

1. THE NATURE OF GOD

The study of the biblical teachings about women must begin with a study of the nature of God, because current theological argumentation is constantly making reassessments about our perception of God. This is not surprising, since the Book of Genesis attests that human nature, male and female, reflects the divine nature, and that the divine will concerning the race is essentially a manifestation of the divine nature. And this reassessment is not altogether unwelcome, for the Church must be constantly trying to explain the truths of the Scripture to the current culture. However, any explanation of the correspondence between the divine nature and human nature can be easily taken to extremes and lose the balance. Ancient Israel's view of God, on the whole, did manage to maintain proper boundaries in the midst of the confusion in the pagan world. Israel's view was far above the pagan view which sought to humanize deities; consequently, her rules of ethical conduct and worship all conformed to a higher will, and their code of conduct was base and profane. It all comes back to the issue of whether the religious ideas were revealed or were made by people.

In modern times there is a renewed effort to make the image of God conform more to the human perception of what God should be like, and consequently the divine will to the human will. But this is by no means a modern endeavor, not even the interest in reviving very human images of deities, both male and female. People of all ages have struggled to understand God, and the issues and ideas of their ages have usually influenced their perception. At times, then, the interpretation of biblical revelation has been altered accordingly. Along this line it is interesting to note that once in a letter to Erasmus Luther said, "Your thoughts of God are too human."^[1]

This criticism is applicable today as well; as Pink further explains,

The "god" of this twentieth century no more resembles the Supreme Sovereign of Holy Writ than does the dim flickering of a candle the glory of the midday sun. The "god" who is now talked about in the average pulpit, spoken of in the ordinary Sunday School, mentioned in much of the religious literature of the day, preached in most of the so-called Bible Conferences, is the figment of human imagination, an invention of maudlin sentimentality (p. 28).

The Church must admit that her view of the Almighty is all too human. Some think of God as an indulgent old man who winks at human weaknesses, or as a God who is too busy with the big things in the world to have time for the details of life, or a God who has to be talked into doing things--or a host of other human perceptions. Certainly, the Church for some time has conceived of God as a powerful lord who manifests all the perfections of manhood--an emphasis that has had a deleterious effect on the attitude toward women. With perceptions like these it is little wonder that the modern age should bring in a challenging voice, not in favor of returning to a more

balanced view of the full revelation of Scripture unfortunately, but in favor of putting forward a feminine image of the deity. In some cases the move might be toward an egalitarian perception, but in others it is clearly towards a dominate feminine image,^[2] or clear polytheism. For example, one of the growing interests today in some of the more radical circles is the recognition of the goddess Lilith, who, some say based on Jewish lore and a clever reading of ancient mythological texts, was Adam's first wife, but became the true force of life.^[3] Some writers also suggest that prior to Josiah and his reforms the people were polytheistic--and that was a good thing because it gave a richness to the faith. But with the reforms of people like Josiah, these other rich areas were shut down, and a rigid monotheism was imposed on the people. Thus, the argument goes, we need to get away from the rigid views of monotheism today and re-capture the richness of the polytheistic world view.^[4] We shall return to these views later in the study.

The Uniqueness of God

The Old Testament nowhere lays out an orderly discussion of the nature of God--it is not a systematic theology. But in every section it records how God revealed Himself through word and deed. If the knowledge of God comes by revelation, then any attempt to reconstruct the divine nature from other sources is misguided. And, if the Word reveals that God is a Spirit, then He can only be known spiritually, that is, when the Spirit of God works in our minds and wills to convince us about the knowledge of God (2 Cor. 4:6). The rest of the religious world, operating without the influence of the Spirit, cannot be sure of the truth. We should not then be surprised that the believing community has been plagued with disparate voices speaking from a pagan mentality, trying to construct a god or goddess that pleases the human will. John tells us to test the spirits (the spirit forces behind the teachers [1 John 4:1]).

Out of all the revelation of God there are certain points that have a direct bearing on this particular study. This discussion will briefly bring them to mind.

God is a Person

Scripture again and again reveals God as having *intellect*, *sensibilities*, and a *will*. Reading the early chapters of Genesis affirms this--God created everything by the declaration of His will, formed all things perfectly by wisdom, took pleasure in the things that were created, sovereignly entrusted the administration of creation to humankind by giving His Spirit and His commandments to them, interrogated and rebuked when creation disobeyed, and was grieved over the presence of evil. Even if one were to argue that these chapters were merely using poetic language and should not be taken that seriously, the ideas introduced here about the divine Person are affirmed throughout all of Scripture. The revelation that emerges is of a personal God who created everything by divine will and superior intelligence and who takes pleasure in granting humans the ability to know God personally.

God is a Spirit

The Old Testament nowhere states the fact that God is a Spirit as clearly as John 4:24 does. In fact, the way in which it presents God as a person opens the danger of approximating the divine too closely to humans.^[5] The widespread use of human descriptions, so necessary for revelation to be understood by humans, makes it difficult at times to see the divine nature as Spirit.^[6] But the Bible safeguards the divine nature by presenting God as infinitely superior to humans.^[7] Nowhere is God even equated to human beings--He is eternal, unchanging, and imperishable; and not even the heaven of heavens can contain Him.^[8] It also safeguards the divine nature as Spirit by prohibiting any kind of images from being made for worship; such images would debase and limit God. He is the invisible, immortal God.

It is to this point that the Bible speaks when it describes God as holy. The Hebrew term *qadosh* has been translated "holy, set apart, unique" at different times. It basically means that there is no one like God anywhere.^[9]

God is One

There is no other god besides God, not in the true sense of the word "God." The affirmation of faith in Deuteronomy 6:4 that "Yahweh is one" is confirmed and expounded upon in the prophets (e.g., Isa. 44:6-8). While other religions thought their gods were real--and while there may have been spiritual forces at work--Scripture teaches that there is only one God. This dictum rules out all rival deities that had so permeated the religious world around ancient Israel. Eichrodt says,

It is worth noting in this connection that any disintegration of the Godhead into male and female principles was also firmly excluded. Yahweh never had a female consort; and thus any idea that he needed to be complemented--a fate which befell all the other major Semitic deities--was rejected. It is very significant that in Hebrew there should be no word for "goddess"; *El* [masculine singular] or *Elohim* [masculine plural] has to serve to denote the heathen goddesses. That even in Israel the effort was made to introduce a Mother-goddess side by side with Yahweh is shown by the protests, prominent both in the cultic reformers and in the prophets, against the Astarte or Asirat cultus . . . Nevertheless, the creation of a sacred pole, the symbol of the goddess, was always felt to be impermissible, however complaisant may have been the attitude to stone pillars. The Elephantine papyri [of Egypt], which record the worship of a goddess called Anat Bethel or Anat Yahu during the sixth century, show how this heathen tendency could prevail, when a Yahweh worshiping community was cut off from the parent congregation.^[10]

God Almighty exists eternally as the only and true God. God self-sufficient and all sufficient. He needs no consort nor complement. All power, all wisdom, all resources whatsoever reside with Him and Him alone.

The names for God in the Hebrew Bible underscore all of this. The personal name God used in the self-revelation to Moses was Yahweh), which was explained by the enigmatic "I AM THAT I AM" (Exod. 3:14). The name presents God as sovereignly independent of all creation.^[11] It attests to God's active existence: He is, and He always will be; but He acts within His creation while remaining over creation and not part of creation. "I AM THAT I AM" prevents Yahweh from being equated with aspects of nature (e.g., the sun god--the sun and the force behind it), and it makes it almost impossible to represent Yahweh with images, either male or female.

The description "God" is a translation of either *'elohim* or *'el*. The first form, a plural in the language, signified Him as the one true God, for the verbs associated with the word are in the singular. The use of the plural is therefore not a numerical plural, nor a remnant of earlier polytheism. It expresses the higher nature of God. The pagans might use the plural "gods" to refer to the pantheon; but the Hebrews used the plural to intensify the description of Yahweh. Some samples of this do occur in pagan religion. In ancient Babylon, for example, the moon god Sin is called "the gods of all gods" to designate supremacy. This use of the plural is common in the Old Testament; it reflects the totality of divine nature and life, describes God as supreme, and actually then rules out other deities. And, it was from the outset not confused with pagan ideas, for the verbs in the text of Genesis were put in the singular, not the plural.

In the Bible the expression "sons of God" (*bene 'elohim*) refers to the angels (Gen. 6:2 for fallen angels; Job 1:6, 38:7). But in the pagan world the expression was used for the pantheon, the lesser gods. It may very well be that fallen angels became gods, or became the forces behind the gods, in the pagan mentality.

The Contrast with Ancient Religions

Polytheism

When one surveys the religions of the ancient world, Egypt, Mesopotamia, or Canaan among others, one is immediately impressed by several features: the incredible number of gods and goddesses, the frequent changes in status within the pantheons, and the human characteristics given the deities.

One of the most striking features of these religions is the enormous number of the gods. In Tallqvist's standard book, *Akkadische Gotterepitheta* (1938), the descriptive list of Akkadian gods occupies over 240 pages, and many of the names defy any attempt to recover their meanings.^[12] Likewise, to name but one other religion, the Eblaite tablets of Syria refer to well over 200 deities.^[13] The ancient Near East festered with immoral and degrading religious ideas

and practices. Male and female deities, pantheons, high and low gods, priests and priestesses, and demons, all make up a substantial part of the Hamitic-Semitic life. All the forces of life and death were attributed to supernatural forces--forces which could be influenced, it was believed, by sacrifice, ritual, and sympathetic magic.^[14]

The mythological texts from these cultures show evidence of struggles between the different gods and goddesses, which probably reflect the many changes of opinion of even rulers among tribes. An invading army, for example, might reduce the gods of the people of the land to a subordinate position, and these dethroned gods might even become demons or evil spirits. In the Babylonian world, the dominance of Babylon was followed by the elevation of Marduk, the god of Babylon, to the head of the pantheon. Likewise in Canaanite religion there is a power struggle in which *El*, the head of the pantheon, is gradually replaced by *Baal*. All this means, of course, that the nature and order of the gods and goddesses were the product of human invention.

The characteristics of these deities were all too human. The gods had consorts, goddesses who at times became more powerful than the gods. These deities ate, drank, slept, cavorted in drunkenness, had sex, conspired to kill each other, and did essentially whatever humans do. At the center of the Canaanite religion, for example, was the fertility cult, that is, the fertility of every aspect of life on earth was the result of corresponding actions in the heavens. This idea led to practices of sympathetic magic by which humans through comparable acts could induce the deities to act and thereby guarantee fertility on earth. What resulted was an array of debased and debasing practices (Lev. 18). Wright and Filson offer this brief summary:

The amazing thing about gods, as they were conceived in Canaan, is that they had no moral character whatever. In fact, their conduct was on a much lower level than that of society as a whole, if we can judge from ancient codes of law. . . . Worship of these gods carried with it some of the most demoralizing practices then in existence. Among them were child sacrifice, a practice long since discarded in Egypt and Babylonia, sacred prostitution, and snake worship on a scale unknown among other peoples.^[15]

Albright appropriately adds,

It was fortunate for the future of monotheism that the Israelites of the conquest were a wild folk, endowed with primitive energy and ruthless will to exist, since the resulting decimation of the Canaanites prevented the complete fusion of the two kindred folk which would almost inevitably have depressed Yahwistic standards to a point where recovery was impossible. Thus, the Canaanites, with their orgiastic nature worship, their cult of fertility in the form of serpent symbols and sensuous nudity, and their gross mythology, were replaced by Israel, with its nomadic simplicity and purity of life, its lofty monotheism, and its severe code of ethics.^[16]

Several samples from the religion of the Canaanites will show how corrupt the perception of deity had become, and how goddesses and gods were nothing more than extensions of the baser instincts of men and women. *El*, the word for God, was the head of the pantheon (compare Hebrew use of the word in epithets like *El Shadday*^[17]). This Ugaritic god is also a fertility god, called

Bull-El (*tor il*). In time he became senile, and had to prove he was still virile by the seduction of two human women.^[18]

The consort of *El* was *Asherah*. She eventually replaced *Anat* as *Baal's* wife when he moved in on the high god (so she was retained as woman's special deity). She built a palace for the victorious god, and along with 70 "sons" joined a feast with great debauchery. She has the word "holy" (*qds*) applied to her, and so is equal to the nude goddess of Egypt, *Qudshu* ("holy one"). She was worshiped by many in Israel, such as the wives of David and Solomon, Jezebel of course, and people in the days of Manasseh. She was a favorite among queens; the Syrians appealed to her in childbirth.

The word '*asherah*' also applies to a cult pillar, probably associated with the goddess. This wooden pole or cult object stood upright as an image of fertility. The Septuagint had difficulty translating the word; it used "groves" mostly, but also "tree" and even "*Astarte*" to translate the word (but that is a separate deity of Sidon).

Baal is the pagan god with whom most students of the Bible are familiar. The term simply means "Alord, master." In the pagan world it was applied to any "divine being" thought to be associated with fertile places--wells, groves of trees, and the like. The main god *Baal* is to be equated with rain and fertility. He is equated with the storm god *Hadad* of Syria (centered in Damascus), the *Adad* of Assyria (located at times in Nimrud or Nineveh). Stelae show him holding a club in his right hand and a stylized lightning flash with a spearhead in his left, attributes of the god of rain. His helmet has horns, symbols of fertility. In fact, he is portrayed leaping upon a heifer (the goddess *Anat*?) as a sign of fertility.

This god achieved his elevated status by conflict with other gods (just as *Marduk* of Babylon had victory over the Sea, *Tiamat*). *Baal* deposed *Lotan*, the twisting serpent who opposed him ("*Leviathan*" in the Old Testament). But *Baal's* chief enemies were Prince Sea (*Yamm*) and Judge River (*Nahar*). In the epic *Baal* is defeated by Death (the god *Mot*) and taken to the subterranean realm of the two rivers--the deep or the abyss. In the spring, when he is rescued, fertility of crop and herd is assured, and life returns with the rains.

Anat is the consort of *Baal*.^[19] She was the goddess of war, love, and fertility. In fact, she is one of the most bizarre creatures of pagan mythology. She was the virgin goddess who conceives (pagan mythology is not always logical); but she is also the victor of *Baal's* enemies. She, with the help of *Shaphash* ("sun"), the luminary, rescued *Baal* from the deep and raised him to his mountain in the North. Her victory over *Mot* is vicious; she is up to her hips in gore, with heads and hands of the enemies stacked high in piles. Thus, she was the driving force in the annual fertility cycle of *Baal*.

In ancient Phoenicia there was a goddess who was worshiped as the mother-goddess. One Punic inscription addresses her AO lady *HWT*, goddess.^[20] What makes this designation striking is the form of the name. The word in the Semitic languages for "life" is *hawah*, *hayah*, or *hay*. The name *HWT*, with the normal feminine ending "t" on it (Hebrew uses an *-ah* ending for feminine nouns, except when they are in the construct, and then the original *t* is present), would then depict her as the goddess of life. In the Old Testament the name "Eve" is written *Hawwah* (with the

Hebrew feminine ending Ah" instead of the At"). Interestingly enough, the Phoenician goddess is a serpent deity, the goddess of the underworld. Some biblical scholars have even suggested that the biblical Eve is a de-potentiated deity whose prototype was this Phoenician goddess.^[21] A goddess of the same name was found in Carthage, her name also being associated with the word "life." A remarkable parallel is the term "snake-water" for "water of life" among the Aramaeans of *Tur 'Abdin*.^[22] It appears that several of the motifs of the original event (recorded in Genesis) have been preserved in the different ancient cultures but with a good deal of confusion due to polytheistic trends. In the Bible the name "Eve" probably means "life-giver" as we shall see, and not "serpent," for nowhere in biblical Hebrew is the root *h-w-h* used that way. We will return to this later.

There is no end to the study of polytheism and all its connections. It should be clear, however, that in polytheistic beliefs there are many motifs that are present in the Bible. But in the Bible they are either human activities or properties of Yahweh. The biblical picture of Yahweh is far above the corrupt activities of pagan deities. For example, fertility comes from Yahweh God's command, but not through violent or sexual practices--it comes through the divine decree of blessing at creation.

Someone has said that moving from pagan polytheism to Yahwism is like leaving a darkened, smoke-filled room of noise and debauchery and walking out into the bright sunlight of a clear day.

Human Descriptions of Yahweh

Anthropomorphic Language

It was necessary for God to reveal Himself to the world in human language, and that language naturally includes a great number of *anthropomorphic*^[23] expressions. Scripture presents God as if He has ears, eyes, eyelids, arms, hands, and feet; and it describes Him as laughing, mocking, sitting, standing, coming down to see, changing His mind, grieving--and a host of other very human activities and feelings. If the Bible describes God in such human terms, how then does it differ from the texts of the pagans?

One distinction between these poetic expressions and the representations of the pagan gods is that no sinful or base characteristics are ascribed to God. The pagan gods sink to levels beneath that of human life, and seldom rise to the levels of purity that depict God in the Old Testament.^[24] The human images used for God in the Bible are morally neutral or positive.

Another distinction is that none of the sexual imagery of the pagan fertility cults attaches to Yahweh. The LORD God is the source of all life; but He is far above the sexual practices of the humans that were ascribed to pagan gods.^[25] Nowhere do we have a hint of a description of sexual organs or acts for God. No, God is holy. Indeed, God is self-sufficient; He needs no consort or lesser gods.

A third important distinction is that the full revelation of the Bible makes it clear that the anthropomorphisms are merely figures of speech because God is so far above everything earthy. For example, Scripture affirms that Yahweh is omniscient and does not need to come down to investigate, that He is omnipresent and is not limited to any region or time, and that He is omnipotent, bearing the world along by His powerful word. All the human descriptions must be interpreted in the light of the complete picture of the LORD God.^[26] For example, on occasion the Bible says that God "repents" (Jon. 3:10); but it also affirms that He is unchanging (Mal. 3:6), and that He works everything according to His eternal will (Isa. 40:12-26). The meaning of the idea that God "repents" then must be merely a poetic way of expressing the pain that evil brings to God.^[27]

And fourth, the Bible has a completely different "world view," or in this case, "heaven view." The ancient pagan world of mythology is foreign to the Old Testament, for it relied on a system of correspondences between the world of the gods and goddesses and the earth; but Yahweh was always viewed as the one, true sovereign Lord of the universe.^[28] So while there are similarities in the description of Yahweh with the description of pagan gods, there are major differences, and these differences can best be summarized by the words of Jesus, that **God is a Spirit**, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:24).

Feminine Images of God

There are passages in the Bible that use feminine images to describe a characteristic or an action of God. While these rhetorical features should be included in one's theological understanding of the fullness of the Godhead, they are relatively few in comparison to the masculine images, and they are used in such a way that they do not directly lead to the depiction of God in the feminine.

Isaiah 42:14. The prophet uses the simile of a woman in childbirth to describe God's patient endurance of Israel's sin turning into an outcry: "Now I will cry out like a travailing woman." No other feminine imagery is used here.

Isaiah 49:14-21. In this passage God speaks of His faithful compassion for Israel using the analogy of a mother not forsaking her children. The point stresses that God has great compassion.

Hosea 11:1-4; 8-9. The prophet uses the human terminology to reflect the nature of God: "bands of love" and "compassion." But Hosea compares God to a husband, and the feminine image is for His people.

Proverbs. Wisdom literature uses personification to describe God in chapter 8. While wisdom is a central attribute of the LORD, it is not given *hypostatic* identity with God in the Old Testament, as in Egypt, for example, where wisdom becomes a goddess. In Proverbs 31 wisdom is personified as a woman because the word for wisdom, *hokmah*, is a feminine noun.^[29] (In Proverbs, *n^ebalah*, "folly," is also a feminine noun, personified in the wayward women of chapters 5-7).

Matthew 23:37 (Luke 13:34-35). Jesus compares himself to a mother hen who would have gathered the people under her wings. It may be that the background of this image is Zion, the Queen City, and that Jesus is contrasting the failure of the leaders to help the people with his own zeal for them. But the reference is a single use of a figure. It is close to the frequent Old Testament use of "Awing" for God's protection, but in those cases no gender is discernible.

Genesis 1:3. The text records that when God created the universe and everything in it, the Spirit of God played a strategic role, "hovering over the face of the water." The verb *rahap* has been given the meanings of "brooding, hovering, throbbing, impregnating," and "conceiving" by various interpreters. But Genesis is not describing God giving birth to the world as pagan literature might. The fact that the word for "Spirit" is a feminine noun (*ruah*) does not necessarily mean that the Godhead is male and female together, for in the Hebrew language parts of the body and elements of nature are feminine nouns.^[30] Not only do passages such as this have no meaning of giving birth, but Scripture clearly affirms that creation was by sovereign decree. The Holy Spirit was the agent--but not in any earthly manner.

Human Titles for God

Father, Lord, King, Prince, Son. These, and a series of less frequently used titles (Captain, Man of War, etc.) are designations that God has chosen for Himself in revelation, to the exclusion of feminine titles, especially those that were fitting for goddesses in the ancient world (such as "Lady" or "Virgin").

Because the Bible makes it clear that God is neither male nor female, these titles must be *metaphorical*. Unfortunately, biblical students have often stayed with the figurative level of the titles (assuming they were literal) and have never enquired into the actual meanings of the metaphors. Since God chose to use these metaphors, they must be retained by those who live by the authority of the Scripture; but they must be explained so that the perception of God might rise above the issue of masculine versus feminine.

It would only be speculative to reason why masculine images dominated the pages of Scripture. The shunning of available feminine titles surely was a safeguarding against the introduction of either too physical or too sexual a picture of God. Feminine titles would also have destroyed the unity of God and resembled pagan religion. The usage of masculine metaphors exclusively would allow the perception of God to remain unified and exalted above the pagan world.^[31] It may also be that this is the reason God allowed no priestesses in His service, for in the ancient world that had degenerated into prostitution.^[32]

Father. The implied metaphor^[33] of "Father" is not a common one in the Old Testament. Malachi asks, "Do we not all have one father?" (2:15) in referring to God's creation of the people of Israel. The figure would probably focus on the work of God in generating and sustaining creation.

In the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 9:5, the throne name "Everlasting Father" is used.^[34] This is comparable to the Ugaritic title "Father of Years."^[35] "Father of eternity" would signify the One who produces and controls the cycles of life from age to age as well as everything that happens and exists in those cycles.^[36]

In the New Testament Jesus called God His Father frequently; He usually joined this with revelation about being sent into the world (John 5:37) or doing the will of His Father (John 8:28-30). In teaching His disciples to pray He instructed them to call God "Our Father." This metaphorical designation of God carries three important meanings. First, it portrays God as the **Sovereign Creator**, the one who produced everything. Second, it portrays God as a **covenant God**, for all the covenants use Father-son language.^[37] Third, it portrays God as a **personal God** who has a close and loving relationship with his creation--in human terms. God may be referred to as the Almighty, but He is also our Father.

Son. In conjunction with this we find the reference to Jesus as the "Son" (of God, or of Man). The metaphor is taken from the Old Testament where it is used as a title for the Messiah as king. Psalm 2 refers to the elected king as "My Son"--a designation taken from the *simile* in the Davidic Covenant ("He shall be to me for a son.") Psalm 2 clarifies that the son is invited to ask for his inheritance, the empire (2:8). Psalm 2 is applied to Jesus fully in Hebrews 1:5 where, after the resurrection, He is seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven. The coronation of Jesus as our Anointed King and His being heir of all things is the point of the expression.

In conjunction with this we find the Danielic title "Son of Man" used for images of Christ coming in glory (Daniel 7:14; Matthew 24:27). The point in Daniel is that this king will be human and humane, in contrast to preceding world rulers--these "beasts" (tyrannical and cruel world rulers or kingdoms) out of the "sea" (or Gentile nations).^[38]

In the New Testament Jesus is described as "the only begotten Son of God" (John 1:14). The verb "beget" is critical here; in contrast to verbs such as "make" or "create," humans can only "beget" through procreation, and thus a begotten child will have the same nature as the parent. The point of this metaphor, then, is that Jesus has the **same nature as the Father**. He is fully divine, and therefore eternal. This is why Jesus can affirm, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). And the Nicene Creed affirms that he is "begotten, not made." To describe Jesus as the "only begotten" means that there is no one else who has that special nature. It does not refer to His nativity in Bethlehem, for it describes Him as eternal and divine. We as believers may be "born again" and called "begotten" when the Spirit of God enters our lives and creates in us new life; but we are adopted! Jesus is the "**only-begotten**," the God-man. There is only one. He is God, now united with glorified humanity forever.

King, Lord. The Old Testament metaphors for God as the sovereign ruler of the universe, whether they be "King" or "Lord" or "Ancient of Days" or "Sultan," all are drawn from the

popularly known descriptions of ancient monarchs. There were women who occasionally came to power in government, but the predominance was for men to rule. It is not important at this point to discuss whether this was fair or not; it simply is a fact of life in the ancient world that "King" was a more powerful image than "Queen," for "Queen" usually described a consort, a subordinate to the monarch (see Ps. 45). For God to use the image of "King" or "Lord" was for Him to declare His absolute dominion over all creation. The gender of the metaphor is only important in that in its context it clearly presents the most accurate picture of the One who is above all things.

And, of course, such revelations of God prepare the way for the full revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the Word.^[39] The mystery of the incarnation is that God entered this world in human form, the form of a man. At the incarnation, a **child was born** to the virgin Mary in Bethlehem; but in actual fact the **Son was given** or sent into the world (Isa. 9:5; Gal. 4:4). The masculine imagery of the Old Testament, then, came to fulfillment directly in Jesus the Messiah. Feminine titles and feminine descriptions could not have played the same part in prophecy or typology.

Masculine Pronouns

Throughout the Bible the masculine pronoun is used for God. Not once is "Ashe" or "it" used.^[40] The verbal forms are masculine, the independent pronouns are masculine, and the pronominal suffixes are masculine. But some of this has to do with normal use of language, for masculine pronouns and verbs were also used when women were the subjects, such as in commandments. One cannot conclude from the use of pronouns that God is a male.

It does no good to try to change this "offending pronoun." To change it to "God" is simply to prefer the masculine noun over the masculine pronoun. To remove it altogether by circumlocution would lead inevitably to de-personalizing God. One simply must acknowledge that God chose to reveal Himself with these pronouns, titles, and images, even though other options were clearly open.^[41]

Summary

1. Throughout the history of the world people have humanized their gods, a tendency that led to idolatry in the ancient world, and to debased and dishonoring perceptions of God in the modern world.
2. The nature of God has been revealed to us in Scripture. It came from God Himself and is not the invention by human beings. If Scripture or prophecy had come by the will of mankind, it would be very different--as we can see from the modern attempts to re-write Scripture.

3. The Bible portrays God as a person, a spirit, and a unity. God is sovereign over all creation, apart from creation, and completely self-sufficient.
4. The nature of God must be contrasted with false religious ideas about deities to gain a full understanding of the revelation. Paganism is polytheistic, it characterizes the gods and goddesses in cosmic battles with each other for power, and it describes them with every base and lewd activity known to humankind. It is also totally illogical and changing (the goddess *Anat* is the virgin goddess who is always conceiving).
5. When the biblical revelation uses human terms, descriptions, and actions to describe God, they are merely figures of speech, for the Bible as a whole distinguishes God from the human and the physical.
6. A few feminine images are used in the Bible to portray God's love and compassion, but they do not in any way lead to a feminine perception of God. They are isolated figures of speech. They remain adjectival; feminine titles are not used.
7. The human descriptions, the titles, and the pronouns used for God are masculine. God chose these forms for the revelation of Himself to portray His nature as Sovereign over all the earth and works as Creator, Ruler, and Judge of the whole earth.
8. Even though the images and the language come from the ancient Near East, one should not change them to fit the contemporary trends, because (a) there is no precedent anywhere in Scripture for such changes, (b) there would be no end to such a revision of the Scripture, liturgy, and the literature of the Church, and (c) to change the metaphors, titles, and language will indeed change the meanings, and that cannot be permitted.
9. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that God is neither male nor female. The revelations of God in Scripture are representative, and give no preference for the male over the female in God's kingdom. Bible teachers must be careful to explain the meaning of God's self-identification to the human race.

[1] Cited by Arthur W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Swengel, PA: Reiner Publications), p. 27.

[2] Many of the recent studies presented at the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion have probed into this topic. The publication of *The Book of J* is

another attempt to rewrite the biblical record. The interest certainly harmonizes with the view of Jill Johnston: "The continued collusion of any woman with any man is an event that retards the progress of women's supremacy" (*Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution*, 1973).

[3] Filomena Maria Pereira, *Lilith: The Edge of Forever* (Ide House, 1998).

[4] Othmar Keel, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1998).

[5] Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, translated by J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), I:211.

[6] For a discussion of anthropomorphism and anthropopathism, see E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1968 reprint), pp. 871-897.

[7] Many passages make this distinction. For example, Psalm 50 affirms the complete independence of God from the whole world, and thereby the distinction between the God of the Bible and the pagan gods.

[8] 1 Kings 8:27. See also Psalm 139:1-12.

[9] The attribute of God's holiness is foundational to theology. The other attributes of God recorded in Scripture give full meaning to this one. In what way is God holy, i.e., unique, distinct, set apart? He is righteous, whereas all others are not; He is powerful, whereas all others are not; He is infinite, whereas all others are finite, and so on through the list of all the attributes.

[10] *Theology*, I:223.

[11] For a thorough survey of the views on the name, see G. H. Park-Taylor, *Yahweh, the Divine Name in the Bible* (Waterloo, Ontario, 1975).

[12] S. H. Hooke, *Babylonian and Assyrian Religion* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), p. 14.

[13] Giovanni Pettinato, *The Archives of Ebla* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), pp. 243-263.

[14] There is a tremendous amount of literature on the subject. Helmer Ringgren's *The Religion of the Semites* offers a good survey. For special studies see W. F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan*, A. S. Kapelrud, *The Ras Shamra Discoveries and the Old Testament*, Larousse's *New Encyclopedia of Mythology*, and especially G. Ernest Wright, *The Old Testament Against Its Environment*, for a discussion of sympathetic magic.

[15] G. E. Wright and F. V. Filson, *The Westminster Historical Atlas to the Bible* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1945), p. 36.

[16] W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1964), p. 214.

[17] We shall return to this epithet later. At this point it is worth mentioning that no one knows what *shadday* means, and so attempts to make it mean "breasts" remain unconvincing.

[18] In addition to the previously mentioned literature on Canaanite religion, see Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986), p. 182.

[19] Umberto Cassuto, *The Goddess Anat* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press).

[20] G. A. Cooke, *A Text Book of North West Semitic Inscriptions* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1903), p. 135.

[21] M. Lidsbarski, *Ephemeris fur Semitische Epigraphik* (1902), I:30.

[22] W. F. Albright, "The Goddess of Life and Wisdom," *AJSL* 36 (1920):258-294.

[23] The name of this figure of speech is taken from the Greek word for man, *anthropos*.

[24] The gods and goddesses of all the religions engaged in the most debased practices. For example, the Babylonian god Ishtar seduced the human hero Gilgamesh; in Egypt the god Osiris had sex with his sister Isis and produced the god Horus; in Greece the god Zeus Married Hera, chased women, abducted the young male Ganymede, and masturbated; in Rome the gods pursued both sexes. Given these beliefs it is no surprise that religions were replete with sexual corruption of every kind imaginable. And it is no surprise that people who want to follow an immoral lifestyle find it pleasing to re-introduce pagan gods and goddesses into their religious systems.

[25] The Torah went out of its way to prevent the sexualization of God and religion. And in Israel's religion, creation was by the decree of God, not by sexual activity or warfare among the gods. Accordingly, sexual activity in Israel was sanctified and not to be profaned. No longer was sex to be a dominant force in religious life.

[26] It should be clear, then, that a consistent study of the images of God in the Bible is essential. Mythology is a total world view; one cannot select isolated descriptions and characterize them as ancient mythological ideas but must balance them with the Israelite view of God and the world. To have mythology, a system of polytheism must be in place, because everything done on earth was an extension of the activities of the gods and goddesses. The ritual at temples then became sympathetic magic, an attempt to imitate the gods and goddesses in order to induce them to act. Moreover, to have mythology the whole system is cyclical and not historical; the system is concerned with the annual seasons of the year, the rains, the crops--life and death cycles. But it was not going anywhere; it had no historical beginning; it had no eschatology. Therefore, there is no Semitic myth in the Bible. The biblical writers might refer to elements of myth in a polemical way; but they did not follow that way of thinking.

[27] H. Van Dyke Parunak, AA Semantic Survey of *NHM*," *Biblica* 56 (1975):512-32.

[28] For a discussion of mythology, see J. W. Rogerson, *Myth in Old Testament Interpretation* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974); Brevard S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (Naperville: Alec R. Allenson, 1960); James Barr, "The Meaning of Mythology in Relation to the Old Testament," *Vetus Testamentum* 9 (1959):1-10.

[29] See my discussion on these passages in "Proverbs" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1991).

[30] See Ronald Williams, *Hebrew Syntax, An Outline* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), p. 9.

[31] The use of feminine images would have brought the Godhead into a close proximity with all that is earthy and physical more than masculine images, for the image of a nurturing mother or a woman birth to creation do not elevate God above humanity but bring the Godhead into the physical process of procreation, at least in the minds of people. In the ancient world, this would have been acceptable, because the gods and goddesses did everything humans did. One could argue that their texts were anthropomorphic, but two things refute this: 1) the texts nowhere say that their god is a spirit and not matter, and 2) the ritual embraced all the physical activities ascribed to the deities.

[32] Male homosexuality was also widespread in pagan temple ritual, but not nearly as common or as symbolic as female prostitution. Women who served in these temples were part of the fertility cult ritual. In the Bible the Levitical code explicitly excluded all such sexual activity, not only from temple activity, but also from the lives of the worshipers at the times of temple participation. Ritual laws of purification even after childbirth were essential for re-entry into the sanctuary.

It should be noted that homosexuality, bestiality, and incest were not outlawed in the Bible only when they were done in pagan ritual--that is the argument offered today. The argument runs that if homosexual activity is a life-long commitment and not part of pagan ritual it is acceptable. These things were prohibited because they were contrary to the order and boundaries of creation; the fact that pagan ritual made them acceptable simply made the prohibition all the more urgent.

[33] Implied metaphors are very common in the Bible. A true metaphor would say, "God is a father." The implied comparison (technical name *hypocatastasis*) simply uses "Father" and leaves the subject matter unstated.

[34] The traditional translations take "eternity" as an attributive genitive, which is certainly possible. But it could also be an objective genitive, meaning he produces eternity. The same kind of decision has to be made with "Prince of peace" which the translators did not attempt to interpret--it could be a peaceful prince (attributive) or a prince who produces peace (objective). The latter fits the prophecy of the chapter better.

[35] See Cyrus Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965), p. 348. The title designates one who will perpetually care for the people and the land (see Isa.

22:2). Sigmund Mowinckel says, "It is evident that such a name really belongs to a god, and not just any god, but the high god" (*He That Cometh*, p. 106).

[36] Here is where the royal ideology of Isaiah transcends the language of the covenant. In the Davidic Covenant of 2 Samuel 7 God was to be the father and the king was to be the son. Here Isaiah gives the name of the son/child who was to be sent/born as "father" (see John 10:30).

[37] In Exodus 4 God calls Israel his "son"--they are the people He formed. The Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7) uses the same Father-son language. And in the New Testament, the New Covenant, we have the Father-son language, for God is our Father, and we have the right to be called the "sons" of God ("children" would work as well).

[38] The title "Son of man" was Jesus' favorite designation of Himself. It is a difficult expression to interpret, and one that cannot be given another translation without losing something of the meaning. It is a title for the "Messiah," it is a designation of a "prophet" (Ezekiel), it is a label for "human," and in Jesus' case, it is ironic because he was not the son of a man, but the seed of the woman.

[39] Throughout the Old Testament the descriptions of God are anthropomorphic. Those words describe God in human terms; they are necessary for humans to understand the nature of God. It is as if he has ears, hands, feet, eyelids, an arm, fingers; or, it is as if he laughs, ridicules, grieves, or repents. But in the incarnation these words, these descriptions became historically and literally true in Jesus Christ. That is why He is called the "incarnate Word." He is the word made flesh, the full revelation of all that God is. With the incarnation, God was now indeed in human form, but without sin, and without the earthy, profane practices of the pagan gods of the world and its religion. No, in the incarnation Jesus revealed what God had intended for human life before sin corrupted it.

[40] Of course, in the Old Testament "it" would not be used at all because there is only masculine and feminine, no neuter.

[41] Those who do not believe that the Bible came by divine inspiration will not accept this at all. For them, the Bible was written by men and reflects their biases and therefore can be changed to be brought into line with modern thinking.