Rupturing God-language: The Metaphor of God as Midwife in Psalm 22

A central issue in feminist theology regards the question of God-language, or how to speak about God in ways that do justice to the belief that both male and female are created in the image of God, so that both male and female metaphors should be used in our theological articulations. Feminist theologians like Phyllis Trible, Johanna Van Wijk-Bos, and Elisabeth Johnson have provided us with thought-provoking and inspiring examples of imagining God in new and creative ways. All of these theologians reclaim female imagery for God by lifting up images in Scripture and tradition that have not yet been fully utilized in the past (e.g. Deut 32:13; 18, Num 11:11-15; Isa 42:14, 45:9-12).

However helpful these treatments are in identifying this important issue, a number of challenges still confront feminist theologians in their quest of speaking of God in such a way that moves us beyond a narrow patriarchal understanding of God. One such a problem is that the female images in the biblical traditions are comparatively small compared to the many male-oriented metaphors with which they share narrative space. The challenge facing feminist theologians who have chosen to stay in the Christian (and Jewish) tradition is how to use these voices constructively and creatively. A first step would be to affirm that these minor voices are not necessarily insignificant. Rather, as this article will show, the female imagery we find for God in Scripture, although small in number, play a definitive role in furthering our speech about God. As we will see, it is exactly these voices that generate dialogue and contribute to the formation of new meaning – often by rupturing traditional formulations about God which may have the effect of expanding our understanding of God. The challenge is to take these traditions, which still may have been underdeveloped at the time, and utilize them afresh.

In this challenge, the thought of the Russian literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin will provide us with some helpful perspectives on the way God-language functions in Psalm 22. Psalm 22 is a good example of the struggle involved in finding adequate God-language in those times when traditional metaphors seem insufficient. Within this process, it is significant that one encounters one of the few instances in the Psalms where a female image for God is used. In Psalm 22:9-10, we find the provocative image of God as midwife when the psalmist proclaims: “Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God.” I argue that although this female image constitutes a relatively small occurrence in light of the other metaphors used for God, this image fulfils an important function in the context of Psalm 22 – particularly in the way
the believer experiences God in this time of crisis. In addition, this female image provides
to us as readers an incentive to broaden and even transform our overall image of God.

1 The Power of Minor Voices

One of the major contributions of Bakhtin’s work is his emphasis on dialogue, and
particularly his desire to hear all voices equally. Bakhtin first identifies this tendency in
relation to the work of Fyodor Dostoevky: “He heard both the loud, recognized, reigning
voices of the epoch, that is the reigning, dominant ideas (official and unofficial), as well
as voices still weak, ideas not yet fully emerged, latent ideas heard as yet by no one but
himself, and ideas that were just beginning to ripen, embryos of future worldviews.”

From his engagement with Dostoevky, Bakhtin derives a literary theory that has profound
implications for life. It seems that it is not only in the novel where it is beneficial to
notice different voices. Feminist theologians and other groups suffering oppression have
helped us understand the necessity to also in life be sensitive to different voices –
particularly those who have been silenced in the past. It is exactly this point that makes
Bakhtin so attractive for feminist interpreters. A feminist dialogics allows voices to stand
next to each other without being merged or drowned out. Moreover, this point is
particularly helpful for our understanding of the role of female language in theological
discourse. As we have noted, it is true that the number of female images that is used for
God is relatively small indeed. But these voices are essential, for they help facilitate
dialogue. Bakhtin teaches us that it is when an idea comes into contact with other ideas,
what he calls “alien thought,” that new meaning is born. He says: “the idea begins to live,
that is, to take shape, to develop, to find and renew its verbal expression, to give birth to
new ideas, only when it enters into genuine dialogic relationships with other ideas, with
the ideas of others.” Thus, it is exactly the unlikely voice, or the unexpected thought that
is responsible for new insight and transformation.

We see something of this at work in Psalm 22’s use of the female image for God in vv 9-
10. Although one could rightly describe this image of God as midwife in terms of
Bakhtin’s words as not yet fully emerged, or as an idea in its embryo state, this metaphor
fulfills an important role in the psalmist’s thought process of figuring out who God is in
those times when nothing makes sense anymore.

Psalm 22 starts out with a cry of anguish. The psalmist deeply feels the absence of God,
and cries out: “My God, my God why have you forsaken me” (v 1). This cry of
desolation already suggests something of the inner struggle at work throughout the rest of the psalm. The psalmist is trying to reconcile the personal nature of her relationship (“My God”) with her current experience of God’s hiddenness and absence.

In the rest of the Psalm, the psalmist is in dialogue with voices of the past and present as she is trying to recall who God is, using throughout the space of the Psalm quite a few metaphors to describe God. God is said to be holy (v 3), the liberator God (vv 4-5, 8, 20-21), God of the ancestors (v 4), God as king (v 28), and God as midwife (vv 9-10). These metaphors all constitute different ways of imagining God – some more traditional than others.

Within this dialogue, we see something of what Bakhtin describes as the dynamic process of moving from speaking in the voices of others to finding one’s own voice. Bakhtin shows how one finds within discourse (e.g. the writings of Dostoevky on which Bakhtin bases his theory), a distinctive move from voices that are “authoritatively persuasive” to voices that have become “internally persuasive.”

This notion is powerfully illustrated in Psalm 22. In her anguish, the psalmist tries all kinds of metaphors to help her out of the pit of despair in which she finds herself. In this dialogue, the psalmist uses the words of others when she begs the God of the ancestors, the liberator God, the God of holiness to save her. Even the voices of those who mock the psalmist, which are introduced in the direct speech quoted in v 8, invoke this more traditional understanding of God when they parody the ancestors’ confidence in a God who saves.

But it is a question whether these metaphors, which could be considered traditional descriptions of God, or in Bakhtin’s words, “authoritarian discourse,” always work? We see in v 6 that even after evoking these traditionally cherished voices of the past, the psalmist draws a sharp contrast between her own experience and the authoritarian voices that have been handed over to her. In the beginning of v 6, the psalmist uses the phrase: “But I”. This introduces an outpouring of words of despair in vv 6-7. The psalmist utters her anguish, using words that describe her shame of being dehumanized (cf. the description in v 6 “I am a worm, and not a human,” and the verbs “despised,” “scorned,” and “mocked”) – this in contrast to the ancestors who were not put to shame (v 5). The psalmist draws a further contrast between her own experience and that of the ancestors when she uses the verb “to trust” three times in vv 4-5 for the relation between her ancestors and God. Her perception of the ancestors who trusted and were saved is
contrasted with her own experience of a God who is absent and not liberating her from her suffering.

Peter C. Craigie calls this a contradiction between theology and experience. At present, the psalmist seems to be questioning the effectiveness of the authoritative voices of the past (theology), with regard to her current experience of being in a dark pit of despair. Ellen Davis rightly notes that the previous symbolic system proves to be hopelessly inadequate in the current situation. She argues that the psalm needs to choose a new kind of speech, which moves “toward the creation of a new symbolic order capable of encompassing the vastly expanded territory of the psalmist’s experience.”

This new kind of speech is dramatically illustrated in the radical transformation from the absolute despair the psalmist is experiencing in vv 2-21 to a renewed hope for the future that occurs in vv 22-31, so much so that some scholars have suggested that this psalm originally consisted of two separate psalms. Most scholars now hold on to the unity of the psalm, which provides a powerful example of moving from lament to praise. I argue that this new vision of the future that grows out of lament is related to the dynamic process of moving from the voices of others to finding new symbols of hope, or in Bakhtin’s words, transforming the authoritarian discourse of the past into an internally persuasive discourse. For it is only when God-language has become internally persuasive that the psalmist can begin to imagine a transformed future.

Within this process, the female image of God as midwife (vv 9-10), which could be considered a less dominant voice, provides the first signs of this type of internally persuasive speech that break open the traditional formulations about God.

2 God as Midwife

The image of God as midwife occurs in vv 9-10 as part of a motivational clause, similar to the motivational clause in vv 3-5 in which the psalmist provides reasons for asking God to help. But there is a distinctive difference between the content of these two clauses. John Kselman describes this difference in tone in terms of the transition that occurs from “our fathers” (v 3) to “my mother” (v 9-10); from the voices of the community to the individual’s own experience.
In contrast to the traditional voices of the ancestors, we see how the motivational clause in vv 9-10 is marked by personal, intimate language that describes the psalmist’s own experience of God being present from the moment she drew her first breath. The psalmist addresses God with the pronoun “you,” saying that it was God who assisted at her birth, who drew the psalmist out of her mother’s womb, and who kept her safe on her mother’s breasts. From that moment, she was cast upon God, whom she boldly calls “my God.” Verses 9-10 end with the confident statement of faith: “You are my God,” altering the initial cry of despair in v 1: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” into a declaration of trust.

It is significant to note that right after this metaphor of God as midwife in vv 9-10, one finds the first petition in v 11 in which the psalmist begs God to not be far away from her. This petition is repeated in v 19, with the added request to God to save her from her situation (vv 20-21). These two petitions form an inclusio, framing the honest and painful expression of the suffering the believer is enduring. Right after the second petition, Psalm 22 will move into a dramatic transformation (vv 22-31). It thus seems that this road to transformation is introduced by the move from the traditional voices of the fathers to the personal experience of the speaker in which the female image of God as midwife plays a central role. This reiterates Bakhtin’s point of the power of the minor voice to bring about new insight.

So, what connotations would this image of God as midwife, which plays such a central role in the movement from despair to a hopeful future, have? First, in light of the fact that women often died in childbirth (cf. e.g. Rachel in Gen 35:16-19), the midwife fulfilled a very important function in those situations when people deeply experienced the fragility of life – in those moments when death and life tend to intersect.

The use of this metaphor in the context of Psalm 22 is based on the belief that God is the opener and closer of the womb (cf. Gen 29:31; 30:22; 1 Sam 1:5-6). To assign the function of a midwife to God is to profess that God is in control of life and death, and it is to implore God to bring about life in a situation of death (cf. the description in vv 17-18 of the psalmist almost being a skeleton whose bones could be counted, and whose possessions are divided among others). Elsewhere in the Psalms, the image of the “pit” or “Sheol” is often used to describe similar suffering than experienced by the psalmist in Psalm 22. So one finds in Psalm 40:2 the expression that God drew the psalmist up from the pit (cf. also Ps 30:3). Evoking the connotations of a midwife who draws a baby from the womb, thereby bringing life to a child, who would have died together with its mother if she stayed in the womb, the psalmist pleads with God to bring about life in his own situation of suffering and despair that could be considered close to death. In conjunction with his prayer for deliverance in vv 20-21, the speaker pleads with God to deliver her life.
It is significant that in vv 20-21, the psalmist once more uses the traditional metaphor of God as deliverer. But now this metaphor does not constitute anymore the authoritarian voices of others, but has been reclaimed by the psalmist to become internally persuasive. It seems that it is through the employment of the female image of God as a midwife that delivers, that the psalmist can use in her prayer of deliverance the more traditional metaphor of God as savior.

Second, it is important to note that this image of God as midwife occurs in the midst of suffering and despair. This image is not a magic cure. Right before and right after this image, one finds in-depth descriptions of the physical and psychological anguish the psalmist is experiencing. The psalmist speaks of her pain of being persecuted. Using a series of animal metaphors (bulls in v 12, lion in v 13, dogs in v 16), the psalmist describes the feeling of being threatened, surrounded or trapped by whatever circumstances are responsible for her situation. We further see how the psychological anguish the psalmist is experiencing leads to severe physical symptoms. This reaches a climax in v 14, when the psalmist describes in rich figurative language how she feels like water being poured out, how her bones are separated and her heart is melting like wax.

But in the midst of this despair, we see like a little boy or girl in pain runs to his or her mother or father, maternal imagery is evoked to describe the need for consolation. In this regard, Phyllis Trible notes how in Psalm 22 the “divine and the maternal intertwine.” She shows how vv 9-10 make a close connection between God and the mother. In v 9, it is God who places the psalmist on the breasts of her mother. But Trible notes that the end of v 9 and the beginning of v 10 contain two “parallel prepositional phrases whose meanings converge. ‘Upon the breasts of my mother’ leads directly to ‘upon you.’ Subject has become object; divine midwife has become divine mother. To be kept safe upon the breasts of the mother is to be cast upon God from the womb.”

It thus seems that even if the internally persuasive image of God does not immediately provide relief, it attests to the important realization that God is present in the midst of pain. Wendy Farley has written extensively about God’s compassion that causes God to enter into suffering. This characteristic of God is evoked in the psalmist’s repeated petition: “Do not be far away.” But Farley rightly points out that God is not only “the benevolent but impotent deity who ‘suffers with the world.’” Rather, “divine compassion is … a radical love that offers liberating power” to overcome the forces of chaos that are responsible for suffering in the world.
One could thus say that the image of God as midwife who works in conjunction with the nurturing mother to care for the psalmist is evoked to describe God’s presence in the midst of the reality of suffering. Nevertheless, in vv 19-22, the psalmist does not only ask God to be present, she also asks God to change her situation. It is this twofold function of God’s nurturing presence and God saving power that is captured in the metaphor of God as midwife – a minor voice that gives rise to new insight and provides a new way of imagining God.

3 Visions of the Future

In vv 22-31, the psalmist sings a song of thanksgiving in the perfect tense, giving expression to the unwavering belief that God’s deliverance is so certain that one can sing of it as if it has already occurred. Within this transformation it is remarkable that the psalmist is not only singing of her own deliverance anymore. Using ever-widening circles, the speaker, who was formerly isolated, now proclaims in the midst of the congregation of Israel a new image of God. Using only personalized language, the psalmist reuses old images to provide a new vision that extends far beyond the psalmist’s own personal situation to the congregation of Israel, to foreign nations, to unborn generations, and even to the dead.

Within this new image of God, we see a vision of justice of a transformed world where the poor (or afflicted) shall have enough to eat (v 26. Cf. also 1 Sam 2:5; Luke 1:53). It is a vision where God is king over all the nations, where people around the earth will acknowledge God, thus proclaiming something of the universal perspective that refuses to claim salvation only for the self.

This vision of God that is open to the future and also have implications for others relates to the central perspective in a feminist theological reimagining of God, i.e., what Mary Grey calls “God as our passion for justice.” She says that what is needed to counter the “static-ness of the traditional images of God” is a “dynamic image of a God who not only ‘hears the cries of the poor (Ps. 72:12-14), but whose compassion and active solidarity transforms the unjust situation.’”

Such an image of a God who is committed to a transformed world forms a central aspect of feminist theologians’ undertaking to critique ideologies and resist oppressive structures. Moreover, in terms of our objective of taking a female image for God and utilizing it afresh, it is significant that the female image of God as midwife who acts as
deliverer and comforter culminates in an image of God’s justice. This is a good reminder that our new images for God should always have an element of justice to it – particularly as God-language can easily become dangerous if claimed for the self. We should always remember that the liberated could well become the oppressor of tomorrow, and the comforted the coldhearted.

Finally, it is important to note that the vision of transformation ends with the hope that future generations will continue to proclaim God’s deliverance (vv 30-31). This relates to Bakhtin’s understanding that the viewer is also a participant in the ongoing dialogue. Every reader continues to respond to the voices of past, and in this process gives new meaning and finds new accents in what has been handed down to the reader. This is also true with regard to God-language. We have the obligation to continue the dynamic process of making the traditional voices of others our own by finding new images for God that may be more suitable for our time. These new images could well be found in the minor voices within the tradition and Scripture, which should be picked up and appropriated anew. This corresponds with an important quality of a feminist dialogics, which does not only want to detect the minor voices within a dialogue, but also find ways to strengthen and expand these voices. And it is exactly these voices that may be responsible for surprisingly new insights that broaden our understanding of God, providing us with language that may be more suitable for the times we are facing.


Although the psalmist most likely was a man, for the purpose of this paper, I will be using the female pronoun in an attempt to be sensitive to inclusive language.


Davis, “Exploding the Limits,” 97, 99.

The etymology of the root yxg is uncertain. Most scholars though retain the meaning “drew from the womb,” Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 196.

The danger of childbirth is evident from the high mortality rate among females in their childbearing years. Carol L. Meyers points out that whereas men’s life expectancy in biblical times was around 40, women’s life expectancy was closer to 30 years of age, “The Roots of Restriction: Women in Early Israel,” *BA* 41(1978), 95.

The power of the midwife to bring about life out death is vividly illustrated in the story of the two midwives in Exodus 1, where the two women, Shiprah and Puah, play a central role in the birth of a nation.

Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 38

Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 60. Cf. also Kselman, “‘Why Have You Abandoned Me?’” 176-177.


Bakhtin, Bakhtin, *Problem of Dostoevky’s Poetics*, 18; “Discourse in the Novel,” 282. We see something of this dynamic process at work in the future use of Psalm 22 itself. It is significant that v 1 becomes Jesus’ prayer on the cross, attesting to the evangelist' conviction that the movement from lament to future hope is exemplified in the event of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. Davis, “Exploding the Limits,” 104.