

Addressing God – Lessons from the Old Testament

Can we address God as ‘she’?

This question was made real for me in fresh ways as I studied the Bible in preparation for our New Start course. The motivation to address this, therefore stems not from a modern attitude of gender equality but is rooted in the biblical record of how people of faith have addressed “the holy One” over the centuries. There are various elements to my response:

1. When Abraham and Sarah left their homeland to travel to Canaan (later to be known as Israel, “the promised land”), they believed they were called by God. But, which God? No community had yet developed a monotheistic faith; all worshipped a variety of gods. The earliest biblical traditions use two different names: El and Yahweh. These names were recognised across many tribes in the near middle east, and were accepted as part of the “host of heaven”.

The general view was that El was the oldest, originating Father God who had been replaced as the chief God by Baal. This pattern we find in Roman and Greek mythology too when, for example, Zeus replaces Uranus or Cronos as the chief God – the older god still lurks though in the background. In Canaan, Baal was a god associated with nature and the renewal of creation, and so (as in many cultures) there were stories of Baal’s death and re-birth, associated with winter/spring. This seasonal transition was often marked in the temple by ritual sex acts between Baal and Ashteroth (one of the most common names of the senior goddess), and performed in reality between the priests and priestesses in the temple. It also seems that many tribes sacrificed the first born as a symbol of allegiance, including, the sacrifice of the first male child.

Abraham’s tribe began to differentiate themselves from the surround culture in two ways: they rejected child sacrifice (see Genesis 22), and they rejected temple sex. In the latter case, they therefore began to stand firmly against any female gods, or the inclusion of the feminine in the temple. This desire to be different 3,500 years ago, needs to be distinguished from whether we today can recognise female characteristics in God, or divine Christians in women.

So Abraham’s tribe told stories based on two different names of God: El, the old originator, and Yahweh, portrayed as their tribal leader, a robust active strong god. Yahweh was still then seen as one among many; but, as the centuries rolled by, Yahweh was increasingly seen as the challenger to Baal, eventually triumphing in ... against Baal and all his consorts. These stories were told just at the time tribes of Israel were defeating the other tribes in Canaan. We can read about this in the older books in the Old Testament: Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings, where the victory of Israel is as much a victory of Yahweh over Baal. Much of this will feel rather foreign and distant to us. But I remind you of this to make the point that we need to be careful about what conclusions we draw from this history. Whereas I am delighted that Abraham’s tribe stopped child sacrifice, I didn’t have to adopt completely their vision of God as my own (not least because the undertaking that there is only one God did not arise till much later).

2. It was only after the people of Israel returned from their exile in Babylon (around 530BC) that the vision of there only being one God really took root. Having tasted defeat in battle and having been banished from their land for generations, the Israelites became less wedded to an image of Yahweh as their tribal leader who guaranteed and ruled in their home-land. From the dust of defeat, the prophets brought forth a new vision of one God alone, a God of law, justice, right behaviour and righteousness. They still called this God ‘Yahweh’, but it was a very different Yahweh to the warrior god worshipped 500 years ago.

As the Israelites settled back on their home-land, weakened in their economy, social standing and political power, they increasingly spoke about God in terms that were not reserved for their tribes alone. A God who wanted people to live lives of honour, wisdom, peace, justice, nobility and compassion was a God who could be worshipped by everyone (whatever their culture) everywhere. This God (which we read of in the longest book of the Old Testament, Proverbs, Psalms, Job) was attractive to many as the Greek empire. Ironically, just at the moment that the people of Israel were at their weakest, their religion became respected and admired around the Mediterranean.

The positive side of this is that new peoples were drawn into the faith of Yahweh, which is the foundation of our Christian tradition. The difficult question that had to be addressed was this: how much of the culture, teaching, traditions and rituals of the Israelites do I have to take on when I become a follower of Yahweh? The Greeks admired the teachings, but rather despised the old stories of the tribal gods. This we hear in the New Testament of Roman soldiers and Greeks who were supporters of the synagogue and prayed to Yahweh, but were not “converted” into “fully paid up” Jews. After all, to this day, Judaism is not a faith of conversion but is something that is passed on through the family. This question was only finally addressed in the newly formed Christian communities by Paul (and not by Jesus) who ... and the gentiles who wanted to follow Christ did not ... have to become Jews.

So once again, this history underlines to me the difficult issue of deciding what is an essential part of our faith, and what is a cultural expression. Just because the people of Israel did not recognise the female aspect of God for hundreds of years, does not mean that we can't or shouldn't? A doctrinaire response that merely states ‘we should do as they did then’ actually seems unfaithful to the history of the tradition it claims to support.

3. One future aspect of this changing image of God is visible in the later books of the Old Testament. The move away from a tribal god was also a move to a more settled, rational God. The literature (especially the book of Proverbs) focuses our attention on our behaviour which is best exemplified in straight forward rules that can be obeyed by everyone. Some of the psalms have the same emphasis too: for example (one of my favourites which I preached on a few weeks ago), Psalm 1, the especially Psalm 119 (all 176 verses ... is to the rewards of keeping God's commandments, and the punishment of evil).

An endless diet of this can be soul destroying. Ecclesiastes expresses that so well with its lament ‘there is nothing new under the sun’. A religion of pure morality is boring and uninspiring. It is likely that Job and Song of Solomon were written in reaction against this. Job is a passionate shout of anger against a world based on ‘the good are rewarded and succeed; that bad are punished’. “That's not true”, Job says against his comforters, who are typical of this rational and soul-less religion. The book of Job finishes with the great claim that, even though bad things happen to good people, God is still with us, and accessible to us. The Song of Solomon is a book steeped in passion, longing, hope, intimacy and love – all of which can be excluded from a moral religion.

Actually, there is one passage in Proverbs (the ultra-rational book) that shows the tradition can correct itself. Proverbs 8.22-9.6 describes wisdom not simply as an attribute of God, but as part of God's own being, wisdom is almost an embodiment of God; note the language. an “embodiment”, a putting into a body – the rational God is removed, distinct, separate from our human condition. The scribes in recognising this, realised that the full truth of God was not being conveyed, so they described the embodiment of God, wisdom, here active among

us. Significantly, Sophia (the Greek word for wisdom) is feminine: there is a ... that when we need God active here and now, we may need or choose to undertake this using the feminine. Wisdom is not a part of God; wisdom is a manifestation of God's true self.

And, to take this one step further, John's gospel is using very similar language in the prologue (John chapter 1) when he talks of the Logos (the Word). The Word is not only a part of God, the Word is God's true self. Sophia, Logos, Jesus: the greatest writers in our Judaeo-Christian tradition were not content to describe God in terms that were too rational, moral and distant; they needed to convey that God is really here among us, including those parts of our lives which we recognised as female and male. Perhaps this is why Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury in 1098, could write a poem to 'Jesus our mother'.

I will pause there. I am not seeking to overturn the faith as we have recognised it. I am noting that, on studying once again the Bible carefully, I see a dynamic tradition that has continually developed. Seeking to express the fullness of God's being and God's relationship with us is a never ending task, demanding much wisdom and sensitivity from us.