

## **Alleged Female Language about the Deity in the Hebrew Bible**

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There is a common belief that in the Hebrew Bible there are a number of places where female language is used in reference to the deity, suggesting that the deity is viewed as a female or at least that in some respect or to some degree this deity is 'female' or 'feminine'.<sup>1</sup> Support for this view is not confined to ardent feminists, but can be found in the writings of, among others, Noth, Newsom, Habel, Goldingay, Craigie, Mayes, Ackerman, and de Boer as well as by authors of volumes entitled *Is It Okay to Call God Mother?* and suchlike.

The conclusion is sometimes drawn, as in the classic statement by Phyllis Tribble, that the vocabulary of female imagery for God 'tempers any assertion that Yahweh is a male deity'.<sup>2</sup> As far as I know, no systematic

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper I will deal strictly with the evidence of the Hebrew Bible as interpreted by contemporary scholars, and do not consider claims of a female aspect in the deity propounded by Christian and Jewish writers in many centuries, including, for example, Clement of Alexandria and Teresa of Avila (see, briefly, Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* [New York: Crossroad, 1983; reprint Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014], pp. 8-14).

<sup>2</sup> Phyllis Tribble, 'God, Nature of, in the OT', in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. Supplementary Volume* (ed. Keith Crim; Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1976), pp. 368-69. See also her earlier 'Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Reread', *Andover Newton Quarterly* 13 (1972), pp. 251-58; 'Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation', *JAAR* 41 (1973), pp. 30-48. Among voices generally supporting this position but not used systematically in this essay I could mention Samuel Terrien, *Till the Heart Sings: A Biblical Theology of Manhood and Womanhood* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985). Marjo Christina Annette Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds: Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1990), though without explicit reference to Tribble, likewise identifies female aspects in the Hebrew deity (pp. 241-43) in six biblical passages. See also Mayer Gruber, 'The Motherhood of God in Second Isaiah', *RB* 90 (1983), pp. 351-59; J.J. Schmitt, 'The Motherhood of God and Zion as Mother', *RB* 92 (1985), pp. 557-69; Julia A. Foster, 'The Motherhood of God: The Use of *hyl* as God-language in the Hebrew Scriptures', in *Uncovering Ancient Stones: Essays in Memory of H. Neil Richardson* (ed. Lewis M. Hopfe; Winona Lake, IL: Eisenbrauns, 1994), pp. 93-102; Helen Schüngel-Straumann, 'The Feminine Face of God', in *The Many Faces of the Divine* (ed. Hermann Häring and Johann Baptist Metzger [London: SCM Press, 1995]), pp. 93-101; Schüngel-Straumann, 'God as Mother in Hosea', in *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets* (ed. A. Brenner; London: T. & T. Clark, 2004), pp. 194-218. Mark S. Smith, 'God Male and Female in the Old Testament: Yahweh and his "Asherah"', *Theological Studies* 48 (1987), pp. 333-40, claims that reference to Yahweh's Asherah in the Quntillet 'Ajrud inscriptions amounts to a 'major shift in the scholarly understanding of the femaleness of the Divine in ancient Israel' (p. 333)—which I doubt. I would also question his assertion that Gen. 1 26 'seems to assume a divine couple, male and female, since the human person is created in the image of the Divine, partaking of both maleness and femaleness' (p. 339). The article by Moshe Weinfeld, 'Feminine Features in the Imagery of God in Israel: The Sacred Marriage and the Sacred Tree', *VT* 46 (1986), pp. 515-29, has virtually nothing to do with the Hebrew Bible, being mostly about the *hieros gamos* in the Ancient Near East.

review has been made of the passages adduced in support of these claims,<sup>3</sup> and that is the purpose of this paper.

I will consider some 23 passages and terms that have been thought to attest female language about the deity under the topic headings of childbirth, midwifery, childcare, female household activities, other female activities (including of non-human females), and two Hebrew terms (Shaddai and a term for mercy).

### a. *Childbirth*

#### 1. **You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you (יְלִדָךְ); you forgot the God who gave you birth (מְחַלְלֶךָ) (Deut. 32.18 NRSV).**

צוֹר יְלִדָךְ תִּשִׁי וְתִשְׁכַּח אֵל מְחַלְלֶךָ

What do the commentators say on this verse? I select three:

'[God] is described as a mother, who *begot and delivered in pain* the Israelites'.<sup>4</sup>

'[T]he verse may be understood to combine images of both fatherhood and motherhood'.<sup>5</sup>

The verb חיל 'describes only a woman in labor pains (e.g., Isa. 51:2). God is such a woman, bearing Israel in travail'.<sup>6</sup>

How female is this language, in fact? First we should consider the word ילד, translated 'bore' in NRSV. Only mothers 'bear', and the Hebrew verb is indeed usually applied to mothers. If we consult *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*,<sup>7</sup> we find that in the qal (which we have here) the first sense is 'bear, give birth to' (which is used of the mother), and that occupies five columns; but there is a second sense (one column), 'beget' (used of the father)—a measure of the comparative frequency of occurrences. Here the subject is Yahweh as the 'Rock' (צוֹר), which would appear to be a rather

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<sup>3</sup> A trenchant review of Tribble's earlier work was offered by John W. Miller, 'Depatriarchalizing God in Biblical Interpretation: A Critique', *CBQ* 48 (1986), pp. 609-16. Another critique was that of Paul V. Mankowski, 'Old Testament Iconology and the Nature of God', in *The Politics of Prayer: Feminist Language and the Worship of God* (ed. Helen Hull Hitchcock; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992). Linda Scheearing writes a helpful article on 'Depatriarchalizing' in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* (ed. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 64.

<sup>4</sup> Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 383 (author's italics). Mothers do not 'beget', however; it is a term always used of the father.

<sup>5</sup> A.D.H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (NCB; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1979), p. 388. Mayes thinks it equally likely that ילד means 'bear', in which case 'the imagery is of motherhood only'.

<sup>6</sup> Tribble, 'God, Nature of, in the OT', p. 388b.

<sup>7</sup> David J.A. Clines (ed.), *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (vols. 1-5: Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993-2001; vols. 6-9: Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007-2016), IV (1998), pp. 213-20 (hereafter *DCH*).

masculine image,<sup>8</sup> so there seems no question but that יָלַד here means 'beget' or 'father' or 'sire' (as all 14 English versions I have consulted, apart from NRSV, translate it).

The second verb, חָיַל, however, is much more plausibly used of a mother. In the qal it means 'writhe' and so typically 'be in labour' (of a mother), but in the polel (which we have here, in the form מְחַלְלֶיךָ) it means both 'bring to birth, bear' (of the mother) or 'cause to be born' (of the father). Its subject can be feminine, as in the case of Sarah (Isa. 51.2), mountain goats (Jb 39.1) and the wind (Prov. 25.23), who 'bear'.<sup>9</sup> But it can also have a masculine subject, as it does when the Lord (אֲדֹנָי) causes the world to be born (Psa. 90.2), and when the voice of Yahweh (the thunder, Psa. 29.9)<sup>10</sup> causes the female deers to give birth,<sup>11</sup> as well as feminine, in the case of Sarah (Isa. 51.2), mountain goats (Jb 39.1) and the wind (Prov. 25.23), who 'bear'.<sup>12</sup> Since the subject here is 'God' (אֱלֹהִים), which is never feminine, the verb should be translated 'brought you to birth' (as NEB, REB).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Though Samuel Terrien rather surprisingly thinks 'rock' is a feminine image (*Till the Heart Sings*, p. ???); see also his 'The Metaphor of the Rock in Biblical Theology', in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann* (ed. Tod Linafelt and T.K. Beal [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998]), pp. 157-71.

<sup>9</sup> In Zech. 13.3 the participle יִלְדֵי יִי means 'their parents', i.e. the one who fathered and the one who bore the child.

<sup>10</sup> We should note alternative readings of this verse: some emend אֵילֹת 'hinds' to אֵילִים 'oaks' and take יְחַלְלֵהוּ 'he causes to give birth' as 'he makes to writhe, whirl' (thus creating a more strict parallelism in the verse, making both cola concern trees); so RSV, NRSV, NAB, NIV, NJB, NET, NLT, CEB. Others seek to improve the parallelism by emending יַעֲרֹת 'forests' to יַעֲרֹת 'kids' and taking חֲשֵׁהוּ 'strip bare' as a new word חֲשֵׁהוּ II 'bring early to birth' (so G.R. Driver, 'Studies in the Vocabulary of the Old Testament. II', *JTS* 32 [1930-31], pp. 250-57 [255-56]; followed by NEB).

<sup>11</sup> Tribble ('God, Nature of, in the OT', p. 388b) says that a masculine subject is 'inadmissible' (*God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. 70 n. 9; similarly Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine*, p. 16), but the examples above of a masculine subject in Psa. 90.2 and 29.9 refute that. John D. Garr, *God and Women: Woman in God's Image and Likeness* (Atlanta: Golden Key Press, 2011), p. 114, regards the translation 'who fathered you' as a 'particularly egregious example of outright mistranslation ... in order to obscure or remove feminine imagery' (p. 114). Carolyn Pressler, 'Deuteronomy', in *Women's Bible Commentary, Revised and Updated* (ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe and Jacqueline E. Lapsley; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), pp. 88-102 (102) calls this text 'one of the relatively few texts in the Hebrew Bible that depicts God with female metaphors' (as so often, it is said that the verb 'literally means "writhe in travail"', but it is incorrect to claim that the meaning of the qal is the 'literal' meaning of the polel; qal senses are in general not the 'literal' meanings of the other voices). BDB, I note, was not very clear about the matter; while noting that in Ps 29.9 the verb is causative, it included the reference in a paragraph with the sense 'writhe in travail with, bear, bring forth' (p. 297b), which cannot be what the causative means (it must be 'cause to bear', with the deer as the object).

<sup>12</sup> In Zech. 13.3 the participle יִלְדֵי יִי means 'their parents', i.e. the one who fathered and the one who bore the child.

<sup>13</sup> I am not so sure about 'gave you birth' (as RV, RSV, NRSV, NAB, NABRE, NET, NLT), since that seems to be what a mother does, while 'brought you forth' (NJPS) and 'gave birth to you' are undoubtedly the mother's action. I don't understand why our versions are so sloppy about their translations of this verb.

Trible defends the view that in v. 18a it is the father who 'begets', and in v. 18b the mother who 'bears'.<sup>14</sup> It is nevertheless hard to believe that the one deity is within the same verse both father and mother. It is irrelevant for this view that the terms 'father' and 'mother' occur side by side elsewhere when in such cases they refer to different people (as in Prov. 23.22, 25; Job 38.28-29, cited by Tribble).

I conclude that this verse offers no support for the claim of female language in reference to the deity: the deity is masculine in both cola of the verse.

## 2. Will one strive<sup>15</sup> with one's Maker ...?

**Does the clay say to the one who fashions it,  
'What are you making?'**

**or 'Your work has no handles'?**

**Will one say to a father, 'What are you begetting?',  
or to a woman, 'With what are you in labor?' (Isa. 45.9-10).**

הוֹי רַב אֶת־יִצְרוֹ חָרַשׁ אֶת־חֲרָשֵׁי אֲדָמָה  
הֵיאֵמֶר חֲמֹר לִי־צִרוֹ מִהַתְּעֵשָׂה וּפְעֻלָּהּ אֵינְיָדִים לוֹ  
הוֹי אֵמֶר לְאֵב מִהַתּוֹלִיד וּלְאִשָּׁה מִהַתְּחַלֵּין

Commentators:

[T]o the very same extent that the God of Israel can be compared to a father the God of Israel can and should be compared also to a mother.<sup>16</sup>

'Prophets often spoke of God as the people's father ...; it is rare for the parallelism to be completed and for God to be compared to both father and mother.'<sup>17</sup>

The text implies that God is all three figures, potter, father and mother.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, what we have here is neither a simile nor a metaphor, but an analogy drawn from everyday life. The deity is not a potter, neither is he a father or a mother. The prophetic reproof here is to a possible objection by his hearers to the idea that Yahweh will use the Persians under Cyrus as his means of salvation for Israel. The objection is envisaged as raised by the clay the potter is using and by someone addressing a father and a mother. There is nothing to say that the someone is the child of the father and mother; indeed it would be strange to imagine a foetus engaged in

<sup>14</sup> Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. 63: 'a woman in labor pains, and this activity the poetry ascribes to the deity. With labor pains, God gave birth to Israel.'

<sup>15</sup> I am accepting the emendation of הוֹי רַב 'woe to one who strives' to הוֹי רַב 'will one strive?' in v. 9 and of הוֹי אֵמֶר 'woe to one who says' to הוֹי אֵמֶר 'does one say?' in v. 10 (as also D. Winton Thomas, 'Liber Jesaiae', in *Biblica hebraica stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1968), p. 746 (hereafter *BHS*)).

<sup>16</sup> Mayer I. Gruber, 'The Motherhood of God in Second Isaiah', *RB* 90 (1983), pp. 351-59 (354).

<sup>17</sup> John Goldingay and David Payne, *Isaiah 40-55* (ICC; London: T. & T. Clark, 2006), II, p. 36.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Ackerman, 'Isaiah', in *The Women's Bible Commentary* (ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), pp. 161-68 (167), who claims that the text implies that God is all three, potter, father and mother (she heads her paragraph 'God as Woman').

disputation with its female parent, and even if it could be, why would that foetus be asking what she is carrying: it is itself!

The prophet's reproof is directed against anyone who doubts the wisdom of what Yahweh is doing. He does not represent the deity as a woman.<sup>19</sup>

**3. Shall I open the womb and not deliver? says the LORD;  
shall I, the one who delivers, shut the womb? says your God  
(Isa. 66.9 NRSV).**

הֲאֲנִי אֲשַׁבֵּיר וְלֹא אוֹלִיד יֹאמֶר יְהוָה  
אִם־אֲנִי הַמוֹלִיד וְעִצְרֹתִי אֹמֵר אֱלֹהִים

A commentator:

The comparison 'stops just short of calling God mother'.<sup>20</sup>

Here is another passage associating the deity with the birthing of a child. But is it representing the deity as a woman? The context is the sudden rebirth of the nation (a land born in a single day, 66.8b). A few lines earlier Zion has been pictured as a mother giving birth with miraculous ease: 'before she was in labour she gave birth' (66.7a). This is all the deity's doing, of course. He is in control of fertility, he opens and closes wombs, enabling a woman to conceive or preventing her from so doing, as in the case of the matriarchs in Genesis (20.18; 29.31; 30.22; cf. 20.18; 1 Sam. 1.5).

The deity can do all this because he is a powerful male god; he can 'deliver' the child, i.e. bring it to birth (יֵלֵד hi.), or 'close (עִצַּר) the womb' as he pleases. There is nothing female about his control of women's fertility. Nor are his actions those of the midwife: no midwife opens a womb, nor does she close any mother's womb. The deity is in charge of childbirth, but he does not effect it, for he is not a mother; he is not a woman, nor is he depicted as such.

**4. For a long time I have held my peace,  
I have kept still and restrained myself;  
now I will cry out like a woman in labor,  
I will gasp and pant (Isa. 42.14 NRSV).**

הַחֲשִׁיתִי מֵעוֹלָם אַחֲרִישׁ אֶת־אִפְקִי  
כִּי־לִדְדָה אֶפְעָה אִשָּׁם וְאִשְׂאֵר

Commentators:

'Her writhing is not a symbol of powerlessness, but of power to bring forth victory. She who labors is she who shouts the war cry.'<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> As against Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. 63,.

<sup>20</sup> Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. 67.

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'Yahweh compares his own acts of salvation with a woman giving birth.'<sup>22</sup>

'God's anguish at the human failure to embody justice is captured in the image of a woman writhing, unable to catch her breath in the pain of her travail. Out of God's travail comes a new world in which the blind are safely led.'<sup>23</sup>

The context of this verse is Yahweh's announcement that he is about to act (in bringing Israel back from exile) after a long period of silence. His action will be accompanied by a broad soundscape: there is to be a 'new song' in praise of Yahweh across the entire world (42.10);<sup>24</sup> the steppe land and its towns raise their voice, the Selaites singing and shouting from the tops of the mountains (v. 11). Yahweh himself goes out like a soldier, angry as a warrior, crying out and shouting aloud (v. 13), and now (v. 14) crying out like a woman in labour (פִּי לֹדֶה), gasping and panting for breath.

Yahweh is not actually a warrior here: there is no warfare, no fighting. He is 'like' a warrior shouting, and he is also 'like' a woman crying out in childbirth. But he is not a woman in labour,<sup>25</sup> he is not bringing anything forth, but just making as much noise as possible, in contrast to having for a long time held his peace, keeping still and restraining himself (v. 14a). The clue is in the preposition 'like': if he were a woman in labour he could not be 'like' a woman in labour; only a person who is not a woman in labour can be 'like' a woman in labour.

The prophet does indeed use the image of a woman in his depiction of Yahweh, but only in one respect: the loud cries of a woman giving birth. It is not a depiction of Yahweh as a woman or as a woman in labour.<sup>26</sup> Nor is it about what Yahweh is about to give birth to nor about him as creator of some new thing.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Sarah J. Dille, *Mixing Metaphors: God as Father and Mother in Deutero-Isaiah* (London: T. & T. Clark International, 2004), pp. 65-66.

<sup>22</sup> Irmtraud Fischer, 'Isaiah: The Book of Female Metaphors', in *Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 303-18 (306; German original: *Kompendium: Feministische Bibelauslegung* [Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1998], p. 248).

<sup>23</sup> Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine*, p. 15. The comment quite misunderstands the passage, in my opinion, leaving out of account as it does the chief point of the image, Yahweh's crying out.

<sup>24</sup> The sea does not 'roar' in accompaniment, despite RSV, NRSV.

<sup>25</sup> Among others, Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. 64, where she calls God 'she', Patricia K. Tull, 'Isaiah', in *Women's Bible Commentary, Revised and Updated*, pp. 255-66 (263), and Garr, *God and Women*, p. 118, see female imagery for the deity here. Even scholars who do not find here a reference to Yahweh as giving birth may find themselves apologizing for so doing: 'While it might seem regrettable to reduce the feminine imagery for God that can be attributed to the OT, it does seem that the versions point to a more natural coherent understanding of the passage ...' (Goldingay and Payne, *Isaiah 40-55*, p. 245).

<sup>26</sup> Contrary to the label 'God as Mother' put on this text by the Women's Ordination Conference ([www.womensordination.org](http://www.womensordination.org)).

<sup>27</sup> Kathryn Pfisterer Darr, 'Like Warrior, like Woman: Destruction and Deliverance in Isaiah 42:10-17', *CBQ* 49 (1987), pp. 560-71, rightly sees that the point of the simile is not a bringing to birth but the cries of the birthing mother, though she fastens on the destructive aspect of the deity's breath, whereas I think the issue is that of Yahweh's loud crying out as contrasted to his earlier silence.

**5. Did you not pour me out like milk  
and curdle me like cheese?  
You clothed me with skin and flesh,  
and knit me together with bones and sinews  
(Job 10.10-11 NRSV).**

הֲלֹא כִּחֹלֵב תִּתִּיכֵנִי וְכַגְבָּנָה תִּקְפִּיאֵנִי  
עוֹר וּבָשָׂר תִּלְבִּישֵׁנִי וּבַעֲצָמוֹת וְגִידִים תִּסְכְּכֵנִי

These lines are indeed about the growth of the human child in the womb, but not about Yahweh as mother.<sup>28</sup> Yahweh as creator is responsible for the development of the embryo, that is, but the creator is not the mother. In bringing a child to birth mothers do none of these things (pour out, curdle, clothe, knit together), and therefore Yahweh, who did these things, is not being depicted as a mother.

**6. Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child' to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? (Num. 11.12 NRSV).**

הֲאֵנֹכִי הָרִיתִי אֶת כָּל־הָעָם הַזֶּה אִם־אֲנֹכִי יִלְדֵתִיהוּ  
כִּי־תֹאמַר אֵלַי שְׂאֵהוּ בְּחִיקְךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר יִשָּׂא הָאִמּוֹן  
אֶת־הַיֶּנֶק עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לְאֲבוֹתָיו

Commentators:

'Indirectly, Moses ascribes that activity [of becoming pregnant and giving birth] to God ... Implicitly ... Moses says that Yahweh conceived and bore Israel'.<sup>29</sup>

'This extraordinary language indicates that Yahweh was indeed mother and nurse of the wandering children.'<sup>30</sup>

'Yahweh himself is Israel's mother.'<sup>31</sup>

Moses objects to Yahweh that he is not responsible for Israel: they are not his creation nor his child. Moses is here denying that he is Israel's mother, not affirming that Yahweh is.

Moses further objects that Yahweh has required him to carry Israel in his arms<sup>32</sup> to the land of Canaan like a male nurse, or, foster father,

<sup>28</sup> Contrast Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine*, p. 28. Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, does not refer to these verses.

<sup>29</sup> Tribble, 'God, Nature of, in the OT', p. 369a; *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. 69.

<sup>30</sup> Phyllis Tribble, 'Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation', *JAAR* 41 (1973), pp. 30-48 (32).

<sup>31</sup> Martin Noth, *Numbers* (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1968), pp. 86-87 (German original, *Das vierte Buch Mose: Numeri* [ATD, 7; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966], pp. 77-78: 'Moses is not the people's mother ... Implicit in this is the very unusual idea that Yahweh himself is Israel's mother'. Philip J. Budd comments that 'Noth presses the metaphor too far in seeing here an implicit reference to Yahweh as mother' (*Numbers* [WBC, 7; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984], p. 128.

carrying an infant. The Hebrew certainly has אָמֵן, the masculine form. It is used in four places in the Hebrew Bible of men, including of Mordecai who was Esther's foster father (Est. 2.7), while the feminine form אִמָּה is used twice, of Mephibosheth's nurse and of Naomi as the nurse of Obed (2 Sam. 4.4; Ruth 4.16). Tribble writes that 'although the word for nurse is masculine (*hā'ōmēn*), the imagery surrounding it favors a feminine meaning'<sup>33</sup>—surely a piece of wishful thinking.<sup>34</sup> Moses is a male, and he believes what is being asked of him is to play a fatherly child care role; he does not want that role, and he certainly has not been their mother ('Did I give birth to them?' Answer expected: No!).<sup>35</sup>

## 7. Does the rain have a father?

**Who fathers the drops of dew?**

**From whose womb comes the ice?**

**Who gives birth to the frost from the heavens?**

**(Job 38.28-29 NRSV).**

הַיִּשְׁלֵמֶטֶר אָב אוּ מִיְהוּלִיד אִמָּה יֵלֵדוּ  
מִבֶּטֶן מִי יֵצֵא הַקָּרָח וְכִפֹּר שָׁמַיִם מִי יֵלֵדוּ

A commentator:

'Yes, the ice does come forth from a woman's womb ... God is this mother.'<sup>36</sup>

Tribble calls this a 'gynomorphic metaphor', commenting 'From the divine womb came the ice and the hoarfrost'.<sup>37</sup> I think this is a misunderstanding. As I understand it, the answers to these four questions are, first, No, and then, three times, No one.<sup>38</sup> That is because the rain and the other forms of

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<sup>32</sup> The Hebrew idiom is 'lift up into the bosom' (נִשָּׂא בְחֵיק), but we should remember that a חֵיק, commonly translated 'bosom', is not equivalent to '(female) breasts' but means properly the fold of a garment above the belt, so that 'in his arms' is a reasonable modern translation.

<sup>33</sup> Tribble, 'God, Nature of, in the OT', p. 369a. She adds that 'an alternate [i.e. alternative] pointing reads *hā'immôn*, a hypocorism for 'ēm, mother', citing P.A.H. de Boer, *Fatherhood and Motherhood in Israelite and Judean Piety* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), p. 35 (no more than a suggestion on de Boer's part). De Boer concludes that '[D]ivine motherhood must have been well known in ancient Israel and Judah'.

<sup>34</sup> RSV, NRSV, NIV, NJPS, NEB, REB, NABRE, CEB have 'nurse', disguising the gender of the foster father, while NLT actually has 'mother', which is indefensible.

<sup>35</sup> On the child care role of the father in the Hebrew Bible, see Brenda Forster, 'The Biblical 'Ōmēn and Evidence for the Nurturance of Children by Hebrew Males', *Judaism* 42 (1993), pp. 321-31.

<sup>36</sup> Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. 68.

<sup>37</sup> Tribble, 'God, Nature of, in the OT', p. 368b.

<sup>38</sup> See David J.A. Clines, *Job 38-42* (Word Biblical Commentary, 18B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), pp. 1111-12: 'the rain, along with all the other forms of moisture, has no (mythological) father or mother (Hartley), being nothing but the product of divine acts or, less probably, the operation of natural laws (cf. v 33) ... [T]here is no polemic against foreign gods, but a resistance to any idea that these beneficent features of the world were brought into being once and for all in a primordial time, as the language of begetting and child-bearing might suggest.'



moisture have no (mythological) father or mother. The language of begetting and birthing, of father and mother, reflects an older theogony, in which these physical phenomena were seen as the offspring of divine unions. The biblical text is resistant to the idea that these beneficent features of the world were brought into being once and for all in a primordial time, as the language of begetting and child-bearing might suggest. There is no father or mother in this verse, and Yahweh is neither.

Another approach to the interpretation of this verse is to wonder why Yahweh should ask 'Does the rain have a father?' if indeed Yahweh is its father. Would he not be more likely to ask, 'Am I not the father of the rain?' Further, if Yahweh is the father of the rain, why would he be asking 'Does the rain have a father?' He would know the answer to that, and Job would too, would he not? It is only if the question is a rhetorical question expecting the answer 'No!' that it makes sense for it to be asked.

### b. *Midwifery*

**8. Yet it was you who took me (גָּחִי) from the womb;  
you kept me safe on my mother's breast.  
On you I was cast from my birth,  
and since my mother bore me you have been my God  
(Psa. 22.10-11 NRSV [EUV 9-10]).**

כִּי־אַתָּה גָּחִי מִבֶּטֶן מִבְּטִיחִי עַל־שְׁדֵי אִמִּי  
עָלִידָה שְׁלֹכְתִי מִרְחֹם מִבֶּטֶן אִמִּי אֵלַי אָתָּה

A commentator:

'Yhwh acted as midwife, first pulling the child out, then immediately setting it at its mother's breast.'<sup>39</sup>

Do we not have here the image of a (female) midwife assisting at the birth of a child, and is not the deity therefore represented as a woman?<sup>40</sup>

I would start my review of this passage with the second line of v. 10, 'you made me safe, or, kept me safe (מִבְּטִיחִי), when I was upon my mother's breast'.<sup>41</sup> This is not the action of a midwife, since it is hard to

<sup>39</sup> John Goldingay, *Psalms. I. Psalms 1–41* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 330.

<sup>40</sup> So Tribble, 'God, Nature of, in the OT', p. 368b; *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, pp. 60-61: 'Although the poetry never explicitly calls God midwife and mother, its form and content disclose these metaphors'. Similarly Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Die Psalmen. I. Psalm 1–50* (Die Neue Echter Bibel; Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1993), p. 149. See also L. Juliana M. Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God's Delivering Presence in the Old Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), pp. 64-79.

<sup>41</sup> I cannot accept the proposal of some versions that it is a matter of the infant's trust in Yahweh, as NIV 'you made me trust in you even at my mother's breast' (similarly RV, NLT), since it would seem strange to attribute such agency to a newborn. I don't even think it is a matter of the infant 'feeling' safe (as NET), but rather of actually *being* safe. The translation 'who laid me at my mother's breast' (NEB, REB) depends on G.R. Driver's

think of any danger a midwife can save a child from when it is resting or nursing at its mother's breast (there might be wars and famines abroad, but midwives are not the obvious guardians from such dangers).

Evidently, the psalmist is in this line envisaging the deity as standing guard over him as an infant while he lay on his mother's breast. In real life, it is usually the mother who keeps her child safe; but here it is the deity keeping the child safe—not as a mother does, but as a god does. There is no metaphor here.

It is the same in the first line of the verse, I argue: in real life, there would have been a human midwife present at the birth, no doubt, but both her assistant role and the mother's even more important role in childbirth are obscured by the psalmist's focus on the role of the deity: 'you drew me, extracted me (the verb גָּחַח) from the womb'. If the child is received from the womb by the hands of a human midwife, and the deity oversees or safeguards that process, that does not make him a midwife. The deity does not displace the midwife or become a midwife himself: his role is the supervision and safeguarding of the natural human process, as it is in the second line of the verse.

If the deity is not himself a midwife, he is not a female, nor does the verse hint at a feminine aspect of deity (the deity is actually addressed in v. 10 as אַתָּה 'you [masc. sing.]'). The background to the language of the verse must be the common concept that the deity 'opens' and 'closes' wombs, i.e. is responsible for women's giving birth or failing to give birth; this is an exclusively divine activity, not corresponding to any human action of father, mother or midwife. Since the psalmist was in fact born, Yahweh must have opened his mother's womb; it is in that sense that Yahweh has taken him from his mother's womb.

This image of the supervisory role of the deity is continued in the next verse: 'Upon you I have been cast from the womb, from the belly of my mother you are my God' (v. 11). Infants are in reality not 'thrown' or 'cast' on or 'abandoned' (שָׁלַךְ) to anyone at the time of their birth;<sup>42</sup> the verb is a very strange one in this context, for it does not mean 'be supported' or 'be entrusted', as our translations suggest, but only ever 'be thrown' and the like.<sup>43</sup> The psalmist expresses a sense that he was abandoned by his

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proposal that we have here not the common בָּטַח 'trust' but a new בָּטַח II 'fall', and thus in the hiphil 'lay' (Driver actually translated 'thou hast laid me flat on my mother's breasts!'); see his 'Difficult Words in the Hebrew Prophets', in *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy Presented to Professor Theodore H. Robinson* (ed. H.H. Rowley; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1950), pp. 52-72 (59). The proposed verb בָּטַח II 'fall' is not at all probable here, though it is perhaps likely in some other passages (cf. *DCH*, II, p. 141a).

<sup>42</sup> Unless perhaps they are exposed, a practice not attested for ancient Israel.

<sup>43</sup> See the 24 senses for the hiphil of the verb identified in *DCH*, VIII, pp. 395-99, and the five for the hophal (which is what we have here); none of them has a positive connotation. J. Cheryl Exum has correctly emphasized the proper meaning of שָׁלַךְ, especially in reference to Hagar's 'casting' Ishmael away in Gen. 21.15 ('Hagar *en procès*: The Abject in Search of Subjectivity', in *From the Margins 1: Women of the Hebrew Bible and their Afterlives* [ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009], pp. 1-16 [12-13]). Elsewhere the idea of being carried (סָבַל, Isa. 46.4; נָשָׂא, Isa. 46.3, 4; 63.9; סָמַךְ, Psa. 3.6; 37.24; תָּמַךְ, Isa. 41.10) by God throughout one's life appears, but that is not the meaning of שָׁלַךְ.

mother and left entirely to Yahweh's care, 'thrown' on to the deity. Such was probably not literally the case in reality, don't you think? The divine protection he has enjoyed all his life so fills his horizon that he expresses a most unfilial thought. His language of the deity's oversight of the birthing process, however pious, is at the same time deeply disrespectful of the mother's agency in giving birth to her child and nurturing it thereafter.<sup>44</sup>

**9. Upon you I have leaned from my birth;  
it was you who took me from my mother's womb  
(Psa. 71.6 NRSV).**

עָלֶיךָ נִסְמַכְתִּי מִבֶּטֶן מִמַּעַי אִמִּי אַתָּה גִּוִּי

To judge by some of the English translations, this would seem to be another version of what we have seen at Ps 22.10a. So NIV has 'you brought me forth from my mother's womb', REB 'you brought me from my mother's womb', NET 'you pulled me from my mother's womb'. But the Hebrew verb is not גָּחַח, the verb we had in 22.10, but גָּוַח, which occurs only here and apparently means 'cut' (cf. גָּוַח 'cutting [of stone]' and גָּוַח 'shear'), and certainly not 'pull out'. The recent translation CEB hazards the guess that it means 'you cut the cord when I came from my mother's womb'—which does sound like a midwife's task—but any connection with the previous phrase 'I've depended on you since birth' would be hard to discern if that were the case.<sup>45</sup>

Others think, faced with this rare verb 'cut', that we should emend the text. Some suggest we read גִּוְחִי 'the one who took me out', from the same verb as in Psa. 22.10, but again there is no proper connection with 'I have leaned on you since birth'. More commonly favoured is an emendation to עִוְוִי 'my strength', which makes better sense in the context (as in NAB 'On you I depend since birth; from my mother's womb you are my strength'; similarly NET, NLT, NABRE), but it remains no more than a conjectural emendation.<sup>46</sup>

Only if we accept the first emendation, to גִּוְחִי 'the one who extracted me' could there be any hint of a midwife in the text, but I already argued

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<sup>44</sup> The psalmist of this particular psalm has a tendency towards the histrionic, as appears also in his reference to his multiple enemies and physical afflictions.

<sup>45</sup> Nancy L. deClaissée, 'Psalms', in *Women's Bible Commentary, Revised and Updated*, pp. 221-31 (227). sees midwife imagery here. Claassens goes further in understanding גָּוַח as referring to the task of a midwife who 'cuts open the mother's womb to free the baby' (Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, pp. 75-76); similarly, John Goldingay, *Psalms. II. Psalms 42-89* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 370 n. 19: 'sounds more like a C-section than the cutting of the umbilical cord'. In ancient times, however, such Caesarian sections seem to have been used only when the mother was dead or dying (see [www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/cesarean/preface.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/cesarean/preface.html), the website of the U.S. National Library of Medicine), and no one to my knowledge has suggested that the text is envisaging such a situation.

<sup>46</sup> H. Bardtke, 'Liber Psalmorum', in *BHS* (1968), p. 1151, thinks that we should 'perhaps' make the emendation.

against that interpretation for Psa. 22.10. So I cannot agree that there is any idea of a divine midwife here.<sup>47</sup>

**10. Or who shut in the sea with doors  
when it burst out from the womb?—  
when I made the clouds its garment,  
and thick darkness its swaddling band,  
and prescribed bounds for it,  
and set bars and doors (Job 37.8-10 NRSV [Evv 7-9]).**

וַיִּסְדֵּךְ בְּדִלְתַיִם יָם בְּגִיחוֹ מִרְחֹם יֵצֵא  
בְּשׂוּמֵי עָנָן לְבָשׁוֹ וְעֶרְפֶּל חֲתָלְתּוֹ  
וְאָשְׁבֵר עָלָיו חֲקֵי וְאֲשִׁים בְּרִיחַ וּדְלָתַיִם

Commentators:

'God appears as midwife who births the sea and wraps it in the swaddling bands of cloud and darkness'.<sup>48</sup>

'God the Mother not only gives birth to the sea, but also dresses it in mist, diapers it in black clouds, erects barriers it cannot cross, and puts it into an enormous playpen with a bolted gate!'<sup>49</sup>

Here is another place where Yahweh has been seen as a midwife or mother. That is not how I read this passage. On the contrary, in these verses it is not the deity who births the sea: it breaks forth (גִּיחַ) of its own accord, a vigorous action for which it alone is responsible. It is not the object of Yahweh's midwifery, nor is the womb from which it is born the deity's. Yahweh appears in the picture not to give it birth but, after its birth, to control its force, shutting it in with double doors, wrapping it in garments (swaddling bands, חֲתָלָה), which in ancient societies were

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<sup>47</sup> Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, does not use this text in support of the concept of a divine midwife. Another possible reference to a divine midwife, not in the Hebrew Bible but in one of its ancient translations, can be mentioned here. Though it is never cited by writers on alleged female language about the deity, the Vulgate of Job 26.13 understood the Hebrew חֲתָלָה יָדוֹ נָחַשׁ בְּרִיחַ as 'his hand brought forth the twisting serpent' (taking the verb from חָלַל 'writhe in pain, bring forth a child' rather than from חָלַל 'bore, pierce' as most modern versions do). How does a divine hand 'bring forth' a creature? It must be a midwife's hand, and thus Vg *obstetricante manu eius eductus est coluber tortuosus* 'and by his midwife hand the twisting serpent was brought forth' (followed by Wyclif 'led out bi his hond, ledynge out as a mydwijf ledith out a child'. This understanding of the Hebrew does not fit the context, however. See further my 'The KJV Translation of the Old Testament: The Case of Job', in *The King James Version at 400: Assessing its Genius as Bible Translation and its Literary Influence* (ed. David G. Burke, John F. Kutsko and Philip H. Towner; Society of Biblical Literature Biblical Scholarship in North America; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), pp. 235-52.

<sup>48</sup> Carol A. Newsom, 'The Book of Job. Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections', in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (ed. Leander Earl Keck; Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), IV, pp. 317-637 (602b). Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, does not adduce this passage in support of the idea of the divine midwife.

<sup>49</sup> Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine*, p. 27. The text does not, however, suggest that the sea is born from God's womb, so God is not pictured as its mother, and the mist and clouds are not garments and diapers but explicitly 'swaddling bands' for restraint.

designed to restrict the movement of the child, and prescribing for it doors and bars, with a severe command 'thus far shall you come and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed' (38.11 RSV). This does not sound at all like a midwife, but rather like a gaoler or a police officer, exercising his greater power over the threatening force of the sea.

Some may ask, Whose is the womb from which the sea was born? The text is simply not addressing that question.<sup>50</sup> The focus is not upon the birthing of the sea but upon the actions taken by the deity thereafter to restrict the damage it could do.

**11. Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?  
Do you attend the wild doe when she is calving?  
(Job 39.1 REB).**

הַיְדֹעָה עַת לָדַת יְעַלֶּי־סָלַע חֲלִיל אֵילוֹת תִּשְׁמֹר

A commentator:

God tends to the needs of these wild animals during the perilous period of gestation, birth, and delivery; he is their unseen midwife.<sup>51</sup>

In this speech to Job, Yahweh is questioning him about his knowledge of the natural world. Some have thought that Yahweh is here portraying himself as a 'unseen midwife' overseeing the gestation of these animals and the delivery of their offspring.<sup>52</sup> The term שָׁמַר, usually 'watch, keep', is here translated by the REB 'attend', perhaps intending to suggest the same understanding. But the verb has a wide range of meanings, and it is used in parallelism with the equally opaque verb יָדַע 'know'; so terms like 'mark' (KJV, RV, NJPS) or 'watch' (NAB, NABRE, NIV, NJB, NET, NLT) or 'observe' (RSV, NRSV, CEB) would be rather more probable translations.

It should be noted that the fact that Job cannot do something does not necessarily imply that Yahweh does it (the deity is not to be envisaged as walking in the depths of the abyss in 38.16, hunting prey for lions in 38.39, or being served by the wild ox in 39.9). Here in 39.1-3 Yahweh 'knows' (יָדַע) the goats' giving birth (MT the 'time' of their giving birth), 'observing' or 'marking' (שָׁמַר) when they bear their kids, 'counting' (סָפַר) the months of their pregnancy, and 'knowing' (יָדַע) again) the time of their delivery. All these actions could be said of a relatively detached observer, though perhaps they represent the concern of a involved carer. That does not make him a midwife.

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<sup>50</sup> As also in Psa. 90.2 ('before the mountains were brought forth [dly pu.] or ever you had caused the earth and the world to be born [lyj htpo.]').

<sup>51</sup> Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary* (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1985), p. 545.

<sup>52</sup> Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, does not use this passage in support of a divine midwife.

**c. Childcare**

**12. I have calmed and quieted my soul,  
like a weaned child with its mother (Psa. 131.2 NRSV).**

אֶסְלֵא שׁוֹיְתִי וְדוֹמַמְתִּי נַפְשִׁי כְּגִמְלַל עָלַי אִמּוֹ כְּגִמְלַל עָלַי נַפְשִׁי

Many readers find here an example of female imagery about the divine. This seems a misunderstanding, for it is not a simile about the deity at all but about the psalmist.<sup>53</sup> My understanding of the verse is that a weaned child is not constantly demanding food from its mother as an unweaned child presumably is.<sup>54</sup> The NLT expresses this exactly: 'I have calmed and quieted myself, like a weaned child who no longer cries for its mother's milk'.

**13. As a mother comforts her child, so will I [God] comfort you;  
and you shall be comforted over Jerusalem (Isa. 66.13 NIV).**

כְּאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר אִמּוֹ תִנְחַמְנוּ כֵן אֲנֹכִי אֲנַחֲמֶכֶם וּבִירוּשָׁלַם תִּנְחַמְנוּ

Yahweh is not here a mother comforting her child,<sup>55</sup> or perhaps rather her grown-up son (אִישׁ),<sup>56</sup> but *like* a mother doing so. We can accept that this is female language about the deity, but it does not suggest that the deity is female. He does not comfort Jerusalem *as* a mother, but *like* a mother.

**14. Can a mother forget the baby at her breast  
and have no compassion on the child she has borne?  
Though she may forget, I [God] will not forget you!  
(Isa. 49.15 NIV).**

הֲתִשְׁכַּח אִשָּׁה עוֹלָהּ מֵרֶחֶם בֶּן־בִּטְנָהּ גַם־אֵלֶּה תִשְׁכַּחַנָּה וְאֲנֹכִי לֹא אֲשַׁכַּחֲךָ

<sup>53</sup> As against Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. 70: the verse 'suggests a comparison between God and a mother'. DeClaissée-Walford, *Women's Bible Commentary, Revised and Updated*, p. 230, rightly, in my opinion, thinks the simile concerns the worshipper rather than the deity.

<sup>54</sup> John Goldingay, *Psalms. III. Psalms 90–150* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 537, thinks this an 'imaginative and complex conjecture', and proposes instead that גִּמְלַל 'refers not to a actual weaning of a child but to its having come off the breast at the end of a feeding (cf. Rashi)'. But there is no evidence that גִּמְלַל can mean this.

<sup>55</sup> As thought by Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. 22; Garr, *God and Women*, pp. 118-19; Tull, *Women's Bible Commentary, Revised and Updated*, p. 265. Strangely, it is not to a mother comforting her child that Yahweh is likened, strictly speaking, but to the child that comforted; but the sense must be that Yahweh is likened to a mother.

<sup>56</sup> I share R.N. Whybray's doubt that אִישׁ can refer to an infant, Gen. 4.1 and Job 3.3 notwithstanding (*Isaiah 40–66* [NCB; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1975], p. 286). Goldingay thinks differently (*Isaiah 56–66* [ICC; London: Bloomsbury T. & T. Clark, 2014], p. 433).

A commentator:

'The Hebrew language boldly ascribes the human experience of motherhood to the psychology of God. It compares the deity to a mother who cannot forget the child she has borne.'<sup>57</sup>

This is an example not of female language about the deity,<sup>58</sup> but of anti-female language about the deity. Far from presenting a female image of the deity, the text contrasts a human mother's commitment to her child with the deity's commitment to Israel. The rhetorical question with which the verse begins might lead us to offer the answer 'No! A mother cannot forget her child.' But the prophet, against expectation, means 'Yes! A mother *can* forget her child; even that is possible'. Yahweh, by contrast, is incapable of forgetting Israel. The point of the verse is that Yahweh is *not* like a mother.

**15. Taste and see that the LORD is good;  
happy are those who take refuge in him (Psa. 34.9 NRSV).**

טַעֲמוּ וּרְאוּ כִּי־טוֹב יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר־יִחַסֶּה־בּוֹ

The term טַעַם 'taste' is almost always used with food as the object. That has led some to think this passage is referring to a child nursing with its mother,<sup>59</sup> but there is nothing in the psalm to suggest what benefit the devotee of Yahweh is encouraged to expect; the theme of tasting or feeding is not resumed elsewhere in the psalm, except perhaps two verses further on where 'The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing' (34.11). The language is of such a general cast that no specific imagery is to be identified here.

**16. When Israel was a child, I loved him,  
and out of Egypt I called my son ...  
it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,  
I took them up in my arms ...  
I drew them with human cords,  
with bands of love;  
I fostered them like one who raises an infant to his cheeks;  
Yet, though I stooped to feed my child,  
they did not know that I was their healer (Hos. 11.1-4 NAB).**

כִּי נֶעַר יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶהְבֵּהוּ וּמִמִּצְרַיִם קָרָאתִי לְבָנִי  
קָרָאתִי לָהֶם בֶּן הָלָכוּ מִפְּנֵיהֶם לְבַעֲלִים יִזְבְּחוּ וְלַפְסָלִים יִקְטְרוּן  
וְאֲנֹכִי תִרְגַּלְתִּי לְאֶפְרַיִם קָחֵם עַל־זְרוּעֹתַי וְלֹא יָדְעוּ כִּי רִפְאֵתוֹם  
בְּחִבְלֵי אָדָם אֲמַשְׁכֵּם בְּעִבְתוֹת אֶהְבֵּה

<sup>57</sup> Terrien, *Till the Heart Sings*, p. 151.

<sup>58</sup> Garr, *God and Women*, p. 118; Tull, *Women's Bible Commentary, Revised and Updated*, p. 263; Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, pp. 66-67, is not explicit.

<sup>59</sup> So Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine*, p. 24. Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, does not refer to this verse.

וְאַהֲיָהּ לָהֶם כְּמָרִימִי עַל עַל לְחִיָּהֶם וְאֵט אֲלֵיו אֹכִיל

The last verse especially (v. 4) is very difficult. Some have translated ‘I was like someone who lifts an infant (עול ‘child’, rather than MT טעל I ‘yoke’) close against her (but the word is not gendered in the MT) cheek; stooping down to [Ephraim] I gave him his food’.<sup>60</sup> There is no reason to suppose that the deity is being depicted as a mother rather than as a father.<sup>61</sup>

**17. Hearken to me, O house of Jacob,  
all the remnant of the house of Israel,  
who have been borne (עמס) by me from your birth (בטן),  
carried (נשא) from the womb (רחם);  
even to your old age I am He,  
and to gray hairs I will carry you.  
I have made, and I will bear (נשא);  
I will carry and will save (Isa. 46.3-4 RSV).**

שָׁמְעוּ אֵלַי בֵּית יַעֲקֹב וְכָל־שְׂאֲרֵית בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל  
הַעֲמָסִים מִנִּי־בֶטֶן הַנְּשָׂאִים מִנִּי־רֶחֶם  
וְעַד־זְקִנָּה אֲנִי הוּא וְעַד־שִׁיבָה אֲנִי אֹסֵבֶל  
אֲנִי עָשִׂיתִי וְאֲנִי אֲשָׂא וְאֲנִי אֹסֵבֶל וְאֹמְלֵט

‘The imagery of this poetry stops just short of saying that God possesses a womb.’<sup>62</sup>

There are indeed references in v. 3 to the mother’s belly (בטן, translated by RSV ‘birth’) and womb (רחם), but the deity is not portrayed as the mother.<sup>63</sup> The phrase ‘borne by me’ means ‘carried [by me]’,<sup>64</sup> i.e. throughout life; it has nothing to do with birth). The ‘house of Jacob and Israel’ have human mothers, but it is Yahweh who has ‘carried’ or supported them throughout their life. Yahweh is their ‘creator’ (עשה, ‘I have made’, v. 4) but not their mother.

#### **d. Female household activities**

**18. And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them (Gen. 3.21 RSV).**

<sup>60</sup> Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine*, p. 24, adding: ‘It is only fair to women to recognize in this passage the work woman have done for centuries—and the patient, yearning tenderness of maternal love’. Quite so, but no doubt the prophet hadn’t thought of being fair to women.

<sup>61</sup> Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, does not refer to this verse.

<sup>62</sup> Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. 38.

<sup>63</sup> As Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine*, p. 27. Fischer calls upon the Vulgate’s *qui portamini a meo utero qui gestamini a men vulva* to find here a reference to the divine mother (*Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, p. 306).

<sup>64</sup> The terms are עמסים and נשאים.



וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים לְאָדָם וּלְאִשְׁתּוֹ כְּתָנוּת עוֹר וַיְלַבְּשֵׂם

A commentator:

'[T]he recital of *Heilsgeschichte* in Nehemiah 9 introduces Yahweh as seamstress ...The role of dressmaker is not unique to the God of the Wilderness. This same Deity made garments of skin to clothe the naked and disobedient couple in the Garden (Genesis 3:21). As a woman clothes her family, so Yahweh clothes the human family.'<sup>65</sup>

Because women are responsible for clothing their family, it is sometimes said that the deity is depicted in female terms.<sup>66</sup> I regard this view as far-fetched.

**19. I will sprinkle clean water upon you,  
and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses  
(Ezek. 36.25 RSV).**

וַזְרַקְתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם מַיִם טְהוֹרִים וְטָהַרְתֶּם מִכָּל  
טְמֵאוֹתֵיכֶם וּמִכָּל-גִּלּוּלֵיכֶם אֲטַהַר אֶתְכֶם

A commentator:

'[S]tatements throughout the Bible about cleansing us from sin carry overtones of God's motherhood.'<sup>67</sup>

Cleaning is women's work, it is said, so when the deity makes persons and things ritually clean it might suggest that he is acting as a female. One has only to consult the word רָחַץ 'wash' in *DCH* to see that overwhelmingly it is males who are the subject of the verb in the Hebrew Bible.

#### e. Other female activities

**20. As the eyes of manservants look to the hand of their master,  
as the eyes of a woman servant to the hand of her mistress,  
so our eyes look to you, Yahweh,  
until you show us your mercy! (Psa. 123.2-3).**

הִנֵּה כְּעֵינֵי עֲבָדִים אֶל-יַד אֲדוֹנֵיהֶם  
כְּעֵינֵי שִׁפְחָה אֶל-יַד גְּבוֹרָתָהּ  
כֵּן עֵינֵינוּ אֶל-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ עַד שִׁחְנֶנּוּ

<sup>65</sup> Trible, 'Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation', pp. 32-33. In *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. 134, on the other hand, while recognizing an image of the deity as tailor, she does not envisage that role as female.

<sup>66</sup> Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine*, p. 28; Smith, *Is It Okay to Call God Mother?*, pp. 55-56 ('God as a Seamstress').

<sup>67</sup> Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine*, pp. 27-28.

A commentator:

'The feminine imaging of God here is striking'.<sup>68</sup>

Yahweh is likened to a 'benevolent mistress who cares for those who serve her'.<sup>69</sup>

There is a simile here, but it is not of the deity likened to a woman. The male servants look to the master, the female to the mistress of the household.<sup>70</sup> If by comparison 'our' eyes look to Yahweh for favour, it does not make Yahweh a male master nor a female master. The deity is not compared to a woman.<sup>71</sup>

**21. I will attack them like a bear robbed of its cubs  
and will tear open the covering of their heart;  
there I will devour them like a lion,  
as a wild animal would mangle them (Hos. 13.8).**

אֶפְנֵשׁם כְּדֹב שְׂכֹל וְאֶקְרַע סִגּוֹר לָבָם  
וְאֶכְלֵם שָׁם כְּלִבְיָא חַיִּית הַשְּׂדֵה הַבְּקָעִים

A commentator:

'Perhaps because the image of God as a savagely angry Mother Bear breaks all our stereotypes of how a woman [especially a mother] ought to behave, it is an important image for our time.'<sup>72</sup>

Most English translations see here a female bear (so KJV, RV, RSV, NRSV, NJB, NJPS, NEB, REB, NET, CEB; only NAB and its revision, NABRE, have an ungendered bear, 'a bear robbed of its young'), and so the verse is often cited among alleged examples of female language about the deity.<sup>73</sup> I see no excuse for the misrepresentation of the Hebrew here, which has שְׂכֹל דֹב. The word דֹב 'bear' is usually masculine, and appears in only one of its 12 occurrences in the Hebrew Bible as feminine (2 Kgs 2.24); the adjective שְׂכֹל 'bereaved' is plainly masculine.

The phrase דֹב שְׂכֹל occurs in two other places: 2 Sam. 17.8, where David and his men are called warriors who are enraged, like 'a bear bereaved of its cubs in the wild', and Prov. 17.12 'Better face a bear robbed

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<sup>68</sup> J. Clinton McCann, Jr, 'The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections'. in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (ed. Leander Earl Keck; Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), IV, pp. 639-1280 (1187b).

<sup>69</sup> DeClaissé-Walford, *Women's Bible Commentary, Revised and Updated*, p. 230.

<sup>70</sup> There is no evident reason why there should be plural male servants and only a singular female servant here. I am sorry that I cannot think of a translation for גְּבִירָה here other than the outmoded 'mistress'.

<sup>71</sup> Contrary to the label 'God compared to a woman' put on this text by the Women's Ordination Conference. Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, pp. 22, 59, does not draw that conclusion.

<sup>72</sup> Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine*, pp. 49-53.

<sup>73</sup> For example, Smith, *Is It Okay to Call God Mother?*, pp. 70-71, 186. Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, does not refer to this verse.

of its cubs than a fool in his folly'. Even if צב is a she-bear, likening warriors or a fool to a she-bear would hardly suggest that there is a trace of the feminine in them. All the 14 English versions I consulted regard the bear in all three texts as a she-bear. Nonetheless, there is absolutely no justification for so doing, and consequently I am obliged to discount the relevance of this verse for our present topic.<sup>74</sup>

### f. Hebrew language terms

## 22. Shaddai

A commentator:

'A wordplay between the epithet *šadday* ("mountains" [sic]) and the noun *šadayim* ("breasts") connotes a maternal aspect in the divine.'<sup>75</sup>

It is often claimed that the divine name Shaddai signals a feminine dimension in the Hebrew deity. Tribble writes: 'Gen. 49.25 parallels the God of the fathers with the God Shaddai. These epithets balance masculine and feminine symbols. Cross holds that Shaddai had the original meaning of female breasts, a meaning that is preserved here through paronomasia. The God of the breasts gives the blessings of the breasts.'<sup>76</sup>

This is a misrepresentation, however. Cross's view<sup>77</sup> was that Shaddai means 'the One of the Mountain'; he compared the Akkadian *šadû*, a term for mountain. The implication was that the Hebrew divine name Shaddai came into Israel from Mesopotamia via Canaan, and meant in Hebrew as in Akkadian 'the One of the Mountain'.

Now Cross did allow that the Akkadian word *šadû* 'mountain' was originally connected with a Semitic word for 'breast',<sup>78</sup> apparently because there is an evident similarity in shape between mountains and breasts; but Cross never suggested that there is any female connotation in the name Shaddai whether in or outside the Hebrew Bible. He thought Shaddai was

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<sup>74</sup> The bear is parallel to the lion (ארי), another male beast, though there is a custom of supposing that the term means 'female lion' (as NJB, NEB, REB, NLT); I have argued at length against this view in my 'Misapprehensions, Ancient and Modern, about Lions (Nahum 2.13)', in *Poets, Prophets, and Texts in Play: Studies in Biblical Poetry and Prophecy in Honour of Francis Landy* (ed. Ehud Ben Zvi, Claudia V. Camp, David M. Gunn, and Aaron W. Hughes; London: Bloomsbury T. & T. Clark, 2015), pp. 58-76 (71-75).

<sup>75</sup> Tribble, 'God, Nature of, in the OT', p. 368b.

<sup>76</sup> Similarly Smith, *Is It Okay to Call God Mother?*, pp. 63-66. So too Garr, *God and Women*, pp. 109-12: 'the ancient name of God that was revealed to Abraham contained vivid feminine imagery' (p. 109). The rather speculative paper of David Biale, 'The God with Breasts: El Shaddai in the Bible', *History of Religions* 21 (1982), pp. 24-56, arguing that Shaddai was a 'fertility god with feminine characteristics' (p. 256), is often cited.

<sup>77</sup> See F.M. Cross, 'Yahweh and the God of the Patriarchs', *HTR* 55 (1962), pp. 225-59 (244-50); *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), pp. 52-60. Cross was following W.F. Albright, 'The Names Shaddai and Abram', *JBL* 54 (1935), pp. 173-204 (180-93); Albright did claim that the Akk. *šadû* 'was probably related to a Semitic word for 'breast', but that did not colour his understanding of Shaddai, which was for him exclusively connected with 'mountain'.

<sup>78</sup> Not attested in Akkadian, as far as I can tell.

a warrior god, identified with the Canaanite El, a male deity through and through.

The claim that the name Shaddai properly or originally refers to breasts has become very widespread (17,000 hits on Google for 'Shaddai breasts'), but lacks any scholarly foundation.<sup>79</sup> One blogger thinks it impressive that the article in the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* mentions the claim,<sup>80</sup> but overlooks the fact that the author of the article concludes that this explanation is 'untenable'.<sup>81</sup>

As for the text in Gen. 49.25, its context reads:

Yet his bow remained taut,  
and his arms were made agile  
by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob,  
by the name of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel,  
by the God of your father, who will help you,  
by the Almighty [El Shaddai] who will bless you  
with blessings of heaven above,  
blessings of the deep that lies beneath,  
blessings of the breasts and of the womb.  
The blessings of your father  
are stronger than the blessings of the eternal mountains,  
the bounties of the everlasting hills (Gen 49.25-26 NRSV).

The syntax is awkward and the text must be imperfect, but it is plain that the 'God of your father' is no different from El Shaddai, and the blessings of abundance come not from a female deity of the breasts but from a paternal deity controlling natural and human fertility (as we saw earlier with the deity who opens and closes wombs).<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> The article of Harriet Lutzky, 'Shaddai as a Goddess Epithet', *VT* 48 (1998), pp. 15-36, is an exception. She argues that Shaddai is an epithet of Asherah, supposedly Yahweh's consort according to the texts from Kuntillet 'Ajrud and elsewhere. If so, it would not be an epithet of Yahweh; Lutzky is hard pressed to explain apparent references to Yahweh as Shaddai.

<sup>80</sup> <https://scribalishess.wordpress.com/2014/05/23/el-shaddai-and-the-gender-of-god>.

<sup>81</sup> G. Steins, 'שָׁדַי *šadday*', in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren and Heinz-Josef Fabry; trans. Douglas W. Stott; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), XIV, pp. 418-46 (422). Similarly M. Weippert, 'שָׁדַי *šadday* (divine name)', in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann; trans. Mark E. Biddle; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), III, pp. 1302-10 (1307): 'this etymology deserves little attention'. Other proposed etymologies are reviewed by Steins (pp. 420-22), concluding that 'no satisfactory etymology for *šadday* has been presented'.

<sup>82</sup> There is probably a play on the similarity of sound between Shaddai and שָׁדַי 'breast' in Gen. 49.25 ('Shaddai who will bless you with ... blessings of the breasts and of the womb'), as there is also between Shaddai and שָׁדַי 'destruction' in Joel 1.15 ('as destruction from Shaddai it will come'). But these are verbal plays, not indications of meaning.

### 23. Language of the womb and of compassion

A commentator:

[W]hen God is spoken of as merciful, the semantic tenor of the word indicates that the womb is trembling, yearning for the child, grieved at the pain. What is being showered upon the wayward is God's womb-love, divine love for the child of God's womb.<sup>83</sup>

Trible regards the language of the womb as a key component in her general argument about female language, giving it prime position in her *IDB* article. She begins with the noun רֶחֶם, a concrete noun that always designates the female organ, the womb, with reference to humans and animals and other entities viewed as female, such as dawn, the sea and the deep. She then claims that the abstract noun רַחֲמִים, usually translated 'compassion', carries with it a feminine aspect, divine mercy being 'analogous to the womb of a mother'. She calls this 'uterine imagery',<sup>84</sup> and translates a sentence such as Jer. 31.20 אֶרְחַמֶנּוּ רַחֵם as 'I will surely have motherly compassion on him [Ephraim]'. Related terms, such as the adjectives רַחוּם and רַחֲמָנִי 'compassionate' and the verb רָחַם 'be merciful, love', have the same nuance, she argues.

She does allow, however, that when רַחֲמִים is used of a father it means 'paternal love' even though she insists that its connection with רֶחֶם 'womb' makes uterine love the primary sense; in her language that sense is a 'semantic value from which a wide range of meanings extend'.<sup>85</sup> The claim to the centrality of 'uterine love' is unprovable, but if רַחֲמִים can refer to fatherly or brotherly love when used of a male (e.g. Joseph's רַחֲמִים growing warm for his brother in Gen. 43.30), it is hard to see why it should mean motherly love when used of the deity. Tribble's concession on this point seems to undermine her whole case for the female character of the term רַחֲמִים.

There is indeed no reason why the meaning of the abstract noun should be determined or even influenced by the meaning of a cognate concrete noun. It is hard to believe that רַחֲמִים would be used so frequently of males (including the deity) if there was inevitably a hint of femininity about it. In fact, there are seven examples of the רַחֲמִים on the part of males, in addition to the 31 in reference to the deity. In only one case (1 Kgs 3.26) is it used of female compassion. It is difficult to believe that speakers of ancient Hebrew ever thought of the similar word רָחַם when they used the

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<sup>83</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 101.

<sup>84</sup> Tribble, 'God, Nature of, in the OT', p. 368; *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, pp. 31-59. Followers include Smith, *Is It Okay to Call God Mother?*, pp. 56-58.

<sup>85</sup> Tribble, 'God, Nature of, in the OT', p. 368b. In her accounts of the semantics of these terms Tribble frequently has recourse to metaphors of origins and travel that are inappropriate to descriptions of language: for example, she writes that 'the womb is a basic metaphor of divine compassion which begins with a physical organ unique to the female and extends to psychic levels in the plural' (Tribble, 'God, Nature of, in the OT', p. 368a); 'semantic value from which a wide range of meanings extends' ('God, Nature of, in the OT', p. 368b; 'Journey of a Metaphor', in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, pp. 30-59).

noun רחמים. Likewise with the verb רחם 'be merciful, love': it is used 43 times, once of a woman, four times of a man, 38 times of the deity.<sup>86</sup>

### **h. Conclusion**

My conclusion is that there is not a single instance of female language about the deity in the Hebrew Bible, that is, of language suggesting that the deity is viewed as a female, whether as a mother or a midwife or in any other typical female activity. I will allow that there are two cases where the deity is compared to a woman (no. 4 about the woman in labour and no. 13 about the mother comforting the child) and I will allow that these passages could be described as 'female language about the deity'; but I would continue to maintain such cases do not suggest that the deity *is* in any way female; rather the contrary, for to say that the deity is 'like' a female is to deny that the deity *is* female.

Each alleged example has to be seriously considered on its own merits, of course, and there are many different factors that need to be examined. But it can hardly be surprising that in the Hebrew Bible, which consistently represents the deity as male and everywhere employs the masculine pronoun 'he' and masculine verb and adjective forms for the deity, there is no trace of a view that in some respect or to some degree this deity is 'female' or 'feminine'. Furthermore, even if every one of the items discussed in this paper were truly examples of female language about the deity, their number would be miniscule compared to the sustained language about a masculine deity throughout the Hebrew Bible.<sup>87</sup>

Nevertheless, the view I am resisting here has become what might be called a current orthodoxy, repeated by many mainstream scholars as well as by a host of more popular writers, despite the almost total lack of critical evaluation and debate that might have been given to it. It can only be supposed that its origins in earlier times of feminist writing accounted for its ready acceptance, and that both women and men committed to gender equality have adopted it because they would dearly love it to be true.

The fact is, though, that the Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible is a thoroughly male god,<sup>88</sup> and there is simply no benefit in failing to recognize that fact

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<sup>86</sup> Some authors add to the case of רחמים the Hebrew word בְּעִים (so Garr, *God and Women*, pp. 116-18, in reference to Isa. 63.15; Jer. 31.20), which does sometimes refer to the womb, but is a general non-gendered term for the internal organs, whether belly or intestines or womb; see further Dorothea Erbele, 'Gender Trouble in the Old Testament: Three Models of the Relation between Sex and Gender', *SJOT* 13 (1999), pp. 131-41 (139-40).

<sup>87</sup> I refer to the massive 700-page compilation of similes and metaphors about the deity in Ugarit and the Hebrew Bible by Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds* (see note 2 above).

<sup>88</sup> See further my "The Most High Male: Divine Masculinity in the Bible" ([www.academia.edu/14079928](http://www.academia.edu/14079928)). See also Susanne Heine, *Christianity and the Goddesses: Systematic Criticism of a Feminist Theology* (trans. John S. Bowden; London: SCM Press, 1988), esp. pp. 26-30, concluding '[T]he biblical God is far from being deserving of the name mother. His masculinity is never in question' (p. 29).

and accept its consequences.<sup>89</sup> For my part, I regret the damage done to the feminist cause by the repeated claim that the Bible is less masculine and less sexist than it actually is.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> It is in my opinion equally incorrect to state that Yahweh is 'beyond sexuality' or 'neither male nor female' in the Hebrew Bible, as, for example, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1992), pp. 188-89: 'The monotheist God is not sexually male. He is not at all phallic, and does not represent male virility ... [he] is asexual, or transsexual, or metasexual (depending on how we view this phenomenon), but "he" is never sexed.' So too Tribble, "Depatriarchalizing", p. 34: 'Yahweh is neither male nor female; neither he nor she. Consequently, modern assertions that God is masculine, even when they are qualified, are misleading and detrimental, if not altogether inaccurate'. Cf. also Brent A. Strawn, *What Is Stronger than a Lion? Leonine Image and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (OBO, 212; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), p. 2 n. 6: 'The combination of feminine and masculine elements in the figuring of Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible may be further indication that ancient Israel conceived of God as being beyond (though perhaps the ground of?) male and female gender'. Neither am I convinced by claims of androgyny in the deity, as in Nicolas Wyatt, *The Mythic Mind: Essays on Cosmology and Religion in Ugaritic and Old Testament Literature* (London: Equinox, 2005), pp. 238-55 (248-50).

<sup>90</sup> I will leave untreated in this paper the question whether in the programme sketched by Tribble and her followers there is not an unfortunate stereotyping of male and female roles. Susanne Heine, for example, remarks: 'It is dangerous and contrary to basic feminist interests when a division of the male and female properties of God gives a boost to the usual stereotyping of roles. Such interpretations tend to perpetuate the notion that law, justice, anger, and power are "typically masculine"; while oversight, feeding, caring and compassion are "typically feminine" ... [T]here is nothing against understanding physical care, love, illness, and mercy as a fatherly attitude towards children' (*Christianity and the Goddesses*, pp. 28, 29). This is a good point, but I am not greatly troubled by it, since while we all abhor stereotyping we can hardly live without generalizing, and it can be argued that the claims of those reviewed in this paper are nothing worse than generalizations about the roles of women in biblical times.