

Volume XXIII - (2022)

The Divine Feminine in the Parable of the Lost Coin

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Journal of Unification Studies Vol. 23, 2022 - Pages 71-80

I was brought up to think of God as “Father”, and that is still the prevalent language used by most Christians, but in fact this has created a limited view of God that does not encompass all of God’s identity. There cannot exist a father without a mother, so to suggest God as purely father would be polytheistic because there needs to be a mother as well.^[1] In the Bible, God has been described with both fatherly and motherly language and is not a gendered deity. However, the New Testament writers, particularly John, popularized the use of Father God (in relation to Jesus as son), and this image of a masculine divine being has been immortalized in such famous artworks as Michelangelo’s Creation of Adam in the Sistine Chapel. So where does one find examples of a motherly God, an image of the divine feminine?

When I first read the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin in Luke 15 for the Parables of Jesus class at UTS, I was hit with a deep realization that has, without exaggeration, fundamentally altered my perspective on the Bible and its description of God. The conclusion I reached on reading these parables was a simple one: if the shepherd (a man) who searched desperately for his one lost sheep represented God searching for us, lost sinners, the woman searching her house for a single coin and rejoicing when she finally found it should also be interpreted as God. But was Luke really saying that God can be female, not just male? After doing some research on this question, I have concluded that yes, indeed, that is exactly what Jesus was saying, and to my great surprise he was not the only biblical author to do so. Although the vast majority of God-imagery in the Bible is masculine, there are in fact a number of passages in both the Old and New Testament that portray God using female language.^[2]

Too long, such passages have been sidelined or ignored by Christians who pray and worship a God that is exclusively “Father” and use only “he” pronouns when speaking of the Divine. Southern Baptist minister Paul R. Smith makes this very argument when speaking of the parable of the lost coin: “On either side of this story [of the lost coin] are the much more familiar stories of the lost sheep and the prodigal son. How many sermons I have heard on how God is a shepherd searching for his one lost sheep or a father welcoming his prodigal son home, but precious few sermons on how God is a woman searching for her lost coin!”^[3] It is time to change that.

In this paper, I will give special focus to the parable of the lost coin by situating these verses in a Bible that contains a plethora of “implicit and explicit references”^[4] to the feminine God, and finally tie that into the concept of Heavenly Mother in Unification theology.

The Divine Feminine in the Bible

Before diving into the parable in more depth, I will discuss the idea of God as a mother or divine feminine in the Scripture and how these images were explored by Christian theologians in the early church as well as in the Middle Ages before being largely ignored in recent centuries.

Each description of God highlights one particular characteristic, so we cannot get a complete picture of God in one verse, but they all help in adding a little bit to our overall understanding. Some verses portray God as a comforting mother, or as a constantly loving mother or as a protective mother hen. There are passages about God as a stern and authoritative father but also as a forgiving and merciful father.

Arguably the most famous verse that presents God as both male and female is in the very first chapter of the Bible: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27).^[5] It stands to reason that if men and women were both created in the image of God, this means that God has both masculine and feminine attributes. Nevertheless, not all Christians agree with such an interpretation, for example by choosing to focus on the word “man” in the first part of the verse.^[6]

Then let us look at some more explicitly feminine or maternal imagery in the Scripture. In Deuteronomy 32:18, God is depicted as a mother giving birth to her children: “You were unmindful of the Rock that begot you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth.” God’s anguish is compared to that of a woman in labor in Isaiah 42:14, and in Isaiah 49:15 God relates the divine experience to that of a mother nursing her baby at her breast. The acts of giving birth and nursing a child are undeniably feminine and speak to some of the most precious experiences in a mother’s life.

The New Testament has several examples as well. In Luke 13:34 and Mathew 23:37 (same verse), Jesus uses the image of a protective mother hen gathering her chicks: “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!” At other times, people are spoken of as “being born of God”, implying God is a mother that bears children – see John 1:12, John 8:41, 1 John 3:9 and James 1:18, among others. And just as in the Old Testament, God is depicted as a nursing mother of an infant in 1 Peter 2:2-3.

In the gospels, Jesus is quoted several times calling God “Father” and addressed God as Father in the Lord’s Prayer,^[7] solidifying in the minds of many Christians the idea that “Father” is the proper way to address God, instead of “Mother.” However, one biblical scholar recently attempted to refute this idea by claiming that Jesus challenged the cultural norms attributed to mothers and fathers in Biblical times. According to Bulkeley, Jesus actually described God as a “motherly father”.^[8] The stereotypical father of the ancient Mediterranean was “stern and authoritarian” while the mother was “loving and compassionate,” and the God that Jesus spoke of often looked more like the stereotypical mother.^[9] The parable of the father with two sons in Luke 15:11-32 depicts a forgiving and loving father who breaks away from cultural expectations and acts as a stereotypical mother would.^[10]

There is another female image of God that was especially prominent in early church history, and we find it in Luke 11:49: “Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute.’” Wisdom, or Sophia, has sometimes been described as the female personification of God.

As a female image of God, Lady Wisdom appears “in the canonical book of Proverbs and also in the deuterocanonical books of Wisdom of Solomon, Baruch, and Ecclesiasticus.”^[11] The latter books belong to the Apocrypha, regarded as canon by Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians but not by Protestants. Proverbs 8:22-31 describes how Wisdom was present at God’s side at the time of the creation. Interestingly, early church fathers and saints who reflected on the parable of the woman and the lost coin saw Woman Wisdom as a

representation of Jesus Christ.^[12] This topic will be discussed further in the next section.

The Divine Feminine Searching for the Lost Coin

The Gospel of Luke stands out among the Synoptic gospels for its inclusion of stories about women and its literary technique of gender-pairing or pairing similar stories of men and women side by side.^[13] Luke used this literary technique in his stories surrounding the nativity (Mary and Joseph, Zechariah and Elizabeth, the prophets Simon and Anna), to describe miracles of Jesus, and for some of the parables, including the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin in Luke 15.

Theologically, the use of “gender pairing” by Luke as a literary technique has underscored Jesus’ ministry of “inclusive liberation,” whereby Jesus freed both men and women from sin and injustice and treated men and women as equals.^[14] The Kingdom of God that Jesus spoke of in the parables was to bring about a just world wherein all human beings have equal value.

Parables were Jesus’ primary teaching tool, since these stories had the ability to make something unfamiliar (the kingdom of God) familiar through relatable experiences for Jesus’ audience. What did Jesus want to convey through the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin in Luke 15? Let’s take a look at these two parables.

The Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:1-7)

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable: “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

The Parable of the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10)

“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Jesus offers these parables to the Pharisees and scribes in response to their complaints about him associating with “tax collectors and sinners”. The Pharisees followed a strict code of morals that prohibited them from approaching or sharing a meal with anyone who “offended against the laws of God” and had not repented, which is why they criticized Jesus.^[15] Jesus answers with the parables to say that he considers these sinners as no longer lost but found again.^[16]

Both of these parallels speak of something that is lost, searched for, found and then finally rejoiced over for being found. In a nutshell, they are about God’s unfailing love that seeks to recover all those who are lost in sin and rejoices when they are found and returned back to God. The central theme or climax of the lost sheep and the lost coin is “the joy of finding again” what was lost.^[17]

Biblical scholars have noted the parallels between these two parables, but as one Christian feminist put it, their “patriarchal interpretative grid” has blinded them to the possibility of Jesus representing God as the woman in the story.^[18] Instead, the woman is simply there to “attract the interest of female listeners who would not be able to relate to shepherding.”^[19] While the shepherd is commonly understood to represent God, the woman is not.

Some scholars go even further to avoid the association. John Crossan argues that despite Jesus calling himself “the good shepherd” in John 10:11, 14, the shepherd in the parable of the lost sheep does not represent God/Jesus because the woman in the parable of the lost coin cannot be a representation of God for “obvious” reasons.^[20] But is it really that obvious?

If we go back and look at early interpretations of these parables, we find a very different picture. Shannon McAlister presents numerous examples of theologians from the early church and the Middle Ages talking about Wisdom as the divine feminine or Jesus as the incarnation of Woman Wisdom. She uses examples where they wrote about the parable of the lost coin:

For St. Aelred of Rievaulx, therefore, the woman seeking her lost coin is also the baker-woman who holds in her hands the leaven of the kingdom of God: she is divine Wisdom—Jesus Christ—whom Scripture portrays as a woman because of her boundless maternal love.^[21]

McAlister also quotes St Augustine, who poetically compared the “lamp of Wisdom” that the woman lights to the light of the Word that “shines and finds the lost.”^[22] The clay lamp itself is also connected to the flesh of Jesus Christ as a human, in reference to Genesis 2:7.

However, this interest in the divine feminine subsided after the Middle Ages. Protestant theologians moved away from describing the woman in Luke 15 as God, and by the sixteenth century, the image of divine Woman Wisdom had faded into the background.^[23]

Thanks to feminist theologians, this history has finally been uncovered and we can examine the woman in the parable with renewed interest. For instance, the fact that the main character in this story is a woman should be considered when discussing the worth of the coin. The Greek drachma is a coin that represents two days’ wages for a woman, while it would be a single day’s wage for a man.^[24] We know the woman is poor since she only has 10 such coins in her possession and her house is so dimly lit that even an oil lamp does not give enough light for her to find the coin unless she also sweeps the floor to listen for the coin’s rattle.^[25] God is searching for us anxiously, just like that poor woman who desperately wants to recover the coin that means so much to her – it is one tenth of her total funds. It reflects the yearning heart of a mother.

This precious female image of God should be celebrated just as the masculine image of the shepherd or the father with the two sons, because God is in fact equally masculine and feminine. Unification theology delves into this topic further.

The Divine Feminine in Unification Theology

Unification theology uses Genesis 1:27 as biblical evidence that God has both masculine and feminine characteristics, or *yang* and *yin*, as they are referred to in the Divine Principle, the foundational book that outlines Rev. Sun Myung Moon’s interpretation of the Bible and understanding of God and the world. Man and woman, created in the image of God, are thus manifestations of God’s yang (original masculinity) and yin (original femininity).^[26]

At the same time, God does not have a gender in the sense that God is neither male nor female. As Unificationist theologian Theodore Shimmyo explains, “God’s Yang and Yin are in *chunghwa*, “perfect harmony.” The Korean word *chunghwa* literally means neutralization without either of the two aspects being stronger than the other. Thus, God’s gender appears to be androgynous and neutral.”^[27]

Nevertheless, God was commonly referred to as “Father” or “Heavenly Father” by Rev. Moon and members of the Unification church for

most of its history. The Divine Principle tells us that God as the creator exists in the “masculine” subject position to his creation, which is the “feminine object partner.”^[28] Hence, the use of the term “Father.” This is similar to the understanding of Christian theologians who see the church, and by extension all humankind, as feminine with respect to the masculine God.^[29] The image of the church as the bride of Jesus, for instance, comes to mind.

However, this image of a solely masculine God was not meant to last forever. In his later life, Rev. Moon spoke of the need for the Heavenly Mother side of God, which had been neglected for too long, to be restored.^[30] According to Unificationist teachings, everything in the world was affected by the fall of Adam and Eve and needs to be restored, and the most important thing to recover is true love. Only at the end of this process of restoration, when we recover true love, will “God’s deepest femininity,” our Heavenly Mother, be fully recognized.^[31]

In the restored world, where God and humankind exist in harmony, the positions of masculine subject and feminine object are no longer fixed:

When the subject partner and the object partner become completely one in harmony [...] the subject partner sometimes acts as an object partner, and the object partner sometimes acts as a subject partner.^[32]

Thus, God can be father at times and mother at other times. Important to note here, we are not trying to replace father with mother, but simply acknowledge the presence of both.

This recognition was achieved with the use of the gender-neutral term “Heavenly Parent” in place of the traditional “Heavenly Father.” It became official less than a decade ago, on January 7, 2013, when it was declared by Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, who has led the Unification movement since her husband’s passing in 2012.^[33]

This change was met with mixed reactions, ranging from people who completely embraced the term to those who strongly objected to it. While Unificationists have started addressing God as Heavenly Parent in their prayers, many fall back on the more familiar “Father,” and the masculine term is also still widely used in our worship songs.^[34]

Suffice it to say, the theology surrounding the divine feminine is an ongoing development within Unificationism, but we are moving in the right direction. This is thanks in large part to the leadership of Dr. Moon, or Mother Moon, as she is affectionately known.

Unification theology is based on the foundation of a messianic couple, instead of a single male messiah, because of our understanding that God possesses dual characteristics of masculinity and femininity, which are embodied on earth by a physical man and a physical woman, the True Parents, who are completely united with God.^[35] Adam and Eve were meant to become the True Parents, but due to the fall, God had to search for a new couple to embody God’s masculinity and femininity completely. Unificationists believe this was achieved by Father and Mother Moon as a messianic couple, paving the way for all couples on earth to also walk this path. Thus, we look to Mother Moon and her maternal embracing style of leadership as an image of the divine feminine and an example to all women.

Throughout most of church history, it has been male leaders who helped people form an understanding of God, so it is no surprise that the masculine side of God stood at the forefront. But it is time for change. We need more women leaders like Mother Moon who embody qualities of the divine feminine to help us relate to God as a mother. One way of doing that is by highlighting female characters in the Bible such as the woman searching for her lost coin in Luke 15 and studying their qualities.

Conclusion

Although patriarchal society and male church leaders have perpetuated the image of God as male, there are actually numerous examples in Scripture that depict God as female, including the parable of the lost coin in Luke 15.

Christian feminists argue that the “lopsidedly masculine language” found in Christian worship, with its references to “men, man, brothers, sons, and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” and the pronoun “he” for God, does not reflect the teachings of Jesus that God loves and values men and women equally.^[36] The use of more inclusive language that affirms both the masculinity and femininity of God is an important step towards bringing about true equality between men and women.^[37]

On a personal level, as a woman, I feel so grateful to have found all of this scholarship on the divine feminine image in the Bible and feel hopeful for a brighter future for all men and women, as we strive to reach the just Kingdom of God that Jesus preached about 2000 years ago. I’m grateful to Mother Moon for bringing Heavenly Mother into the spotlight, and I want to raise my children to know God as both a father and a mother.

Notes

[1] Tim Bulkeley, *Not Only a Father: Talk of God as Mother in the Bible & Christian Tradition* (Auckland: Archer Press, 2011), 37.

[2] I will present a few such examples in the next section, although it is not an exhaustive list (that would be beyond the scope of this paper).

[3] Paul R. Smith, *Is It Okay to Call God “Mother”: Considering the Feminine Face of God* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 76.

[4] *Ibid.*, 51.

[5] All biblical verses in this paper are taken from the RSV translation.

[6] Virginia Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), 3.

[7] The Lord’s Prayer is found in Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4.

[8] Bulkeley, *Not Only a Father*, 44-49.

[9] Bulkeley, *Not Only a Father*, 45.

[10] Bulkeley, *Not Only a Father*, 48.

[11] Mollenkott, *Divine Feminine*, 97.

[12] Shannon McAlister, “Christ as the Woman Seeking Her Lost Coin: Luke 15:8-10 and Divine Sophia in the Latin West,” *Theological Studies* 79, no. 1 (March 2018): 9, doi:10.1177/0040563917745830.

[13] Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan, *Parables of the Kingdom: Jesus and the Use of Parables in the Synoptic Tradition* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 115.

[14] Johnny Awwad, “Traits of Women Discipleship in Luke’s Gospel,” *Theological Review* 42 (2021): 15-16.

[15] Eta Linnemann, *Jesus of the Parables: Introduction and Exposition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 70.

[16] Linnemann, *Jesus of the Parables*, 71.

- [17] Ibid.
- [18] Mollenkott, *Divine Feminine*, 65.
- [19] Mollenkott, *Divine Feminine*, 64.
- [20] John Crosson, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 38.
- [21] McAlister, "Christ as the Woman," 22.
- [22] McAlister, "Christ as the Woman," 15.
- [23] McAlister, "Christ as the Woman," 27.
- [24] Mary Ann Beavis, ed, *The Lost Coin: Parables of Women, Work, and Wisdom* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002), 36.
- [25] Ibid., 36.
- [26] Sun Myung Moon, *Exposition of the Divine Principle* (New York: HSA-UWC, 1996), 19.
- [27] Theodore Shimmyo, "God and the World: Advantages of the Unification Doctrine of God's Dual Characteristics." *Journal of Unification Studies* 16 (2015).
- [28] Moon, *Exposition of the Divine Principle*, 19.
- [29] Mollenkott, *Divine Feminine*, 3.
- [30] Shimmyo, "God and the World."
- [31] Andrew Wilson, "Heavenly Mother," *Journal of Unification Studies* 10 (2009), https://journals.uts.edu/volume-x-2009/93-heavenly-mother#_ednref21.
- [32] Moon, *Exposition of the Divine Principle*, 38.
- [33] Andrew Wilson, "Reverend Moon's Early Teaching on God as Heavenly Parent," *Journal of Unification Studies* 16 (2015), <https://journals.uts.edu/volume-xvi-2015/268-reverend-moon-s-early-teaching-on-god-as-heavenly-parent>.
- [34] Andrew Wilson, "Theological Developments in the FFWPU since the Death of Rev. Moon," *Journal of Unification Studies* 19 (2018), <https://journals.uts.edu/volume-xix-2018/308-theological-developments-in-the-ffwpu-since-the-death-of-rev-moon#a17>.
- [35] Moon, *Exposition of the Divine Principle*, 172.
- [36] Mollenkott, *Divine Feminine*, 1-2.
- [37] Mollenkott, *Divine Feminine*, 13.

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