



THIRD EDITION

PHILOSOPHY
of RELIGION

SELECTED READINGS

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victims. Salvation is envisioned as deliverance from systems of social oppression and as restoration of an egalitarian peasant society of equals, "where each have their own vine and fig tree and none need be afraid" (Mic. 4:4).

Although Yahwism dissents against class hierarchy, it issues no similar protest against gender discrimination. There are several reasons (not to be seen as "excuses") for this. First, there is always a sociology of knowledge in social ideology, even in liberation ideology. Those male prophets who were aware of oppression by rich urbanites or dominating empires were not similarly conscious of their own oppression of dependents—women and slaves—in the patriarchal family. Only the emergence of women conscious of their oppression could have applied the categories of protest to women. This did not happen in Yahwism. Second, although Hebrew religion was to shape systems of patriarchal law that emphasize gender dualism and hierarchy, in its protest against Canaanite urban society it would have known powerful females, queens, priestesses, and wealthy landowners who functioned as oppressors. It would have been difficult to recognize women as an oppressed gender group when the primary social stratification integrated some women into roles of power. Indeed, perhaps it was not until the early modern period that the perception of women as marginalized by gender became stronger than the perception of women as divided by class. Only then could a feminist movement arise that protested the subjugation of women as a group.

The New Testament contains a renewal and radicalization of prophetic consciousness, now applied to marginalized groups in a universal, nontribal context. Consequently, it is possible to recognize as liberated by God social groups overlooked in Old Testament prophecy. Class, ethnicity, and gender are now specifically singled out as the divisions overcome by redemption in Christ. In the New Testament stories, gender is recognized as an additional oppression within oppressed classes and ethnic groups.⁴ . . .

The Liberating Sovereign

A second antipatriarchal use of God-language occurs in the Old and New Testaments when divine sovereignty and fatherhood are used to break the ties of bondage under human kings and fathers. Abraham is called into an adoptive or covenanted relation with God only by breaking his ties with his family, leaving behind the graves of his ancestors.⁵ The God of Exodus establishes a relationship with the people that breaks their ties with the ruling overlords. As the people flee from the land of bondage, Pharaoh and his horsemen are drowned. God's kingship liberates Israel from human kings. The antimonarchical tradition inveighs against Israel's capitulation to the customs of the surrounding people by adopting kingship.

These Old Testament traditions are developed in Jesus' teaching. It has been often pointed out that Jesus uses a unique word for God. By adopting the word *Abba* for God, he affirms a primary relationship to God based on love and trust; *Abba* was the intimate word used by children in the family for their fathers. It is not fully conveyed by English terms such as *Daddy*, for it was also a term an adult could use of an older man to signify a combination of respect

THE GODDESS IN JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN MONOTHEISM

In Hebrew religious development, male monotheism does not, by any means, succeed in simply supplanting the older world of Gods and Goddesses or the cult of salvation through renewal of nature-society. Rather it imposes itself on this older world, assimilating, transforming, and reversing its symbol systems. Thus, for example, the ancient myth of the Sacred Marriage lives on in Yahwism, but in a reversed form that uses this story to exert the possessive and judgmental relation of the patriarchal God over the people of agricultural society. The patriarchal God, not the Goddess, is the dominant partner in the Sacred Marriage. The female has been reduced to the human partner as servant to God. In the prophet Hosea, the marriage symbol is taken over judgmentally as a diatribe against the "harlotry" of Israelites, who prefer Baal, the vegetation and rain God of the Canaanites, to Yahweh, the nomadic patriarch. Yahweh is depicted as the angry and threatening husband who will punish his unfaithful bride with summary divorce.

But he is also described as winning her back and making her faithful to him by drawing her out into the desert wildness. . . .

BEYOND MALE GENDER GOD-LANGUAGE IN THE BIBLICAL TRADITION

The Prophetic God

Although the predominantly male images and roles of God make Yahwism an agent in the sacralization of patriarchy, there are critical elements in Biblical theology that contradict this view of God. By patriarchy we mean not only the subordination of females to males, but the whole structure of Father-ruled society: aristocracy over serfs, masters over slaves, king over subjects, racial overlords over colonized people. Religions that reinforce hierarchical stratification use the Divine as the apex of this system of privilege and control. The religions of the ancient Near East link the Gods and Goddesses with the kings and queens, the priests and priestesses, the warrior and temple aristocracy of a stratified society. The Gods and Goddesses mirror this ruling class and form its heavenly counter-part. The divinities also show mercy and favor to the distressed, but in the manner of noblesse oblige. . . .

The Davidic monarchy represents a capitulation of Judaic leadership to the city-state model of power, but the prophets of Israel continue the tradition of protest against the hierarchical, urban, landowning society that deprives and oppresses the rural peasantry. This established at the heart of Biblical religion a motif of protest against the status quo of ruling-class privilege and the deprivation of the poor. God is seen as a critic of this society, a champion of the social

and affection.⁶ But is it enough to conclude from this use of *Abba* that Jesus transforms the patriarchal concept of divine fatherhood into what might be called a maternal or nurturing concept of God as loving, trustworthy parent?

The early Jesus movement characteristically uses this concept of God as *Abba* to liberate the community from human dominance-dependence relationships based on kinship ties or master-servant relationships. In the Gospel tradition, joining the new community of Jesus creates a rupture with traditional family ties and loyalties. In order to follow Jesus one must "hate" (that is, put aside one's loyalty to) father and mother, sisters and brothers (Luke 14:26; Matt. 10:37-38). The patriarchal family is replaced by a new community of brothers and sisters (Matt. 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35; Luke 8:19-21). This new community is a community of equals, not of master and servants, father and children. Matthew 23:1-10 states that the relationship to God as *Abba* abolishes all father-child, master-servant relations between people within the Jesus community: "You are to call no man father, master or Lord." The relationship between Christians is to be one of mutual service and not of mastery and servitude. . . .

The Proscription of Idolatry

A third Biblical tradition that is important to a feminist theology is the proscription of idolatry. Israel is to make no picture or graven image of God; no pictorial or verbal representation of God can be taken literally. By contrast, Christian sculpture and painting represents God as a powerful old man with a white beard, even crowned and robed in the insignia of human kings or the triple tiara of the Pope. The message created by such images is that God is both similar to and represented by the patriarchal leadership, the monarchs and the Pope. Such imaging of God should be judged for what it is—as idolatry, as the setting up of certain human figures as the privileged images and representations of God. To the extent that such political and ecclesiastical patriarchy incarnates unjust and oppressive relationships, such images of God become sanctions of evil.

The proscription of idolatry must also be extended to verbal pictures. When the word *Father* is taken literally to mean that God is male and not female, represented by males and not females, then this word becomes idolatrous. The Israelite tradition is circumspect about the verbal image, printing it without vowel signs. The revelation to Moses in the burning bush gives as the name of God only the enigmatic "I am what I shall be." God is person without being imaged by existing social roles. God's being is open-ended, pointing both to what is and to what can be.

Classical Christian theology teaches that all names for God are analogies. The tradition of negative or *apophatic* theology emphasizes the unlikeness between God and human words for God. That tradition corrects the tendency to take verbal images literally; God is like but also unlike any verbal analogy. Does this not mean that male words for God are not in any way superior to or more appropriate than female analogies? God is both male and female and neither male nor female. One needs inclusive language for God that draws on the images and experiences of both genders. This inclusiveness should not become more abstract. Abstractions often conceal androcentric assumptions and pre-

vent the shattering of the male monopoly on God-language, as in "God is not male. He is Spirit." Inclusiveness can happen only by naming God/ess in female as well as male metaphors.

NOTES

1. M. Kay Martin and Barbara Voorheis, *The Female of the Species* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975).
2. E. O. James, *The Worship of the Sky God: A Comparative Study of Semitic and Indo-European Religion* (London: Athlone Press, 1963).
3. Phyllis Bird, "Women in the Old Testament," in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. R. Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), pp. 48-57.
4. See, for example, Matt. 15:21-28; Mark 5:25-33; Luke 7:11-17, 7:36-50, 10:38-42, 13:10-17.
5. Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *God the Father: Theology and Patriarchy in the Teachings of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), pp. 21-28.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 70-81.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Describe how Ruether thinks that ancient patriarchal societies gave rise to male monotheism, that is, a masculine concept of God. According to Ruether, what problems has male monotheism caused?
2. As a corrective to male monotheism, Ruether proposes reviving goddess imagery. Describe the goddess religious orientation and explain how she thinks it will help solve problems that are caused by male monotheism. Although she identifies a biblical tradition of male dominance, how does Ruether argue that there are biblical grounds for overthrowing it?
3. Ruether recognizes that God, as spirit, is neither male nor female, which are physical realities. She speaks of the tradition of apophatic theology, which emphasizes the unlikeness between God and creatures, and argues for inclusive language for God that is inherently metaphorical. Review her points related to these issues and evaluate.