

The God Who Is Father: Divine Masculine Language in Scripture

Thematic Study — Both Testaments

Key Passage

*"Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers?" — **Malachi 2:10, ESV***

*"But now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." — **Isaiah 64:8, ESV***

Introduction

A persistent feature of theologically liberal Christianity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been the push to revise the gendered language of Scripture — speaking of God as 'she' or 'he/she,' replacing 'Father' with 'Parent,' and rewriting liturgy and translation to remove masculine pronouns. This is not a minor stylistic preference. It represents a direct challenge to the self-disclosure of God as He has chosen to reveal Himself in Holy Scripture.

Scripture is not silent on the question of how God should be addressed. From Genesis to Revelation, the God of Israel consistently reveals Himself using masculine personal pronouns, as Father, as King, as Husband — never as Mother, as Queen, or as Wife. This is not merely a cultural accommodation to a patriarchal world. It is theological revelation: God has chosen these images, and those images carry doctrinal weight. To revise them is not to update Scripture; it is to overwrite it.

This study examines the biblical case for masculine language for God: what Scripture actually says, the Hebrew and Greek grammar involved,

the theological reasons behind the language, and how to respond thoughtfully to the revisionist claim. We also address the small number of feminine similes used of God in Scripture — noting that a simile is not an identity, and a metaphor of care is not a statement of divine gender.

1. How God Names Himself: The Foundational Witness

The Divine Name and Its Grammar

The personal name of God in the Old Testament is the Tetragrammaton — YHWH (יהוה) — usually rendered LORD in English translations. This name is consistently used with masculine grammatical forms in Hebrew. The verb forms, pronouns, and participial phrases associated with YHWH throughout the Hebrew Bible are uniformly masculine singular.

The primary Hebrew title Elohim (אֱלֹהִים), while formally a plural form (the plural of majesty), likewise takes masculine singular verb agreement when referring to the one God of Israel. For example:

"In the beginning, God [Elohim] created [bara — masculine singular verb] the heavens and the earth." — Genesis 1:1, ESV

This is not an accident of Hebrew grammar that could easily be reversed. Throughout the thousands of verses of the Hebrew Bible, not a single instance occurs where God (YHWH or Elohim speaking as the God of Israel) is addressed or referred to using feminine verb forms or feminine pronouns as His primary mode of address. The masculine is not incidental — it is pervasive, sustained, and clearly intentional.

God as Father: The Direct Title

One of the most significant aspects of God's self-revelation is His use of the Father title. This appears in both Testaments with doctrinal weight. In the Old Testament it is used sparingly but with great force — as God's covenantal identity in relation to Israel:

"You are the LORD, our Father; our Redeemer from of old is your name." — Isaiah 63:16, ESV

"Is he not your father, who created you, who made you and established you?" — Deuteronomy 32:6, ESV

"A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling." — Psalm 68:5, NIV

In the New Testament, the Father title moves to the centre of revelation. Jesus does not introduce the concept of God as Father as a novel metaphor; rather, He confirms and deepens what the Old Testament had already disclosed. Jesus consistently calls God 'Father' (πατήρ, patēr) and teaches His disciples to do the same:

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name." — Matthew 6:9, ESV

"I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." — John 20:17, ESV

The Greek word patēr (πατήρ) is an unambiguously masculine noun. Jesus never uses a feminine substitute. He never says 'Our Parent in heaven.' The precision of His language is deliberate — and as the eternal Son, He is in the unique position of knowing the Father as no one else does (Matthew 11:27). His language carries supreme authority.

Hebrew & Greek Note

In Hebrew, every noun has a grammatical gender. The use of masculine forms for God is consistent and sweeping — it is not the result of default masculine grammatical assumptions that happen to apply to God. The feminine grammatical gender is extensively used elsewhere in Hebrew (e.g., for the nation of Israel, for wisdom personified in Proverbs 8, for the Spirit in some older usages). That God is consistently male in Hebrew grammar is a theological choice embedded in the text of Scripture itself.

2. Masculine Images Throughout Scripture

King

God is repeatedly identified as King — an inherently masculine image — throughout both Testaments:

"The LORD is King forever and ever; the nations perish from his land." — Psalm 10:16, ESV

"The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all." — Psalm 103:19, ESV

"King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God." — 1 Timothy 1:17, ESV

Husband

In the prophets, God uses the image of a husband in covenant relationship with Israel as His wife — and the marriage metaphor runs throughout Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah:

"For your Maker is your husband — the LORD Almighty is his name — the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer." — Isaiah 54:5, NIV

"Return, faithless people... for I am your husband." — Jeremiah 3:14, NIV

It is impossible to reverse these images without destroying their theological content. The covenant infidelity of Israel is consistently portrayed as spiritual adultery — Israel as the unfaithful wife, God as the wronged husband. This is not exchangeable imagery. It carries specific covenantal and moral force that depends on the asymmetry of the roles.

Warrior and Shepherd

God is also revealed as a divine Warrior who fights for His people (Exodus 15:3; Isaiah 42:13) and as the Shepherd who leads and tends His flock (Psalm 23; John 10:11). Both of these are masculine images with deep roots in the ancient Near Eastern context of the text. They are not cultural accidents — they are chosen revelations of divine character in covenantal relationship.

Cross-references: Exodus 15:3; Psalm 23:1; Isaiah 42:13; Hosea 2:16; Ephesians 5:25-32; Revelation 19:6-7

3. What About Feminine Similes?

Revisionist theologians point to a small number of passages where God uses feminine imagery. These deserve honest examination — and honest exegesis reveals that they do not support what is claimed.

Isaiah 49:15 — A Mother's Compassion

"Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you." — Isaiah 49:15, ESV

This is a simile — a comparison — not an identity statement. God is not saying 'I am a mother.' He is saying that His faithfulness surpasses even the most powerful human bond of maternal love. The rhetorical force depends on the extraordinary tenderness of a nursing mother being used as a standard of comparison — yet God's faithfulness exceeds even that. The grammar of the passage is clear: the subject remains the LORD, with masculine pronouns and verb forms throughout the surrounding context.

Isaiah 66:13 — As a Mother Comforts

"As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem." — Isaiah 66:13, ESV

Again, this is simile — 'as one whom his mother comforts.' The comparison is between a quality of comfort (tenderness, gentleness) and God's comforting action. It does not assert that God is female. The word 'as' marks it as a comparative construction. If this passage made God female, then passages comparing God to a lion (Hosea 13:7-8), a moth (Hosea 5:12), or an eagle (Deuteronomy 32:11) would make Him an animal.

Matthew 23:37 — The Hen Gathering Her Chicks

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem... How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings." — Matthew 23:37, ESV

Jesus — who is unambiguously referred to with masculine pronouns throughout the Gospels and identified as the Son — uses a maternal

simile to describe His longing for Israel. The simile expresses tenderness and protective desire. It does not reassign Jesus's gender. Indeed, using a feminine image to describe a masculine person is common in all human languages; it no more makes the speaker female than calling a man 'the lion of the tribe of Judah' (Revelation 5:5) makes him a lion.

Key Distinction: Simile ≠ Identity

A simile says: 'God acts like a mother in this regard.' An identity statement says: 'God is a mother.' Scripture provides the former in a small number of places; it never provides the latter. Feminist revisionism consistently treats similes as identity statements — a fundamental error of basic literary interpretation. Honest exegesis must maintain the distinction.

4. Is the Masculine Language Merely Cultural?

The most common revisionist objection runs as follows: the masculine language for God is a product of the patriarchal cultures in which the biblical texts were written, and therefore it reflects human limitation rather than divine revelation. This argument deserves careful response.

Scripture Itself Contradicts Its Surrounding Culture

If the masculine language for God were simply borrowed from the patriarchal cultures of the ancient Near East, we would expect the God of Israel to look very similar to the gods of Israel's neighbours — including the prominent female deities of the Canaanite, Babylonian, and Egyptian religious worlds. In fact, the opposite is true.

The religious context in which Israel lived was saturated with goddess worship. Asherah was worshipped as the consort of El (and sometimes of YHWH, in apostate Israelite practice). Ashtoreth (Astarte), Ishtar, Isis, and Hathor were all prominent female deities in the cultures surrounding Israel. The consistent biblical polemic against these goddesses is fierce (Judges 2:13; 1 Kings 18:19; Jeremiah 7:18; 44:17-19).

If the biblical authors had simply been reflecting their cultural biases, we would expect at minimum some accommodation to the goddess traditions around them — especially given the historical evidence that many Israelites did in fact worship these goddesses. Instead, Scripture systematically, relentlessly, and polemically excludes all female deity language from the character of YHWH. The God of Israel is not and does not have a divine consort. This is a theological decision that runs against the grain of the surrounding culture, not with it.

God Transcends Biology

Conservative theology has always maintained that God is spirit (John 4:24) — He has no body and no biological sex. The masculine language of Scripture is not a claim that God is male in a biological sense. It is a revelation of personal identity: how God relates to His creation, how He exercises authority, how He enters into covenant, and how He should be addressed.

The distinction matters. Critics of traditional language often argue: 'God is not literally male, so why use masculine pronouns?' But conservative theologians have never claimed that God is literally male. The claim is that God has revealed Himself using masculine personal language, that this language is authoritative, and that to discard it is to substitute human preference for divine self-disclosure.

"God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." — John 4:24, ESV

The transcendence of God's nature over human biology does not license us to revise His chosen language; it simply reminds us that the language is revelatory and personal rather than anatomical.

Jesus, as the Eternal Son, Knew Better

The most decisive argument against the cultural-accommodation theory is Jesus Himself. If anyone had the knowledge and authority to correct or revise misleading masculine language for God, it was the eternal Son who exists in perfect communion with the Father (John 1:1-2; 10:30).

Jesus consistently called God 'Father' — not 'Parent,' not 'Mother,' not 'the Divine.' He taught His disciples to pray 'Our Father.' He addressed God as 'Abba, Father' in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36).

Jesus never once corrected the masculine language inherited from the Old Testament. He deepened it. The Son's witness to the Father is the highest possible authority on how God should be addressed — and that witness is uniformly and deliberately paternal.

Cross-references: John 1:1-18; 4:24; 10:30; 14:9; Mark 14:36; Galatians 4:6; Romans 8:15

5. The Trinitarian Shape of the Language

The masculine language for God is not simply a feature of Old Testament monotheism carried over by cultural inertia. It is structurally embedded in the Trinitarian revelation of the New Testament in ways that make it theologically indispensable.

The three Persons of the Trinity are identified as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — with the Son explicitly identified as the Son of the Father (John 1:14; 1 John 4:14). The word 'Son' (υἱός, huios) is masculine. The word 'Father' (πατήρ, patēr) is masculine. To replace 'Father' with 'Parent' and 'Son' with 'Child' is not merely a pronoun change — it destroys the relational structure of the Trinity that Scripture reveals.

The eternal generation of the Son from the Father — a foundational doctrine of classical Trinitarian theology — is expressed in the language of paternal and filial relation. The Great Commission given by Jesus uses the Trinitarian formula: 'baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matthew 28:19, ESV). This formula is given by Christ Himself. It is not a cultural artifact. To alter it is to alter the revealed name of God.

"Baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." — Matthew 28:19, ESV

The Spirit, while grammatically neuter in Greek (πνεῦμα, pneuma — a neuter noun), is referred to by Jesus with masculine pronouns in the

Gospel of John. In John 16:13-14, Jesus says of the Spirit: 'When he comes... he will guide you into all truth... he will glorify me.' The masculine pronoun is used deliberately despite the neuter grammatical gender of the noun — a grammatical irregularity that signals personal, not merely generic, identity.

The Trinitarian Stakes

Removing masculine language from God is not simply about pronouns. It unravels the relational structure of the Trinity as Scripture reveals it. 'Father' and 'Son' are not interchangeable with 'Parent' and 'Child' — they carry specific relational meaning about origin, authority, and love within the Godhead that gender-neutral language simply cannot preserve.

6. The Authority of Scripture Over Cultural Revision

Behind the push to revise divine language lies a particular view of Scripture: that the Bible is a human document reflecting human cultures, and that its language can and should be updated to reflect contemporary values. This is the hermeneutic of liberal theology, and conservative Christianity has consistently and rightly rejected it.

The conservative position is that Scripture is the inspired Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16), breathed out by the Holy Spirit through human authors, and therefore carries divine authority in all that it affirms — including its language for God. God did not accidentally reveal Himself with masculine language in a culture that happened to be patriarchal. He chose that language. And that choice is authoritative.

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." — 2

Timothy 3:16, ESV

The revisionist position implicitly claims that the contemporary interpreter knows better than the inspired text how God should be addressed. This is not a modest scholarly observation; it is an act of profound theological presumption. It places the judgment of the

interpreter above the self-disclosure of God — which is precisely the error that every generation of heresy has made in some form.

Fidelity to Scripture does not require us to believe that God is biologically male. It does require us to address God as He has revealed Himself to be addressed — as Father, as He, as Lord — because these are not human inventions. They are divine gifts of revelation, graciously given so that we might know God rightly.

Cross-references: 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21; Isaiah 40:8; Psalm 19:7-9; Deuteronomy 4:2; Revelation 22:18-19

Discussion Questions

1. Why does it matter whether we use masculine or feminine language for God? Is this simply a matter of preference, or is there something theologically at stake?
2. Examine the simile in Isaiah 49:15 closely. What is God actually claiming about Himself in that verse? How does an accurate reading of the literary form (simile) affect the interpretation?
3. If God is spirit and has no biological sex, why does Scripture consistently use masculine language rather than gender-neutral language? What does this tell us about the nature of divine revelation?
4. Jesus knew perfectly well the full nature of God. He consistently used masculine language and addressed God as Father. What is the theological significance of this for the debate over gendered language?
5. How does the Trinitarian formula in Matthew 28:19 — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — depend on gendered language? What is lost if those terms are replaced with 'Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer' or similar substitutes?
6. The surrounding pagan cultures of Israel worshipped goddesses. How does this historical fact strengthen (rather than weaken) the

case that Scripture's masculine language for God is a deliberate theological choice?

7. How would you respond charitably but firmly to a church member who argues that calling God 'she' is perfectly acceptable because 'God is beyond gender'?

Closing: Knowing God as He Has Revealed Himself

The question of how we address God is not a secondary one. Prayer, worship, Scripture reading, preaching, and theology all involve speaking of and to God — and the language we use either conforms to His self-revelation or substitutes our own preferences for it. The God who calls Himself Father is not waiting for us to correct Him.

For the believer who takes Scripture seriously, the right response to the revisionist pressure is neither panic nor hostility but clarity: this is what the Bible says, this is why it says it, and we trust the wisdom of God over the fashions of our age. The masculine language of Scripture is not a cage to be escaped; it is a gift to be received — the language in which the eternal God has graciously chosen to be known.

The doctrine of divine fatherhood, in particular, is one of the most pastorally rich in all of Scripture. Those who have experienced painful or absent earthly fathers may find the very concept difficult. Yet it is precisely because God is the perfect Father — not like broken human fathers — that the title is worth receiving and defending. He is the Father from whom every family in heaven and earth is named (Ephesians 3:14–15). He disciplines in love, provides unfailingly, and never abandons His children (Matthew 7:9–11; Hebrews 12:5–11). That Father deserves to be known by the name He has given.

"For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named." — Ephesians 3:14-15, ESV

Key Cross-References

Divine Fatherhood: Deuteronomy 32:6; Psalm 68:5; Isaiah 63:16; 64:8; Malachi 2:10; Matthew 6:9; John 20:17; Galatians 4:4-6; Romans 8:15

God as King: Psalm 10:16; 47:2; 103:19; Isaiah 44:6; 1 Timothy 1:17; Revelation 19:6

God as Husband/Covenant Lord: Isaiah 54:5; Jeremiah 3:14; Hosea 2:16; Ezekiel 16:8; Ephesians 5:25-32

Inspiration and Authority of Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21; Hebrews 4:12

Trinitarian Formula: Matthew 28:19; John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13-14; 2 Corinthians 13:14

Feminine Similes (rightly understood): Isaiah 49:15; 66:13; Matthew 23:37

God as Spirit: John 4:24; Deuteronomy 4:15-16

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