclusively "male", would it be true nevertheless that the God of the Bible is predominantly "masculine" in character? Of course the use of the terms "masculine" and "feminine" in these contexts

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is sensitive and controversial. To plead, say, that men should be free to express their "femininity" more openly, is to risk confirming that very division and stereotyping of human characteristics from which liberation is sought. Nevertheless, there persists an agreed conventional short-hand, such that some qualities, which may be present in any human being, are describable as typically "masculine" and others as predominantly "feminine". And it is both the boast and the allegation of some - the boast of those who justify the male domination of the Church, the allegation of those who deplore it - that the Church has modelled itself upon a highly masculine God. The exercise of ecclesiastical authority, for example, has been founded upon a God who is fundamentally a ruler and monarch, both solitary and stern in his "masculine" exercise of "male" power. As subjects of a King, Lord and Master, women are appropriately, or wickedly, subordinate within a Church whose government is a symbol of God's own.

Are not both the justification and the accusation here wedded to a grotesque caricature of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, whose exclusive characterisation as "masculine", and thus as remote, unfeeling, authoritarian and patriarchal, would be quite misleading? In answer to our original question "what is God like?", the Scriptures indicate not the impassible unmoved mover of Aristotle, nor the deified absolutism of Caesar, but an infinitely personal God of passion and compassion, responsibility and responsiveness, who offers intimacy, knows grief and wounding, submits to resistance and rebuff. To take the Trinity seriously, and thus let Jesus, and no philosophy or politics "show us the Father", is to subject to iconoclasm - above all, that of the cross - all human conventions of what is powerful and wise, and

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all human images of what is God-like.

Whatever domination is associated with and practised by human fathers, it is pity and compassion which characterise the heavenly Father.... His kingdom is not of this world, founded on this world's forms of power and justice, but a kingdom for sinners and outcasts and those of lowly status, a kingdom in which the godless are justified. And the King's power is a foolish weakness which uses the nobodies of the world to bring down the somebodies (1 Cor.1:28) / 21

As the Report hurries on to say, none of this means that the God revealed in Christ is not King, Lord, Master....and Father. Nor is it that he lacks authority. But there is a profound re-interpretation afoot, whereby true rule and fatherhood consist in the creation, not the denial, of freedom and friendship, equality and community. It is as Master that the Son of God makes us friends, no longer slaves (Jn.15:15); as Father that God delivers up his beloved to godforsakenness and himself to the pain of sonlessness (Rom.8:32). Which is to say that reforms of the invulnerable, authoritarian caricature, and of church forms and prejudices dependent on it, reside not in abandonment of God's Fatherhood (in preference, say, to some Earth-Mother, goddess, figure), but precisely in new and open attention to the Father, as Jesus and the Bible actually disclose him. Only within and not outside the Fatherhood of God lies the dynamic which can create the fullness, equality and togetherness of human life, and end the selfish, fearful domination of any race, people or sex.

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The most direct and urgent means of correcting distortions of thought and practice based upon an image of God as a quasi-male, absolute sovereign, is recovery of and return to the Father of Jesus. / 22

Yet it is just here that all the foregoing data and reflections demand some response. For if it be true that the Father of Jesus, from whom there can and must be no escape, is neither "male" nor "masculine"; that in the revolutionary disclosing of the Father's love many women and female figures played their part: that the Scriptures even before they knew God as the Father of Jesus had likened his love and compassion to that of mothers, and affirmed a resemblance between him and every woman as of every man; then are we not free, or obliged, to reassess the range of human language which the Church should gather up in praise and affirmation of Father-God? No Scriptural precedents call God "Mother"; many surely prompt us to qualify the "Father" with adverbs and adjectives drawn from woman's story and the female experience. Indeed, given all that we have seen of the God of the Bible, is it actually possible to express his Godness and his Fatherhood, in all its love, suffering and care, without some such qualifiers instinctively recognised as feminine? This God is tender and comforting; this God is sensitive and vulnerable; this God is protective and knows how to weep. Of any human father these things may be true; not to contrast with his fatherhood, or to diminish it, but to express its richness, might we not extol him and supremely the One from whom all fatherhood in heaven and earth is named (Eph.3:15), as a father most "motherly"? /23.

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VIII

It remains simply to indicate some further questions which an affirmative answer to this one would provoke. If it is biblically admissible, or required, to recognise God as our "motherly Father", how might such recognition affect the thought and speech of the Church? That meditation on the divine motherliness has always yielded a rich if confined spiritual harvest, is not in doubt. From Clement of Alexandria to Julian of Norwich to Count von Zinzendorf, Christian women and men of faith and vision have delighted in the mother-love, not exclusively of the Father, of course, but also of Christ and of the Spirit. /24 While such reflections have found a place in Protestant evangelical pietism, as well as in contemporary liturgies of the ecumenical movement, they are most readily identified with Eastern Orthodoxy and with medieval Catholicism. Is that in itself a ground for suspicion and reservation on the part of Reformed Christians now? Or is it a summons for the opening of heart and mind, lest an arbitrary rejection of a rich legacy impoverish our own Christian experience and that of future generations?

Again, if Christians do give feminine word as well as masculine to their God's creative power and passion, would prudence and discretion restrict such speech to the privacy of personal prayer, and the meditations of a few? Or might there be occasions when the whole people of God, gathered to worship "Our Father" and to hear his Word, might be helped to ponder and to celebrate the maternal, womanly qualities of Abba's love?

This leads to a final question, which kindled unresolved controversy in the Church of Scotland's Study Group. /25 Whether in private or in public,

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may the motherliness of God only be expressed, or may it also be addressed? Does our Lord's example and command mean that, however wide our range of images employed about God, we may name and address him exclusively as "Father"? Is creaturely approach to the divine and holy One so awesome and solemn that we may give him that name alone which the authority of Son and Word ordains? Or is this Father, so intimate and loving, less concerned for the correctness of our vocabulary than for the sincerity of our hearts and the scope of our vision? And does he then take pleasure in the humble strainings of his children for the best words they can find with which to hail and name his all-embracing grace? Would it dismay, or delight, this Father, if some of us supplemented our address of him not only with "Rock" and "Fortress" and other terms of lifeless rigidity and strength, but also with that living being, made in his own image, whose warmth, fertility and selfless care, embodies for so many the ultimate expression of human love?

New College,
Edinburgh.

Alan E. Lewis.

Notes:

1. The Motherhood of God: The Report of the Woman's Guild/Panel on Doctrine Study Group, Alan E. Lewis, ed., St. Andrew Press, 1984.

2. Much of the groundwork for the Biblical section of the Report was done by my Edinburgh colleague John C.L. Gibson, and though what follows is a personal reworking and expansion of the data he helped to uncover, I am anxious to record my indebtedness to him.

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3. Report, p.36.

4. For a provocative exegesis of this and many other passages involving women and female imagery in the OT, see P. Tribble, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality, Fortress Press, 1978.

5. See R. Haughton, The Passionate God, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981, ch.7, for an extended consideration of Rev. 12; and for a massive study of the place of women in Christian origins see E.S. Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, SCM Press, 1983.

6. See Report, pp.54-60.

7. See Song of Songs, 2:4 et passim; Hos.3:1 et passim; also, e.g., Deut. 4:37; 7:7; 2 Sam. 12:24; Ps. 146:8; Prov. 3:12; Is.43:4; Jer.31:3.

8. See e.g., Ex. 33:19; 2 Sam. 24:14; Ps. 51:1; 77:9; 102:13; Is.49:10,13,15; 54:7,8,10; 63:15; Jer.31:20; Hos.1:6; 14:3;

9. See also Deut. 32:6. The procreative dimension is also logically present, though usually deeply sublimated, where the parental relation between God and Israel is seen from the other side, and the people are described as Yahweh's "son", "sons" or "children" (i.e., sons and daughters). See e.g., Ex.4:22f.; Deut.14:1; 32:5; 19:20; a. 1:2,4; 30:1,9; Jer.3:14,22; 4:22; 31:20; Jos. 11:1. This last passage ("When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son"), makes explicit what elsewhere is implicit: that the people of Israel are God's "children" not by some natural affinity with him, let alone a quasi-biological descent from him, but purely by grace - those convenantal acts of salvation history through which God mercifully

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establishes the relationship with his elect, as their deliverer from slavery and death to the new birth of life and freedom. Note also the special identification of the Davidic messiah, promised to bring the history of salvation of fulfilment, as God's "son" or "child" (e.g., Is. 9:6).

10. See esp. Song of Songs; Second Isaiah; Jeremiah; Ezekiel; and Hosea, passim.

11. For a powerfully poetic and progressive sermon preached on this text in Scotland (ironically enough!), almost 60 years ago, see J.S. Carroll, The Motherhood of God and Other Sermons, Hodder & Stoughton, 1925, pp. 1-7. And for a remarkable exposition of Is. 31:5 quoted above, by another Scot, see George Adam Smith, Commentary on Isaiah I -XXXIX, (Expositor's Bible).

12. On this entire moving passage, Jer. 31:15-22, see Tribble, op.cit., pp.40-50. She shows that Yahweh is indeed identifying with Rachel's grief. For an autobiographical reflection on the experience of motherhood as that can illumine and enrich the understanding of God's creativity and provision, patience and pain, see M. Hebblethwaite, Motherhood and God. G. Chapman, 1984.

13. Report, p. 39.

14. Jn. 13:33; cf. 1 John 2:1, 12, 13, 18, 28; 4:4; 5:21.

15. See Report, pp. 7ff.; 11-15; 18ff.

16. A thorough contemporary discussion of this phenomenon - though one which says much less that is new than it appears to realise - is S. McFague's Metaphorical Theology, SCM Press, 1983. See ch.5

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esp. for the issue of male and female models of God.

17. See J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, SCM Press, 1981, p.162. Cf. T.F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, SCM Press, 1965, pp.30f.: "It would be inherently wrong to use expressions like 'right hand' or 'bosom' or even 'father' and 'son' as if they meant when applied to God the same thing they mean when used of creatures. It is thus one of the most important elements of theological activity to discern the basic change in meaning which our ordinary speech undergoes, lest we should speak in merely human terms of God or speak in unwarranted ways of creatures".

18. See Athanasius, *Contra Gentes*, 19, and *Ad Serapionem*, I, 15.

19. *Ad Serapionem*, I, 16, 17.

20. See e.g., J. Moltmann, *op. cit.*, p.165.

21. *Report*, p.25; see pp.24-27. On the figure of "Wisdom", whose most manifest influence on the NT is in this 1 Cor. 1 passage, see *Report*, pp.41-43. Also J.D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, SCM Press, 1980, ch. VI. It would be wrong to build too much on the feminine gender either of Wisdom in the OT or of the divine wisdom which Paul opposes to the wisdom and power of the world. Yet the figure of *Sophia* as well as that of *Logos* is most likely at play in the NT conception of *Christ's pre-existence*. Thus neither the identity of Christ's person, nor his cruciform revelation of God's power-through-weakness, are understood or expressed in the Bible by figures, symbols and concepts which are solely masculine.

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Notes:

22. Report, p.28.

23. For the phrase "the Motherly Father" and its trinitarian basis, see J. Moltmann, "The Motherly Father", in Concilium, no. 143, God as Father?, pp.51-56; also Trinity and the Kingdom of God, esp. pp.162ff.; and E. Moltmann-Wendel and J. Moltmann, Humanity in God, SCM Press, 1984, chapters 5 and 6.

24. For a partial survey of this history, see Report, ch. 7; cf. M. Hebblethwaite, Motherhood and God, ch. 16; C.F. Parvey, ed., Ordination of Women in Ecumenical Perspective, W.C.C., 1980, pp. 43-47; and P. Wilson-Kastner, Faith, Feminism and the Christ, Fortress Press, 1983, ch.5.

25. See Report, pp. 44-47; 65f.