How the Mother God Got Spayed
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Is God gendered as a male in the Bible? What about Jesus' words in John 4:23–24 where he says that “God is spirit”? In the same passage, however, Jesus calls God “Father.” Does he do so in reference to an actual masculinity of God? Is this a manifestation of male domination and patriarchy? Ben Witherington doesn't think so. According to him, Jesus calls God “Father” and not “Mother” only because he did not have a human father, while he did have a human mother. Witherington thinks that, at least in the New Testament, God is not perceived to be male, but a genderless divine essence. He says that we are too quick to read into the Bible our own over-sexed and gender-language-sensitive culture.

But are we? Or are we trying to apologize for the misogyny in the Bible because of our religious belief in the sacred nature of the Bible? How could Scripture, which is the Word of God to so many Christians, be the product of patriarchy and its over-sexed values that are grounded in the perpetuation of male domination and the degradation of the female? How could Jesus in the Gospel of John, for example, be portrayed as someone who valued God as a male spiritual being, a God who relates to human beings as a dominant father would do to his subordinate children (John 4:23–24)?

To begin with, humans—whether ancient or modern—think within gender categories. And whether we admit it or not, gender never has been neutral. Power is always involved. In the ancient world, the female body was believed to be subhuman, imperfect—a deficient body because it lacked the male genitalia. The male body was the perfect body. So the male body dominated the scene, including the Bible, Christian theology and Christian ecclesiology. In other words, the Bible came into being within a cultural matrix where the female body by definition was substandard and dehumanized. This dehumanization of the female body affected virtually every storyline of the Bible.

In some forms of early Christianity, women could be leaders of churches only when they remade themselves into “males.” This wasn't perceived by them to be just a metaphor. This was real. We have records of women like Thecla and Mygonia who chopped off their hair and dressed as men in order to preach and baptize. We have records of hermit women like Mary of Egypt who fasted to the point that their bodies stopped menstruating and pilgrims believed them to be holy men. What a surprise when these women died and their bodies were revealed as female! Early Catholic Christians refused to allow women into the pulpit at all because of their obviously deficient yet seductive bodies. The second–third-century church father Tertullian explains that women have no recourse: They cannot transcend their naturally deficient and sexualized bodies through baptism, fasting or cross-dressing. Once a woman, always a woman, he says. This same kind of argument continues to be used by Catholic authorities to keep women out of the priesthood.

This misogynist view of the female body affected the way in which the ancient people created their theologies and engaged in worship. This is not to say that all ancient Jews and early Christians perceived God only as a male Father God. Indeed, worship of the Mother God in conjunction with the Father God can be demonstrated to have occurred within ancient Israel. Both the Bible and archaeology confirm this.

So it isn’t that the Mother God was absent from their worship. Rather she was consciously eradicated from worship by the religious authorities. The ancient Israelites used to worship the Queen of Heaven even in the Temple in Jerusalem because she kept famine away (Jeremiah 44:15–19). But once the Babylonians conquered the Jews, the exiled priests blamed their plight on the worship of the Goddess. When they wrote the narrative that would become the basis for the Hebrew Bible, the worship of the Queen of Heaven was recast in brazen sexual terms. Her worship was not just idolatrous, it was adulterous and justified the physical abuse of Israel. What was once legitimate worship was recast as illegitimate idolatry. The exiled Israelite priests demanded the sole worship of the male deity YHWH from that time forth.

Much the same story can be traced in early Christianity. We have records that demonstrate that the Holy Spirit was perceived by the first Christians to be not only female, but also Jesus’ Mother. In the noncanonical Gospel of the Hebrews, Jesus calls the Holy Spirit his Mother. The Gospel of Thomas records the same thing. We even have evidence that some Christians thought it was hilarious that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. What a joke! “How could a woman ever become pregnant by a woman?” they asked. In the Syrian Christian tradition well into the third century, the Holy Spirit as

the “Compassionate Mother” was called upon in the baptismal prayers to come and instruct her newly born children.

So what happened to the Mother Spirit in Christianity? She was neutered (or spayed, if you prefer) as the language shifted from Aramaic into Greek, where “spirit” lost her female coding. In Hebrew and Aramaic, “spirit” is a feminine word. In Greek, it is a neuter word. In Latin, it is a masculine word. This erosion of the female Spirit was hurried along by the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, which perceived of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as “consubstantial,” or of the same substance. The female could never be consubstantial with the male in the ancient mind because the female body was not the same as the male body. It was deficient. So the female Mother Spirit was refashioned into a quasi-male or male that proceeded from the Father and Son, and the Mother was erased from the Godhead. To this day Christians do not perceive of the Holy Spirit as female or as Mother; those who do are heretics. But the Spirit’s femaleness was an original feature among early Christians and has eroded over time. The early Catholic Christians gradually repressed the female aspect of the Christian Godhead, and a bogus story developed that she was never there to begin with. It is this storyline that we are most familiar with and have bought into for 2,000 years.

Because the dehumanization of the female body was considered to be part of the natural order of the world in antiquity, her subordination and marginalization was perceived by the Biblical authors to be part of the divine order as well. Rather than accepting this perspective as prescriptive for our own world today, or conveniently ignoring it as if it did not exist or doesn’t matter, or apologizing for it through convoluted theological explanations, I think the time has come for us to confront head on the fact that misogyny is the real serpent in the Garden and we must stop listening to its lies.

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