

The Spirit and the Divine Feminine

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[0 : 00] Hey, this is Anthony Parrott, one of the pastors at The Table Church. And a couple of months ago, I was preaching and that service got interrupted by a medical emergency.

And so I was never able to finish that sermon. So a couple months later, here I am in front of a microphone because I thought I would share what I was going to share that evening at church and put it out as a podcast instead.

So the topic is the Holy Spirit and the Divine Feminine or God and the Divine Feminine, essentially talking about how does scripture talk about God and gender and all of that.

So let's dive right in. So Genesis chapter one, verse one, we get creation of the world when God began to create the heavens and the earth.

And the word here for God in Hebrew is Elohim, Elohim. Em is usually in Hebrew, a plural ending, and it can be in the right context translated as the gods.

[1 : 04] It's also the ending of Hebrew words like face, which is panim or water, mayim. And in general, it has something to do with like flow, expansiveness beyond a single definable thing.

So in the beginning, Elohim, God, not the gods, but God began to create the heavens and the earth. And this Elohim is expansive. This God goes beyond one single definable thing.

Verse two says, Now, the spirit of God is the Ruach Elohim, the spirit of God.

And the spirit of God, this Ruach Elohim, flutters over the face of the waters, the panim mayim. Ruach, spirit, is a feminine noun.

Hebrew is a language that has masculine and feminine endings, which then changes what verbs and adjectives that you pair with it. And so Ruach, spirit, is a feminine noun.

[2 : 13] It can mean air or wind or breath. But it also, in the Hebrew scriptures, refers to an aspect of how God relates to humanity. It's one of the personas of God that shows up in scripture.

Now, Hebrew scholar, Old Testament scholar, Wilda C. Gaffney, she states that when languages of gender forms, there are correct translation rules that you have for how to deal with that when you're dealing with a non-gendered language like English.

So correct translation necessitates adding an appropriate pronoun for clarity. If you're dealing with a feminine noun in the original language, then you need to have a feminine pronoun in English to make sure that that translation is coming across clearly.

But this has not happened in English. Our Hebrew Bible translations don't usually add appropriate female pronouns.

Basically, due to patriarchy and sexism, we just remove the pronouns altogether. So she does this thing in one of her books, and I've kind of carried this out in front of my notes in front of me here, of like, what would it sound like if we added those pronouns back?

[3 : 24] So the Spirit of God, Genesis 1, verse 2, she fluttered over the face of the waters.

Numbers chapter 11 talks about the Spirit.

The Spirit, she rested upon Eldad and Medad as they prophesied. Story of Balaam. Balaam raises his eyes. Numbers 24, Spirit of God, she came upon him.

Judges chapter 6, so the Spirit of Yahweh, she covered Gideon like clothing. And this covering like clothing metaphor happened a bunch of times in the book of Judges chapter 3, chapter 11, chapter 13, 14, 19, 15.

First Samuel talks about Samuel anointing David with oil in the Spirit of Yahweh. She rushed upon David from that day forward. And again, similar language in 1 Samuel chapter 10, chapter 11, chapter 19.

The Spirit of Yahweh, she spoke through me. It says in 2 Samuel 23, the Spirit of the Lord, she will rest on the branch of Jesse. Isaiah chapter 11. As the Lord spoke to me, it says in Ezekiel 2, the

Spirit, she entered me and set me on my feet.

[4 : 25] And I heard her speaking to me. The Spirit, she lifted me up and took me away. Ezekiel says in chapter 3. My Spirit, she remains in my midst. Do not fear. Teach me to do your will. For you are my God.

Let your good spirit, let her lead me on level ground. And it says in Psalm 143. So you can see if we add these pronouns back into our English translations, it actually really changes how we might speak about God and divine names and divine identity when we actually have accurate Bible translations.

But they've been removed. And so, you know, even having a sermon about like, well, what pronoun should we use for God would get you thrown into like some sort of, you know, conservative church jail? But it doesn't have to.

It shouldn't. Because this is actually ingrained in our Hebrew Bibles that these pronouns are entirely appropriate for how we speak about the Spirit, for sure.

Gaffney says feminine language occurs in the text, the Hebrew Bible, repeatedly of God. This means that feminists and womanists advocating for inclusive and explicitly feminine God language aren't changing but restoring the text and could be considered biblical literalists.

[5 : 44] I love that. You know, it's often folks who call themselves biblical literists, like, well, you can't say she about God. Sorry for my, sorry for my biblical literist voice. Can't say she about God, but actually it's already in the text.

And when we remove it, that's what's changing the Bible. The idea of a feminine aspect of God, however, is not restricted to just a clever grammatical argument. It's also made utterly explicit in the book of Proverbs.

So Proverbs chapter 3 and chapter 8 talk about wisdom. And wisdom is personified in Proverbs as a woman. So chapter Proverbs 3, 19, Yahweh founded the earth by wisdom.

He established the heavens by understanding. And in chapter 8, we actually get this wisdom personified speaking. So she says, Yahweh possessed me at the beginning of his way, before his works of old.

From eternity I was established, from the beginning, before the earth was. When there were no watery depths, I was brought forth. When there were no springs with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills, I was brought forth.

[6 : 50] Before the earth and the fields and the first dry land, I was beside him as a master architect. And I was his delight daily, playing always before him, frolicking within the inhabited earth and delighting in the children of humanity.

So this is wisdom personified in Proverbs 8, speaking as a woman. Wisdom, this is chapter 8, verse 1. Wisdom cries out atop the heights along the path at the crossroads.

She takes her stand by the gate before the city. At the entrances, she shouts. So, not a surprise, the Hebrew word for wisdom is chokmah, and the Greek word for wisdom is sophia.

And these are both, again, feminine nouns. And woman wisdom actually takes on a whole life and character throughout Jewish wisdom literature and a collection of books called the Apocrypha, which were written towards the end of the Hebrew Bible and the time of Jesus.

So woman wisdom, it doesn't just show up in Proverbs, but she shows up in a bunch of Jewish literature, not all of which makes it into our Bibles, but was still being written about around this time. So listen to this section on Lady Wisdom from a book called The Wisdom of Solomon, which is written about 100 years before the time of Jesus.

[8 : 01] This is Wisdom of Solomon, chapter 7. Wisdom, the designer of everything that is, has taught me. Her spirit is insightful, holy, unique, diverse, refined, kinetic, pure, spotless, transparent, harmless, delighting in what is good, sharp, unstoppable, overflowing with kindness, delighting in humans, steadfast, secure, not anxious, all-powerful, all-seeing.

Her spirit can be found in every spirit that is perceptive, pure, and refined. Wisdom is more mobile than anything that moves. She pervades and embraces everything because she is so pure.

Wisdom is the warm breath of God's power. She pours forth from the all-powerful one's pure glory.

Therefore, nothing impure can enter her. She's the brightness that shines forth from eternal light.

She's a mirror that flawlessly reflects God's activity. She's the perfect image of God's goodness.

She can do anything since she's one and undivided.

She never changes, yet she makes everything new. Generation after generation, wisdom enters souls, and she shapes them into God's friends and prophets. God doesn't love anything as much as people who make their home with wisdom.

[9 : 11] She's more splendid than the sun and more wonderful than the arrangement of the stars. She's even brighter than sunlight, for night follows day, but evil can never overcome wisdom.

She stands strong from one in the world to the other. She is a marvelous governor over everything in between. So yeah, author of Wisdom of Solomon has a bit of a crush on woman wisdom.

And there's a connection between the feminine spirit of God in Genesis 1, the spirit of God. She fluttered over the surface of the waters and lady wisdom of Proverbs of Jewish wisdom literature. I, woman wisdom, was at the creation of the world as the master architect. So yeah, in Jewish literature, they would connect the spirit that hovered over the waters, Genesis 1, and this woman wisdom in Proverbs, the wisdom of Solomon.

They saw a connection between these two feminine divine characters. Now, let me make a point about gender in the Trinity.

[10 : 15] Christians have believed in the Trinity for a long, long, long, long time. And what I'm not arguing is that there are clear, thick lines to be made between masculine aspects of God in God the Father and feminine aspects in only God, God the Holy Spirit.

I think that's really far too neat and clean of a divide, and the Trinity is nothing if not mysterious and difficult to put in the language. Throughout Scripture and Christian literature, each person of the Trinity has had both masculine and feminine language applied to them.

Throughout Jewish literature, Yahweh, God, and the Ruach, glory and wisdom of God, have had masculine and feminine language applied to them. So some examples, Deuteronomy chapter 32 says, a mother eagle protecting its nest, hovering over its young.

As a mother eagle has done that, so has God spread out wings. Deuteronomy 32, Eloah, God gives groans, gives birth from heavy labor.

Isaiah 42, God says, Like a woman in labor, I will moan, I will pant, I will gasp. Isaiah 49 says, As a woman cannot forget the infant at her breast or walk away from the child she bore, no more can I forget you.

[11 : 37] Jesus, in Luke chapter 13, says, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God's messengers, how often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings.

Romans chapter 8, All creation groans and suffers with the pains of childbirth together until now, and we within ourselves have the spirit within us also groaning within ourselves.

And, quite massively, Christ, Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, is also identified with both male and female imagery. So, in John chapter 1, the author of John identifies Christ as the Word. In the beginning, it's the Word. The Word is with God. And in the Greek, this is the idea of the logos. Logos is synonymous with the Greek concept of Sophia, which is the feminine figure for wisdom. And that same creation motif is right there in John chapter 1. In the beginning, it's the Word. The Word is with God. All things were created by Him, created by this Word. So, Cynthia Snavelly, writer, theologian, she writes, While the historical Jesus is explicitly male, and I'm not arguing that, not arguing about the gender of Jesus of Nazareth, but while the historical Jesus is explicitly male, the living Christ is not limited to male or female form.

[12 : 55] That is, the second person of the Trinity, which pre-exists the human physical body of Jesus, born of Mary. This is not limited to male or female form. In other words, the eternal presence of Christ in the life of Christians is not bound by human gender categorization, but because Christ is God, transcends the limitations of male or female.

Now, if you want to argue back and say, Yeah, Anthony, but this is all just metaphor. Then, sure, yeah, you would be correct. But that's true of all the language we use about God.

The male language for God is no less metaphor than female language. And just because it's metaphor doesn't mean it lacks meaning. Imagine sweeping away the entirety of our language about redemption, ransom, atonement, the cross, because it's all just metaphor.

I've had people tell me that we can't use feminine language for God because it's all just metaphor in Scripture. But can you imagine how upset the conservative gospel coalition Theobros would be if I argued that we can't do communion because it's just a metaphor?

That we can't talk about Jesus redeeming us because it's all just metaphor? We can't talk about Jesus as good shepherd because it's just metaphor? No, that's absurd. Yes, it's metaphor, and so we should use those metaphors.

[14 : 14] If God employs metaphors calling herself a mother in labor or a mother who can't walk away from a child at its breast, then why would Christians refuse to employ those metaphors?

So, some implications. If we unnecessarily limit our experience of God and our language about God to masculine language, to male-only language, then we are dramatically reducing our ability to relate to God.

Imagine not—and some of us don't have to imagine— imagine not having a solid, steady mother or father figure. And I didn't for the first 10 years of my life.

So that, you know, changed the way that I related to both men and women. And if I did the same thing with God, I'm just like, yep, God is only masculine, never feminine, then that affects my ability to relate to this God that I believe is personal and wants to have a relationship with me.

Next, when God made humanity in their image, it wasn't the case that male was more in the divine image than female was.

[15 : 30] But when we limit our language around God to only masculine language, our language is going to create a culture in which men are more God-like than women.

Only acknowledging God as male weakens women's connection with the divine. Exclusive God as male language implies that women are lesser.

In other words, because God is male, men are somehow more reflective of the divine than women are. And that has real serious implications for how the culture treats women. Like, will we grant, as a culture, will we grant women bodily autonomy?

The ability to dress how they choose to dress, to have sex with whom they choose to have sex, the ability to bear children or not, and when to choose? Will all those decisions be just left to men who are the real image bearers, the one who share pronouns with God?

If we see God as solely male, will we be able to see women as leaders, creators, and imaginaries for our social order? Or is that only left to half of the species in the name of keeping women in their place?

[16 : 40] Limiting our language limits our imagination and our capacity to see the world as it could be. And if anyone deserves language that is large and imaginative and creative and grand, I would think it is God.

And to cut off so much possible language about God because of patriarchal assumptions about what pronouns are in the Bible does a huge disservice to the mystery and the wonder of who God is.

So practically, for me, this means that I often refer to God as they, which to me recognizes the bigness, the expansiveness of God's character.

And I also think it's important to refer to God as she, as a verbal, vocal reminder that God is not merely one set of pronouns, that God is not merely identified with male metaphors.

God as she reminds me that women are created in the image of God, that God is more expansive than I can possibly imagine, and that my language needs to continually grow, not shrink, when I'm talking about the divine character.

[17 : 57] I think this also probably reimagines how we pray and the images that we think of in our minds, the language that we use, of if we only refer to God as father and never mother, if we only refer to God as he and never they or she, then our prayer lives are also half of what they could be.

And I don't think it needs to be that way. Scripture gives us the permission, the language, and the tools to pray in much more expansive and creative ways. So I hope you found that at least a little bit helpful, a little bit of biblical background, and I hope it grants you the permission to refer to God in whatever way you find most comfortable and helpful.

Peace be with you.