

The feminine and mother facets of Go

The gender of God in the original texts and Jewish tradition (All the text in this section is 100% lifted from its source.)

At Creation, God is described in both masculine and feminine imagery in the opening verses of Genesis. God (a masculine noun) creates by his Word, and life begins as the spirit (a feminine noun) of God hovers over the earth with her life-giving breath.

The Hebrew word for God in Genesis 1 is *Elohim*. So, in the beginning, *Elohim* created the heavens and the earth. The *ruach Elohim* of Genesis 1:2 is a feminine noun accompanied with a feminine-ending verb form, *m'rechephet*. Thus, the "spirit of God hovering" is a metaphorical allusion to the feminine in God. The verb *m'rechephet* is identical to the verb used in Deuteronomy 32:11 where God is compared to a mother eagle: God upholds Israel as an eagle hovers and spreads her wings. (It is not customary to use the pronoun She to identify the spirit, but in the Hebrew, the Spirit cannot be identified with the pronoun He, according to many Hebrew scholars.)

[Source](#), CBE International, an organization that advocates for "the biblical and historical case for women's equality"

In the Hebrew Bible (and in translations to languages with a she/he dichotomy) God is referred to as "he". God might be a 'He' in the Bible but non-Hebrew-literate individuals do not always know that in Hebrew language, grammatical gender is NOT an indicator of actual gender. Hebrew nouns have grammatical gender. Each object is masculine or feminine.

There are no gender-neutral pronouns in Hebrew, i.e. there is no equivalent of the English "it". Everything is a "he" or a "she". The spirit of God *Ruach Elohim* (Genesis 1:2) is a feminine noun. So is the *Shekhinah* - the Presence of God. Does this mean the Spirit of God and the Presence of God are female?

Since the titles for God in the Hebrew Bible (*Elohim*, *El*, *Adonai*) are masculine nouns, God is called "he". A book *sefer* is a masculine noun too. So a book is also called "he". God is no more male than a book is male.

[Source](#), ColorQ, an old-looking website that discusses relationships between minority ethnic groups... there's no author, but I have double checked and "the language lacks gender-neutral terms for people and groups of people." (NY Times, ha)

The reason God is referred to as “he” is largely due to the limitations of language. There is no “divine” non-gender in the biblical languages (or in English) that we can use when talking and writing about God; so we are limited to the grammatical genders of masculine and feminine in Hebrew, and masculine, feminine and neuter in the Greek. Many Biblical names and titles of God, such as *Yahweh*, *Elohim*, *Adonai*, *Theos* and *Kurios* are grammatically masculine which is the reason why masculine pronouns are used in association with these words.

The Greek word for “Spirit” (*pneuma*), however, is grammatically neuter, and so neuter pronouns (corresponding to “it”) are often used in reference to the Holy Spirit in the Greek text of the New Testament (e.g., [John 14:17](#); [Rom. 8:16](#), [26b](#)). Nevertheless, these Greek neuter pronouns are usually translated into English as masculine pronouns (such as “he”) simply so that the Holy Spirit does not seem impersonal.

The Hebrew word for “Spirit” (*ruach*), on the other hand, is grammatically feminine, and some early churches referred to the Holy Spirit in feminine terms. The Syriac Church used feminine pronouns (corresponding to “she”) when speaking and writing about the Holy Spirit until about 400 AD.

The fact that the word “Spirit” is neuter in the Greek Scriptures and feminine in the Hebrew Scriptures does not mean that the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is actually neuter or feminine. Similarly, the fact that God is referred to with masculine pronouns in the Scriptures does not mean that God is actually masculine.

[Source](#), Marg Mowczko, she writes “exploring the biblical theology of Christian egalitarianism.

[...] Within this framework, YHWH in the Bible is masculine. Most scholars believe that this is irrelevant, claiming, e.g.:

The grammatical forms for God are masculine and the representations of God are mostly masculine. Although God does use a comparison to a woman in childbirth (Isa 42:14), nonetheless there is a strong scholarly consensus that God is regarded as nonsexual. “If sex must be applied to Israel’s deity, it would be monosex, and this is either an incompleteness or a contradiction in terms.”

Some biblical scholars suggest that YHWH is above gender, because YHWH is so fundamentally different from humans that it is inappropriate to use any human terminology of God. This was voiced frequently in medieval Jewish philosophy, and as a result this viewpoint is influential today [...] and resonates strongly in modern theology

[Source](#), TheTorah.com - this is lengthy but goes much deeper into the masculine depictions, feminine depictions, and Jewish understandings of the gender of God throughout time. I highly recommend this one.

Biblical descriptions of God as feminine

God described through metaphors of animal mothers

- As an enraged mother bear robbed of her cubs
 - Hosea 13:8 I will meet them as a bear that is bereaved of her whelps, and will rend the caul of their heart, and there will I devour them like a lion: the wild beast shall tear them. (KJV)
- Many times likened to a bird who protects her young under the safety and shelter of her wings (KJV)
 - Ruth 2:12 The LORD recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust.
 - Psalm 17:8 Keep me as the apple of the eye, Hide me under the shadow of thy wings,
 - Psalm 36:7 How excellent is thy lovingkindness, O God! Therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of thy wings.
 - Psalm 57:1 Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me: For my soul trusteth in thee: Yea, in the shadow of thy wings will I make my refuge, until these calamities be overpast.
 - Psalm 61:4 I will abide in thy tabernacle for ever: I will trust in the covert of thy wings. Selah.
 - Deut 32:11-12 ¹As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings: So the LORD alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him.
- In the New Testament, Jesus described his longing to protect Jerusalem using the analogy of a mother hen who gathers her chicks under her wings (Luke 13:34; Matt. 13:33 and 23:37).

God as womb/birthing/human mother/midwife

- John 3:3-8 - must be born again. John 1:12, John 4:7, and John 16:21 speak of being born of God and God bringing forth a new humanity like the pangs of a woman in labor.
- Isaiah 42:14 "as a woman in labour", 66:13 "As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you", Isaiah 46:3 "who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb" (ESV)
- Hosea 11:3-4 "...[I]t was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up by their arms [...] and I bent down to them and fed them." (ESV)
- Deut 32:18 "And you forgot the God who gave you birth." (ESV)
- God's womb in Job:
 - Job 38:8 Or who shut up the sea with doors, When it brake forth, as if it had issued out of the womb?
 - Job 38:28-29 Hath the rain a father? Or who hath begotten the drops of dew? Out of whose womb came the ice? And the hoary frost of heaven, who hath gendered it?
- Gal 4:19 Paul speaking and sharing in God's childbearing pains for his spiritual children
 - My little children, of whom I travail *in* birth again until Christ be formed *in* you,

- Romans 8:22 From the beginning to now the entire creation has been groaning in one great act of giving birth (creation)
- From the word “womb” (rehem) comes the verb “to have compassion” (raham), and the phrase “Yahweh’s compassionate (raham) and gracious” repeatedly appears in the Hebrew scripture to describe the merciful and saving acts of God in history. (Deut. 4:31; 2 Chronicles 30:9; Nehemiah 9:17; Ps 78:38; 86:16; 103:8; 111:4; 112:4; 145:8; John 4:7 These verses show images of God who demonstrates “womb-like compassion” for her child Israel.
- God as midwife (KJV):
 - Psalm 22:9 – 11: But thou art he that took me out of the womb: Thou didst make me hope when I was upon my mother's breasts. I was cast upon thee from the womb: Thou art my God from my mother's belly. Be not far from me; for trouble is near; For there is none to help.
 - Psalm 71:6: By thee have I been holden up from the womb: Thou art he that took me out of my mother's bowels: My praise shall be continually of thee.
 - Isaiah 66:9 Shall I bring to the birth, and not cause to bring forth? saith the LORD: shall I cause to bring forth, and shut the womb? saith thy God.

God as a nursing mother

- Isaiah 49:15 “Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?” (ESV)
- Numbers 11:12 “Did I conceive all this people? Did I give them birth, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a nursing child,’ to the land that you swore to give their fathers?” (ESV)
- 1 Peter 2:2 – 3 “Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.” (ESV)
- Note : Some have used John 7:38 and the that says “Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water” to refers to God’s heart, but this passage in fact refers to the heart of whomever believes in Jesus.
 - Some translate John 7:38 as saying “From his breast shall flow the fountains of living water,” but I haven’t found this in published translations. However, when we check the [interlinear](#), we notice that the word for “breast,” κοιλίας, which is a feminine noun that can refer to the womb, but especially the innermost being.

God compared to a woman

- Psalm 123:2 God referred to as a master and as a mistress
 - Behold, as the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their masters, and as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress; so our eyes wait upon the LORD our God, until that he have mercy upon us. (KJV)
- Jesus likens God and God's kingdom to the woman searching for her missing coin (Luke 15:8-10) and as a woman baking bread (Matt 13:33).
- Described as Wisdom / Sophia throughout the first 9 chapters of Proverbs (ex. 4:13 "she is your life, giver of life") Also often in the apocryphal books of Wisdom of Solomon (7:22 "she is fashioner of all things", 8:1 "she orders all things") and Sirach (24:1-27 where She (aka wisdom) came from the mouth of God, she is God’s word, breath, spirit.)

- Gen 2:7, Ps 104: 29; John 3:8 God referred to as *Ruah*, feminine Hebrew word meaning breath, wind, inspiration or spirit; presence that gives life
- *Rachamin*, Hebrew word for compassion – root word, *rahan*, means womb
 - Context example : When Moses asked to see God’s glory and God passed before him, God called out His name. Jewish people call this the Thirteen Attributes of God. “*And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD God, merciful [rachum]and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth’*”(Exod. 34:6). Verse seven continues with the enumeration of God’s attributes. Out of 12 translations I checked, only two translate *rachumas* “compassionate” instead of “merciful.” In Judaism, compassion is the fourth attribute, as they list “the LORD,” “the LORD,” and “God,” as the first three attributes. Christians, on the other hand, would most likely say compassion was the first attribute listed. ([source](#))
- *El Shaddai* – God of the mountains or God of the breasts or many-breasted-one, which makes much more sense in the context of where God first reveals God's self as *El Shaddai*. God is speaking to Abram in Gen 17:2 and says He/she will greatly increase Abram's numbers. Then again, God uses this name when speaking to Jacob (Gen 35:11) and tells him to "be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins". More notes on El Shaddai below.
 - [El-Shaddai and bountiful provision](#)
 - [El-Shaddai and breasts in the Bible](#)

Other interesting things

- God isn’t referred to as Father much in the Hebrew Bible, but more as a political or royal figure. It’s Jesus who first fully refers to God as Father. (*Abba*, in Aramaic, means “father” specifically, not “parent.”) ([Source](#), Catholic News Agency)
- While Jesus was a man, his maleness is not emphasized in the New Testament. For instance in Philippians 2:7, 1 Timothy 2:5, and 1 Corinthians 15:47, the Greek word translated as “man” (*anthrōpos*) actually means a “person” or a “human being”. In fact, Jesus is rarely referred to in the Greek as *anēr* (man); he is most commonly referred to as *anthrōpos* (a human being). (This seems like a vague thing to me, not all would find it compelling in any particular way, but the lack of emphasis on his maleness is indeed interesting, if that’s something you’re looking for.) ([Source](#), Marg Mowczko)
- The Chinese language has a special genderless pronoun used in reference to divinity. The Chinese character for “he” contains the character for “human” and so is unsuitable when referring to deity. ([Source](#), Marg Mowczko)
- That some early Christians regarded the Holy Spirit as profoundly feminine is demonstrated in this quotation from the Valentinian-Gnostic Gospel of Philip: “Some said Mary became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. They are wrong and do not know what they are saying. When did a woman ever get pregnant by a woman?” Marvin Meyer, “The Gospel of Philip”, The Nag

Hammadi Scriptures (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007). ([Source](#), Marg Mowczko)

- [I highly recommend this poem by Allison Woodard that beautifully and intimately describes God as our mother.](#) (This is art and not argument.)

Church History: God as Mother in Christian history

“Ambrose, Chrysostom, Origen, Irenaeus, and Augustine all describe God in maternal terms.¹⁶ [...] Others include Gregory of Nyssa (395), The Venerable Bede (673-735), Peter Lombard (1110-64), Thomas Aquinas (1125-74), Mechild of Magdeburg, (1210-80), St. Bonaventure (1221-74), Catherine of Siena (1347-80), Martin Luther (1483-1546) and Count Zinzendorf (1700-60).

“From this brief study we note how leaders throughout church history employed feminine images for God. We moderns by comparison may wish to use a balance of feminine and masculine metaphors for God used by the historic church.” ([CBE International](#))

The 12th century saw an increase in feminine and motherly imagery used to describe the Christ by male theologians. “[...] the concept of the motherhood of God was well known in the thirteenth century to followers of St. Francis, and to those familiar with the *Ancrene Riwe*, with St. Anselm, and with the writings of Mechthild of Hakborn.” ([Source](#))

Clement of Alexandria (150 - 215)

Clement of Alexandria notably mixes his metaphors when describing God the Father and also wrote “The Word (Christ) is everything to His little ones, both father and mother.” ([Gender and the Nicene Creed](#), page 36)

“This is our nourishment, the milk flowing from the father by which alone we little ones are fed. . . . Therefore, we fly trustfully to the ‘care-banishing breast’ of God the father; the breast that is the Word, who is the only one who can truly bestow on us the milk of love. Only those who nurse at the breast are blessed . . . little ones who seek the Word, the craved-for-milk is given from the Father’s breasts of love for man.”¹⁷ “The Word [Christ] is everything to His little ones, both father and mother.” (From *Christ the Educator*) ([CBE International](#))

St. John Chrysostom (c. 349 - 407)

“[...] in his *Baptismal Instructions*, St. John chrysostom writes: ‘Just as a woman nurtures her offspring with her own blood and milk, so also Christ continuously nurtures with his own blood those whom He has begotten.’”

St. John also mentions the motherhood of God in his *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*. ([CBE International](#)) “Thus also do affectionate fathers act, and mothers that love their children; when they

see their little children forsake their society, and playing with those of their own age, they cause their servants to enact many fearful things, that by such fear they may be constrained to flee for refuge to their mother's bosom. Even so doth God oftentimes hold out some kind of threat; not that He may bring it upon us, but that He may draw us unto Himself.” ([Homily X](#), page 67)

St. Augustine of Hippo (354 - 430)

St. Augustine speaks of Christ as a nursing mother:

“He who has promised us heavenly food has nourished us on milk, having recourse to a mother's tenderness. For just as a mother, suckling her infant, transfers from her flesh the very same food which otherwise would be unsuited to a babe... so our Lord, in order to convert His wisdom into milk for our benefit came to us clothed in flesh.”

In his *Confessions* he wrote, “For ‘the Word was made flesh,’ that Thy wisdom, whereby Thou createdst all things, might provide milk for our infant state.”²⁶ ([Gender and the Nicene Creed](#), page 37)

William of St. Thierry (c. 1075 - 1148)

William of St. Thierry discusses Mother God nourishing the Christian church in powerful images of motherhood:

“... it is your breasts, O eternal Wisdom, that nourish the holy infancy of your little ones.... Since that everlasting blessed union and the kiss of eternity are denied the Bride [the Church] on account of her human condition and weakness, she turns to your bosom; and not attaining to that mouth of yours, she puts her mouth to your breasts instead...” ([Jesus as Mother](#), page 26, shared after *Medieval Religion* in this link)

St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 - 1053)

“Bernard of Clairvaux, whose use of maternal imagery for male figures is more extensive and complex than that of any other twelfth-century figure, uses “mother” to describe Jesus, Mose, Peter, Paul, prelates in general, abbots in general, and, more frequently, himself as abbot. To Bernard, the maternal image is almost without exception elaborated not as giving birth or even as conceiving or sheltering in a womb but as nurturing, particularly suckling.” ([Jesus as Mother](#), page 115)

“Do not let the roughness of our life frighten your tender years. If you feel the stings of temptation . . . suck not so much the wounds as the breasts of the Crucified. He will be your mother, and you will be his son . . .” (Cited in [Gender and the Nicene Creed](#), page 37)

St. Anselm (1033 - 1109)

In [this prayer to St. Paul](#), St. Anselm refers to both Paul and the Christ as mother, echoing Paul's own words in 1 Thess and Galatians and Jesus's words, as well. See notes at the bottom of the linked

page for more background and find more of the prayer in [Jesus as Mother](#), pages 113-115.

And you, Jesus, are you not also a mother?
Are you not the mother who, like a hen,
gathers her chickens under her wings?
Truly, Lord, you are a mother;
for both they who are in labour
and they who are brought forth
are accepted by you.

[A Song of Anselm](#) shares “Jesus, like a mother you gather your people to you; you are gentle with us as a mother with her children.”

Meister Eckhart (1260 - 1328)

“Medieval mystic Meister Eckhart described God’s activity: “What does God do all day long? God gives birth. From all eternity God lies on a maternity bed giving birth to all. God is creating this whole universe full and entire in this present moment” ([Source](#))

Julian of Norwich (1342 - 1423)

Julian of Norwich was an English mystic in the Middle Ages (and has a feast day in the Anglican liturgical calendar). She wrote extensively on this theme.

“She retains the tradition of calling on God as our Father, which Jesus himself initiated, but without subordinating her Mother images to her Father images: “as truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother.” Each member of the Trinity is described in both male and female language, and all such language is understood as metaphor for the Uncreated Eternal. Julian’s fresh and balanced images assure us that seeking a feminine image of God within orthodox Christian theology is not a passing cultural fad.” (Source : [A short piece on Julian of Norwich and some of her theology](#))

Below are [excerpts of her work. Showings](#).

But often when our falling and our wretchedness are shown to us, we are so much afraid and so greatly ashamed of ourselves that we scarcely know where we can put ourselves. But then our courteous Mother does not wish us to flee away, for nothing would be less pleasing to him; but he then wants us to behave like a child. For when it is distressed and frightened, it runs quickly to its mother; and if it can do no more, it calls to the mother for help with all its might. So he wants us to act as a meek child, saying: My kind Mother, my gracious Mother, my beloved Mother, have mercy on me. I have made myself filthy and unlike you, and I may not and cannot make it right except with your help and grace.

. . . And then he wants us to show a child’s characteristics, which always naturally trusts in its mother’s love in well-being and in woe.

“As truly as God is our Father, so is truly God our Mother. Our Father wills, our Mother works, our good Lord the Holy Spirit confirms. . . . And so Jesus is our true Mother in nature by our first creation, and he is our true Mother in grace by taking our created nature.” “ God Almighty is our loving Father, and God all wisdom is our loving Mother, with the love and goodness of the Holy Spirit.”

See more: [excerpt from *Revelations of Divine Love*](#) and [more quotations from Julian of Norwich](#)

St. Catherine of Siena (1347 - 1380)

“St. Catherine of Siena wrote to Pope Urban VI, urging him to ‘amend in truth those who are feeding at the breast of your sweet Spouse.” ([Gender and the Nicene Creed](#), page 37)

St. Teresa of Avila (1515 - 1582)

“For from those divine breasts where it seems God is always sustaining the soul, there flow streams of milk bringing comfort to all the people.” (From *The Interior Castle*, [see excerpt here](#), page 49)

Further reading

- I haven’t read much of it, but [Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages](#) by Caroline Walker Bynum comes highly recommended from many resources I found on this topic. Some is available on Google Books in the link, and I’ve referenced it extensively above.
- [Gender and the Nicene Creed](#) by Elizabeth Rankin Geltz (often referenced above) is available in excerpts as a pdf on Google Books. I recommend this, and I’ve found it to be very digestible. She notes on page 39:

“Yes, ‘We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ.’ When I repeat these words of the Nicene Creed, I mean: ‘**I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, who is imaged as both male and female, by Jesus himself and throughout the tradition of our church.**’ When will this tradition be recovered in the liturgy and creeds of our church?” (emphasis mine)
- [Article from U.S. Catholic on calling God “Mother”](#) (2014)
 - “In fact, every recent pope since John Paul I has made some reference to the value of understanding God like a mother.”