GOD, OUR MOTHER

The Bible's imagery of God's maternal characteristics
Isaiah 46:3-4

Nearly twenty-five years ago, I began seeing gender-inclusive religious slogans like, "Our God, She is alive." Academic debates about feminism and patriarchy had reached a popular level and started to appear in bookstores and on bumper stickers. While some opposed gender-inclusive Bible teaching because of prejudices and others pushed gender-inclusive Bible teachings into unbiblical areas, the debate revolved around a clear center – God does describe Himself using feminine imagery in the Bible. As we celebrate Mothers' Day today, we will consider the Bible's feminine presentation of God to see what insights it provides us about our mothers.

Beginning considerations

- "God is spirit"[1] and is not defined by the physical male and female identities that determine our physical bodies (*John 4:24*).
- However, the Bible does overwhelmingly present God in masculine terms (*cf. Matthew 6:7-15*).
- God made Adam and Eve - both male and female - in His image (*Genesis 1:26-27*); both genders find themselves reflected in the Bible's presentation of God.

God as a mother

- Several places in the Bible use images of mothers from nature to picture God's identity.
    - The Bible, for example, uses the images of a mother bird to describe God, who offers protection "in the shadow of [His] wings" (*Ruth 2:12; Psalm 17:8; 57:1; 91:4*). Jesus drew on that imagery to describe his desire to gather Israel together as "a hen who gathers her chicks" (*Matthew 23:37*).
    - In the song He gave to Moses (*Deuteronomy 31:19*), God described Himself as a mother eagle teaching her young to fly and catching them when they fall (*Deuteronomy 32:11*).
    - In contrast to the comforting imagery in Psalms and Deuteronomy, Hosea describes God as a mother bear "robbed of her cubs" to picture the fury God felt towards Israel for their rejection of Him (*Hosea 13:4-8*).
- The Bible also uses images of mothers with their children to picture God.
    - God compared the intensity of His feelings toward Israel to a mother in labor (*Isaiah 42:14*; *Deuteronomy 32:18*).

[1] All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

    - Isaiah accompanied the announcements of God's devastating punishment of Judah with images of God as a comforting mother.
        - God would "bear" Israel like a mother carrying her child (*Isaiah 46:3-4*).
        - God could not forget the Jews like a nursing mother could not forget her child (*Isaiah 49:15*).
        - God would comfort Israel like a mother comforting her child (*Isaiah 66:13*).
- The Bible's images of God as a mother occur primarily in two places - the psalms and Isaiah. The grouping of those images in the psalms and the prophets reveal valuable insights.
    - Finding themselves in situations in which they needed protection, the psalmists' imagery of mothers employs their fierce protection of their young to picture the protection God extends to His people (*cf. Psalm 57:1*).
    - The uses of maternal images in the prophets appear in conjunction with their announcements of God's judgments on the nation and offer an essential contrast that reminds the people of God's tender care for them (*cf. Isaiah 66:7-13*).

Applications

- A couple of important applications for our mothers can be taken from the Bible's presentation of God's maternal care and protection.
    - God cared for and protected His people even when they did wrong (*Deuteronomy 31:19-22; 32:9-11; Judges 10:10-16*), setting an example for the care and protection we expect from our mothers.
    - God's care and protection did not disregard disobedience but dealt with it in ways that sought to motivate proper behavior (*Isaiah 1:24-26; 49:14-23*). God's purpose of cultivating obedience in people reminds us that a mother's care and protection must seek to grow dedication to God in their children (*Deuteronomy 6:4-9; cf. 2 Timothy 1:5*).
- The care and protection that God models for mothers requires them to devote themselves more to Him than to their children (*Matthew 22:34-38; 10:37*).
    - Only by devoting themselves to God can mothers develop the ability to be the parent that God desires them to become (*Ephesians 5:1, 15-6:4; cf. Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Matthew 22:34-40*).
    - Devoting themselves to God first, for example, offers the only way that mothers can provide the role model and teaching their children need (*Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 1 Peter 1:14-16; 3:1-2*).
- The Bible's presentation of maternal imagery to describe God shows the concern He has for His people, a concern motivated by their disobedience, which points to a truth about parenting - it can be a heartbreaking experience. That reality should motivate our mothers to take encouragement and comfort from the presentation of God and His relationship with His children - He knows, He understands, and He promises His help (*Hebrews 4:14-16; Romans 8:28-30*).