

FATHER-RULER: THE MEANING OF THE METAPHOR "FATHER" FOR GOD IN THE BIBLE

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One of the more emotional topics in the Church today is the use of the title "Father" for God. "Father God" is no longer a term that unites all people.

On the one hand, goddess feminists are rejecting Judaism and Christianity as viable religions for today. One major reason is this term. Mary Daly, in her anti-Christian diatribe, is often quoted: "If God in 'his' heaven is a father ruling 'his' people, then it is in the 'nature' of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male-dominated."¹ Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* has the character Shug Avery explain to the protagonist Celie: "When I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest. You mad cause he don't seem to listen to your prayers. Humph! Do the mayor listen to anything colored say?"² Carol P. Christ writes: "I left the church . . . because I concluded that patriarchy was deeply rooted in Christianity's core symbolism of God the Father and Son."³ Daly and C. Christ are now witches. Walker is a pantheist.

But similar statements are also being made in the Christian community. Sallie McFague, a religious liberal, writes that God the Father is a Biblical model. Nevertheless, "the feminist critique of God as father centers on the *dominance* of this one model to the exclusion of others, and on the *failure* of this model to deal with the anomaly presented by those whose experience is not included by this model."⁴ Her words are not too different from those of evangelical pastor Paul R. Smith: "The passion of my life has been to discern what God is saying to the church today and to translate that into practical reality within the local church." To speak of God exclusively in male terms "seriously distorts our faith" by implying that "God is more 'masculine' than 'feminine' as we commonly understand those terms" and "men are more like

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¹ M. Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (2d ed.; Boston: Beacon, 1985) 13.

² A. Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982) 166.

³ C. P. Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987) 3.

⁴ S. McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 145.

God than women, a belief which buttresses the idea that only men should be in charge."⁵

On the other hand, conservatives, who may or may not treat the Bible as reliable, are insisting on the priority of God as Father and the literal truth of God as Father. Roland Mushat Frye states: "For the church to adopt inclusive feminist language for the deity would disrupt and destroy the careful, nuanced, and balanced formulations that for centuries have made it possible to proclaim the three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, whom Christians encounter as divine, within a single and undivided godhead."⁶ And Donald G. Bloesch writes: "When we speak of God as Father in the biblical sense, it should be borne in mind that this is not a mere symbol. . . . When Father refers to God, . . . the word is not figurative, but closer to being literal in that it is practically transparent to what it signifies." According to Bloesch, God as masculine has creativeness, initiative and aggressiveness. Femininity is receptivity, openness, spontaneity, intuitiveness.⁷ Gordon Dalbey takes a psychological perspective. Incorporating the thoughts of Robert Bly and other men's movement writers he writes: "The natural inclination to attribute ultimate life to the mother/woman simply must be overcome by a supernatural power [who], . . . while encompassing the female, must nevertheless project a male persona."⁸ John L. McKenzie simply declares without proof: "God is, of course, masculine, but not in the sense of sexual distinction."⁹

The literature on this topic is mammoth. What I would like to do in this brief essay is clarify the nature of metaphor, simile and analogy and suggest an aspect of metaphor—the interconnection of an image—that can help better explain the significance of God as Father.¹⁰

I. THE NATURE OF METAPHOR, SIMILE AND ANALOGY

In today's secondary literature on the Bible I have found three basic archetypes for the significance of metaphor. For scholars such as Frye, Bloesch and Susan Foh, God the Father is a more literal term than God as "mother." Frye states that God the Father is a metaphor. A metaphor "*names*." It "carries

⁵ P. R. Smith, *Is It Okay to Call God Mother? Considering the Feminine Face of God* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993) 24, 28, 42.

⁶ R. M. Frye, "Language for God and Feminist Language: A Literary and Rhetorical Analysis," *Int* 43 (January 1989) 56; cf. E. Achtemeier, "Why God Is Not Mother," *Christianity Today* 37 (August 16, 1993) 17–23.

⁷ D. G. Bloesch, *The Battle for the Trinity: The Debate over Inclusive God-Language* (Ann Arbor: Servant, 1985) 35, 37.

⁸ G. Dalbey, *Healing the Masculine Soul: An Affirming Message for Men and the Women Who Love Them* (Dallas: Word, 1988) 42. Ironically, aspects of the men's movement are neopagan in practice. For a critique see W. D. Spencer, *The Goddess Revival* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), chap. 3.

⁹ J. L. McKenzie, *The Two-Edged Sword: An Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1956) 94.

¹⁰ In W. D. Spencer, *The Goddess Revival*, I amplify the discussion in "God Is Invisible" and "God Is Not Male" (chaps. 6–7).

a word or phrase *far beyond* its ordinary lexical meaning so as to provide a fuller and more direct understanding of the subject." When the Bible uses metaphors to refer to God, these metaphors are unique, "transparent to the divine reality."¹¹ In contrast, according to Frye, a simile merely "compares." It likens words to their dictionary sense in some particular way clarified or even defined by the context. Similes are limited. The similes for God as mother "are not and do not claim to be transparent to personal identity," unlike the metaphors for God the Father. He claims these distinctions come from the time of the early Greek rhetoricians.¹²

Preceding Frye's 1989 article is Susan Foh's 1979 study. She is careful to repeat that

God is spirit, and as such, is beyond the categories male and female. . . . Nonetheless, he has consistently revealed himself as Father in the God-breathed Scriptures. . . . The masculine terminology has significance because God has given the man authority in the family (husband) and in the church (elder), rather than the woman.¹³

What are the principles underlying her conclusions? Like Frye she considers a metaphor to be more important than a simile. Foh writes that metaphors and similes both compare, both are types of analogies. But paternal images for God (metaphors) describe the person of God ("is") while maternal images for God (similes) describe an action of God ("as"). When one action is compared to another action, nothing is revealed of the person.¹⁴

God, on the other hand, does not seem to distinguish between person and action. Rather, action tells us about the person: "You will know them by their fruits" (Matt 7:20). God's earliest self-revelation is by action: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). The ten commandments are preceded by a description of God's actions for Israel: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exod 20:2). When a child asks a parent the reason for celebrating Passover the parent is to answer with a lengthy description of God's actions, beginning as follows: "With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (13:14).¹⁵

Bloesch has received much response to his view. He concludes that God the Father is more literal. It is an analogy, not a metaphor: "Father, Son, Lord, Creator, Redeemer, Judge, and Savior are analogical and literal terms"¹⁶ These are root ontological symbols. Good shepherd, true vine, rock,

¹¹ Frye, "Language" 51-52, 54-55.

¹² *Ibid.* 51, 53. For a similar view see also G. Leonard, I. MacKenzie and P. Toon, *Let God Be God* (Wilton: Morehouse, 1989) 54.

¹³ S. Foh, *Women and the Word of God: A Response to Biblical Feminism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 163.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 151-152.

¹⁵ See also Deut 5:6; Lev 19:36; 25:38; Exod 15:26; Isa 44:6-8; 45:5-6; Jer 27:4-5; 32:17-23; 33:2; Neh 9:6; Jonah 1:9; John 1:1-15; Acts 4:24; 14:15; 17:24; Rom 11:36; Col 1:15-19; Heb 1:1-4; Rev 3:14; 4:11.

¹⁶ Bloesch, *Battle* 35-36.

fortress, and God as mother are metaphorical and merely symbolic. He considers metaphors and analogies to be types of symbols. "Symbol" refers to "any kind of imagistic language whose meaning cannot be directly comprehended by theoretical reason."¹⁷ Metaphorical knowledge, according to Bloesch, "alludes to that which escapes conceptualization." It is "only intuitive awareness," "a suggested likeness between two things that are manifestly dissimilar." On the other hand, an analogy conveys conceptual content. It is "real" and "objective" knowledge. It "presupposes an underlying similarity or congruity."¹⁸

Whether someone views God as primarily masculine has nothing to do with her or his view of the Bible. Foh speaks of the Bible as "God-breathed Scriptures."¹⁹ Bloesch speaks of the Bible as "translucent," not transparent to the Word of God.²⁰ In contrast, according to Bloesch, scholars who treat the Bible as "inerrant" treat the Word of God as "transparent" in the Bible. For them the Bible is a verbal revelation from God and a document of revealed propositions.²¹

If Bloesch thinks a metaphor is not an analogy, Sallie McFague concludes that all analogies are metaphors. Whenever you spot "a thread of similarity between two dissimilar objects, events, or whatever, one of which is better known than the other, and using the better-known one as a way of speaking about the lesser known" you have a metaphor.²² To McFague, for example, "God is Father" is a metaphor and an analogy. "This is a chair" and "Jesus is the Savior" are both examples of metaphorical thinking.²³

My own view is that analogies may be literal or figurative. "Literal," according to *Webster's Dictionary*, refers to the "ordinary meaning" or "actual denotation" of a word.²⁴ In content, figurative analogies such as metaphors and similes are the same. Their only difference is the manner of statement. Moreover metaphors and similes reveal as much content, concept and revelation as literal language.

According to *Webster's Dictionary* an "analogy" is "a similarity or likeness between things in some circumstances or effects, when the things are otherwise entirely different," and "an explaining of something by comparing it point by point with something else."²⁵ An "analogy" is "a comparison of two generally dissimilar things that are similar in one way, with the inference that they must be similar in a second way."²⁶ In other words, metaphors and similes compare two things of unlike nature. For example, "Jesus

¹⁷ Ibid. 20–21, 35–36.

¹⁸ Ibid. 21.

¹⁹ Foh, *Women* 163.

²⁰ Bloesch, *Battle* 63.

²¹ Ibid. 62.

²² McFague, *Metaphorical* 15.

²³ Ibid. 16–17. R. C. Duck adopts her view in *Gender and the Name of God: The Trinitarian Baptismal Formula* (New York: Pilgrim, 1991) 14.

²⁴ N. Webster, *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (2d ed.; ed. J. L. McKechnie; New York: Dorset and Baber, 1983) 1055.

²⁵ Ibid. 64.

²⁶ Z. Seech, *Logic in Everyday Life: Practical Reasoning Skills* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1988) 81.

is God" is literal. "Jesus" and "God" are of like nature. Neither "Jesus" nor "God" is a figurative term or image. "Jesus is a carpenter like Joseph" is a literal analogy. Both "Jesus" and "carpenter" are literal terms of like nature. "Jesus is Savior" and "God is Father" are analogies that are also metaphors. "Jesus is like a Savior" and "God is like a Father" are analogies that are also similes. "Jesus" and "God" are literal names. "Savior" and "Father" are figurative terms or images. No theological or revelational difference exists between "Jesus is Savior" and "Jesus is like a Savior" or "God is Father" and "God is like a Father." The difference between metaphor and simile is not a difference of identity and likeness. Rather, the difference is how the author asserts or states a comparison.²⁷

What proof can we summon that metaphor and simile are similar in identity and likeness? By delving back into ancient times we can discover that Greek and Roman rhetoricians saw metaphor and simile as different in style but not in content. Aristotle explains in the *Art of Rhetoric*: "The simile also is a metaphor; for there is very little difference. . . . Similes must be used like metaphors, which only differ in the manner stated. . . . All that are approved as metaphors will obviously also serve as similes which are metaphors without the details." In *Poetics* Aristotle explains the relation between metaphor and analogy: "When B is to A as D is to C, then instead of B the poet will say D and B instead of D. . . . For instance, a cup is to Dionysus what a shield is to Ares; so he will call the cup 'Dionysus' shield' and the shield 'Ares' cup.'" In *Rhetoric* Aristotle gives an example of an untrue analogy: "Iphicrates, when they tried to force his son to perform public services because he was tall, although under the legal age, said: 'If you consider tall boys men, you must vote that short men are boys.'"²⁸

Demetrius has a similar view: "A simile is an expanded metaphor." It is less risky. Longinus states: "Bold metaphors are softened by inserting 'as if.'" According to Quintilian, metaphor is a shorter form of simile. In a metaphor "a noun or a verb is transferred from the place to where it properly belongs to another where there is either no literal term or the transferred is better than the literal." Despite what Frye states, early Greek rhetoricians do not make the distinctions between metaphor and simile that he does.²⁹

What these Greek and Latin rhetoricians state is also affirmed in the Bible. At one point I listed only the similes in the gospel of Luke. As I did so, however, I discovered that it was ripping Bible passages into shreds. Often Biblical speakers will interchange simile and metaphor. For instance, in Luke 11:34–36 Jesus begins with an extended metaphor: "The lamp of the body is your eye. Whenever your eye may be healthy, also your whole body is full of light; but when you may be evil, also your body is in darkness.

²⁷ See also G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 144; B. Wren, *What Language Shall I Borrow? God-Talk in Worship: A Male Response to Feminist Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 97.

²⁸ Aristotle *Art of Rhetoric* 3.4; *Poetics* 28; *Rhetoric* 2.23.17. Aristotle treats analogy as one type of metaphor. He also uses analogy in nonfigurative terms.

²⁹ Demetrius *On Style* 2.80; Longinus *On the Sublime* 22.3; Quintilian *Institutio Oratoria* 8.6.5, 8; cf. Frye, "Language" 54.

Therefore watch out lest the light, the one in you, is in darkness. Therefore if your whole body is full of light, not having any part in darkness, you will be completely full of light.” Jesus concludes with an extended simile: “as (*hōs*) whenever the lamp with its ray gives you light” (my translation). Certainly neither the metaphorical nor the simile section is more literal than the other. One does not name, another compare. The same images of light and darkness are used throughout. Jesus uses the final simile to clarify the image—a lamp with rays—and to conclude dramatically the comparison.

Ironically, in one place where Jesus uses motherhood as an image for himself he uses both metaphor and simile: “How often have I desired to gather your children (“gather” and “children” are metaphors) as (*hon tropon* begins the more explicit simile portion) a hen gathers her brood under her wings” (13:34).

Similarly in the parable of the rich person in 12:16–21 the parable is an extended metaphor, and the conclusion is a metaphor in the form of a simile. In the parable in 12:35–38 Jesus begins with a brief metaphor followed by an extended simile. His second parable about being “ready” (12:40) is developed with an extended metaphor (12:39).

Thus only because someone has some other agenda would one argue that either metaphor or simile is more literal or more important than the other. Both metaphors and similes are similar, figurative ways to express analogies. Rather, as interpreters in order to reach the truth we need to understand that (1) we have a concept explained by its image, (2) we must keep aware constantly of the like-unlike analogy between the concept and the image, and (3) we must go on to evaluate the effect of the image.

Figurative language, whether metaphor or simile, should also be evaluated by other aspects. According to Brian Wren, followed by G. B. Caird, metaphors can be simple or compound depending on the points of similarity or resemblance between the literal concept and the figurative image.³⁰ “Degree of correspondence” is the extent of the likeness between the literal concept and the image. For example, the only correspondence between God and the unjust judge of 18:1–6 is that both have the power to vindicate. Jesus mainly contrasts the unjust judge and God (18:6–8). God and the judge have little correspondence. “Degree of development” is the extent to which the author develops the elements of a certain image in any given instance. An example is Luke 8, where Jesus extensively develops the comparison between receptivity of listeners and fertility of soil in the parable of the sower (8:4–15).

II. INTERCONNECTION OF AN IMAGE CLARIFIES GOD AS FATHER

Another aspect of metaphors and similes that is important for interpretation is the interconnection of the image. Forgetting this idea also causes confusion today.

³⁰ Wren, *Language* 91 n. 16; Caird, *Language* 153–154.

McFague uses the term "model" for a comprehensive, ordering structure with impressive interpretive potential. A model has "organizing networks of images."³¹ She defines "God the Father" as a metaphor that has become a model. When does a developed metaphor become a model for McFague? That is a very subjective—indeed, philosophical—decision. From a literary perspective, choosing a model is not necessary. What is helpful is considering whether an image is part of a network and has interconnections. Do we have the appropriate interconnections for any particular image? Caird calls this "a metaphor system," "a group of metaphors linked together by their common origin in a single area of human observation, experience or activity, which has generated its own peculiar sublanguage or jargon."³²

For instance, when I look up at the Big Dipper I might say that I see a "foot." Having read *Collier's Encyclopedia* I have in mind a large bear's foot.³³ Someone else, having just returned from a gymnasium, might think I refer to a human foot. Someone who has been working on a manuscript might think of the bottom of a page. Someone who has been sewing might think of the part of a sewing machine that holds the cloth steady. Someone who just came from the armed forces might think of the infantry. We are all correct about seeing a foot. But do we have the foot connected to the appropriate body?

In the same way, when we think of God the Father the image of "father" may suggest various constellations in our mind depending on our personal background and our culture.

Someone who is white in the United States might recall that 50% of fathers have two children, 76% of fathers work, and 29% of fathers have managerial or professional jobs. But someone who is black in the United States might recall that 46% of fathers have two children, 71% of fathers work, and 32% of fathers are operators or fabricators.³⁴ What interconnection of images is in your mind? Possibly some of our readers have an interconnection of images that fits none of the above. Some readers might recall that 26% of Spanish fathers have three children and that fully 82% of Hispanic males of Mexican origin work. The interconnections of the image "father" for every individual affect communication. The interconnections of the image "father" in the Bible also affect interpretation and application.

If one were to study the context of every reference to God as Father, what would one learn? God is like good human fathers or parents in some ways. God is unique (Matt 23:9), has children (but not from sexual procreation) and therefore deserves honor (Mal 1:6), works (John 5:17; 15:1; Matt 15:13), provides and protects (Ps 68:5–6), disciplines but never abuses (Heb 12:7–11), is someone one obeys (Matthew 26; 2 Cor 6:18), teaches (John

³¹ McFague, *Metaphorical* 23, 25.

³² Caird, *Language* 155.

³³ G. A. Davis, "Constellation," *Collier's Encyclopedia* (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 7.227.

³⁴ T. and N. Briacree, *Almanac of the American People* (New York: Facts on File, 1988) 137, 142, 211, 222.

6:45; 8:28),³⁵ receives glory when the children do good (Matt 5:16), loves, especially when obeyed (John 10:17), forgives (Ps 103:13; Matt 6:14–15), and appreciates thanks (Col 1:12; 3:17; Eph 5:20). Any of these qualities could be just as true of fathers or mothers.

God as Father is also a perfect and all-powerful Parent (Matt 5:48). This father creates the world, gives only good gifts to children and knows what people need before they ask.³⁶ Josephus refers to Zeus as “nominally Father, but in reality a tyrant and a despot.” In contrast, the Biblical metaphor “father” draws out a paradoxical picture of a very powerful father who is also very tender.³⁷

Everything so far mentioned could have been just as true of ancient or modern parents. But the last network of our constellation for the ancient image of father is unique to the ancient world and to certain males: “father-ruler.” A father could be also, in the ancient Jewish, Greco-Roman world, a ruler of a country, a judge (1 Pet 1:17; 2:14), or have heirs. For instance, Emperor Claudius is called “father of the fatherland” (*patēr patriδος*).³⁸ A more extended description of rulers may be found throughout 1 Maccabees. Ancient rulers could have armies, appoint ministers of state (“friends”), give rewards of robes, crowns or money, expect obedience, and have heirs. Their “friends” or ambassadors, with whom they had intimate conversations, could represent the ruler.³⁹

Similarly God the Father in the Bible has a kingdom (not of this world), has an army (of angels), provides peace, is a judge.⁴⁰ The “heir” or “son” is Jesus Christ, who represents the King and intimately communicates with the King.⁴¹ God as ruler has a will that should be obeyed and gives rewards (Matt 6:1–6). In contrast, God as ruler is not limited to national interests. God as Father has an impartial love, loving and caring for friends and ene-

³⁵ In 1 Macc 2:65 Simon is called “father” because he will counsel his brothers.

³⁶ Matt 11:25; 6:8–9, 32; 7:11; Jas 1:17; 1 Cor 8:6; Eph 4:6.

³⁷ Josephus *Ag. Ap.* 2.33. D. Tennis agrees: “Father God is an intimate, tender, present, available, compassionate, reliable Parent.” She thinks that the feminists who want to abolish God as Father want to abolish a particular kind of father image: a tyrannical one and an exclusively male God who places only males in charge (*Is God the Only Reliable Father?* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985] 13, 89). T. A. Small adds that “the Father revealed in Jesus Christ” includes “the authority of father” and “the tender care and encouragement of mother also” (*The Forgotten Father* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980] 59). J. Jeremias writes that “father” signifies for orientals what “mother” signifies for us: “absolute authority and tenderness” (*The Prayers of Jesus* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967] 11–12).

³⁸ Josephus *Ant.* 20.11. For further examples see M. R. D’Angelo, “*Abba* and ‘Father’: Imperial Theology and the Jesus Traditions,” *JBL* 111 (Winter 1992) 623. She states that the titles *parens patriae* and *pater patriae* were awarded to Julius Caesar late in his life to indicate a relation of *pietas* between Caesar and the Roman people. E. M. Lassen adds that “the father-figure was very strong in the early Principate, applying both to father within the family and the father metaphor used in the public sphere” (“The Use of the Father Image in Imperial Propaganda and 1 Corinthians 4:14–21,” *TynBul* 42 [May 1991] 133–134).

³⁹ 1 Macc 2:18; 3:38–39; 6:8–15; 7:8–9; 10:19–21.

⁴⁰ Luke 9:26; 11:2; Matt 26:53; 18:34–35; Rom 1:7.

⁴¹ John 5:36, 43; 10:15, 30; 11:41–42; 14:6–7; 16:28; 17:25–26; 1 John 2:23.

mies alike, partial not to powerful people (allies) but to oppressed people, always merciful, not wanting even one person to be lost.⁴²

The metaphors of a father and son in the Bible go back to the prototype of God and David: "I will be to him as a father, and he shall be to me as a son" (2 Sam 7:14).⁴³ What does that mean? The similes signify that David's inheritance is guaranteed. David might be punished when he sins, but the monarchy, the covenant line, will not be removed. This regal promise is restated as fulfilled in David's descendant, Jesus (Heb 1:5).

Even in NT times among the Romans the father-son metaphor was used to indicate the formal adoption and loving care of an heir. For example, Roman Emperor Gaius promises he will be "more than a guardian, a tutor and teacher" of Tiberius Gemellus, his cousin: "I will appoint myself to be his father and him to be my son."⁴⁴ Gaius was lying. His metaphorical language, however, communicated to his listeners that Gaius intended to instruct Tiberius, prepare him for leadership, and give him full power. The father-son metaphor communicated to ancient listeners the intimacy, love and care of a parent and the power of a ruler.

Since women were rarely inheritors among Jews (and could not adopt),⁴⁵ the metaphor "mother" would not include the double image of father-ruler. Jewish rabbis reproved any father who wanted his daughter to inherit when he had a son. Such an inheritance would be illegal because it was contrary to the oral laws of the Mishna.⁴⁶ In ancient Babylonian society, if a father wanted his daughter to stay with his household he would legally call her his "son."⁴⁷ Therefore if Jesus and the early Christians are bringing out the point that the relationship between God and Jesus is that of a ruler and an heir, what we should be asking as humans is not could God be mother but, rather, can humans, other than Jesus, be heirs? Can Jews and Gentiles, free and slave, male and female all be "sons" or heirs of God through faith in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:6)? Can all of us be descendants of Abraham (3:29)?⁴⁸ That is the question the early Christians did ask and did get answered. Yes, we can be heirs by adoption.

⁴² Matt 5:44–48; Luke 6:32–36; 2 Cor 1:3–4; Jas 1:27.

⁴³ 2 Sam 7:13–16; 1 Chr 17:13; 22:10; 28:6; Ps 89:26–37. See also Tennis, *Only Reliable* 86. R. Hamerton-Kelly and Jeremias suggest that the metaphorical language of adoption goes as far back as God adopting Israel as a firstborn son (Exod 4:22–23; 6:6–8; Jer 31:9). The imagery of father signifies in the Bible freedom and love (*God the Father: Theology and Patriarchy in the Teaching of Jesus* [OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979] 45, 100; Jeremias, *Prayers* 13).

⁴⁴ Philo *Embassy to Gaius* 4.

⁴⁵ Smith, *Is It Okay* 94. See also F. Martin, "Mystical Masculinity: the New Question Facing Women," *Priscilla Papers* 6 (Fall 1992) 2.

⁴⁶ *m. B. Bat.* 8:5.

⁴⁷ R. R. Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992) 176.

⁴⁸ A. B. Spencer, *Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1985) 68. J. Jeremias also mentions that "being a child is the characteristic of the kingly rule" (*New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* [New York: Scribner's, 1971] 180–181). R. Clapp explains that when Christians are baptized into Christ, they show they are adopted by God. Their

III. CONCLUSION

When we call God “Father” today, do we communicate that God has the power of a ruler in a monarchy and the intimacy, love and care of a father or mother? What would be a dynamic equivalent today? Ruler-heir would be a nonsexist way to say “father-son.” But how many ruler-heirs do we all know? Emperor-prince/princess is another possibility. Former Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia had heirs, but unfortunately he was deposed. God, on the other hand, can never be deposed. The Queen of England and the prince/princess might be apt, but the queen does not have all the powers of an ancient ruler. Prime minister might be better, or president. But they have no heirs, and God has no congress or parliament from which to muster support.

God is Father not because God is masculine. God is Father because “father” in the ancient world was a helpful metaphor to communicate certain aspects of God’s character. God is Spirit, neither male nor female. God has no form at all (as God clearly revealed to Moses in Deut 4:15–16).⁴⁹ Therefore many metaphors and similes, actions, and descriptive adjectives are needed to help us understand God.

new parent is God, their new siblings are other Christians, their first and fundamental family is the Church (*Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Tradition and Modern Options* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993] 82–83).

⁴⁹ Early Christians such as Athanasius were well aware of God being “by nature incorporeal and invisible and untouchable” (*Contra Gentes* 29.35). See also Col 1:15; John 4:24.