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Cross-Gender Imagery in the Bible

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An examination of the phenomenon of cross-gender imagery in the Bible reveals that gendered imagery does not affect gender designation. Thus a masculine person is grammatically always identified (or "designated") as masculine, even when feminine imagery is used to describe him. This rule is true of both OT and NT and of both human and divine persons. Feminine imagery for God may reflect the rhetoric of kingship in the ancient Near East, in which kings are compared to mothers.

Key Words: God as feminine, feminine imagery in the Bible, gender, king as mother

Consider the following quotations from four contemporary novels:

1. "She's a better man than he."[1]
2. "He would be pregnant with her."[2]
3. "The dispatch of the layout left him in a sort of postpartum depression."[3]
4. "Feeling like Judas Iscariot, Mrs. Kate Carpenter gave Barbara . . . the home phone number."[4]

These are all examples of what I will call "cross-gender imagery," that is, feminine imagery describing masculine persons, or masculine imagery describing feminine persons. It is a literary phenomenon that is widespread in contemporary speech and literature. It is not at all unusual, after all, to hear a man referred to as a "prima donna" or a woman as "one of the boys."

1. Margaret Arnold, *Lament for a Lady Laird* (Woodstock, Vt.: Foul Play Press, 1990) 41.
2. Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (Toronto: Vintage, 1993) 114.
3. Leonard Sanders, *In the Valley of the Shadow* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1996) 136.
4. Mary Higgins Clark, *Let Me Call You Sweetheart* (New York: Pocket Books, 1996) 196.

But cross-gender imagery is not restricted to contemporary language. It seems to be well attested in the literatures of many cultures and historical epochs. For example, we find it in the Gilgamesh Epic, where a weeping Gilgamesh is described as "moaning bitterly like a wailing woman,"[5] in the royal inscription of an ancient Syrian king, who claims that his subjects were disposed to him "as an orphan is to his mother,"[6] and in the dialogues of Plato, where Socrates famously compares himself to a midwife.[7] Given the pervasiveness of this kind of imagery in many different cultural contexts, it is not surprising that we find it in the Bible as well.

In the present paper I will examine the phenomenon of cross-gender imagery in the Bible, both in the OT and NT.[8] I will begin by making a general linguistic observation about the distinction between "gender designation" and "gendered imagery" and then proceed to illustrate this distinction with a number of representative examples of biblical cross-gender imagery, first as applied to humans, and then as applied to God. My overall thesis will be essentially twofold: first, that the designation of a person as masculine or feminine is unaffected by cross-gender imagery, and second, that this first point applies not only to human persons, but also to God as divine person.

Gender Designation and Gendered Imagery

The general linguistic observation that I have in mind has to do with the various ways in which a language identifies a person's gender. These are essentially of two kinds: lexical and grammatical. A lexical way of identifying the gender of a person is by the use of words that have a gender-specific meaning, such as "king" and "queen," or "beget" and "give birth." However, this is not a foolproof way of indicating whether a person is masculine or feminine, since it is possible, by way of exception, for a woman to be metaphorically called a king, and for a man to be metaphorically said to give birth. Consequently, although the gender of a person can usually be inferred from the use of lexically gender-specific vocabulary, this is not always the case. Even nouns like man, or adjectives like pregnant do not necessarily tell

5. *Gilgamesh Epic* 8.2.3 in *ANET*, 87 (translation by Speiser).
6. Inscription of Kilamawu in *ANET*, 655.
7. Plato *Theaetetus* 150C.
8. For a preliminary account of cross-gender imagery in the Bible, see the Study Report of the "Committee to Study Inclusive Language for God," in *Agenda for Synod 1997* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church in North America, 1997) 265-372, especially 309-20.

us that the person to which they refer is masculine or feminine, as we saw in our opening sentences.

But many languages also have another, more reliable way of indicating whether a person is masculine or feminine, a way that I will call "gender designation." This is not a lexical but a grammatical feature of language and involves the use of gender-specific forms of such parts of speech as pronouns, articles, adjectives, and verbs. These gender-specific grammatical forms, which may be called "gender designators," are absent in some languages, are relatively rare in others, and are very numerous in others again. In Turkish, for example, they do not occur at all, while in English they are relatively rare, being restricted to forms of the third-person singular pronoun (*he/him/his/himself and she/her/herself*). In the biblical languages, on the other hand, gender designators are quite numerous. Hebrew and Aramaic have gender-specific forms, not only of pronouns and pronominal suffixes (both second- and third-person, singular and plural), but also of adjectives and verbs, while Greek has gender-specific forms of pronouns, adjectives, and articles. For our purposes the most noteworthy feature of these grammatical gender designators is that in the biblical languages they consistently identify the so-called "natural gender" of the persons to whom they refer. In other words, these grammatical features, unlike the lexical items that we discussed in the previous paragraph, are reliable indicators of whether a given person is masculine or feminine and are thus independent of the phenomenon of cross-gender imagery.

Another way of making this basic linguistic point is to say that, in the biblical languages there is a consistent correlation between the masculine and feminine of grammatical gender and the natural gender of persons. Formulated in this way, this is a rule that I believe holds absolutely. Note that the formulation embodies a threefold restriction: it is restricted to the biblical languages (there are exceptions in other languages, such as Italian[9]), to masculine and feminine (there are a few neuter nouns designating persons in Greek[10]), and to persons (there are a few "epicene nouns" designating animals, while plants are not treated as being gendered[11]). With these qualifications,

9. See Muhammad Hasan Ibrahin, *Grammatical Gender: Its Origin and Development* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973) 52.

10. For example, τέκνον "child" and diminutives like παιδίον "little child."

11. GKC 122b, e—f. Many linguistic discussions of gender misleadingly use the categories *animate* and *inanimate*, which should logically include plants in the former class. It would be more helpful to speak of *personal* and *impersonal*, with animals straddling the divide.

we can posit that grammatical gender consistently matches natural, or personal, gender.[12]

Consequently, since grammatical gender designation in the Bible consistently matches a person's natural gender, while gendered imagery does not, it is clear that the two are independent of each other. In other words, a woman can be compared to a man in a metaphor or simile and still be unambiguously identified by the grammatical gender designators in the context as a feminine person. This is true even in English, where we have relatively few gender designators, but it is much more obviously the case in the biblical languages, which have many gender designators. For example, in the English sentence "She too lived like a king, wealthy and secure," the pronoun "she" identifies the person in question as a feminine person, even though she is described by a masculine image. But in the Hebrew equivalent of this sentence, the verb "lived" and the adjectives "wealthy" and "secure" would also designate her gender.

Cross-Gender imagery Involving Humans

To illustrate these distinctions in practice, I turn now to examples of cross-gender imagery in the Bible, restricting my attention initially to cases involving human beings. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotations are from the NIV.

(1) 2 Sam 17:8. "You know your father and his men; they are fighters, and as fierce as a wild bear robbed of her cubs." Hushai is here comparing David and his men to a דב שכול, literally a "bereaved bear." Although the noun and adjective here are both masculine, it is agreed on all sides that the animal being described is a she-bear, since the Hebrew word for bear (דוב) is a so-called "epicene noun" (an animal name of one grammatical gender that refers to both the male and female of the species), and the behavior being described is not characteristic of a he-bear. Consequently, although David and his men are clearly identified as masculine in the context, they are here being compared to a female animal.

(2) Isa 13:8. "Terror will seize them, pain and anguish will grip them; they will writhe like a woman in labor." The reference here is to the Babylonians, who are designated as masculine by three gender designators in this verse: two verbal forms and a pronominal suffix.

12. Because we are restricting our discussion to persons, and the category persons includes such "supernatural" entities as angels, demons, and deities, I will henceforth refer to "personal" rather than "natural" gender. By personal gender I mean the attribute of being a "he" or a "she."

For example, in the phrase "they will writhe like a woman in labor," the verb is יחילון, the third-person masculine plural, *Qal* imperfect, of the root חיל.

(3) Isa 19:16. "In that day the Egyptians will be like women. They will shudder with fear at the uplifted hand that the Lord Almighty raises against them." The Egyptians here (literally, "Egypt") are designated as masculine by three verbal forms (יהיה, וחרד ופחד) and one pronominal suffix (in עליו).

(4) Isa 33:11. "You conceive chaff, you give birth to straw." Both of the verbs here, although they evoke a feminine image, are second-person masculine plural forms, and thus designate the people addressed as masculine persons, as do the two pronominal suffixes that come later in this verse.

(5) Hos 13:13. "Pains as of a woman in childbirth come to him, but he is a child without wisdom." Just as the English pronouns here make clear that the person in question (Ephraim) is masculine, so do the gender designators of the original Hebrew. The last phrase is literally "he a son not wise" (הוא בן לא חכם), in which the pronoun, the noun, and the adjective are all masculine.

(6) Nah 3:13. "Look at your troops—they are all women." It is Nineveh who is here addressed by the prophet, and her soldiers (literally her עם, people bearing arms[13]) are equated with women. Since the Assyrian soldiery is consistently treated as masculine, we here have a further example of cross-gender imagery, in this case a metaphor rather than a simile.

The foregoing examples are all cases of masculine persons being described with feminine imagery, and this seems to be more common than cross-gender imagery that goes the other way around. However, there are at least two examples in the OT where a feminine figure is described using masculine imagery. These two examples, both of which involve personification, are the following:

(7) Prov 8:30. "Then I was the craftsman at his side." The speaker in this famous verse is Lady Wisdom, the feminine personification of חכמה and the word that is here translated "craftsman" is אמון, a Hebrew noun of uncertain meaning (other common renderings are "darling" and "child"[14]). However, whatever its precise meaning, it is fairly clear that it designates a masculine person, since

13. See BDB, s.v. 017 2d.

14. See the lexica and the commentaries on Proverbs. (However, it is also possible that אמוך should be read as an adverb, not a noun. See B. Waltke, "Proverbs: Theology of," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997] 4.1082).

the corresponding feminine term is אמנת. Since all the gender designators in the context identify Lady Wisdom as feminine, this is another example of how gender designation is unaffected by gendered imagery.

(8) Jer 3:2. "By the roadside you sat waiting for lovers, sat like a nomad in the desert." The one being addressed is personified Jerusalem, and it is clear from the Hebrew pronouns and verbs in the context (for example ישבת, translated "sat waiting") that this person is feminine. She is compared to a "nomad," Hebrew ערבי, which is masculine. The corresponding feminine form would have been ערבית.

There are many other places in the OT where we find cross-gender imagery involving human persons. So far I have identified about a dozen, and this number can be increased by seven if we include all cases where men are the subject of the verb חיל "to writhe (as in childbirth)."[15] We should also note that one of the fundamental metaphors of the OT is Israel as the wife of Yahweh. Since the noun "Israel" is masculine, and the leaders of the nation were overwhelmingly male, we can consider this basic metaphor another example of cross-gender imagery. In all cases the pattern we have observed is followed: gender designation is not affected by gendered imagery.

The examples of cross-gender imagery in the NT are less numerous, but they follow the same pattern. The following are the clearest cases:

(9) Matt 23:37. "0 Jerusalem . . . how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings." The speaker here is Jesus, who compares himself to a hen, a female animal. Although there are no gender designators in the immediate context that specify that Jesus is masculine, Matthew elsewhere regularly refers to him as ὁ Ἰησοῦς, using the masculine article.

(10) Gal 4:19. "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you." The apostle Paul presents himself metaphorically as a woman in childbirth, but there is no doubt that he considered himself a masculine person. This is reflected in the grammar of the preceding v. 16, where the question "Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?" contains the masculine adjective ἐχθρός.

(11) 1 Thess 2:7. "As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children." Whether the "we" here represents the apostle Paul alone, or Paul together with Silas and Timothy (see 1 Thess 1:1), it is clear that the subject is masculine. This is confirmed by the mas -

15. See Deut 2:25; Isa 23:5; Jer 5:3, 22; Joel 2:6; Job 15:20 and 26:5.

culine plural of the adjective translated "gentle" in this verse (ἤπιοι) and by the other gender designators in the context.[16] The apostle is comparing himself with a mother or female nurse (Greek τροφός), but the grammar shows that he retains his masculine gender. It is of interest to note that Luther, in his German translation of the Bible, reinforced the cross-gender imagery by rendering the masculine adjective ἤπιοι as *mütterlich* "motherly."[17]

(12) 1 Thess 5:3. "While people are saying, 'Peace and safety,' destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape." The people in question are identified as masculine by the pronoun αὐτοῖς "on them," but the imagery is clearly feminine.

There is a further example of cross-gender imagery in John 16:21, where Jesus' disciples are compared to a woman giving birth, and perhaps also in Matt 13:33 par., where the kingdom of heaven is compared to the yeast that a woman uses, but these cases are less direct and explicit than the ones we have discussed. Whether we include them in our list or not, it is noteworthy that all of the instances of cross-gender imagery that I have identified in the NT so far compare males to females, rather than females to males.

Cross-Gender Imagery Involving God

The general pattern that we have identified applies, not only to cross-gender imagery applied to human persons, but also to such imagery applied to God. I suspect that the same pattern also holds for angels, demons, and the gods and goddesses of pagan religions, but so far I have discovered only one possible example of cross-gender imagery involving angels: the parable in Luke 15 in which the joy of the angels is compared to the joy of the woman who found her lost silver coins. But there are a goodly number of examples where the God of biblical religion, who is consistently identified as masculine by the gender designators of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, is compared to a woman or other female figure.

It is probably not necessary to demonstrate the point that the relevant grammatical indicators of the biblical languages consistently designate God as masculine. But it is a point worth making that such masculine gender designators referring to God are much more numerous in the original languages of the Bible than in English translations.

16. This point is unaffected if we adopt the well-attested reading νήπιοι instead.

17. Luther's translation reads as follows: "Sondern wir sind mütterlich gewesen / bey euch / Gleich wie eine amme jrer Kinder pfleget." See D. Martin Luther, *Die gantze Heilige Schrifft Deudsch 1545 / Auffs new zugericht* (ed. Hans Volz; Munich: Rogner & Bernhard, 1972) 2381.

For example, Genesis 1 has only 6 gender designators for God in the NIV ("he" 5 times, and "his" once), but there are 36 in the original Hebrew (1 pronoun and 35 verbal forms). Since all three of the biblical languages are much more highly gendered than English, the original text of the Bible throughout indicates much more frequently than our translations that the God of Israel is grammatically a he, not a she. This is due especially to the fact that many forms of the verb and pronoun are gender-specific in Hebrew and Aramaic, and adjectives are gender-marked both in these Semitic languages and in Greek. Masculine gender designators referring to God number in the hundreds of thousands, while there is a complete absence of feminine gender designators for God. Grammatically, the God of the Bible is consistently treated as a masculine person.[18]

We turn now to some representative passages in the Bible where God is compared to a woman (or, in one case, to a female animal).

(13) Num 11:12. "Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their forefathers?" This is a series of rhetorical questions addressed by Moses to God, in effect saying: "It was not I who conceived and bore these people, but it was you, Lord." Although the feminine imagery is not directly applied to God, it is clearly implied. Nevertheless, God is also clearly designated as masculine by the verb תאמר "you tell," as well as the other gender designators referring to him in the context.

(14) Deut 32:18. "You deserted the Rock, who fathered you; you forgot the God who gave you birth." The Hebrew for the words "who gave you birth" is מחללך, the masculine form of the *Polel* participle, based on the root חיל. We thus have another example of a feminine image expressed in a masculine grammatical form. It should also be noted that the verb translated "fathered" (ילדך) is also masculine and that the nouns for "Rock" (צור) and "God" (אל) are both grammatically masculine as well. The feminine image describing God as giving birth is thus embedded in a context that repeatedly designates him as masculine.

18. An apparent exception is found in the MT of Num 11:15, where Moses, in addressing God ("If this is how you are going to treat me, put me to death right now") uses the pronoun את, vocalized like the second-person singular feminine pronoun. The verb, however, is masculine, and the pronoun in the Samaritan text is spelled אתה, representing the masculine form. The anomaly in the MT was noted in the 17th century by John Weemes, who explained it as the result of Moses' passion. See his *Exposition of the Second Table of the Morall Law,* in *The Works of Mr. John Weemse (sic) of Lathocker in Scotland, in Three Volumes* (London, 1636) 88: "So *Moses* anger; his passion blinded him so, that he speaketh of God in the feminine gender." I am grateful to Rev. Jai-Sung Shim, a doctoral student at Calvin Theological Seminary, for alerting me to this passage in Weemes.

(15) Isa 42:14. "But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant." The person speaking is the Lord, who in the previous verse is clearly designated as masculine. See the following masculine verbal forms in v. 13: יצא, יעיר, יתגבר, supplemented by the masculine pronominal suffix in איביו "his enemies." God is clearly compared to a woman, but he just as clearly retains his masculine gender.

(16) Isa 66:13. "As a mother comforts a child, so will I comfort you." Once again, the speaker is the Lord, who is identified as masculine in the preceding verse. The relevant gender designators in v. 12 are the two masculine verbal forms אמר and נסה.

(17) Hos 13:8. "Like a bear robbed of her cubs, I will attack them and rip them open." The speaker is again the Lord, who is compared to a דב שכול, a bereaved she-bear. Although there are no specifically masculine gender designators for him in the immediate context, since the verbs are all in the first person, we can assume that Yahweh here continues to be grammatically masculine, as he is throughout Hosea elsewhere. It is noteworthy that this example of cross-gender imagery applied to God is exactly parallel to the imagery applied to David and his men in 2 Sam 17:8. In both cases, masculine persons are compared to a she-bear without losing their masculine identity.

The foregoing five examples are typical of all of the cases of feminine imagery for God in the OT. There may be as many as a dozen other examples, depending on how generously we define the category. But the general pattern holds throughout: feminine imagery for God does not affect the fact that all gender designators identify God as masculine. It should also be pointed out that feminine imagery for God is consistently in the form of similes rather than metaphors. God is often said to be *like* a woman, he is never said to *be* a woman. This is a point on which divine cross-gender imagery differs from its human parallels, because there are cases where the OT does metaphorically equate men with women (e.g., Nah 3:13; see above).

The NT offers-fewer examples of feminine imagery for God, and the ones that do occur are generally indirect or implied. Perhaps the following two are the clearest instances:

(18) 1 John 4:7. "Everyone who loves has been born of God." The phrase "born of God," which occurs repeatedly in 1 John (also 5:1, 4, 18) could be understood as an example of implied cross-gender imagery, since birth suggests a mother, and the words "of God" (ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ) identify God as masculine.

(19) 1 Pet 2:2-3. "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good." The milk of newborn babies

suggests breastfeeding, and the reference to the Lord suggests that he, like a mother or nurse, is the source of that milk. There is no confusion, however, about the gender designation of that source: "the Lord" is masculine in Greek (ὁ κύριος), as is the adjective that describes him as "good" (χρηστός).

As these examples show, the overall biblical pattern holds also for the NT feminine images for God. God is consistently designated as masculine, even when he is compared to a woman. Even if we include more doubtful cases, such as Jesus' reference to being born again in his discussion with Nicodemus (John 3:3-8), the same general rule is observed: the gender designation of God is independent of the gendered imagery that describes him.

It seems, therefore, that the pattern of cross-gender imagery describing God in the Bible follows the pattern of cross-gender imagery describing humans. This is hardly surprising, since it is true, generally speaking, that the grammatical and literary usages of biblical language apply to all persons equally, whether human or not. In fact, it can be shown that this general rule is true also of extrabiblical literatures.[19] In using the same language for both humans and God, and in consistently distinguishing within that language between gender designation and gendered imagery, the biblical authors are simply following the same linguistic conventions as the ones that were prevalent in surrounding cultures. Cross-gender imagery appears to follow the same rules wherever it is found.

God and the Rhetoric of Kingship

In connection with this overall thesis of linguistic continuity between the Bible and its surrounding cultures, let me conclude by suggesting a possible reason why feminine imagery for God is found as often as it is in the OT. My proposal is that such imagery was part of the rhetoric of kingship in the ancient Near East and that it was therefore appropriate for the basic OT metaphor of God as the supreme king.

There are a number of ancient Near Eastern royal inscriptions that state that a given king was like a mother. The earliest example of this known to me is a Sumerian inscription of *Lugal-zage-si*, dated to the 24th century BC. The list of royal epithets in this inscription includes the following: "the king of Umma . . . , born for the office of shepherd, the hero, the counseling mother of Enki, the beloved friend

19. See, for example, the instances of cross-gender imagery applied to deities listed under the entry *abu* "father" in *CAD* A Ia.

of Sataran." Although the translation "the counseling mother" has been disputed, it fits both the Sumerian original (AMA ŠA-KUŠ) and the other examples of king-as-mother in the ancient Near East.[20]

Less disputable and much closer in time and space to the OT writings are two royal inscriptions from northern Syria. The first is written in Phoenician and celebrates the exploits of Azitawadda of Adana, who seems to have lived in the 9th century BC. This inscription begins as follows: "I am Azitawadda, the blessed of Baᶜl, the servant of Baᶜl, whom Awariku made powerful, king of the Danunites. Baᶜl made me a father and a mother to the Danunites."[21]

The second inscription is written in Samalian, a dialect of Old Aramaic, and is an autobiographical account of Kilamuwa of Sam'al, also dated to the ninth century BC. In the middle of the inscription we find the words: "to some I was a father. To some I was a mother. To some I was a brother." A few lines later he writes of his subjects as follows: "They were disposed (toward me) as an orphan is to his mother."[22]

These inscriptions seem to suggest that it was not uncommon for a king to describe himself as a mother, that is, as someone to whom his subjects could turn for sustenance and security. It is possible that these examples of the king-as-mother image represent a traditional rhetorical convention in the ancient Near East. Such a convention would certainly explain the striking metaphor that we find in Isa 60:16, where the Israelites are given the following eschatological promise: "you shall suck the milk of nations, you shall suck the breasts of kings" (NRSV). The startling image of kings giving suck would lose some of its incongruity if it were part of a tradition of royal rhetoric in which the king was compared to a mother. It is in fact a tradition that still finds echoes in modern European literature.[23]

20. See Edmond Sollberger, "La frontière de Šara," *Or N.S.* 28 (1959) 336-42 (338). The translation "counseling mother" (*mère conseillère*) is changed to "counselor" (conseiller) in Edmond Sollberger and Jean-Robert Kupper, *Inscriptions royales sumériennes et akkadiennes* (Paris: du Cerf, 1971) 92. However, the Sumerian word AMA "mother" is included as royal epithet (with a reference to this inscription) in M.-J. Seux, *Épithètes royales akkadiennes et sumériennes* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1967) 386.

21. See *ANET* 653 (translation by F. Rosenthal).

22. See *ANET*, 654 (translation by F. Rosenthal).

23. Cf. Martin Luther, "O das Herzog George . . . solcher heiligen patron und mutter worden ist," cited in K. Spalding, *An Historical Dictionary of German Figurative Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984) 1730; and the first paragraph of "The Translators to the Reader," prefaced to the King James Version of the Bible (1611): "those noursing fathers and mothers (wheresoever they be) that withdraw from them who hang upon their breasts . liuelyhood and support" (alluding to Elizabeth I and James I).

Since the kingship of God is one of the basic images of the OT, if not indeed *the* root metaphor of the Hebrew Scriptures, it makes eminent good sense to understand much, if not all, of the feminine imagery for God in the light of this tradition of royal rhetoric. Given the fact that so much of the trappings of ancient Near Eastern kings (throne, footstool, scepter, council, rule by fiat) is used in the biblical depiction of the Great King in heaven, it is altogether understandable that the image of king-as-mother would be used as part of this depiction as well.