

**The impact of relationship with human  
fathers on relationship with Heavenly Father  
– and how this affects and can be addressed  
in spiritual direction**

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It has long been of interest to me that Jesus of Nazareth – God incarnate, ‘the Word become flesh’ (John 1:1, 14), the one who had the very nature of God, but who decided that his ‘God-ness’ was not something to be grasped, but of his own free will gave up all that he had and took the nature of a servant (Philippians 2:6-8) – that as he ‘got his head around’ who he was – as he, in his total humanity, came to realise he was also totally divine – that the term from his human Aramaic language which he chose to use to address the ‘first person of the trinitarian Godhead’ was ‘Abba’.

‘Abba’ is a word that is difficult to translate into English. Often translated ‘Daddy’, scholars debate whether or not this is an accurate translation, and just how intimate the word’s meaning and connotation were in the time of Jesus’ life. (1) However, it is certainly a familial word, used to address one’s father, and has nuances of a loving and intimate relationship. (Note: The New Testament was written in Greek; ‘Abba’ is one of the very few words from Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus, retained in it.)

This concept of Jesus having, and opening the way for us to have, a relationship of intimacy with a God who is a loving father is strongly reinforced by two other New Testament references:

The Apostle Paul’s words in Romans 8:15 ...

*The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” (NIV)*

The image of the loving father in Jesus’ famous ‘Prodigal Son’ story (Luke 15:11-32, especially verses 20-24).

During 40 years of pastoral ministry, I have experienced repeatedly that many people find this concept of God as an intimate, loving father difficult to accept, or identify with, or ‘feel’. This is because of their experience of a human father who is or has been so different from that – absent, distant, authoritarian, or abusive (emotionally, physically and/or sexually). This can have an enormous negative impact on their relationship with God.

Another factor in my thinking regarding this matter is that, during the time I’ve been in church ministry and leadership, a key theological and biblical issue, linked to this concept of ‘God as Father’, has been and is the struggle many people have with the concept of God as male, and their experience of the patriarchal nature of so much biblical interpretation and church life.

On top of all that, while I am very much a novice as a Spiritual Director, each of the two people I’ve been offering direction to as I’ve begun in my training over the past two years (both males in their fifties) has ‘issues’ in his relationship with God, because of his relationship with his human father.

So, this has become the focus of my ‘Special Interest Project’:

**‘The impact of relationship with human fathers on relationship with Heavenly Father – and how this affects and can be addressed in spiritual direction’.**

At the core of much of the spiritual direction 'enterprise' is the challenge of helping a directee to experience a deep and deepening relationship with God, when s/he has a dysfunctional image of God – 'an image (of God) that is negatively impacting their relationship with God, self and others'. (2) Struggling with the concept of God as Father is, in fact, a subset of this wider image of God issue, which is so significant and ubiquitous in spiritual direction.

This whole matter arises from the fact that we need to use metaphor in order to speak and even think about God. As Sally McFague writes so profoundly and powerfully, 'a metaphor is a word or a phrase used inappropriately. It belongs properly in one context but is used in another ... Metaphor is a strategy of desperation. It is an attempt to say something about the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar, to speak of what we do not know in terms of what we do know ... Metaphors always have an "is" and an "is not" character.' (3).

This is our human dilemma in speaking and thinking about God; we have to use language and categories that will always fall short of the full reality of who God is. It is good to remember that Jesus himself faced this same conundrum, and that he chose to use the metaphor of 'father', and the word 'Abba'.

I have interviewed and/or received written responses from around 20 New Zealand spiritual directors as I've researched this topic. (4) My two core questions were:

1. Have you encountered this issue of relationship with earthly father negatively affecting relationship with Heavenly Father – either personally, and/or with people you've directed, and, if so, can you give some details?
2. What have you found helpful in working through this issue – again, either personally, and/or with those you've directed? (5)

Before looking at the responses received to those questions, I will outline my own experience over the last 18 months or so with my very first directee, A. I am very new to spiritual direction, and I'm not suggesting that I have lots of wisdom to impart! However, my experience with A does give a specific example of how the earthly father relationship can negatively impact the Heavenly Father relationship (without the person involved even realising it), and, of how this can be worked with in spiritual direction.

The first issue that arose in my conversations with A – who would consider himself a committed and long-standing disciple of Jesus (and I would agree with that self-assessment) – was that he felt God never 'spoke' to him ... He never 'heard' anything directly from God. This appeared to him unfair, as other people seemed to hear from God a lot. He felt a disappointment with God over this state of affairs ...

This 'never hearing from God' also, of course, mitigated against any real sense of a deep personal relationship with God (even though A's theology was that he did have a personal relationship with God). So, A felt disappointment with God, but also assumed that in some way this situation must be his fault.

In our spiritual direction conversations, we eventually came across the fact that A had never had a close relationship with his late father. A's father wasn't a 'bad person' ... But A had never been told by his father that he loved him, and he'd felt that his father always seemed to be angry with him – and A never understood why. A's father was an older father, and a large man, and he didn't speak a lot, or express his emotions easily, apart from the emotion of anger. Therefore, A often felt afraid of his father, and his overarching sense of his relationship with his father was that he (A) was a disappointment to him.

Over a period of time (several sessions – although not the whole of any session), we explored the possibility that this relationship with his father may be impacting A's relationship with God. He could see that there may be a link, but wasn't sure exactly what the link might be, nor how or why this would contribute to his feelings of never hearing from God directly. (I continued to explore these possibilities and connections in my supervision sessions.)

I suggested a few 'exercises' for A to try in between our sessions – exercises involving drawing or other artistic expression, and/or writing – both of which are very much part of A's 'make-up'. While A would seem quite enthusiastic when I suggested these, he didn't actually try any of them between our sessions. Eventually, I invited him to draw, and then to write, during our sessions, and left him on his own each time for a period. This proved to be significant. The hard part for A, it became clear, was actually getting started on one of these activities. Once he started, he was able to quickly draw a powerful picture expressing where he was in his relationship with God and where he wanted to go in that relationship, and to write honest and moving letters to both his father and to God, which was liberating for him. We realised that the difficulty in 'getting started' was a nervousness about addressing God honestly about these matters; a concern that this isn't how you should treat God. A knew from the Psalms and other Scriptures that biblically this is OK; but it still didn't quite feel OK to him.

In our conversations, A had talked a bit about the Prodigal Son story, and the image of the father in that story. After suggesting some work he could do with that story between our sessions, and, again, nothing happening, I decided to attempt an imagination exercise (a new thing for me!) with A in one of our sessions. I simply gave A some time to reflect on which character in the story he felt the closest affinity with, and then to imagine himself 'in the action' of the story. As we progressed, I asked him a few questions ...

This was life-changing for A! He imagined himself as the younger son. He saw the father, arms outstretched, running towards him. Interestingly, this father was both God, and A's human father – 'all the best things about my father'. (Also interestingly, this 'amalgamation' was not confusing or difficult for him). He experienced for himself, personally, the loving embrace of the father. A bit later in this imagination exercise, he also started to hear the voice of the older brother, telling him he was not worthy of the father's love. Since then, we've talked about where that voice comes from, and we've continued to work on dwelling more of the time in the loving embrace of the father, and listening less and less to the older brother's voice. Recently, A told me he couldn't remember why he'd ever felt disappointment about his relationship with God!

Back now to the responses and insights on this subject which I received from a group of experienced spiritual directors. I received a strong affirmative response to my first question:

*Have you encountered this issue of relationship with earthly father negatively affecting relationship with Heavenly Father – either personally, and/or with people you’ve directed ... and, if so, can you give some details?*

Here is a summary of the answers and comments:

- For many people, ‘father’ is not an image they see God in – because their own father was distant or authoritarian or abusive.
- Our ‘family of origin experience’ provides the lens we see the world and God through.
- A loving father can nevertheless have a sharp temper, and harsh words that can humiliate and demean.
- ‘I realised there were things I needed to forgive my father for ...’
- ‘A lightbulb moment as I realised I didn’t expect Heavenly Father to be listening properly due to being distracted, more engaged with other things ...’
- ‘I had an image of God as a grumpy – occasionally violent – old man with a stick ...’
- ‘Losing my father as a teenager left me with a fear of abandonment that I projected onto God ...’
- A ‘performance orientation’ learned in relation to one’s father (and/or mother) can be transposed onto God.
- For some, the image of father is just too simple and impoverished – at least on its own – to mediate the divine in his/her incomprehensibility and closeness.
- Numerous ‘stage of life’ things can bring this issue to the surface: death of father; your child reaching the age at which you experienced loss or abuse; oldest child becoming (or seeking to become) independent; starting to date; getting married; becoming a parent; seeing your husband being a father ...

My main goal in doing this project was to provide ideas, resources and approaches, from experienced spiritual directors, that will be helpful in addressing this ‘father/Father’ issue in spiritual direction. Here, then, is a summary of the experience and wisdom of a varied group of spiritual directors, expressed in their answers to my second question:

*What have you found helpful in working through this issue – either personally, and/or with those you’ve directed?*

### **Working with the past ...**

Look at the directee’s life in five year blocks – noting down significant experiences, and talking about how the directee viewed God in each season.

Elicit descriptions of the directee's parents, and relationship with them, and the climate and culture of family of origin.

Work through the grief of what was experienced as a child.

Work through the challenge of forgiving father (and/or others) ...

### **Exploring 'God as Trinity' ...**

The trinitarian nature of the Christian God is a wonderful aspect of Christian theology ... This can help a directee access God through Jesus and/or the Spirit, rather than starting with God/Father.

The story of the Prodigal Son is a good biblical starting point for exploring God as seen and shown in/through Jesus.

Focusing on the Spirit opens the way for exploring feminine images for God. *(See Appendix 4 for resources regarding feminine images of God).*

### **Exploring God through Scripture, media, experience ...**

Exploring the trinitarian nature of God can open the way to discovering and experiencing God through a whole range of other biblical passages, stories and images. Also, seeing God through experiences of observing positive examples of fathering (including the directee's own experience of being a parent); and, through movies, novels, poems, plays, art, etc., where there is a positive portrayal of the image of father. What has the directee seen or experienced which helps him/her to think of 'Father God' in a positive light?

### **Working creatively ...**

Interactive Drawing Therapy was mentioned by several directors. This uses drawing and writing to complement 'talk therapy', and aims to integrate left and right brain functioning, which can facilitate access to 'unconscious thinking', and reveal deeply buried thoughts and feelings. IDT can bypass set beliefs and religious teachings. For example – get the directee to choose a colour, or a shape, that in some way represents 'Father God' to him/her, and use that to 'draw God'. Then get the directee to write some words that best describe the God s/he has drawn. This can help the directee to confront his/her own deep beliefs about God. These may in fact be quite contrary to what s/he has been taught about God, and knows s/he 'should' believe about God, and possibly thinks s/he does believe. This can enable the directee to realise that s/he is not actually operating out of those beliefs, and can open the way for honest and healing conversation. IDT can be particularly helpful for directees who cannot or will not speak much about their relationship with God.

A similar approach can be taken by using a variety of symbols, objects, pictures, paintings, icons. Invite the directee to choose perhaps three of these that in some way represent God, or speak about God, to him/her. Use this as a beginning point for conversation about image of God, and God as Father. If you are using a 'God chair' as a reminder of the presence of

God in the session, the chosen symbols could be placed on this chair while they are talked about. *(See Appendix 1 for a list of possibilities ...)*

Encourage the directee to consciously look for images or experiences of the goodness of God, and to 'build a collage in his/her mind' of a loving, protective God who desires growth and freedom for him/her. Look at creation – what might the sea, a rose, a tree, etc, suggest about the true nature of God? What about the goodness s/he sees in people (created by God, in the image of God)?

### **A biblical/theological approach ...**

Exploring and reflecting on passages of Scripture with a directee, and asking simple questions, can be helpful. For example: 'What might God be inviting you to or revealing of God's self in this story?' 'What might God want to say to you now, having heard that wondering you just expressed in relation to that passage?' If the directee's answer seems not to be in line with the grace and love of Christ, it may be helpful to ask more about where that answer came from – what part of him/her. Or, what about the tone in which it was said, the quality of voice, etc. 'Does that seem like God as sensed from the Bible, or from your experience, or what is expressed by others whom you trust,' etc. ...? There may also be the opportunity to highlight a stark contrast in how the directee is describing God. On the one hand, speaking of God as mean or cruel, and yet on the other hand, expressing a desire to spend silent time with God. A question to raise in such circumstances could be, 'What's it like holding those two different thoughts/desires at this time?'

For some directees, and at certain points of the journey, it may be helpful to explore and discuss the biblical and theological understanding that is underpinning their view of God, and their image of 'Father'. It may be that some of what they've been taught and come to believe, and feel, is quite contrary to orthodox Christian faith, and they may need help to replace this poor theology. In particular, it can be liberating to understand at a deep level that 'whoever has seen Jesus has seen the Father' (John 14:9). In other words, realising that the best way to understand what God the Father is like is to look at Jesus as the Bible portrays him; for Jesus to be the lens through which everything the Bible says about God is viewed. Meditating on this verse, and other similar Scriptural statements (there are many in the New Testament) can be very helpful, and freeing.

*(See Appendix 2 for a list of helpful books on this topic to which a directee could be referred)*

### **Other possibilities ...**

Very briefly, some other things mentioned by spiritual directors:

Silent Retreats can be very helpful for people as they grapple with image of God issues, and specifically with the idea of God as Father.

Some directees may need referring to a counsellor as they deal with matters related to viewing God as Father, and their personal experience of a human father.

Also mentioned in a couple of responses was the use of 'prayer ministry'. While perhaps not a 'typical' aspect of spiritual direction, prayer ministry, carried out by experienced and gifted and wise practitioners, can be an extremely effective way of assisting directees to be liberated from past experiences (including those related to a human father) which are inhibiting their spiritual growth. I have some experience of being involved in such ministry myself, as did one or two of the Spiritual Directors I had contact with. *(See Appendix 3)*

To conclude, I will share a personal experience relating to father and Father. When our first child was born over 39 years ago, I remember thinking as I drove home from the hospital after the birth, 'Where has all this love come from?' I felt this overwhelming love, this deep desire to do the very best for this tiny baby, whom I knew nothing about! She hadn't done anything to earn this love – it was just 'there'. When I arrived home, I wrote about what I was feeling and thinking ...

*A life ...*

*coming into being.*

*Creation in action.*

*A little girl;*

*a daughter.*

*My daughter ...*

*And curiously, I sense a desire*

*to look after her,*

*To make her happy,*

*To do the very best for her.*

*Yet I know nothing about her;*

*I don't know one thing*

*about her personality, her abilities,*

*her qualities, her faults,*

*her weaknesses.*

*Even her appearance –*

*if they brought me back another baby*

*that looked similar,*

*I'd believe it was her!*



*I don't know her at all,*

*She's a stranger –*

*Yet, I love her.*

*Not because of what she's like,*

*what sort of person she is –*

*But instinctively,*

*because of her relationship*

*with me ...*

*I'm her FATHER.*

I know that, for various reasons, that's not everyone's experience of becoming and being a parent. But it certainly was and is mine. And over the years since becoming a father I have learnt and understood more of the love of God for me through being a parent myself than through any other means. While there are many difficulties for many people in thinking of and experiencing God as a loving Father, this metaphor can still be a great blessing for those people – if it can be 'redeemed'. Spiritual direction can be a significant aid to bringing about that redemption.

## Notes:

- (1) See, for example:  
Harris, Chad, 'The Biblical Meaning of "Abba", and It's Not Daddy'  
<https://himpublications.com/blog/meaning-abba/>  
and  
Engle, Karen, 'What Does "Abba" Really Mean?'  
<https://blog.logos.com/what-does-abba-really-mean/>
- (2) *Healing Dysfunctional Images of God*, Gay Cochrane, Spiritual Growth Ministries Special Interest Project, 2005, p.2.
- (3) *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p.33
- (4) *I am indebted to Jeannie Martin-Blaker of the Auckland Spiritual Directors' Support Group for her help with this. She forwarded an e-mail request, from me, to all those who are part of this support group, asking if they would help with my research on this topic. I'm also very grateful to all who responded to this request. There were also a few other spiritual directors whom I know whom I approached directly to ask to help me. Interestingly, the respondents were mostly women – just 4 men ... but that may simply be a reflection of the predominant gender of spiritual directors in New Zealand at this time. Most were 50+, which again is probably a reflection of the 'spiritual director demographic'. And most had many years of experience, although a couple were fairly new to spiritual direction.*
- (5) *A third question invited recommendations of books or other resources which might be helpful in this research – see below.*

## REFERENCES USED AND RECOMMENDED

- |                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| Bakke, Jeannette A. | Holy Invitations. Baker Publishing Group, 2000<br>Kindle Edition                                       |
| Bell, Rob           | At The Heart Of Life's Big Questions –<br>LOVE WINS<br>HarperCollins Publishers, 2012                  |
| Cochran, Gay        | Healing Dysfunctional Images Of God<br>Spiritual Growth Ministries, 2005<br>(Special Interest Project) |
| Gide, Andre         | The Return Of The Prodigal Son<br>Walter Ballenberger, 2014<br>Kindle Edition                          |

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   Crossroad, 1984
- Jacobsen, Wayne                    He Loves Me: Learning To Live In The Father's Affection  
   Wayne Jacobsen, 2007  
   Kindle Edition
- Jersak, Bradley                    A More Christlike God:  
   A More Beautiful Gospel  
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   Harvest House Publishers, 1985  
   Kindle Edition
- Nouwen, Henri                    The Return Of The Prodigal Son  
   Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 1994
- van Reken, Ruth Ellen Letters Never Sent:  
   A Global Nomad's Journey From Hurt To Healing  
   Summertime Publishing, 2012  
   Kindle Edition
- Whitehead, Evelyn Eaton and James D.  
   Christian Life Patterns: The Psychological Challenges and Religious Invitations  
   of Adult Life.  
   Image, 1977
- Whitehead, Evelyn Eaton and James D.  
   Seasons of Strength:  
   New Visions of Adult Christian Maturing.  
   Image, 1984
- Young, William Paul                The Shack. Windblown Media, 2008 (*and movie*)

## Appendix 1

A list of possible symbols, objects, pictures, paintings, icons which can be used as a starting point for helping a directee explore image of God, suggested by spiritual directors:

An icon of The Trinity (e.g. Rublev's Icon)

An icon of Jesus

A garden path

A tree in a forest

A bird's nest

A shepherd/sheep image

A copy of Rembrandt's "Return of the Prodigal Son"

A holding cross (wooden)

Flowers – in a vase

An old cloth that has some beautiful colours on it

"Jesus-y" sandals, that look like Jesus has just sat down with us

A colour picture of Aslan, from "The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe"

A picture of a "Maori Jesus" (from St.Faith's church in Rotorua)

A statue of a lion crushing the head of a snake

An image of Jesus on the cross

An image of a gate

An image of the pillar of fire to the Israelites in the desert

A lamp

*Sometimes you can invite the directee to take home the image(s) chosen, and 'sit' with them – either in prayer or on their kitchen bench so they look at them while doing 'daily tasks'. This can help bridge the gap from direction session to 'every day life'.*

## Appendix 2

A list of recommended books on this subject, gleaned from the Spiritual Directors who engaged with me:

The Critical Journey (Stages of Faith), by Hagberg and Guelich

The Return of the Prodigal Son, by Henri Nouwen

The Shack (the book and the movie), by William Paul Young

Love Wins, by Rob Bell

Towards a More Christlike God, by Brad Jeurak

The Father Heart Of God, by Floyd McClung

Images of God in the Bible, by Arthur E Zannoni

Sexism and God-Talk, by Rosemary Radford Ruether

God is More Than Two Men and a Bird, by Sandra M. Schnieders  
(US Catholic, May 1990; Vol. 55, Issue 5)

Not Only a Father, by Tim Bulkeley

Surrender to Love, by David G Benner

The Sacred Romance: Drawing Closer to the Heart of God,  
by Brent Curtis & John Eldredge

Letters Never Sent – A Global Nomad’s Journey from Hurt to Wholeness,  
by Ruth E. Van Reken

Will the Real God Please Stand Up?  
Healing the dysfunctional images of God, by Carolyn Thomas

## Appendix 3

### Prayer Ministry ...

Some thoughts on 'inner healing' and 'impartation' as means of helping someone to be free from past hurts and enabled to experience the lifegiving knowledge of the love of Father God – from John Randerson, a very experienced minister with many years of experience working with YWAM, based in Hawaii.

I was put in touch with John by a friend who highly recommended him to me upon hearing of my Special Interest Project. The questions I asked John were:

Do you think there is 'cross over' between an inner healing ministry and spiritual direction? If so, what would that look like? How might spiritual directors minister to those they are directing who are struggling with the idea of God as Father? How might spiritual directors be agents of 'an impartation of Father's love' (*John's words*)?

Here is a summary of his response:

Spiritual Direction is a wonderful ministry area to engage in; I hope I can contribute something to your research.

My wife and I do a lot of Inner Healing ministries and know how much our families of origin impact our lives. So many of us have grown up with absent, distant, or abusive fathers. The very word 'father' brings up painful memories, so that talking of God as Father is often dismissed! (Jesus is safer! But the glorious mystery of the Trinity is too often conflated into the worship of Jesus only.) Breaking off negative sin patterns inherited from our parents and forgiving them is a major component of inner healing ministries.

The biggest thing I have learned over 33 years of exploring the 'Father Heart of God' is that this must not be just head knowledge but that we all need an impartation of Father's love.

How to 'impart' Father's love? That is a great question.

But we need an earlier starting point. This is where some good questions need to be asked.

We have developed questions to help the ministry receiver identify trauma in his/her life. Trauma comes in two kinds: The first is the things we missed out on that we never received (like absent or distant fathers not giving us the love we needed to grow into maturity). That is where love has to be imparted to bring healing. The other type of trauma is things that were done to us: sexual abuse, verbal abuse, divorce, etc. Those are tangible memories that can be explored and healed. Forgiveness needs to be extended whether the person who caused the trauma is alive or dead. It is amazing how forgiveness should be Christianity 101, but we find that so many people hold on to their unforgiveness because they think the other person does not deserve to be let off the hook!

The other focus of our questions is to identify an 'Orphan Spirit'. Abandonment, loneliness, not belonging -- I am sure you can list all the common symptoms. Then we can figure out where it came from -- father, mother, siblings, etc.

Then we try to explore the faulty beliefs that we develop as a result of our negative experiences -- I am worthless, God only loves me when I am good ...

This is where we take seriously the injunction in Romans 12:2 to renew our minds. Modern neuroscience is a wonderful help here as it confirms what the Bible has been saying all along! But it tells us that replacing negative beliefs with godly ones takes focussed effort over about 60 days to embed new neural pathways. There is a whole lot of research in that area -- I suggest you explore Caroline Leaf on that subject!

Back to impartation! Yes, we remove the ungodly beliefs, release forgiveness, and pray! John 17:26 is a powerful prayer here. The person who has never received love from an earthly father is now free to receive love from the Father, via those who minister to him/her. An 'appropriate' hug (given with permission) is a powerful tool, since it releases oxytocin!! Our brains have all these wonderful positive hormones that make us feel good!! At our stage in life, I can give a father's embrace and my wife can give a mother's embrace. We make sure to avoid any hint of impropriety here.

The person needs to receive from others too! And to give love to others in need! Our spouses and friends should be positive sources of love in our lives!

That's about a week of teaching condensed into a few brief sentences, but I hope it gives some fuel for thought.

Too many believers are still trapped in false identities and need to meditate much in Romans 8! We need God's truth, we need to forgive, we need to renounce and repent of ungodly beliefs. Only then are we ready for an impartation of God's unconditional love.

## Appendix 4

### ALTERNATIVE GOD IMAGES FROM THEOLOGICAL/SPIRITUAL WRITINGS<sup>1</sup>

Mary Betz, one of the Spiritual Directors who helped me with ideas and resources for this project, shared with me – and is happy for me to share more widely – an appendix from her doctoral thesis, on Women's Images of God (finished in 2004). Mary's list of 'alternative God images' (below), accompanied by references from her thesis, may be useful to readers of this paper. I thank Mary for allowing me to include and share it here.

#### God as Mother

*Hebrew Scriptures – especially ...*

*Prophetic Tradition, e.g. Isaiah 42:14, 49:15, 66:11-12; Hosea 11:14; Numbers 11:12-13*

*Lukan tradition, e.g. Acts 16:26-28*

*Christian mystical tradition, e.g. Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, Augustine of Hippo, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, etc.<sup>2</sup>*

Mother - MR, AC, KZ, KF, SM, DS, MTW, BMM, MS, AH, EJ, JAC, LS

Loving/unconditionally loving mother - LS, CS, JDM

Nurturing mother - CS, BF

Mother God/who gardens - SA&PH, MC, CF, PLR/ CF

Nursing mother - MW, PT, LS, PLR

God who rocks me gentle - CF

Gramma God/Grandmother - CF, EJ

Great mother - CF

Mother giving birth - CF, BF, MH, CW, PT

God who gives birth - BMM, LS

Breastmilk of God - BMM

Strong mother - RRR

Comforting mother - JWB, LS, PLR

Faithful mother - PLR

Holy mother - ND

Maternity - EJ

Gracious mother - ND

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<sup>1</sup> Sources surveyed are those theologians (including systematic, pastoral theologians, pastoral counsellors, spiritual directors, liturgists, liturgical musicians, artists, and some social scientists whose work is discussed and footnoted in Appendix A. Initials refer to authors' names, see list on the last page of this appendix. Many other sources could have been surveyed as well, as there is an ever growing, supply of books and articles from the theoretical to the hands-on offering alternative titles, names and images for God. This list is therefore not exhaustive, but it is inclusive of examples from some of the works of major theologians writing in the area plus a number of 'practitioners' in related fields. Images have been clustered according to similarity of content/meaning and probable origin. Information in italics indicates some probable origins for each category of God images. The list of images was compiled in 2000.

<sup>2</sup> See Virginia Ramey Mollencott, *The Divine Feminine*, 20-24; Bridget Mary Meehan, *Exploring the Feminine Face of God*; and Bridget Mary Meehan, *Delighting in the Feminine Divine*.



Jesus as mother - BMM, MTW  
Christ as nursing foster mother - BMM  
Labouring one/woman in labour/birthpangs - PLR/ BMM, CW, JWB, EW, PT/ LS  
Pregnant woman/and woman who conceives - KF, CF, BMM/ PT  
Feminine love births creation - BMM  
Mother of all living – PLR

### **God as Womb/Compassion**

***Prophetic Tradition, e.g. Jeremiah 31:20; Isaiah 46:3-4, 49:13-15***

Womb of compassion - PLR  
*Rahamin/ rahem* – CF/ PT  
Divine womb/ of darkness – CF/ PLR  
Womb – CW, PT, MS, JAC  
Womb love, divine compassion – BMM  
Yahweh's womb – LS  
Compassionate one – PLR  
Compassion – EJ, HG, PT  
Dark womb – AH  
Womb of creation – ND  
Womb of God, mother – LS  
Fertile womb of all, womb centre – PLR  
Womb of Wisdom – BMM  
Mercy, compassion – EW  
Mercy, comfort – BF

### **God as Sister**

#### ***Wisdom Tradition***

Sister – AC, DS, JAC, EJ  
Eternal sister – ND

### **God/Jesus as Wisdom/ Sophia (see also Trinity)**

***Wisdom and Prophetic Traditions, e.g. Proverbs 4:5-13, 7:4-9:6; Wisdom 6:12-11:1; Ecclesiasticus 6; Baruch 3:1-4:4; Ben Sirach 1, 24:1-10;***

***Pauline and Johannine Traditions, e.g. 1 Corinthians 1:23-30, 2:6-8; John 1; also Matthew 11:18-19 and Luke 11:49***

Holy wisdom – *Sophia* – KZ, CW, EJ  
Sophia – SA & PH, EW, PLR, CRT, JCE  
Wisdom – BF, RRR, JAC, JWB, BN, DL, MTW, GR  
Wisdom Sophia – CF, EB  
Baker of the Bread of Life – MTW  
Bakerwoman – CW, BMM

Sophia as counsellor – BMM, BN, MTW  
Sophia as hostess – EB, EJ  
Sophia as teacher – BMM, EW  
Sophia as tree – EB, CRT  
Jesus/Christ Sophia – EJ, CRT/BMM  
Spirit Sophia – EJ, EB  
Mother Sophia – EJ  
Sophia as craftswoman, mother, lover, creator, woman of Justice – BMM  
Sophia as homebuilder, rare gem – EB  
Sophia as law – EB, BMM  
Lady Wisdom – LS

### **God as Presence/ Shekhinah**

#### ***Exodus 24, 40; Rabinnic Tradition; Acts 2:2-3***

Shekhinah/Shekinah – JP, CF, PLR/ SA&PH, DS, BMM  
Fire – CS, KF  
Living wind – DS  
Place – JP  
Presence – JP, MTW, PLR  
Ever present God – CF  
She who dwells within – AR  
Intimate Presence – EJ  
Encompassing Presence – MTR  
The Still Presence – PLR  
Encompassing Matrix – RRR

### **Shaddai (as God with breasts, or Breasted God)**

#### ***Hebrew Scriptures, e.g. Ruth***

*Shaddai* (my breasts) – AR,  
*El Shaddai* – KF, BMM, MTW, CF, CW, JWB  
God with breasts like mine – PLR

### **God as Goddess**

#### ***Ancient Near-Eastern Traditions***

Goddess/ God/dess – CC, RG, MTW, PLR/ RRR, CS  
Goddess who is creator, mother, virgin, maid, crone – KZ

### **God as Woman/ Female / Feminine (other than above)**

***Jewish Scriptures – Prophetic and Wisdom Traditions;  
Christian Scriptures – Lukan, Pauline and Johannine Traditions, Contemporary***

Midwife – BMM, MH, CW, MS, EJ, LS, PLR  
Washerwoman God – BMM, CF  
Woman – KF  
Female – JP  
Aunty – ND  
Divine feminine – PLR  
Mistress – LS  
Queen of heaven – GR, PLR

### **God as Spirit**

#### ***Throughout Jewish and Christian Scriptures and traditions***

Spirit – CS, CF, CW, EW, JAC, EJ, MTW, JWB  
Great spirit – SA & PH  
*Ruah* – PLR, CF  
Breath of God – MTW  
Breath of Life – RRR, PLR  
Paraclete – DL  
Sustainer/of joy – JAC/ND  
Sanctifier – ND  
Wind blowing where it will, Dwelling at the heart of the world – EJ  
Comforter – JAC  
other Spirit images – PLR

### **God as Creator**

#### ***Hebrew Scriptures, e.g. Genesis 1-2; Proverbs 8:22-31***

Creator – JAC, MTW  
Creatrix – MR, BN  
Cocreator – JP, AR  
Creating/Creative – MR/ CS, MTW  
Primal matrix – MR  
Maker and Mender – JWB  
Recreative energy – EJ  
Creator - Destroyer – MTW  
Source – JP, DS, SA & PH  
Source of all my life/ Source of Life – PLR/ AR, EG

### **God as Friend**

#### ***Wisdom and Johannine Traditions, e.g. Wisdom 7:27; John 15:15; Yom Kippur liturgy***

Friend – SA & PH, AC, KF, SM, EJ, JP, ESF, AR, MS, JAC, DL, MTW, PLR  
Companion – JP, AR, MS, HG, PLR  
Welcoming friend – PLR

Relational God – AC  
God with us – KF  
God who lives with us – KZ  
Partner – EG

### **God as Lover**

#### ***Hebrew Scriptures, e.g., Song of Songs***

Lover – SM, JP, CW, AR, ND, MTW  
Beloved – EJ  
Divine eros – MR  
Heart of my life, Burning love – PLR  
Male lover – KF  
Feminine passionate love – BMM

### **God Dwelling Within**

#### ***Johannine tradition, e.g. John 15:4-7***

Self – AMR, SA & PH  
God within – AMR, MS  
God indwelling – SA & PH, DS, BN  
God residing within – KF  
Incarnational God – AC  
Woman who dances within our hearts – BMM  
Inner female voice speaking truth – CS

### **God as YHWH, I am**

#### ***Hebrew Scriptures, Johannine Tradition***

Yahweh, I am who I shall become – RRR  
I am – KF  
She who is  
The unpronounceable name – JWB  
The living one – GR

### **God who Suffers**

#### ***Prophetic Tradition, e.g. Isaiah 42:14***

Powerless, suffering God – AMR  
Suffering God/compassion poured out – AC, DS/EJ  
God who suffers – KZ  
God of defeat and pain – DS  
God in her poor – CF

God suffering with – CF  
God as co-suffering – MST  
God who trembles with our tears – BF  
God's love as passion, power is to suffer – DM  
Nose of God which flares at the stench of slavery – DM  
God of pathos participates in suffering of world to transform it from within – DM  
Sufferer, Painbearer, Victim – ND

### **God who Rejoices**

#### ***Hebrew Scriptures***

God of gladness – BF  
God who shakes with laughter – BF  
God who laughs with glee – CF  
Laughing spirit – BMM  
Exultet, Jubilee – GR

### **God as Liberator/ God of Power**

#### ***Exodus and Prophetic Traditions***

Liberating God – AC  
Liberating Sovereign – RRR  
Liberating power – EJ  
Liberator/ of the poor - ND, MTW/ ND  
Freedom – BF  
Power - MTW, BF, JAC  
Higher power - CS, JAC  
Empowers/ Empowering – JWB/MTR, PLR  
Incarnates power in persons – BF  
Strong – CS

### **God as Healer/Helper**

#### ***Prophetic, Wisdom and Synoptic Traditions***

Healer/ of the wounded – MTR/ ND  
Healing – BF, JAC, MTW, PLR  
Great physician, Teacher, Educator – JAC  
Healing, empowering with and ethic of justice and care – MTW  
Health – GR  
Binder of broken hearts – GR  
One who wipes away tears – PLR  
Consoler, Provider, Embracer, Nourisher, Gift-bearer – ND  
Nurturer – PLR, JAC  
Help/ Helper – MTW/ PLR, MTW

Seeker of the lost – PLR  
Guide – PLR  
Servant – DL, ND  
Shepherd – DL

### **God as Justice**

#### ***Prophetic Tradition***

Justice – BF  
Eternal justice – ND  
Passionate for justice and peace – EJ  
Prophet – EJ, ND

### **God as Father**

#### ***Hebrew Scriptures, Synoptic and Johannine Traditions***

Father – JAC, LS, MTW  
Father who is gentle, loves nature, is warm and affectionate – KF  
Father not in origin but who will never be separated from us – DS  
Loving father who carries a little child in his arms – RRR  
Abba – HG

### **Other Anthropomorphic Images for God**

#### ***Scriptures; Contemporary***

Weaver – MS  
Potter – CW  
Jazz band musician/leader – EJ, CB  
Father-mother – MTW  
Child, Grandfather – ND  
Brother – JWB, JAC  
Good person – SA & PH

### **God in Nature Metaphors**

#### ***Throughout Hebrew Scriptures; Johannine Tradition; Contemporary***

Fountain/ Fountainhead/Fountain of Life – JP, ND/ DS/ EG  
Bath – GR  
Wellspring – JP, DS  
Spring of all goodness – DS  
Rain on parched earth – KF  
Ocean and oceanbed – K F  
Water of life/ Living water – DS/ MTW, JAC

Flow of life – AR  
Water/ Waters – MS/ RRR  
Ground/ Ground of life and being – ND/ JP, DS  
Rock – JP, KF, GR, CW, MS, JWB, ND  
Shelter/from the storm – KF/KF, PLR  
Protection – KF/MTW  
Mountains – RRR  
Volcano – GR  
Trees/ Tree of Life/ Tall evergreen tree – GR/ JP/ KF  
Nature/ Mother earth – JP/ MTW, BMM  
World as God’s body – SM  
Warm gentle sun – KF  
Light – JP, DS, JAC, ND  
Clean brightness, radiant light – KF  
Splendour – ND  
Fire/ and flame – MS, RRR/ MTW  
Fire and rose are one – KF  
The colour purple – KF  
Darkness – JP  
Mist with arms – CS  
Elemental force – MTR  
Air – DS  
Mother bird (eagle, hen) – RRR, JAC, CS, PLR, JWB, MTW, CF, MTW  
Pinions, Peacock, Paradise bird, Pelican, Phoenix – GR  
She-bear/ Ferocious mother bear – CW/ PLR

### **God as Food**

#### ***Christian Tradition***

Bread/ Bread of Life – RRR, ND/ JAC  
Food, Feast, Famine – GR

### **God as Human-made Objects**

#### ***Wisdom Tradition, Contemporary***

Door – JAC  
Threshold – BM  
Armchair – MB  
Fortress – JAC, GR  
Stronghold, Fastness, Tower – GR  
Refuge – JAC  
Shield – ND  
Kuphar (boat), Cup, Necklace, Oboe, Xat, Yoke, Zion – GR

### **God as Trinity**

### ***Christian Tradition***

Trinity – CML, MTW

Mother Sophia, Jesus Sophia, Spirit Sophia – EJ

Source, Word, Spirit – KR

### **God of Abstract Images**

#### ***Johannine Tradition, Contemporary***

Love/ Love of Life – CS, KF, MTW, JAC, DT/ EG

Truth / Source of Truth – KF, SA&PH /ND

Law – GR

Strength, Hope, Source of Equality – ND

Peace – JAC

Way – ND

Future – AC

### **God of No Images, God of Mystery**

#### ***Non-Yahwist Traditions of the Hebrew Scriptures, Christian Mystical Tradition***

God of no words or images – KF

God beyond all names – BF

Who are you – BMM

God as mystery – CS, MTW, AC

Great mystery – JAC

God as unknown and hidden – AC

### **Other God Images**

#### ***Scripture, Contemporary***

Holy one – JAC

Holy one of Israel – JWB

God's Gaze – GR

Jesus – MTW

Woman Christ – BMM

Incarnation – GR

Tangible, soft – CS

Mary – BMM

Anna, Miriam, Monica, David, Uriel – GR

Emerging connection – MTW

Beating heart – KF

Ordinary women's experience – BMM

### **Initials and Authors' Names**



AC – Anne Carr  
AH – Anna Holmes  
AMR – Ana-Marie Rizzuto  
AR – Adele Reinhartz  
BF – Bernadette Farrell  
BM – Betsan Martin  
BMM – Bridget Mary Meehan  
BN – Barbara Newman  
CB – Carolyn Bohler  
CC – Carol Christ  
CF – Colleen Fulmer  
CML – Catherine Mowry LaCugna  
CRT – Susan Cady, Marian Ronan and Hal Taussig  
CS – Carroll Saussy (and participants)  
CW – Charlie Westfall  
DL – Daniel Louw  
DM – Douglas Meeks  
DS – Dorothee Soelle [or Sölle]  
DT – David Tracy  
EB – Enid Bennett  
EG – Elyse Goldstein  
EJ – Elizabeth Johnson  
ESF – Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza  
EW – Elaine Wainwright  
GR – Gail Ramshaw  
HG – Helen Goggin  
JAC – Jann Aldredge-Clanton  
JCE – Joan Chamberlain Engelsman  
JDM – Julie Donovan Massey  
JP – Judith Plaskow  
JWB – Johanna van Wijk-Bos  
KF – Kathleen Fischer (women's reflections)  
KR – Karl Rahner as noted by Ruth Duck  
KZ – Katherine Zappone  
LS – Leonard Swidler  
MB – Margaret Butler  
MC – Meinrad Craighead  
MH – Margaret Hammer  
MR – Martha Robbins  
MS – Margaret Schrader  
MST – Marcel Sarot  
MTW – Miriam Therese Winter  
ND – Neil Darragh  
PLR – Patricia Lynn Reilly  
PT – Phyllis Tribble  
RG – Rita Gross

RRR – Rosemary Radford Ruether  
SA&PH – Sherry Anderson and Patricia Hopkins (their study participants)  
SM – Sallie McFague

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