

Feminist imagery of yahweh in the bible essay example

[Sociology](#), [Communication](#)



\n[[toc title="Table of Contents"](#)]\n

\n \t

1. [Shall I bring to the birth and not cause](#) \n \t
2. [“ Yet thou are he who took me from the womb;](#) \n \t
3. [“ Forty years didst thou sustain them in the wilderness,](#) \n \t
4. [Bibliography](#) \n

\n[/toc]\n \n

In “ Depatriarchalizing Biblical Interpretation,” Phyllis Trible attests that at first glance the Women’s Liberation Movement and Hebrew Scriptures have little in common. However, she does give convincing arguments to the contrary. Her personal search to find a way to understand the Scriptures without undermining her involvement in the Women’s Liberation Movement has yielded much food for thought. Myth plays an important and powerful role in the daily lives of people, whether or not they realize it. Since the interpretation of the Bible affects so many people, it makes Trible’s efforts seem less trivial. One of the themes of interest is Trible’s work at highlighting the prevalence of anthropomorphic language and occurrence of female imagery for God in Scriptures. Though at first glance the role of women may seem inferior to that of men, stepping away from tradition Scripture interpretation can bring forth rich evidence of Biblical interest in “ women’s work” and reveal an equal place for women alongside that of man.

If patriarchal interpretation of the Bible is the lens through which so many millions of people live their lives, then Trible is certainly not in the wrong to take on that interpretation. After all, myth at its basic function is to teach

and show humans how to live in the world. The creation myth and subsequent myths and language create the picture that makes up Yahweh. How Yahweh is depicted and this Deity's interactions with humans in turn influence the relationship of human to Yahweh, man to woman, man to nature, etc. As the patriarchal interpretation is the dominant interpretation no matter the Christian religion, then Tribble's efforts are all the more paramount to debunking patriarchy's claim to superiority over women. Indeed her efforts are of import to any woman trying to understand the Bible in relation to her own life and womanhood.

The first example Tribble brings forward is the denunciation of sexism in regards to Yahweh. As she cites in Duet 6: 4, Yahweh is different from the fertility gods, of whom were commonly worshiped. Not only is Yahweh not ascribed to either gender, the Deity is above such gender assignments. Although it is recognized, and the dangers noted, that the masculine label more often than not does describe this Deity. But this denotation, one can hypothesize, could simply be a reflection of the patriarchal bent of Hebrew culture at the time of writing. Thus the cultural struggle of pronouncing the existence of a God above labels of sexuality against the human need to define such a Deity must be taken into account. This is particularly of importance should the language grammar itself lack a gender-neutral component of defining objects.

After explaining the dichotomy of describing a gender neutral God with masculine language, Tribble beautifully segues into examples of anthropomorphic language within Hebrew Scriptures. Anthropomorphic language, it should be noted, that ultimately reflects more of a woman's role

than a man's, though it defies outright gender labels. Tribble uses Hosea's image of Yahweh. Tribble writes, "Yahweh is the parent who teaches the child to walk, who heals tender wounds, and who feeds the hungry infant." In this, Yahweh is likened to a human being while skirting the issue of gender. In fact, the stress of this passage is ultimately Yahweh's love for the human beings of whom the Deity created. Love which is defined by work women would typically do, namely child-rearing activities.

The role of women in the Hebrew Scriptures in some ways is reflection of the role of women in Western society today. Though women today can be self-supporting entities in their own right and are not bound by the restrictions of Hebrew women in the age of Scripture, the expectations governing both sets of women have many similarities. These similarities are defined by a man's worldview, aka patriarchy. Thus women today, while enjoying greater freedom than Hebrew women, are still to a large extent expected to be the ones to cook, clean, be nursemaid, care for children, serve others, and run the household. All of these activities ultimately define women and place them below man as they are at heart acts of labor and servitude. Yet in these activities lies a powerful revelation. For, in order for man to humble himself before Yahweh, he must take on these actions of women's work. Just as Yahweh subsumes his own role as all-powerful Deity to show love for humans, man must subsume his own inclinations for dominance and aggression to show love for Yahweh.

Describing Yahweh and his relationship towards his creation using feminine imagery happens throughout the Scriptures. Indeed, Tribble writes, "Midwife, seamstress, housekeeper, nurse, and mother: all these feminine images

characterize Yahweh, the God of Israel." All of these roles belong solely to the mother or women in the household and these are the pictures created to show man how God loves him. The decision by the writers of Scripture to characterize God with outright feminine imagery deserves a second look and a question towards patriarchy's claim to superiority.

As Yahweh created man and woman, in addition to all creation, this very feminine image of God as being one who brings forth life is prevalent throughout Scriptures. For example, Third Isaiah 66: 9 states:

Shall I bring to the birth and not cause

says the Lord;

shall I, who cause to bring forth, shut the womb?

says your God.

The experience and ability to give birth is exclusively feminine. From the time Yahweh judged woman in the garden for eating the apple and decreed that she shall suffer the pains of childbirth, so have women done so. But childbirth is a double-edged sword. Perhaps men are spared from the pain, but they are also spared from the ability to give birth. This attribute of bringing forth life is something that women have in common with Yahweh that men will never have a part of.

Furthermore, Second Isaiah quotes God speaking as if he is a new mother crying out in the pain of birth. Yet not only does Yahweh bring forth life, he also nourishes it with food and drink, or in keeping with the image of birth, God nourishes and comforts like a mother nursing her baby. This is particularly poignant imagery as the relationship between nursing mother

and baby is about so much more than the transference of milk. It is about love and comfort and building the bond between mother and child.

In addition of being likened to that of a laboring and then nursing mother, the maternal imagery of Yahweh is further expounded as that of a midwife. The role of a midwife is to see an expecting mother safely through birth and deliver the baby from the womb. From there, she tends to the baby, making sure it is healthy before placing it at the mother's breast to nurse. A midwife is also responsible for ensuring that the mother also delivers the placenta and doesn't hemorrhage. God is depicted as being like a midwife several times throughout the Old Testament. Most notable is in Psalm 22: 10-11:

“ Yet thou are he who took me from the womb;

Thou didst keep me safe upon my mother's breast.

Upon thee was I cast from my birth”

God is the one in charge of navigating the dangerous waters of labor and delivery, making sure everyone makes it safely through.

Along with all things maternal, labor, breastfeeding, caring for children, so are sewing and mending also very much woman's work. Along with this could be the process of spinning wool into thread used to make garments and other items. “ As a woman clothes her family, so Yahweh clothes the human family.” In the creation story, God clothes Adam and Eve after they ate fruit from the tree and became aware that they were naked. In the Hebrews' forty years of wandering, Yahweh provided for their every need, including clothes, as accounted for in Nehemiah (9: 21):

“ Forty years didst thou sustain them in the wilderness, and they lacked nothing; their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell.”

Thus Yahweh plays mother to her children, bringing them to life, nourishing them, and providing for their every need. Finally, in the feminine imagery of Yahweh that Tribble brings up, is the ever-present theme of feeding the hungry. “ As mothers feed their household, so Yahweh prepares manna and quail for the children of Israel.”

In conclusion, Tribble creates a persuasive claim for understanding the woman’s role in Hebrew Scriptures as one that is more equal than the traditional interpretation. Though it may seem frivolous to compare two such different things as Hebrew Scriptures and the Women’s Liberation Movement, when viewed through the impact that such myths have on cultural ideologies, it is not such a stretch.

While she covers a lot of ground in her argument, most poignant are the examples she shows of the feminine imagery of Yahweh. These rich images show how Yahweh loves and provides for her children the way that only a mother could and would. These images reinforce the importance of the role of women, not as subordinate to man, but on equal footing.

Bibliography

Tribble, Phyllis, “ Depatriachalizing in Biblical Interpretation.” Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 41, No. 1 (1973) : 30-48, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1461386>.