

Book Manuscript

**THE ROLE OF WOMEN AND THE NATURE OF GOD:
A SOCIO-BIBLICAL STUDY**

Caleb Rosado

(Revised March, 1987)

Dedicated to the women in my life:

my wife, Ronnie,

and my two daughters,

Charis and Elissa,

who gently encourage me

to be sensitive to their needs.

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PREFACE

Human beings are creatures of habit, including habits of belief and thought. Once we get into a set pattern of behaving, believing and thinking, change comes with great difficulty.

The ideas for this book did not come overnight, nor were they the product of a few months of quick research. Rather they are the result of ten long years of struggling with a new understanding of God relevant to the needs of our world society, and the role this God desires for the members of the Church--both men and women--in fulfillment of their mission. The first struggle came in a graduate class on Church and Society I took at the Seminary at Andrews University in 1977. For the class project I decided to do an investigation into the whole issue of the ordination of women. Prior to my research I had no position on the matter. In fact, the leaning of my beliefs and thoughts were somewhat negative to the question. After considering the matter from a Biblical and historical perspective, and in terms of church polity, my views changed.

Later, as I got into graduate work in sociology at Northwestern, I realized how inequality is structured into the very fabric of our society and its institutions--the church not exempt. During this same time period I also began to understand why many today are rejecting God, because God is perceived as a stern, harsh being who sanctions oppression in various forms. Slowly and painfully my ideas about God began to change, and with them the role humans are to play in the divine/human drama. With the establishment of All Nations Church, I came to the realization that due to the nature of the congregation--a microcosm of the world in

terms of ethnic diversity--it would have a short-lived history, if a new understanding of God was not presented on which the church would base its mission and purpose for existence. Thus began my own, and with me my congregation's, understanding of God as a Compassionate Being who ministers to us at all levels of human need. We were introduced to this God by His son, Jesus of Nazareth, our Elder Brother, whose way is *the way of compassion--love to God manifested in genuine concern for humankind*.

All the chapters of this book were originally given as sermons over the past eight years to my All Nations congregation.

This book would not be possible without the fine assistance of several able people who gave critical comments and made editorial changes. I want to thank Daniel Augsburg, Kit Watts, Sara and Abraham Terian for their recommended changes. Kit especially gave me many helpful editorial ideas all of which were utilized. A warm thanks also goes to Kenneth Strand and Faye Chamberlain for not only reading the manuscript, but encouraging its publication. Leona Running, however, deserves my most heartfelt appreciation for painstakingly editing the entire manuscript twice, and for her kind words in the Foreword.

I trust the book will not only give you a new understanding of the role women ought to play in the Church, but of the God who has already given us an example as to how to go about it, by His own treatment of women and the role He has given them.

Caleb Rosado
Berrien Springs, MI
March, 1987

FOREWORD

Caleb Rosado has produced a book that is much needed at this time, when the role of women in the church is viewed from polarized positions, with each side claiming Biblical support for its views. Unless made aware by some educational process or other, most people are oblivious to how much their attitudes and opinions are conditioned by their entire background and experience--which are very different from other people's--and how much effect this conditioning has on even the way they understand the Bible!

This is where sociology can be helpful, explaining deeper reasons (which may turn out not to be the correct reasons) for holding certain views, and even interpreting the Bible in certain ways. Bringing his cross-disciplinary training to focus on this important question, Dr. Rosado produces valuable illumination of the whole problem. He goes to basic principles rooted in the very nature of God as progressively revealed to human understanding. His treatment of many, many Old and New Testament texts is thoughtful and genuine exegesis, and his basic premise--that Jesus Christ revealed the character of His Father much more perfectly than was done by men writing under inspiration but hampered by their position among the distortions caused by the Fall--is surely correct. God was sending His light through faulty prisms that bent its rays and darkened it. Jesus simply ignored the man-made barriers He encountered and revealed the compassionate Heavenly Parent.

A delightfully and satisfying journey is ahead for each thoughtful reader of this excellent book.

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INTRODUCTION

The role of women in the church, and especially the question of their ordination to ministry, is a highly contested one in lay and scholarly circles within Adventism. The lines of opposing views are pretty well drawn, and each side claims that God is on their side, for their position is regarded as a faithful interpretation of the Bible on the matter. Yet, while making such claims, the conclusions of both groups are often in conflicting opposition to each other.

At the heart of this question of the role of women in the church lies a more basic question, the question of the nature of God. Donald G. Bloesch in his book *Is the Bible Sexist?*, states: "The debate over sexist language [and I would add, the role of women in the church] is ultimately a debate concerning the nature of God."¹ I believe he is right in this statement, though wrong in the basic argument of his book. We must understand the character of God before we can understand the place this God has for women . . . and men . . . in the divine plan for humankind.

Essential to this understanding of God, however, is the observation that people using the same sources can arrive at different conclusions. There are reasons for this. And the discipline of sociology--the science which studies human behavior in social settings--can be most helpful in understanding the why of these differences.

¹Donald G. Bloesch, *Is the Bible Sexist?* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1982).

Why a Sociological Approach?

I realize that the bringing of sociology together with theology to explain the relationship between the divine and the human raises serious questions in the minds of some, reminiscent of the act of Nadab and Abihu offering "strange fire" before the Lord in Numbers 26. There are justifying reasons for such a view, since theology and sociology have not always seen eye-to-eye on issues. And some have used sociology to deride religion.

However, part of the problem for this uneasiness in the minds of some is a failure to distinguish the limitations of both fields. Theology, as the study of God and God's relationship with humankind, focuses on matters of faith, which are beyond the reach of what can be measured objectively by science. Sociology, on the other hand, deals with what can be measured by empirical observation. Matters of faith are beyond the scope of objective social science. Thus the two delve into separate realms, and are not necessarily contradictory in their findings, since the means by which each arrives at its conclusions differ. The results though are often complementary.

This is especially true when the church is the object of analysis. The church is not only a divine institution--the Body of Christ--but also a human institution with social, political and economic dimensions, and can be safely studied by both disciplines. Some however fail to make this distinction. And because the focus of believers is already a religiously-oriented one, a theological orientation dominates their worldview, and they define the church only from a biblical perspective. Thus their understanding of the church is confined to a theological dimension only. James M. Gustafson declares: "Many make the explicit or tacit assumption that the Church is so absolutely unique in character that it can be understood only in its

own private language."² All the while, however, the church, as a social institution functioning in society and within history, continues to affect people's lives politically, economically and socially.

This book approaches the question of the nature of God and the role of women from a sociological framework because one of the basic premises of the sociology of knowledge with regard to religion is that a people's understanding of God is shaped by those social factors that give formation to them as a people. It is out of this experience, unique to their social situation, that a people begin to articulate questions about God. By looking at our subject matter from a sociological as well as a theological perspective, we avoid a one-sided view.

This book is addressed to the general Christian reader, and thus the point of view expressed takes a rather broad approach to the question. Though much of the material will be helpful to scholars and those already acquainted with the subject, my purpose is to give the non-specialist another perspective by which to view God, as the Liberator of people, especially women.

The Content of This Book:

The fundamental premise of the book is expressed in chapter 1, and it is this: That Jesus is the only One through whom we gain a correct understanding of the character and nature of God. However, our understanding of Christ and Scripture is already conditioned by our culture, and by the social position we occupy in society. Chapter 2 gives us a fuller understanding of Jesus' view of God in light of His action and attitude towards the patriarchal structures of His day. Chapter 3 focuses on the manner by which Jesus acted towards women in light of the social mores of His

²James M. Gustafson, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as a Human Community* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 100.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Role of Women in the New Testament

One of the highly debated questions at present within the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America is the question of the ordination of women. Should women be ordained to the Gospel ministry, and function as pastors with full privileges in the local church?

In 1881 at the General Conference session, a formal resolution was proposed, stating, "that females possessing the necessary qualifications to fill that position, may, with perfect propriety, be set apart by ordination to the work of the Christian ministry."¹ One hundred years later, this resolution still has not been acted on. What's holding it up? It depends on whom you ask. Some give theological reasons, others Spirit of Prophecy reasons, others sociological and cultural reasons, others administrative reasons, others economic and political reasons, others job-market competition reasons, others organizational structural reasons, others biological reasons, others historical reasons, while others list reasons of status quo. Can it be that for many, however, it is *fear* of doing what is different?

When will the day come when God's people will do what is right, not because of political pressures, not because of economic pressures, not even because of pressures of expediency, but simply because it is the right thing to do?

Such was the *modus operandi* of the Early Church. But before we take a look at the action of the Early Church towards women, let us first look at the action of God, and the role He permitted some women to have in the proclamation of the Gospel.

¹ *Review and Herald*, Vol. 58:25, December 20, 1881, p. 392.

Women In the Gospels:

In God's great plan of bringing about the salvation of the human race, God the Father chose to allow the Son to become a human being. The process that He used to bring about His birth was the well-known human process of procreation. But He only used one-half of the components of that process, the female component, not the male.

Now some might say, that's obvious. God didn't need the male component; after all, artificial insemination is nothing new. But He did need the female component. Not really. Mary wasn't necessary either. On whom did God depend for the creation of Adam? He could have done the same for Christ. But He chose not to; instead He used a woman!

It is quite interesting that the name of the woman He selected was Mary, meaning "bitter."² Was her name symbolic of the social situation of the members of her sex, and thus a reason why God chose her? Others say that Mary (from "Miriam") means "exalted."³ If the plight of women has been a bitter one, ever since that glorious day their state of bitterness has been turned into exaltation. "And the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God'" (Luke 1:30). With the coming of Christ, women now stand in a favorable position, because of Christ.

The first human being whom God used as a medium through which the Gospel--Jesus Christ--could be given to the world, was a woman, of approximately

²Robert Young, *Analytical Concordance to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, n.d.).

³Alexander Cruden, *Cruden's Unabridged Concordance* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968).

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13-14 years of age.⁴ Mary was the first person to bring forth Truth, to provide Salvation to the human race. And the first sermon preached in the new dispensation was Mary's great statement of faith, generally called "The Magnificat" (Luke 1:46-55).

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
And his mercy is on those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm,
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,
he has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted those of low degree;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent empty away.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his posterity for ever."

⁴Henri Daniel-Rops, *Daily Life in the Time of Jesus* (New York: Mentor-Omega Book, 1962), p. 120. Cf. Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, pp. 364-368.

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That God first chose a woman for such a task was no accident; it was all part of the Divine Plan to turn the tables on humanity. "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. . . . God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor. 1:25,27).

Jesus also had the habit of "turning the tables" on people, of approaching them on the blind side, of doing the unexpected. He tended to catch people off guard by His words and actions.

A case in point was His dealings with the Samaritans. Jesus was concerned with the salvation of the Samaritans. He could have entered the city of Sychar in John 4 with His disciples, and not only obtained food, but also provided spiritual food for the people. Instead, He chose to stay behind, while His disciples went on in, because He had in mind having another person bring the Gospel to the Samaritans. The person that God allowed to bring the Gospel to the city was none other than a woman, a woman who as result of experiencing an encounter with Jesus, underwent a dual role-change: she not only experienced spiritual transformation from a sinner to a disciple, but also a social transformation from a pitcher-woman to a preacher. The text says: "So the woman left her water jar [the symbol of her role of servitude as a woman], and went away into the city, and said to the people, 'Come, see a Man'" (John 4:28-29). She had now switched roles and become a preacher of the Gospel. The result is found in verse 30, "They went out of the city and were coming to him."

She must have had a persuasive presence about her, for notice the response by the men of the city, vss. 39-42:

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Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world."

Here we have a successful evangelistic endeavor, one conducted by a person to whom the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians could also very well apply: "God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (vss. 28,29).

The incident with Mary and Martha in Luke 10 also shows how Jesus comes up with the unexpected, in this case a role-reversal. Mary should have been in the kitchen with Martha. But, as was mentioned previously [on page 36], Jesus had more important things in mind for Mary. "Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42). Jesus was preparing Mary for a broader ministry than just waiting on tables, as Martha assumed. It was a ministry of hearing the Gospel, in order to impart the Gospel. Jesus called this "the good portion." And it was a portion that women should have, not just the "anxious and troubled" portion that has ever been their lot. Jesus then added, it "shall not be taken away from her." This is Jesus' intent with regard to women, which the church should practice.

The most glorious event in the history of humankind is the Resurrection of our Lord and Savior. One would think that an event of such magnitude, in view of

the times, would be given to men to proclaim, in whom people had confidence. Yet God chose women as the first ones to preach the news of the Risen Lord (Luke 24:1-12). He is a God who again chooses "what is weak in the world, . . . what is low and despised, . . . even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast" (1 Corinthians. 1:27-29).

Women In the Early Church:

Because of the example of its Lord and Master, the Early Church incorporated women into leadership positions right from the very beginning.

Women were part of the Upper Room experience in Acts 1 when the Holy Spirit descended upon all present (Acts 1:14; 2:1-4). On both men and women the gift of tongues was imparted. This gift was not the babbling, unintelligible type prevalent today among the Charismatic Movement, but the ability to speak foreign languages. This is made clear in Acts 2:5-12.

"And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'" (vs. 12). It means that God is no respecter of persons, *nor of gender*, but distributes His gifts to all whom He pleases, women as well as men, for the preaching of the Gospel to the nations is too broad a task to be entrusted to just one group. Pentecost made it clear that all, both men and women, received the gift of tongues--communication--for one purpose and one purpose only--to preach the Gospel to every nation. Peter emphasized this when he declared that even the Old Testament prophet, Joel, had predicted this event, which included women as well as men, as the recipients of God's Spirit for the proclamation of the gospel. And as a result of God's Spirit being poured "on my menservants and my maidservants . . . whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:18,21). This text makes the point that the act of preaching carried out by women as well as men was

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not just a mere prophesying--a declaration of statements about God--but an evangelistic proclamation which resulted in decisions for Christ.

Many of the early missionaries were women, who along with their husbands proclaimed the Gospel to the Gentiles, as missionary couples. There is a list of them in Romans 16. Prisca and Aquila, who brought the gospel to Apollos, labored together with Paul, Romans 16, vss. 3-5. Prisca is consistently mentioned first, showing that she was the more prominent of the two. Then there is Mary in vs. 6. We don't know who this Mary is. Perhaps it was Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, who sat at the feet of Jesus, and is now exercising her "good portion." Andronicus and Junia were a husband-and-wife team, of whom Paul says four things: they were his relatives, they had accepted the gospel before Paul, they had been in prison with him for preaching the gospel, and they were not just apostles, but stood out as *apostles of distinction*. Because Paul calls them "apostles," male interpreters have tried to suggest that Junia, a common Roman female name, is really Junias, an uncommon Roman male name. But the early church fathers, such as Chrysostom, understood this text as referring to a husband/wife team.⁵ There were also in vs. 15 Philologus and Julia, and Nereus and his sister. Vs. 12 mentions three other women, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis, who were hard workers for God. In all, of the 25 persons whom Paul mentions, a full one-third or eight are women.

One of these eight was Phoebe, who was not only a deacon⁶ but also a *prostatis*, a word which male Bible translators have translated as "helper." But

⁵F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 68.

⁶There is no such expression as "deaconess" in the original Greek text of the Bible. This is an English feminization of the word "deacon," which in the New Testament is applied to both men and women, cf. 1 Timothy 3:11.

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"in the literature of the time the term had the connotation of leading officer, president, governor, or superintendent."⁷ The same word is used in 1 Thess. 5:12 to characterize persons with authority in the community, and in 1 Tim. 3:4f and 5:17 to designate the functions of the bishop, deacon or elder.⁸

Paul is giving Phoebe a letter of recommendation, which was common at the time (cf. 2 Corinthians. 3:1-3), as a letter of introduction to the place where the person was going to work. More than likely Phoebe was headed for Rome to serve as spiritual leader, elder or pastor, and Paul was sending a letter of recommendation or introduction, to the church to cooperate with her in her endeavors for the gospel (Romans 16:1-2).

Then there were the house churches, "where the early Christians celebrated the Lord's supper and preached the good news."⁹ "Since women were among the wealthy and prominent converts (cf. Acts 17:4,12), they played an important role in the founding, sustaining, and promoting of such house churches. The following texts which speak of women as leaders of house churches demonstrate this: Paul greets Aphia 'our sister,' who together with Philemon and Archippus was a leader of the house church in Colossae to which the letter to Philemon was written (Phlm. 2). Paul also mentions twice the missionary couple Prisca and Aquila and 'the church in their house' (1 Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:5). . . . [In] the letter to the Colossians [Paul] refers to Nympha of Laodicea and the 'church in her house' (Col. 4:15). According to Acts the church of Phillipi began with the conversion of the business woman Lydia from Thyatira who offered her house to the Christian mission (Acts 16:15.)"¹⁰

⁷Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, p. 181.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 177.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 177-178.

There is a great significance to the connection between the house churches and these women. In Judaism the Temple and the synagogue made women virtual spectators of the worship experience. The Court of Women in the Temple, located to the side of the main area and slightly elevated, was the closest women could get to view the service. In the synagogue women also had to sit on one side and listen. If they had any questions, they could ask their husbands at home. Thus Judaism relegated women to *spectatorship*.

With the coming of Christianity, there was no more Temple or synagogue, as these were part of the old dispensation done away with at the cross. The church now met in homes and in the houses of the believers. "The house church, by virtue of its location, provided equal opportunities for women, because traditionally the house was considered women's proper sphere, and women were not excluded from activities in it."¹¹ In fact, "the public sphere of the Christian community was *in* the house and not outside the household. The community was 'in her house.' Therefore, it seems that the *domina* of the house, where the ecclesia gathered, had primary responsibility for the community *and* its gathering in the house church."¹²

Thus, women were not only active participants in the the proclamation of the Gospel in the Early Church, but from the evidence, they also served as pastors and leaders of the local house churches, this being the meaning of the expression, "the church in *her* house."

The Bible thus makes very clear that the role for women in the proclamation of the Gospel was a prominent one, assigned to them by God, God Himself being the first one to use women in such a capacity in the person of Mary.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 176.

¹² *Ibid.*

The result of such action was that the Early Church "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6), "so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10).

The same will happen today, if we will only free the hands to get the work done. Ellen White says, "Women who are willing to consecrate some of their time to the service of the Lord should be appointed to visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor. They should be set apart to this work *by prayer and laying on of hands*."¹³ In the same statement she goes on to say, "This is another means of strengthening and building up the church. We need to branch out more in our methods of labor. Not a hand should be bound, not a soul discouraged, not a voice should be hushed; let every individual labor, privately or publicly, to help forward this grand work. Place the burdens upon men and women of the church that they may grow by reason of the exercise, and thus become effective agents in the hand of the Lord for the enlightenment of those who sit in darkness."¹⁴

In another place she also says women should serve as pastors. "The experience thus gained [in canvassing work] will be of the greatest value to those who are fitting themselves for the work of the ministry. It is the accompaniment of the Holy Spirit of God that prepares, both men and women, to become *pastors* to the flock of God."¹⁵

¹³ *Review and Herald*, July 9, 1895. Emphasis added.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Review and Herald*, January 15, 1901. Emphasis added.

Conclusion:

The time has come for the church to set out like her Lord and follow His leading and revealed will fully. We won't be the first in doing this, for other religious groups are way ahead of us in bringing about change. Even Conservative Judaism now has a woman rabbi, an amazing, bold step, considering the historic Jewish position towards women.

It is my conviction that Pentecost will not come upon the church until men *recognize* the gift of tongues--of preaching the Gospel--among women, and allow that responsibility to be exercised. The word "recognize" is important because this gift, this calling to preach the Gospel, comes from God and not from men. Men cannot impart it, they can only acknowledge it, and act on its recognition.¹⁶

If the failure to act is due to the fear of whether or not people are ready, then how do we explain the Sabbath truth? No one is ready for that; and that truth breaks social and economic rank with the rest of society. But that has never stopped us. Why now?

I long for the day when others can say of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as was said of its Lord: "We know that Seventh-day Adventists are true people of integrity, and care not for what people say, for they do not measure their actions based on people's positions, but truly teach and practice the way of God."

¹⁶See Appendix A for a model of how to bring about change in this area at the local church level.

beings open themselves more and more to understand God, God discloses more of His substance and nature, so that our comprehension of God grows.

God Is Neither Male Nor Female:

"If the Bible likens God to both a father and a mother, this implies that in His own being God is also *unlike* either, since all analogies are comparisons with a difference. A human father's pity for his children and a human mother's care for her infant disclose to us not only something of what God is like, but also something of what He is *not* like. The difference between humanity and God in this regard is that human fatherhood and human motherhood presuppose a sexual distinction between male and female. Because of this distinction, at the creaturely level, a male can be only a father, and a female only a mother. But unlike us, God can be both a Father and a Mother to His people; He is not subject to the either/or of fatherhood or motherhood as we are. That is to say, God is like a human father, *not* in His sexuality as a male, but in the *compassion* which He shows for His children; and God is like a human mother, *not* in Her sexuality as a female, but in the solicitude which She shows for the well-being of Her infant offspring. In other words, God's mode of personal existence transcends sexual distinctions."⁹

But while transcending sexual distinctions, by use of such imagery we are enabled to catch a shadowy glimpse of what God is like. Shadowy in the sense, as Paul declares, that "now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face" (I Corinthians 13:12). And what we do see is the full embodiment of compassion, willing never to give us up even if our human mothers will, for the price that God as our Mother paid for us was too dear for Her to give up on us.

⁹This next section is from Paul K. Jewett, *The Ordination of Women* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 42,43.

Conclusion:

This was the God that Jesus revealed, Who like a Woman, took a lamp and lit it; took a broom and began to sweep and search every nook and cranny of Her room until she found that one lost coin--you and me--upon which could still be traced, though marred, Her image in Whose likeness we were formed (Luke 15:8-10).

This God was also like a Hen who wanted to gather all of Her chicks--you and me--under Her wings until the storm of life is over and we are safe in the dawning of that Day (Matthew 23:37).

That was the kind of God Jesus revealed. The God we are invited to accept. And the God whose character we must reflect.

Do you know that God?

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Motherhood of God

The object of theology is knowledge of God in light of the human situation. Theological knowledge of God can best be comprehended as it arises out of human experience and human need. Abstract, philosophical concepts of God, generated in a social vacuum, are unknown in Scripture. "In Hebrew 'to know God' is to encounter a personal reality; and a person is not known unless his name is known."¹

John L. McKenzie, renowned Old Testament theologian, makes an interesting observation regarding the Hebrew understanding of the name.

In Hebrew speech there is a peculiar association of the person and the name that is foreign to our idiom. "Name" is used in contexts where modern language uses "person" or "self." To have no name is to have no existence in reality; when one's name is blotted out, one ceases to exist. To give a name is to confer identity and not merely to distinguish from other individuals or species; when God creates, he gives a name to each object of his creation.²

¹John L. McKenzie, "Aspects of Old Testament Thought," in Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy (eds.), *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 737.

²*Ibid.*

Thus, we read the following in Genesis 5:1,2: "When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created." The word "man" in this text is not man as "male," but man as "humankind," both male and female. "Male and female he created *them*." Man is not given his name, his identity, his meaning in existence until he is united with the female, then both together are called humanity.³ Paul K. Jewett is correct when he makes the observation that "humanity is, in its deepest root, a shared humanity. Humanity that is not shared humanity is *inhumanity*."⁴

McKenzie continues: "To know the name is to know the reality named. For this reason the OT reflects the love of etymologies which, if analyzed linguistically, are fanciful. The name is pregnant with meaning." To connect the name "with a characteristic of a person or an event in his life reveals the person more fully. Hence the knowledge of God is disclosed in his name."⁵ In other words, to know God we must know His name or names.

The Feminine Name of God--*El Shaddai*:

There are four basic names for God in the Old Testament: *Elohim*, the general title for God; *Yahweh*, from which is derived the name Jehovah; *Adonai*, usually translated Lord; and *El-Shaddai*, God Almighty. In addition to these four there is a whole gamut of names which are a combination of these four.

One of these four names is most important to our study of the feminine side of God. It is the name *El-Shaddai*, or God Almighty, as it is usually translated.

³Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1975), p. 25.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁵McKenzie, 1968, p. 737.

El-Shaddai is one of those Hebrew words that leave Old Testament scholars declaring, after all the semantical dust has settled, "no explanation is satisfactory."⁶

The problem lies in the etymological meaning of the root word *Shad*, which can be translated in one of two ways which appear to be opposite and contradictory. One meaning is "breast," a woman's breast.⁷ The other meaning is "mountain." Now some might wonder what is the difference, breast or mountain, are we not talking about the same thing? No, for the meaning attached to mountain is a lot different than the one attached to breast. The meaning given is that of "violence," "devastation,"⁸ as in a volcanic mountain that devastates violently. Thus, for some OT scholars, *El-Shaddai* is the "god of the mountain," powerful and almighty in violent destruction. (This has been one of the most perdurable images of God in the OT--as an angry God of war and destruction, who destroys all enemies--which in turn has had some rather devastating effects on people's lives, when compared with the God Jesus portrayed.)

But the name can also mean "the Mighty-Breasted One," from *El* meaning "might," "power," and *Shad* "breast." Or as Robert Girdlestone declares, "The Bountiful One,"⁹ or the "Giver of Life" and the "Pourer-forth," as Andrew Jukes defines it.¹⁰

Why the difficulty in accepting this latter meaning for *El-Shaddai*? The reason may be found in the male perspective given to Scripture in its translation

⁶Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Lexicon In Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1958), p. 950. Hereafter footnoted as K-B.

⁷K-B, p. 949.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Robert B. Girdlestone, *Synonyms of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans, 1897). p. 32.

¹⁰Andrew Jukes, *The Names of God in Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1967), p. 67.

and interpretation. Throughout the history of the church, men have been the sole translators and interpreters of the biblical text. It has thus been natural for a male point of view to be incorporated, even unconsciously, in the text and its interpretation. For example, Deuteronomy 32:18 says, "You were unmindful of the Rock that begot you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth" (RSV). Here is a total female imagery for God! "Begot" means "bore" you and can be used of both fathers and mothers. But the expression "gave you birth" in the Hebrew means "to bring forth in labour-pains."¹¹ Yet the Jerusalem Bible, one of the more respected versions, translates this verse as "the God who *fathered* you," a complete misreading of the meaning. Thus the meaning of *El-Shaddai* as the "god of the mountain" may be male interpretation in order to avoid the unacceptable--God as a Mighty-Breasted Woman. Andrew Jukes believes that it was from this image of God as the Mighty-Breasted Woman that the pagan nations derived in corrupted manner the *Sheddim*, the many-breasted idols of their fertility religions.¹²

However, one must be careful about placing too much emphasis on etymologies, for as James Barr, the noted biblical semanticist, says: "Etymology is not, and does not profess to be, a guide to the semantic value of words in their current usage, and such value has to be determined from the current usage and not from the derivation."¹³ In other words, what is important is not the meaning of the words, but how they are used in Scripture. When we consider the usage of *El-Shaddai*, God Almighty, in Scripture, the issue is resolved as to which of the two meanings God seeks to have us understand with regard to the name.

¹¹K-B, p. 294.

¹²Jukes, p. 67.

¹³James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 107.

The first time *El-Shaddai* is used in Scripture is in Genesis 17:1, where God establishes Her covenant with Abraham and promises to *multiply* his seed and make him "exceedingly fruitful," since he had no children. In Genesis 28:3; 35:11 both God and Isaac bless Jacob in the same manner. The next usage of *El-Shaddai* is in Genesis 43:14, "where Jacob, in the intensity of his anxiety on behalf of his youngest son [Benjamin] whom he is about to send into Egypt throws himself upon the tender compassion of the All-Bountiful God, and says, '*El-Shaddai* give you tender mercy before the man, that he may send back your other brother and Benjamin.'"¹⁴ The word for "mercy" in this text is also the word for "womb," *rachamim*, again a strong feminine imagery showing that "the place of birth is the vehicle of compassion."¹⁵

However, the one text that brings all of these meanings into focus is Genesis 49:25, where Jacob is blessing Joseph, the symbol of Jesus as the savior of his people in Egypt:

By the God of your father who will help you,
by God Almighty [*El-Shaddai*] who will bless you
with blessings of heaven above,
blessings of the deep that couches beneath,
blessings of the *breasts* and of the *womb*.

In this text the blessings of *El-Shaddai* are connected with blessings of the breast and blessings of the womb.

¹⁴Girdlestone, p. 33.

¹⁵Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 55.

pouring itself out for others. Therefore, [She] can quiet the restless, as the breast quiets the child; therefore [She] can nourish and strengthen, as the breast nourishes; therefore [She] can attract as the breast attracts, when we are in peril of falling from [Her]. This is the Almighty."¹⁷ Almighty in benevolence, Almighty in sufficiency, Almighty in nurture, Almighty in comfort, Almighty in compassion, Almighty in caring. This is the Gospel--a long-neglected aspect of it; this is a fuller picture of God--a long-neglected understanding of Her nature.

A Compassionate God for an Uncompassionate World:

The hungry, dying masses of the world need a picture of God like this--the God who seeks to create community around Her compassionate, caring nature. The poor and destitute masses of humanity in the world need a revelation of a God like this, who provides and protects from all which will destroy Her children. The uncaring and the indifferent, those that inflict pain and hardship on others in their selfish pursuits, need a picture of a God like this, that will create compassion in an uncompassionate world.

Christianity is not having the success that it should in certain areas of the world, particularly Asia, because of the manner in which God is portrayed--as an authoritative, dominating father-figure.¹⁸ A compassionate God that is not removed from human suffering, but cares for His/Her children and "suffers with" them, is One whom many will accept. The suffering masses of humanity will more

¹⁷Jukes, p. 68.

¹⁸See C. S. Song, *Theology From the Womb of Asia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986).

readily respond to a God that resembles "a warm-hearted mother" than "a stern father."¹⁹

During the summer of 1980 my wife and I had the privilege of working with Cambodian refugees in Thailand. Though our purpose for being in the camps was to prepare refugees for relocation to their country of destination, we soon discovered a need on their part for an understanding of the God of Christianity. We were faced, however, with the dilemma of how to convey a knowledge of God to a people who had only known suffering. A missionary of another denomination was also in the camp where we were located seeking to do the same thing, but in spite of the fact he had been there for more than a year, only two persons had made a commitment to Christ. After listening to his efforts in communicating God in abstract terms divorced from people's reality, I knew that another approach would have to be taken. Upon reflecting on the socio-political experience of these refugees, it dawned on me that *Jesus also had been a refugee*, fleeing the Pol Pot type of dictatorship of Herod. He too suffered and knew what it was like to be ousted from His country because of political reasons. And "because He himself has suffered, He is able to help those who" also suffer (Hebrews 2:18). The result of presenting God as One who "suffered with them," was that the entire group of more than seventy persons in our study group, the majority of them men, accepted and confessed Christ as Lord.

The world is hungering for such a compassionate God, who "suffers with" a hurting humanity. It is with this concept of God in mind that God declares in Scripture:

¹⁹Shusaku Endo, *A Life of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973). This book is a portrayal of God from the perspective of Japanese culture.

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"Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it" (Psalm 81:10).

"Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (Isaiah 55:1).

If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, . . . "out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7:37,38).

The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let him who hears say, "Come." And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price (Revelation 22:17).

No more beautiful picture of God is portrayed than the one found in Isaiah 66:10-13:

Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her,
all you who love her;
rejoice with her in joy,
all you who mourn over her;
that you may suck and be satisfied
with her consoling breasts;
that you may drink deeply with delight
from the abundance of her glory.
For thus says the Lord:

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"Behold . . . you shall suck,
you shall be carried upon her hip,
and dandled upon her knees.
As one whom his mother comforts,
so I will comfort you."

Both church and society need to know and understand the Mighty-Breasted Mother of Israel, God of all comfort, compassion and care, who wants to set up house in our home and life; who wants to convert Her Church into a Caring Community; who wants to communicate to a selfish society a comprehensive display of Her character of selfless love.

This was the imagery from which Jesus drew, when He declared:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! (Matthew 23:37).

Jesus' picture of a mother gathering her children comes from the female imagery of *El-Shaddai* in Psalm 91. In the end of time, when according to Revelation God's people will undergo persecution for revealing God's character in their lives, the words of this psalm describing the actions of God, as the Mighty-Breasted One who protects all of Her children, will bring hope and strength to God's people during their hour of trial:

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High,

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who abides in the shadow of the Almighty,
will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust."

For [She] will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence;

[She] will cover you with [Her] pinions,
and under [Her] wings you will find refuge;

[Her] faithfulness is a shield and buckler (vss. 1-4).