

# **YHWH: Motherly Father - Fatherly Mother?**

## **Introduction**

"1999, the third and final year of preparation will be aimed at broadening the horizons of believers, so that they will see things in the perspective of Christ: in the perspective of the "*Father who is in heaven*" (cf. Mt. 5:45), from whom the Lord was sent and to whom he has returned (cf. Jo. 16:28)", says the Holy Father in his Apostolic Letter (TMA. 49). Following Jesus," the whole of the Christian life is like a great pilgrimage to the house of *the Father*", through which "we discover anew each day" the unconditional love of God our *Father / Mother* in the heart of each person - the believing community as well as the whole of humanity (TMA 49-50).

In the light of the above, the following article probes into the *Fatherhood \ Motherhood* of God as portrayed in the OT, with a view to a right understanding and appreciation of it in our own personal lives and in our relationship to people at large. We shall not merely limit our study to "*what*" the various texts tell us, but enquire further into "*how*" and "*why*" they speak so, for us, at the threshold of the third millennium.

## **Father-child image shunned**

The concept of God as father and Israel as his people does not occupy a central place in the faith and theology of Israel. Hence the relationship between God and his people has been variously expressed through figures such as shepherd and sheep (Ez 34; Ps 23), husband and wife (Hos 1-2), king and subject (Pss. 93-95) etc.

The reasons why the Father-son image has been very cautiously and seldom used are: to keep the fundamental distinction between the creator and the creature, the Most Holy and the sinful, the infinite and the finite and thus exclude any equality between the two; to preserve and protect the Israelites from the fertility cult of the Canaanites and other surrounding nations (cf. Jer 2:27-28) and finally, to turn the elect

people from a naturalistic paganism which confused cosmogony with theogony, thus postulating physical descent of the humans from God.<sup>1</sup>

### Father-child image imitated

However, from Babylonian hymns where the deity was addressed "the Father of the Land", and from Canaanite worship where El (God) was invoked under the name "the all-Father", Israel began using 'abh' (= father) as a theophorous element in many of the proper names such as Abiram (= the Father-God is exalted), Abiezer (= the father-God is help), Abimelek (= the father-God is king), Abinadab (= the father-God is noble), Abshalom (= the father-God is peace) etc. In names like Abihiel (= my father is El: 1 Sam 9:1), Abhiyyam (= my father is Yahweh: 1 Kgs 14:31) etc, God or Yahweh is designated as father. This is surely a cautious movement from the attitude of initial shunning and suspicion!

### Father-child image accepted

The relationship of God and the humans which consists both in distinction between the two (weakness and mortality) as well as communion between the two (origin from God), ideas common to Babylonian theology, came slowly to be expressed by the Priestly writer in the words "*image and likeness*" (Gen 1:26-27; 5:1; 9:6). At the same time, the biblical writer was cautious in expressing communion as distinct from any physical or biological relationship with God. "The communion of the Holy God was wholly different with man, the creature of God."<sup>2</sup> In fact "There is no trace in the OT the term father applied to Yahweh as the begetter of the people . . . The title 'father of Israel' is a theological metaphor which expresses the love of father for his son

1. Botterweck, C.J. and Ringgren, H., eds., *Theology of the O.T. Vol. 1*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1979, pp. 16-19; Buttrick, G.E. (ed.) *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 2, Abingdon, Nashville, 1980, p. 415; Vriezen, Th.C., *An Outline of OT Theology*, Blackwell, 1966, pp. 144-145.

2. Cf. Eichrodt, W., *Theology of the OT*, SCM, London, 1967, p. 177 says: "The attainment of a *new inwardness* in the God-man relationship finds expression in the way in which men now *dare* to apply the Father-son relationship to God's attitude to the pious individual" (Prov 3:12; Ps 68:6 etc.); Von Rad, G., *Old Testament Theology I*, Edinburg, 1970, pp. 144-146; Vriezen, *Op.cit.*, 144-145.

(Hos 11:1)"<sup>3</sup> or the love of the mother for the child (Is 42:14; 49:15). We shall examine this reality by following the order of Books as given in the Bible.

## Father-child image used

### i) The Torah:

In the Pentateuch there are seven passages in which the Father-child image is described:

Ex. 4:22-23	:	Israel my firstborn <i>son</i> . . . my <i>son</i> .
Nu. 11:12	:	This people . . . a sucking <i>child</i> .
Dt. 1:31	:	as one carries a <i>child</i> (God carried you)
8:5	:	as a parent disciplines a <i>child</i> . . .
14:1	:	you are <i>children</i> of the Lord your God
32:5-6	:	You are degenerate <i>children</i> . . . Is he not your <i>father</i> who created and established you?
32:18	:	Rock that <i>bore</i> you . . . who <i>gave you birth</i> .

a) The term *father* is explicitly used in Dt 32:6 in the context of Israel's refusal to give an undivided allegiance and exclusive loyalty to God. She is degenerate, perverse, crooked, foolish and senseless (32:5-6). She has dealt falsely with Yahweh and has been "unmindful of the Rock"(32:4,18), namely, of Yahweh who is portrayed as unchangeable, stable and secure (cf Pss. 18:2; 31:3; 61:2; 62:2 etc) as against her own infidelity and fickleness<sup>4</sup>. The two terms used in 32:6 as referring to the father, namely, "*created and established*" are the same also in 32:18 where the reference is to the Rock which "*bore . . . and gave birth*". Some authors think that these two terms are used symbolically and they refer to *both the parents*: the *father* who "created and bore" and the *mother* who "established and gave birth", thus reminding Israel that she owed her origin completely to God.<sup>5</sup> Others

3. McKenzie, J.L., Dictionary of the Bible, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1968, p.275.

4. Mayes, A.D.H., Deuteronomy, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1981, pp. 384-388; Craigice, P.C., The Book of Deuteronomy, ICOT, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1979, P. 378.

5. Mayes, Op.cit., 388; Vriezen, Op.cit., pp. 145-146.

however, attribute the two verbs as pointing to "a mother who begot and delivered in pain".<sup>6</sup> But the term used for creation in 32:6 is "qanah" and not "barah" used in the creation story (Gen 1:1 etc.). It is the same verb used in the *exodus story* (Ex 15:16) which points out rather to acquisition or creation of a new people by YHWH, after the liberation from Egypt.

The term "Remember the days of old" in 32:7 recalls to the mind of the people that the liberative acts of YHWH in the *past* in favour of the people had a continuing significance for the *present* as well as for the *future*.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, since a direct reference to creation (or birth) is avoided, we may affirm that YHWH is portrayed here as both *father and mother* or as a *parent* and not purely only as father or mother.

The parents who love their children have recourse to discipline and chastisement (Heb 12:5-11).<sup>8</sup> As children grow from a critical and wavering period of adolescence to steady maturity, the need for education and discipline becomes essential. This is exactly what is happening in the case of Israel. The Wilderness period is the time of adolescence for her; and the responsible parent that God is, he / she is testing them through trials, hardship, correction, admonition, discipline etc.<sup>9</sup> This disciplining of children belongs to both *father and mother*, and God may be portrayed here as both.<sup>10</sup>

b) A concrete admonition to avoid the worship of other gods is also expressed in Dt. 14:1, where too we may not be wrong in positing a parent (father-mother) image following 8:5. Because of her intimate relation to God who is everything for her, namely, a parent, *father-mother*, worship of any other is considered apostasy for Israel.

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6. Craigie, Op.cit., 378-383.

7. id. *ibid.*, 378.

8. The use of 'YHWH'; 'Kyrios' in Prov. 3:12 is given the understanding of "pater" in Heb. 12:5-11 which may be rightly read as 'parent' as in NRSV.

9. Thompson, J.A., Deuteronomy, Inter Univ. Press, Leicester, England, 1974, p. 136; Craigie, op.cit., 186; Christensen, D.L., Deuteronomy, WBC, Dallas, Texas, 1991, p.174.

10. See note 8; cf. Raja, R.J., God as Mother in the OT, Jeevadhara, Vol. XXI, No. 121, pp.1 11-112, argues for the motherhood of God from these texts of Deuteronomy, which do not exclude fatherhood.

c) The last text in Deuteronomy is 1:31 which speaks of God carrying Israel "Just as one carries a child". Together with this text we may add Num 11:12 which is cast in the form of a group of angry rhetorical questions: "Did I *conceive* all this people? Did I *give birth* to them that you should say to me 'carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries a sucking child . . . ?' The Hebrew term "homen" used to denote "nurse" is masculine, although the "sucking child" suggests a female foster parent. Moses' complaint is that he is not the peoples' mother/father, and is hence not obliged to fulfil maternal / paternal duties towards them. "Implicit in this is the very unusual idea that YHWH himself is *Israel's mother*".<sup>11</sup> However there are also authors who hold that this image refers more to the male of the parents, as for example, shepherds (Is 40:11) or *foreign kings* who are expected to serve Israel as nurses.<sup>12</sup>

d) The only other text we should examine in the Pentateuch is Ex 4:22-23 which alone in the OT refers to Israel as *the first born*, although Ephraim too is called first born in Jer 31:9. In our text "Israel is lovingly called 'my son, my first born' and the Pharaoh's son too, in an exact parallel, is poignantly called 'your son, your first born'".<sup>13</sup> Since the text refers to YHWH leading Israel "with a mighty hand and a strong arm" out of Egypt (Dt. 4:34; 6:21; 7:19; 11:2; 26:8), it may be said that the text here could probably refer to a *male image of God* (a father), strong and mighty, in contrast to a female image (a mother) tender and loving! The bond between God and Israel is like strong paternal care and solicitude exhibited through "the wonders that I have put in your power" (4:21) which are highlighted in this text.

The texts which we have analyzed in the Pentateuch do not in any way force us to give a univocal meaning of "father-son" to "God-Israel" relationship (except perhaps Ex 4:22-23), but a more general meaning of "parent-children". May not then God be addressed Fatherly Mother or Motherly Father?

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11. Noth, M., Numbers, SCM, London, 1968, p. 86; Raja, art. cit., p. 111.

12. Levine, B.A., Numbers 1-20, AB. 4, Doubleday, 1993, p. 323; Budd, P.J., Numbers, WBC 5, Waco, Texas, 1984, p. 128; Ashley, J.R., The Book of Numbers, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1993, p. 210.

13. Durham, J.G., Exodus, WBC, Waco, Texas, 1987, p.56.

## ii) The Historical Books

In the *Historical Books* the term "son" as referring to king Solomon occurs in three places: 2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chr 22:10; 28:6, all in the context of building "a house for my name". Notice that in the parallel text of 2 Sam 7, namely, in 1 Chr 17, where the context also is building 'a house for YHWH' (1Chr 17:12), the reference is made to David as "servant" (17:4) and "shepherd" (17:7).

Davidic kings were believed to be sons of YHWH (Pss. 2:7-8; 89:26-27). But this concept of sonship of kings among Israel was not based on physical or biological descent as among the Egyptians, but on adoption or covenant or royal grants. The formula "I shall be his father, and he shall be my son" (2 Sam 7:14a) may be an adoption formula; but since in verse 15 there is a reference to "*hesed*"- "steadfast love" or an covenant loyalty, we may conclude that the sonship mentioned here is due to the covenant.<sup>14</sup> The observance of "the statutes and the ordinances" referred to in 1 Chr 22:12-13 and the reference to the Lord God "choosing" and "taking delight" (1 Chr 28:4) also point out more to the covenant vocabulary than to a formula of legal adoption.

We may note that the term "*son*" used here may point out to God as parent or father. The statement "I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings" (2 Sam 7:14b) may refer more to the correction or discipline usually dealt with by *both the parents* (cf. before Heb 12:5-11; Dt 8:5), although some claim that it could refer to "God who will always be a *Father* who chastizes his son" or the king who is in "special relationship with God and can call him *father*".<sup>15</sup>

Thus the three texts in which the term 'son' is used in the Historical books, refer to the king as the brother of the rest of Israel and at the same time he and Israel become sons of the same *parent*, who is the God of the covenant.

14. Kalluveetil, P., *Declaration and Covenant*, Rome, 1982, p.48 cited in Anderson, A.A., *2 Samuel*, WBC, Dallas, Texas, 1989, p. 122; Conroy, C., *1 and 2 Samuel*, 1 and 2 Kings, M. Glazier, Wilmington, Delaware, 1983, p.108.

15. Cf. Note 8; Hertzberg, H.W., *1 and 2 Samuel*, OTL, SCM Press, London, 1982, p. 286; Mangan, C., *1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah*, Wilmington, Delaware, 1982, p.70.

### iii) The Prophetic Texts

1) Earlier than Jeremiah (c. 625) and Deutero-Isaiah (c. 550), prophet *Hosea* (c. 750), after portraying in an allegoric form in chs 1-3 God's covenantal love for Israel, as conjugal, moves on to delineate it in ch. 11 as maternal/paternal (11:3-4, 8-9).<sup>16</sup>

In the light of Exodus 4:22f (cf. before) Israel is called by God as "my son" (11:1). YHWH plays the role of a teacher, a wise man, an educator for infant Israel (11:2-4). The helpless dependence of an infant on the adult and the personal involvement of the adult with the child is expressed here in terms of election verbs "loved" and "called" (11:1-2). This educative process may be attributed to the *parents*, both father and mother as explained earlier with reference to Dt. 32:5-6; 8:5; 2 Sam 7:14 etc.

At the same time, the female metaphor (the mother element) seems to be more apt here. YHWH will deal with Israel according to his holiness in terms of "compassion and tender emotion which parents feel towards the helpless child".<sup>17</sup> The expression "my heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender" used in this context (cf. 11:8-9) may "support the idea of a *teacher-mother*". Besides, the term "nihumim" (11:8) translated as "fever" in J.B. is close in meaning to "*rehemim*", (the womb), and hence the mother figure with all her humane gentleness and compelling affection is all the more appropriate here. YHWH as a compassionate *mother*, committed *instructress* or dedicated *nurse* is what Hosea seems to be insinuating in this section.<sup>18</sup>

2) This Hosean idea is continued in *Jer. 31:20*. To bring forth the intimacy of YHWH's feelings for Israel feminine metaphors are freely employed. "The community as mother (31:15-16) becomes now the people as son and YHWH as *mother* (31:18-20), and the bitter weeping of the bereaved mother is transformed by the "uterine" love of YHWH".<sup>19</sup>

16. Raja, art. cit., pp. 111-112.

17. Mays, J.L., *Hosea*, SCM, London, 1969, p. 157; Stuart, D., *Hosea*, WBC, Waco, Texas, 1987, p. 177-178.

18. Raja, art.cit., p. 111-112; see also note 14 in the same page (112); Mays, op.cit., p.155.

19. Raja, art.cit., p. 112-113.

The rhetoric of this passage is, according to Trible, "replete with female semantics" and for Carrol it "describes the physically powerful urges a mother feels for her son or lovers for each other" and "the erotic maternal urgings of the deity as mother". This usage reminiscent of Hos 11:1-4 is so filled with vivid anthropomorphic language that: "Both men and women can understand these metaphors because of their own experiences within families", as motherly or fatherly,<sup>20</sup> but more surely as *motherly*.

In an earlier passage (2:27) *Jeremiah* condemns the folly of Israel with regard to the idiocy of their shameful acts in telling a sculpted stone of a fertility deity, "you gave me birth", or a carved piece of wood, "you are my father". But Israel also at the same time called YHWH "My Father" (3:4). YHWH reproaches Israel for this hypocrisy of a syncretistic religion which coupled the covenant faith with fertility worship.<sup>21</sup>

The disappointment of YHWH with Israel reaches almost the limits of exasperation, when he exclaims: "I thought you would call me *My Father* and would not turn from following me. Instead, as a faithless wife leaves her husband, so you have been faithless to me" (3:20). "Both metaphors, that of God as *parent* and God as *husband* reveal different dimensions of the covenant faith".<sup>22</sup>

But the notion of God as father and Israel as son, which is dominant in Deuteronomy (1:31; 8:5), is also developed in *Jer 3:19* as well as in 3:4. Only now in 3:19 YHWH says that they must not only call him "My Father" as in 3:4, but show through their repentance of

20. Carrol, R.P., *Jeremiah*, SCM, London, 1986, pp. 597-600; Trible, P., *God and Rhetoric of Sexuality*, *Overtures to Biblical Theology* 2, Fortress Press, 1978, p. 45; Swidler, L., *Biblical Affirmations of Women*, Philadelphia, 1979, p. 31 speaks of the "doubly uterine words" used here which means "motherly womb-love"; Keown, G.L. & Co., *Jeremiah 26-52*, WBC, Dallas, Texas, 1995, pp. 120-121; Raja, art.cit., pp. 112-113; Boadt, L., *Jeremiah 26-52 etc.*, M. Glazier, Wilmington, Delaware, 1971, p. 52 speaks of "a mother's compassion"; Holladay, W.L., *Jeremiah 2*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1989, pp. 191-192.

21. Craigie, P.C. & Co., *Jeremiah 1-25*, WBC, Dallas, Texas, 1991, pp. 36-38, 51-52, 64-65; Boadt, L., *Jeremiah 1-25*; M Glazier, Wilmington, Delaware, 1982, p.27; Thompson, J.A., *The Book of Jeremiah*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1981, pp. 179-180.

22. Craigie, op.cit., p. 64.

heart and their actual return to him from fertility cult and other worship and thus they "would not turn from following me" (3:19).<sup>23</sup> The reflective nature of these verses (3:19-20) illuminates the warmth and love that lie permanently in the heart of God<sup>24</sup> who is a *parent!*

We may draw the conclusion that for Jeremiah it is certainly the *maternal* image of God that takes precedence over the paternal, although this latter may not be completely excluded.

3) Before we pass on to Isaiah (both Proto- and Deutero-), we may briefly touch upon two passages (2:10 and 3:17) in *Malachi* (5th c BC), the last of the Minor prophets.

The question "Have we not all *one father?*" is explained by further questions: "Has not one God created us? "Why then are you.....profaning the covenant of our fathers? (2:10). This series of questions may be interpreted in the light of 3:17 where YHWH says in covenantal terms: "They shall be mine..... my special possession ('*segullah*') .....and I will spare them as a *man (isch' - 'anthropos')* spares *his son*". The NRSV translates this last phrase with the Word "as *parents* spare their *children*". This inclusive language usage spares us from seeing only a patriarchal image in God; and it seems the right way to interpret these texts.

4) Last among our treatment of the prophets, comes *Isaiah*. In *proto-Isaiah* there are four texts 1:2,4 and 30:1,9 which speak about son/children in relation to father/parent in roughly the same contexts.

The phrase "Sons I have reared and brought" (1:2) presents YHWH in a parent-child relationship with Jerusalem and Judah (1:1). The same may be said about 1:4 where the reference is to "sons who deal corruptly", namely a people laden with guilt; 30:1 where "rebellious children" who resist the will of parents (Dt 21:18) are spoken about and 30:9 which mentions about "rebellious people, lying sons, sons who will not hear the instruction of YHWH". All these refer to a disobedient people, a people who failed to respond in faith and loyalty to YHWH. They were turning to Egypt for protection and help, "despising the Holy One of Israel" (1:4).

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23. Bright, J., *Jeremiah*, A.B. 21, Doubleday, NY, 1965, p. 23,25-26; Thompson, op.cit., pp. 192-193; 206-208.

24. Craigie, op.cit., p. 64.

The people of Judah are addressed as children/sons "who will not hear the instruction of YHWH" (30:9). According to the Wisdom tradition it was sages and wise men who imparted learning to people who were addressed as 'children' (Prov 1:25,30; 8:14; 19:20 etc.).<sup>25</sup> The expression here is not unlike that found in 1:2-3. They are "rebellious children" (30:1) "rebellious people" (30:9) who "have rebelled against me" (1:2). In all these cases the children will not listen to "the teaching of our God" (1:10), "his ways.....the law" (2:3), "the law of the Lord" (5:24), "the testimony.....the teaching" (8:16) etc. Thus we may affirm that "Proto-Isaiah attributes all wisdom to Yahweh and makes him the source of all that the wisdom tradition attributed to human teachers",<sup>26</sup> the children however are portrayed as disobedient.

Although in all these 4 texts God is not designated as Father, yet in the context of the teaching of the Wisdom of the Torah, we may not be wrong in attributing *fatherhood* to YHWH. At the same time this relationship between YHWH (father) and Judah (children) "does not refer to any kind of consubstantiality between God and man".<sup>27</sup> He is a *father* in so far as he bestows diligent care in the bringing up of his children and instructing them in the Torah, as did the rabbis (cf. the 'hakam-talmid, 'rabbi-mathetes', master-disciple relationship in which the rabbi or master was only a male!).

*Deutero-Isaiah* surpasses all in the use of paternal-maternal images to designate YHWH. In the context of the prophetic oracles of doom against Israel, he uses the "woe formulae" (45:9-10) which "are an uncomfortable reminder of the former days (of Israel) pictured in chs. 5 and 10".<sup>28</sup>

The image of the potter at work is very common in the ancient Near East and in Israel (cf. Is 19:16; Jer 18:19), "expresses the artist's unlimited power in the disposing of his material".<sup>29</sup> Hence Israel can

25. Jensen, J., *Isaiah 1-39*, M. Glazier, Wilmington, Delaware, 1984, pp. 39,233,237.

26. Jensen, *op.cit.*, p. 237.

27. Kaiser, O., *Isaiah 13-39*, SCM, London, 1980, p. 285; cf. also, *id.*, *Isaiah 1-12*, SCM, London 1983, pp. 13-14.

28. Westermann, C., *Isaiah 40-66*, SCM, London, 1969, p. 166; Watts, J.D.W., *Isaiah 34-66*, WBC, Waco, Texas, 1987, p. 157; Scullion, J., *Isaiah 40-66*, Wilmington, Delaware, 1982, p. 71.

29. Westermann, *op.cit.*, p. 166; Scullion, *op.cit.*, p.71.

never contest the decisions of YHWH as a piece of pottery can no more question the intentions of the potter. Thus the series of questions in 45:9-10 condemns the rebellion of Israel against her creator. The terms "father" ('*abh*') and "woman" ('*ischa*') placed successively in 45:10 could be rendered in the context for the sake of parallelism as "*Father*" and "*mother*".

YHWH may be considered a father in line with the image of the potter; but it is better to see him as *Father-mother* or a parent in the context in which he/she is presented and also as one who "created humankind upon the earth" (49:12).

The address to YHWH as father (63:16; 64:8) is rare (Dt 32:6) and one sees here already a pointer to what the N.T. would say later (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6; Mt 6:9). It is a confession of confidence<sup>30</sup> in both 63:16 and 64:8. In 63:16 the emphasis is more on the father, although it picks up the theme from 63:8 where Israel is called "children". In 64:8 however, it is the "work of your hand", namely the children who are given attention to. The term father which was never applied to God in the preexilic period because of the danger of misunderstanding in the physical generative sense, has now come to be cautiously used in the time of Deutero-Isaiah, in the post-exilic period.<sup>31</sup>

The emphasis in both cases (63:16 & 64:8) is "not on the father-child relationship but on creator-creature. The people has sinned; God cannot cancel what has happened; yet after all 'we are your people' (63:8)"<sup>32</sup> is the affirmation made here. Hence more than just the male aspect, the term "father" as used here could refer to the *parent*. It is the divine "presence", the self-manifestation of God (63:9) that brought Israel out of Egypt (cf. Ex 33:14; Dt 4:31). It is YHWH's love that "carried" them (63:9; 46:3). In fact these verses (63:7-19) "recall to the mind of Israel the Deuteronomistic pattern of revolt, rebuff, recall and repentance".<sup>33</sup> Thus it is the parental image of YHWH that comes out to the fore here, as also in 43:6 where YHWH says, "bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth".

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30. Westermann, *op.cit.*, p. 397; Scullion, *op.cit.*, p. 193.

31. Watts, *op.cit.*, pp. 333-336; Westermann, *op.cit.*, pp. 392-394.

32. Scullion, *op.cit.*, 193-194.

33. Scullion, *op.cit.*, 194-195.

A striking image of YHWH as a woman in labour pains is portrayed in 42:14. YHWH who stirs up in fury like a strong soldier and warrior (42:13) is turned suddenly into a woman who shrieks, groans, pants and gasps like a woman who has been pregnant and in labour pains and is about to deliver. The picture depicts the passion and the ardent love of God for his people.<sup>34</sup>

It is not without reason that in five places in Deutero-Isaiah (40:11,31; 46:3-4; 63:9; 66:12) the metaphor of "*carrying*" is used. The idols of the Gentiles have been carried by their devotees on beasts of burden (46:1-2). But the people of Judah are carried by God himself (46:3), and this, both before the beginning of their existence (44:2,24; 49:5) and also, all through the course of their life, as the texts show us:

40:11 - "Like a shepherd. . .he will . . .*carry* them".

40:31 - "They shall *mount up* (carry) with wings like eagles".

46:3-4 - "You have been. . . *carried* from the womb. . . even to your old age I will *carry* you".

63:9 - "He lifted them up and *carried* them".

66:12 - "You shall. . .*be carried* on her arm".

His people are not a heavy load or tiresome burden for YHWH. He will carry them lovingly as a shepherd carries the lamb in his hands, not as an undifferentiated multitude but as individuals (40:1), as a soaring eagle carries her young ones on her wings (40:31), as a mother carries her children in her arms (66:12-13). The five times repeated first person singular "I" in 46:4 asserts the fact that what the gods of Babylon were unable to do (46:2), YHWH will do. This he/she has done in the past and this he/she will continue to do.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, in the context of Israel's lack of faith (49:14) YHWH responds with one of the greatest as well as striking expressions of divine love expressed in the Bible (49:15; 66:12-13). The picture painted in 49:15 is that of a baby sucking at its mother's breast, which "is one of

34. Young, E.J., The Book of Isaiah III, Eerdmans, 1972, p. 129; Westermann, op.cit., p. 106, says " it is not the pain of the woman in travail, but the change from long silence to crying out, to loud groaning and panting".

35. Scullion, op.cit., p. 82; Westermann, op.cit., pp. 45-46; Watts, J.D.W.; Isaiah 34-66, WBC 25, Waco, Texas, 1987, p. 90.

the strongest, if not the strongest expression of God's love in the O.T."<sup>36</sup> The Bible's cherished way of portraying God's graceful love reaches here the acme and the climax of tenderness. Here for the first time the reserve which the Bible elsewhere observes so strictly with regard to feminine predications for God is shattered and the passionateness of God's love for his people is poignantly portrayed through the image of a mother suckling her baby, the darling child of her womb.

From 49:15 to 66:12-13 there is a growth in the development of the motherly figure of YHWH. In 49:15 God loves Israel as a mother loves the baby sucking at her breast; in 66:13 however, God comforts Israel as a mother comforts her grown up son. In spite of the fact it is hard to deal with a grown up son, yet "the mother's love for her offspring remains firm throughout life and thus forms a natural comparison for the divine comfort (40:1)".<sup>37</sup> While 49:15 surely expresses the deepest affection of *the mother* (YHWH), 66:13 highlights the endurance and perseverance of this affection of the mother (YHWH) for Israel from baby-hood upto old age.

Thus the picture of *YHWH-mother* is a most touching expression through which the song of consolation is sung to Zion (49:14-26), "a walled city pictured as a mother pregnant with life".<sup>38</sup> The feminine image of God is the best the author could use in this context. Although in Proto-Isaiah the male image dominates, it is the female image that pervades the Deutero-Isaian presentation of YHWH.

#### iv) The Wisdom tradition

a) Among the Wisdom Books, since the Psalms are "the Bible in miniature" (M. Luther) and "the compendium and 'summa' of the whole O.T." (R. Bellarmine), we may first have a look into them to find out the maternal/paternal images used for God.

Called "a triumphal hymn", Ps. 68, a collection of autonomous poems sung at the enthronement ceremony of the king, invokes God as well as the king as the "*Father of the orphans*" (68:5-6), since the

36. Young, E.J., *The Book of Isaiah III*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1972, p. 285; Westermann, op.cit., p. 420; Raja, art.cit., pp. 113-114.

37. Young, op.cit., pp. 527-528.

38. Stahlmueller, C., *Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah in NJBC*, TPI, Bangalore, 1990, p. 340.

latter was the vice-gerent of YHWH himself.<sup>39</sup> This title has nothing to do with "fathering" in the physical sense, but follows the Ugaritic texts in the description of an ideal king.<sup>40</sup> The same may be said with regard to *Ps 103:13* where YHWH is named father (cf. "As a father has compassion (*'rehem'*) for his children, so the Lord has compassion (*'rehem'*) for those who fear him"). Far from physical fatherhood, it is the social relationship in which the loving concern of the father to his sons and the obedience of the sons to the father (cf. "those who fear him" 103:11-13) which are emphasized.<sup>41</sup> The repeated use of the term *'rehem'* (103:13) meaning 'womb', translated as 'compassion' can have also allusion to the *motherliness* of YHWH.

Two other texts, *Pss. 2:7 and 89:26-27* which speak of God as father refer to divine adoption of the king according to the messianic promise, "I will be a father to him and he shall be a son to me" (2 Sam 7:14). In the context of the king being threatened by enemies, a divine guarantee is given through the sonship idea. The reference here is not in any way to physical fatherhood or to the deification of the King. By the act of anointing, the king has been elevated to a higher sphere than the ordinary mortals; he is closer in relationship to God than the people. It is "the election, the anointing and the installation which are, viewed as an adoption"<sup>42</sup>, which make him higher in dignity than the ordinary Israelites.

The term "begetting" ("today I have begotten you" 2:7) may have an allusion to a "non-Israelite prototype of the royal document, but in our context it can only refer to the adoption of the King and the declaration of his sonship".<sup>43</sup> The term "the first born" (89:27; cf. Ex 4:22; Jer 31:9) would imply here, "one who belonged to God" or one who was holy (Ex

39. Dahood, M., *The Psalms II*, A.B. 17, 1968, p. 133; Anderson, A.A., *Psalms (1-72)*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1981, pp. 481-482; Sabourin, L., *The Psalms I*, Alba House, NY, 1969, pp. 199-201.

40. Anderson, *op.cit.*, pp. 485-486 cites ANET, p. 149a and p. 151a.

41. Anderson, *op.cit.*, p. 715.

42. Mowinckel, S., *Psalms in Israel's Worship I*, Oxford, 1962, p. 65; Sabourin, *op.cit.*, Vol. 2, pp. 213-216; Anderson, *op.cit.*, I, pp. 67-68; II, pp. 641-642; Botterweck et al., *op.cit.*, p. 18-19.

43. Anderson, *op.cit.*, I, p. 68, Weiser, A., *The Psalms*, London, 1962, p. 113.

13:2; Nu 3:13) and thus one who enjoyed a privileged position with God. This refers to both the king as well as Israel.<sup>44</sup>

The 4 texts we have briefly explained speak of the *fatherhood* of God not in physical terms but in the sense of adoption, and the use of sonship for Israel, and especially for the King, denotes closeness and nearness to God. "It is only symbolical and is used, very rarely, by those authors who strongly emphasize God's love."<sup>45</sup>

The 2 imaginative metaphors, that of a midwife ("you who took me from the womb....." 22:9-10) and a *nurse* ("from my youth you have taught me....." 71:17-18) bring out the idea that God has taken care of the psalmist from the moment of his birth, namely, from his being admitted into the family of God (cf. Job 3:12) and has directed his life, protected and guided him lifelong as a midwife or a nurse.<sup>46</sup> "From the very moment of his birth he had relied on YHWH's intimate *female role* and from the very stirrings of his life YHWH has been the citadel of his faith".<sup>47</sup>

The last texts we are dealing with are *Pss. 27:10; 123:2 and 131:2*. In all three there is a metaphor of dependence, that of a parent carrying and caring for the child. In *Ps. 27:10*, "the Lord functions as a parent to the king" in his extreme forsakenness.<sup>48</sup> In *123:2* God is portrayed "as a *father* figure dispensing food to his household" (cf. *Ps. 104:27-28*) and Israel as one "who expresses....devoted love and trustful hope in the *fatherly care* that God as the Lord, will give his own".<sup>49</sup> Since God here takes the place of both master and mistress,

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44. Anderson, op.cit., II, p. 642.

45. Vriezen, op.cit., pp. 143-147 states that the father-child image is little used at a time when Israel was threatened by syncretism only after the exile the formula is used more directly (p. 146).

46. Craigie, P.C., *Psalms 1-50*, WACO, Texas, 1983, p. 199; Weiser, op.cit., p. 222; Anderson, op.cit., p. 188; Mowinckel, op.cit., p. 220 rightly says that *Ps 22* belongs to "protective Psalm" type.

47. Raja, art.cit., p. 115.

48. Allen, L.C., *Psalms 101-150*, WBC, WACO, Texas, 1983, p. 199; Craigie, op.cit., p. 233; Weiser, op.cit., p. 253 says here that "God is like a father who sides with his child". Raja, art.cit., pp. 115-116; Kidner, D., *Psalms 1-72*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1973, p. 121 says "God's love begins where man's leaves off"

49. Allen, op.cit., p. 160; Weiser, op.cit., p. 753.

we may also think of him representing both the *parents*, the father and the mother!

We finally come to a picture in *Ps.131:2* which symbolizes contentment and serenity of a weaned child in the bosom of the *mother*, "a child that quietly rests by his mother's side, happy in being with her".<sup>50</sup> This portraiture which expresses such trust in God is "a major element in the inner life of the *"anawim"* and the 'saddiqim', the 'poor' and the 'righteous' ".<sup>51</sup>

"The supportive care that YHWH had ever given his covenant people" makes the psalmist learn the lesson of total dependence on God. "Such was his relationship to God, the *mother and father* of his soul (cf. 27:10) and he would not have it otherwise".<sup>52</sup> He has the quietness of soul that he now invites others to place their "hope in the Lord from this time on and for ever more" (131:3). Thus far we have dealt with the Psalms, where both *the mother* as well as *the father* image is attributed to God.

b) We should now briefly touch on the rest of the *Wisdom tradition* to bring to an end our enquiry on the expression of parenthood of God which are found there. We shall limit our study to the Books of *Sirach*, *the Wisdom of Solomon* and the Book of *Proverbs*.

In general, in the period of time during which the Wisdom tradition developed in Israel, ethical regulations of conduct were considered as of unique importance in the service of God. The assurance that the observance of the moral commands implied success could never be a matter of serious doubt.<sup>53</sup>

It is in this background one finds as "abundance in Israelite Wisdom, of sayings relating to the duties of *children* towards their parents"<sup>54</sup> (cf. Prov. 1:8; 4:1; 6:20; 10:1; 15:5,20; 17:21,25; 19:26 etc., Sir. 3:1-16; 7:27; 22:4-5 etc.). When we compare this to the very sparse references in the non-Israelite literature of the time, such as the Egyptian

50. Weiser, op.cit. p. 777; Allen, op.cit., p. 199; Anderson, op.cit., p. 878.

51. Sabourin, op.cit., Vol. 2, pp. 103-109.

52. Allen, op.cit., p. 199.

53. Eichrodt, op.cit., II, pp. 337-338.

54. Eichrodt, op.cit., II, p.338.

Wisdom book of Ani or the Babylonian proverbs, we may be allowed "to ask whether it is not the God of the Fifth Commandment, who as the *father* of his people, is the pattern of all fatherhood, who has here opened men's eyes to the especial importance of piety toward parents".<sup>55</sup>

Besides that, in the post-Jeremian times (circa 650-580) when individuals found themselves thrown back more and more on their own resources, they were forced to come to a new understanding of divine Providence, a marvelling contemplation of God's care and concern in things small and great (Prov. 20:24; Job 5:19-27; 14:5; Pss. 37:5,18,23; 73:23-24; 139:16 etc.). "This attainment of a new inwardness in the God-people relationship finds expression in the way in which people now dare to apply the *Father-son* relationship to God's attitude to the pious individual" (Prov. 3:12; Pss. 68:6; 103:13; Wis. 2:16; 5:5 etc.),<sup>56</sup> and in "a new evaluation of suffering as a *fatherly correction* . . . as a mark of divine favour" (Prov 3:12; Pss. 66:10; 118:18; 119:67; Job 36:5).<sup>57</sup>

There are also a few texts both in the book of *Sirach* (23:1,4; 51:10) and in the book of *Wisdom* (2:13,16-18; 5:5), all of them used in prayer, both individual laments (Sir. 23:1-4) and individual thanksgiving (51:1-12) and in the judgement made of the righteous by the godless (Wis 2:13,16-18; 5:5) where the father-son imagery is used. While the concept of fatherhood has been in vogue in a collective sense elsewhere (Hos 1:1; Is 63:16 etc.), an individual pious Jew can be elevated to the heavenly sphere and can also call God as "my father" in the context of God as the source of moral life. "Ben Sirach seems to be the first on record to transfer the relationship (of God) to a single individual - himself - to pray to God as '*my father*'".<sup>58</sup>

To the above may be added allusions to God as a *female being* (Wis 8:2-9; Prov 8:23-31). The term '*Hokmah*' (cf. '*sophia*' in Greek, '*sapientia*' in Latin, '*Saraswathi*' in Hinduism) a *feminine noun*, is portrayed here as the divine-human spirit who informs all created realities (Prov 8:1-9:6; Wis 6:12-9:18; Sir 24 etc.). It is called "a *daughter* of

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55. Eichrodt, op.cit., II, pp. 339-340.

56. Eichrodt, op.cit., II, pp. 176-177.

57. Eichrodt, op.cit., II, p. 177.

58. Mackenzie, R.A.F., *Sirach*, Glazier, Wilmington, Delaware, 1983, P. 95.

God through whom God mediates the work of creation, providential guidance, revelation and reconciliation to God".<sup>59</sup> This mediating person is called by Solomon his *bride* of whom he says: "I loved her and sought after her from my youth, and desired to take her for my bride . . ." (Wis 8:2).<sup>60</sup>

## Conclusion

At the end of our long journey examining the parental imageries used for God in the Torah, the Historical Books, Prophetic Books and the Wisdom Books, it is not wise to ask if the God of the Bible is male or female, father or mother.

Human imagination has conjured up various images to represent God: he is father (Is 63:16; 64:7; Sir 23:1-4; 51:10); he is mother (Num 11:12; Jer 31:20; Is 49:14-15; Ps 131:2 etc.); he is husband (Is 54:5; 62:5); he is a woman in travail (Is 42:14; 46:3-4); he is a nurse (Ps 22:9-10; 71:17); he is a mistress (Ps 123:2) etc. But he is beyond all these since he defies any one image to capture him in all his various relationships to Israel as well as to all humankind.

However, in an imagery which is very close and dear to all, can we not call God '*Fatherly-Mother*' or '*Motherly Father*'? We may join Juliana of Norwich (1342-1413) one of the great mystics who has been true to the Biblical tradition, and affirm: "As truly as God is our *Father*, so just as truly is he our *Mother*".<sup>61</sup>

59. Reuther, R.R., "The Female Nature of God: A problem in contemporary Religious Life" in *Concilium* (March 1981) pp. 61-66; Swidler, L., *Biblical Affirmations of Women*, Philadelphia, 1969, pp. 36-49 presents a number of texts which portray the feminine dimension of God in '*Hokmah*': (Prov 1:20-33; 3:13-18; 4:5-9; 11:13; Job 28:12-28; Sir 1:1-10; Wis 7: 21-8:6; 9:1-4 etc.). In p. 36 Swidler affirms that "Hokmah is doubtless the Hebrew expression of the ancient goddess that has been biblically canonized"; Conzelmann, H; "The Mother Wisdom" in the future of our religious past, ed., Robinson, J.M., SCM, London, 1971, p. 243 says "Wisdom's....predecessor is the syncretistic Goddess which is most widely known under the name of Isis".

60. Raja, art.cit., p. 116.

61. Anon, *Enfolded in Love: Daily Readings with Juliana of Norwich*, London, 1980, p. 35. Cf. also Molinari, P., *Juliana of Norwich*, London, 1958; Anon, *Juliana of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love*, London, 1914.

The South Indian mystic Manickavasagar, a great Tamil savant (7th to 8th c AD), is not far behind when in "Thiruvacagam" (Sacred Utterances) he describes God *Siva* in the following terms:

"As *Male* appearing, thou dost change to neutral form, and in *Female* form dost hide thyself";

"See Him the *Male*, the *Female* and *Neither one*";

"The *Feminine*, the ancient *Male*, the *Neutral One*";

"Thus stood He forth, was *Female*, *Male*, was *Neither*".

"O Light supreme, *Male*, *Female*, rare ambrosia";

"O my *Mother*, o my *Sire*, my gem beyond compare";

"*Mother* of the immortals in the heavenly land,

*Father* gracious to those that come to thee";

"*Father* and *Mother*, *Lord*, to all besides,

*Sire*, *Mother*, *Lord* to him all these are not" etc.<sup>62</sup>

We would like to end this study not without a brief note on the concept of "*Arthanarishwara*", the image of Shiva and Shakti, a figure that harmonises in itself the male (*Shiva*) and the female (*Shakti*) aspects of God in one. Does it not come very close to the "*Father-Mother*" image of God in the Bible? We shall not take the image as such, but no one can deny its meaning and significance as applied to the God of our fathers and mothers as portrayed in the Bible!

R.J. Raja, S.J.

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62. Pope, G.U., The Thiruvacagam or Sacred Utterances of Manikka Vacagar, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1900; pp. 21,26,38,39,64,77,92,115,282.