

GOD KNOWN AS “HE”

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Scripture consistently characterizes God in masculine terms. At the grammatical level, that pattern expresses itself in Hebrew masculine pronouns, adjectives, and verbs. “She” never designates the God Yahveh in any book of either testament.

Indeed, the noun אלהים, “God/god,” does rarely refer to a goddess (1 Kings 11:33, Ashtoreth), but that never happens with the God of Israel. Not only do masculine pronouns refer to אלהים—and all his other designations—but Hebrew verbs with it carry masculine gender terminations. (Hebrew verbs have gender in the second and third persons.) Masculine adjectives likewise modify אלהים. This characterization holds true for Greek texts as well, which show θεός in the New Testament and the Greek translation of the Old Testament (LXX).

The roles and imageries for God are masculine. He is king, not queen (of heaven or whatever). He is the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ, not the mother. He is creator by will and authority, not by birthing. True, (a) the gender of nouns used for certain (b) imageries do not in themselves indicate the sex of (c) the referents. Nevertheless, in virtually all nouns, grammatical gender does line up with the sex of the imagery and its referent. For example, מלך is a masculine noun for “king,” a role held by a male.

In English, male and female referents have correspondingly masculine and feminine nouns. We identify as neuter (it) anything that is not male or female. Hardly ever does anyone these days refer to a ship or country as “she.” The neuter pronoun often designates an animal if its sex is not known or is not important to the discussion. With people, we might call a baby “it” if we do not know whether it is a boy or girl. English pronouns are largely common, that is, applicable to male and female: I/me/my, we/us/our, you/your, they/them/their, who/whose/whom (ever), that/those, this/these, another, (any/some/every)one, one another, one/ones. Only the third person singular personal, intensive, and reflexive pronouns necessitate sex-reference: he/him/his, she/her, himself/herself.

In the biblical languages—Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek—sex reference and noun gender almost always correlate. (But the Greek word for “baby” is neuter: βρέφος; child is παιδίον.) Sexless items may be any gender, but that is by convention. So, aside from sex reference the grammatical-physical correlation breaks down. A spear may be neuter (δόρυ), a sword may be feminine (μάχαιρα), a word for house may be masculine (οἶκος) or feminine (οἰκία).

These comments about grammatical gender vs. sex reference help in dealing with a few points that might cloud the claim made in the lead sentence of this article. The Hebrew term for the “spirit” of God in the Old Testament is feminine (רוּחַ). Hebrew has no neuter gender; so all referents, sexual or otherwise, are masculine or feminine. Furthermore, this word has its first application outside the personal realm; it means “wind.” Wind serves as a physical image for a non-physical referent/reality: spirit, with or without capitalization, whether having divine

reference or not, whether being a descriptor or personal name. (Hebrew has no capitalization, and Greek uncial script from biblical times had capitalization only; hence, for different reasons, there is no formal proper noun-common noun differentiation in either language.) It becomes a picture for an intangible “reality,” and so is applied to a non-physical real deity. So the inference is not, for instance, that there is a feminine aspect of deity. The term is feminine, but the referent is not female whether referring to God or not.

A similar point applies to the Greek word for spirit. Πνεῦμα is neuter. It likewise has a physical first application: “*The wind blows*” (John 3:8). Again, wind became an image for a non-physical/visible “reality” that was applied to non-physical/visible real deity, the (Holy) Spirit—as well as spirit in its six or seven other biblical usages. So in one case (Greek), the basis for the imagery is neuter while in the other it is feminine (Hebrew). The inference is not that there is some female, neuter, or male component to the nature of the God of the Bible. At the grammatical level, God is “he,” which reflects the gender of the dominant nouns for roles that God has and performs.

Personal manifestations from the spiritual realm are masculine in the Bible. That is so despite the fact that spiritual beings are never characterized as sexual. In scripture, sexuality is a distinctive feature of the physical order; it is never attributed to God or angels. Even more generally, spirit is parallel to physical: “*a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have*” (Luke 24:39), hence, not sex; “*God is [a] spirit*” (John 4:24) as are angels (Hebrews 1:7 < Psalm 104:4). Yet when an entity from that realm enters the physical realm, the description is masculine, including the angel of the Lord, who often carries deific descriptors.

Pagans evidently projected sexuality onto their gods in some way to consider them consorts, queens, goddesses, and female. Perhaps they pictured them as materializing or “materializable” into sexual beings. But divine and angelic manifestations in the Bible are not like that.

The incarnation was masculine. When God sent the “Son” into the world, he sent him as male. That feature of his incarnate state carried through in the resurrection “appearances,” which evidently could be called materializations: he could eat (Luke 24:41-43) and be touched (John 20:27, *etc.*). At the same time, he could become sensibly present in a locked room (John 20:19), could disappear (Luke 24:31), and ascend to heaven (Luke 24:51). That involved miracle as well, like his walking on water during his ministry (Matthew 14:25; Peter too; 14:28-41).

In the resurrection, humankind will presumably be asexual since people do not marry or continue to be married there; they are like the angels (Matthew 22:30).

Personal imageries for deity are masculine. The overwhelming number of such imageries for God are male. He is king of Israel, not queen. He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, not mother.

Consequently, God as “he” does not derive from anything male in his ontic nature. It is a phenomenon rooted in language. (He is not called “it,” of course, because God is personal rather than a thing, force, principle, or idea.)

Scripture does not explain why it refers to God as he, but the human languages it used forced a choice about grammatical gender. Since God is personal, masculine and feminine terminologies are the options. Uniform masculine usage in that regard over 1500 years by more than 40 authors in a wide range of cultural and religious circumstances suggests there was a significant reason, one that must lie in **(1) appropriateness**. So, maintaining that practice rests on **(2) approved precedent** set by divinely commissioned representatives. We have no new reason for speaking differently about God than biblical writers did. Nothing about modern considerations calls for abandoning the scriptural pattern. We are not more informed than inspired writers who spoke under God's protective and guiding hand. Bringing in "new factors" would declare some kind of disbelief in the adequacy of the revelation that has come to us—as if the biblical writers did not take some factor into consideration, were blinded by some cultural limitation without divine correction (2 Samuel 7:3ff), or were simply ignorant of something important that we now know. Taking that approach casts the issue back into a disbelief in the sufficiency and inerrancy of divine guidance, and suggests that Christians today have a source superior to the Source that oversaw inscripturation.

Another reason for masculine terminology can be that **(3) male better conveys strength** (1 Peter 3:7; cp. Jeremiah 31:22). God as eternal creator, sustainer, and ruler of all humankind and the whole universe does not mix well with descriptions that depict relative weakness. God has no non-physical attributes that call for female nature to get them included in the full picture of his nature. Distinctively male-vs-female characteristics do not exist in the spiritual realm: reproduction, and related factors. God is called "he," not because he is male, but because he is powerful.

Power relates, in turn, to **(4) his personal "ultimateness"**: "*I AM BECAUSE I AM*" (Exodus 3:14). Ultimate responsibility correlates with ultimate power to maintain it against all challenges to it: omnipotence. Ultimate reality as creator of everything else involves determining the purpose of what exists besides God, which in turn makes God the determiner of right and wrong, good and bad; that determination always derives from purpose. For personal kind, purpose includes ethics and morality. Maintaining purpose ultimately requires success in power encounter as the final defense against what opposes God. Authority does not suffice. Authority is a derivative determiner that needs power to "make it stick."

Keeping sexuality out of the picture stays away from **(5) picturing him in unworthy ways**, as in having a consort. It stays away from concretizations in idols and their physical, hence, sexual representations or as abodes of the deity. Avoiding divine sexuality takes away any reason for fertility rites, temple prostitution, or the sexual lure of female deity. Sexuality has nothing to do with the divine nature, function, or worship. We do not need to appeal to the feminine to gain psychological and interpersonal qualities for deity like caring, responsiveness, cooperation, tenderness, patience. Caring does not have to come from comparing him to a nurse, for example, any more than protection has to come from comparing him to a chicken (Matthew 23:37). The "nurse" imagery is actually masculine in Numbers 11:12 and Isaiah 49:23 anyway (nursing father; cp. 1 Thessalonians 2:7 + 11). Such qualities are not distinctively female traits and so do

not call for invoking female imagery to get them included in his nature. Consequently, nothing appropriate is gained by calling God “she.”

The cases appealed to for referring to God as “she” come from the interpretation error called “allegorizing the comparison”: Deuteronomy 32:11-12 (like a mother eagle); 32:18 (the Rock that bore you, the God who gave you birth); Psalm 12:12 (like the mother of a weaned child); 122:2-3 (like a mistress looked up to by her maid); Isaiah 42:14 (like a woman in labor; cp. Paul in labor for the Galatians in 4:19!); 49:15 (like a nursing mother); 66:13 (like a comforting mother); Hosea 11:3-4 (like a mother); 13:8 (like a mother bear); Matthew 23:37 = Luke 13:34 (like a hen gathering her chicks); Luke 15:8-10 (like a woman looking for a lost coin). When readers carry comparisons beyond the writer’s application, they lose the writer’s authority. They are making the affirmations on their own. Such inferences would be like claiming Paul was a woman, that God has a flesh-and-blood body, a bear’s hair, bipedal locomotion, or feathers!

Masculinity for deific reference and conceptualization (6) stands in deliberate rejection of pagan conceptualizations, which included sexuality. It deliberately rejected those ideas because it consistently contrasts with them. No polytheism, no male and female deities, not even God as “materializable” by way of female idols, no animal representations like the golden calf (Exodus 32). God could not even be seen in his own nature (Exodus 33:17-23; 1 Timothy 6:16), and his people repeatedly feared that seeing him would kill them (Genesis 32:30; Judges 6:22-23; 13:22). That whole set of divine features flew in the face of pagan conceptualizations.

Given these considerations, the burden of proof for the propriety of addressing God as she falls on the shoulders of those who propose to do that. What is the reason and basis for that departure? Any push for addressing God as “she” has no basis in his nature, in revelation, in some historical feature (patriarchal society), or in some practical need. Instead, it comes from the rise of modern feminism in its unscriptural and anti-scriptural forms and degrees. That movement attempts to eradicate the divine order created in humankind and communicated to them, and the relative gifting God has put with human persons. Trying to erase human sexuality is not only unreal; it is destructive and contrary to divine intent. Since purpose always determines right and wrong, the right to determine purpose lies with the One who creates with purpose and bestows nature correspondent to it. Acting as if human sexuality does not exist, fosters denying other natural and revealed factors. Among other things, it shifts the basic social unit from the family to the individual. It resonates with the homosexual perversions of human nature and function, and calls for sameness as a means to equality.

This whole deviation is rooted in a false response to the drive for the meaningfulness that is hardwired into human persons, self-esteem in particular. The modern unisexual departure moves the basis for self-esteem from fulfillment of purpose to success in competition, from being appreciated for self-giving love that unifies, to competition that divides. Contrast replaces complement as the circumstance of self-worth. It recasts meaningfulness in the comparison between persons instead of the relationship between each person’s purpose and the fulfillment of that person’s purpose. It attempts to erase roles and role emphases that have any connection with sex. The full, wholesome situation supposedly does not come from fulfillment of complementary roles, but from success in egalitarian competition and sameness. If every person is not provided

the same possibilities, it is not “fair” because that person does not have equal, unqualified access to what gives worth. “Equal” ends up meaning “same.” Equality measures across individuals rather than within them between purpose and fulfillment of purpose. Egalitarianism promotes a simplistic, inadequate understanding of the complexity level in God’s intended arrangement. It settles for an immature awareness of the subject at hand. Consequently, it is not a progressive view, but a deficient one that sells short the complexity of interpersonal process between highly diverse components in the process.

Most of the press for female terminology about deity comes from objecting to patriarchal society, which supposedly moves in concert with projecting masculinity onto deity. Extremes beget extremes, and that has happened with roles insofar as they may relate to sexuality—roles in the home, church, and general society. Placing final responsibility on the shoulders of the husband in the home, for example, gets mistaken as a hint that husbands are worth more. That is competition rearing its head as the basis for value and forgetting the leveling effect of love (Colossians 3:19, *etc.*). Solving the objection to *divine masculinity* will not happen till the *theory of worth* is shifted away from competition, and *leadership theory* shifts away from power and authority to divine intent and personal competence. Admittedly the feminist push-back comes partly in response to mistaken and exaggerated notions of leadership and the manner in which it resides in human interaction everywhere. Correct that, and much of the objectionableness disappears. So to speak, who cares about rank when real love governs at all levels and sets the circumstance for worth? (cp. Christ, Ephesians 5:25)

The primary push for including “she” in pronominal reference to God does not start with God or revelation at all. It does not start with the perception of something objectively real but with the desire for something subjectively arbitrary. (Remember here the comments about the misguided basis for worth and the need to understand the proper approach to leadership.) The idea is to pronounce equality on all humankind as a matter of abstract principle. Presumably it is designed to short-circuit pride over being one kind of human (male) and another (female), but it is doubtful whether the new conceptualization escapes pride any better than the “patriarchal” one properly practiced, that is, without its misconceptualizations, exaggerations, and abuses.

Feminism suggests that the earlier Judaeo-Christian heritage projected maleness onto God because that is what they perceived about themselves as superior because they were male, bigger, stronger, and having greater stamina. The starting point for such deific reference, then, was supposedly with humankind. But the same process is occurring now with a subjective human viewpoint wanting to correct the former human viewpoint (God as masculine) by projecting female or male-plus-female gender onto deity. That renovation tries to avoid the undervaluing of female that is supposedly implied by making masculinity the consistent feature imbedded in God.

The procedure proceeds from an abstraction. It chooses one feature because it desires the effect of that feature: that all individuals have an equal place in the system. One trouble with arbitrary ideas is that they are simplistic; they do not include the collective features and their interactions. Secondly, abstract ideas do not necessarily reflect the real circumstance. The

proposition endeavors to minimize or disregard actual variants in humankind. Questions like these might be asked:

(a) Is it true (real vs. arbitrary) that female is completely interchangeable with male in all societal roles because of same gifting?

(b) Is it true that humankind is as eternal as deity kind so as to conceive of deity as per human preferences?

(c) Is it true that the biblical witness reflects human thought rather than divine revelation?

(d) Is it true that humankind has made itself (cp. Psalm 100:3) so as to determine its own nature and purpose instead of yielding to divine directives?

(e) Is it true that women are as big and strong as men and therefore as able to project security and stability as men can? (Note the attempt to get hold of the reins of authority as a means of control, which is then maintained by the power of others.)

(f) Is it true that women are as well suited to leadership roles as correspondingly capable and mature men are?

(g) Is it true that the psychology of masculinity and femininity can be and should be the same?

(h) Is it true that God as “he” is a reflection of patriarchal bias rather than something actual and important?

(i) Is it true that evolution can replace creation, and science can replace revelation so a humanistic construction can be discovered?

With such questions in mind, is it appropriate to project femininity or male-plus-female onto monotheistic deity? Mankind is creating God in “hesh”* own image rather than humankind being second by virtue of being created from God-kind. Is humankind in any position to construct a philosophy of humanness that does not regard Godkind as in primary position (by virtue of creation) to set the agenda for humankind? (“hesh” coined for third-person common)

Furthermore, human construction rather than divine revelation is the source of the feminist idea. Evolution replaces creation, and scientific progress replaces revelation. The process refuses qualified guidance in preference for searching and experimentation. Feminism’s approach to conceptualizing God represents the same process that it accuses patriarchy of doing. Pagan cultures did the same thing in projecting sexuality and polytheism onto deity. Feminism ends up doing something akin to paganism when it comes to the nature of God.

To make the feminist attitude toward divine nature work, a person would have to assume that the New Testament—and the Old—were a product of its time, not something based in divine revelation. No more did it offer objective truth about divine nature than what feminism imagines today. In place of divine origin via revelation, the New Testament and today’s alternative to it are both products of their own times. Evolutionary process has supposedly moved forward to some more sophisticated attitude toward God (if God exists) and the correlative behaviors of humankind (if that matters). Divinely given scripture as the arbiter of human conduct gets replaced by human striving for a supposedly superior frame of reference that gives credence to a more enlightened, self-generated perspective. Interestingly, that perspective just “happens” to

corroborate the desired unisex attitude toward humankind and toward the God humankind is presumably in the image of.

God known as “he” is revelation’s consistent presentation. Nothing is gained by departing that characterization, some things are lost, and foreign factors get introduced. It is the same process seen in every other effort to give respectability to a foreign philosophy by piggybacking it on the Christian faith—all the while denying the Christian view of God and people.

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