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Does the Bible Refer to God as Feminine? (Bible Perspective

Hershel Shanks
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Hershel Shanks

In at least one instance in the Hebrew Bible, God is referred to as feminine. The gender is not apparent in Eng-

lish translations because *you* is neither masculine nor feminine. However, many other languages, including Hebrew, use masculine and feminine forms of *you*.

The feminine reference to God occurs in Numbers 11:15. The children of Israel are in the desert. Despite their rescue from Egyptian bondage, they are complaining bitterly. In Egypt, they recall, they ate fish and cucumbers. They had melons and onions and garlic and leeks. Here they have only manna. Moses himself is distressed at the burden of having to lead the people: "I cannot carry this people by myself," he tells the Lord. "It is too much for me."

Then he asks God to kill him so that he can end his wretchedness. Here is the crucial passage:

"If this is the way you [feminine!] are going to treat me, put me to death at once."

Does the Bible Refer to God as Feminine?

At that point, God tells Moses to appoint 70 elders, who would eventually share the burden of administration with him.

Is Moses calling on the Lord's feminine nature by addressing him with the feminine "you"? This certainly seems to be a possibility.

Some will argue that the *you* in this verse is not really feminine. Masculine "you" in Hebrew is *atah* and consists of the three letters *aleph*, *tav*, and *heh* ('*TH*). Feminine *you* omits the last letter and is pronounced *at*.

If this were all, it would be clear that God is addressed in the feminine here. But like it or not, things get more complicated. Hebrew generally is written only with consonants. At an early stage, certain letters served as rudimentary vowels. These are called *matres lectiones*, "mothers of reading."

**Hershel Shanks is the Editor of Biblical Archaeology Review. His column appears in Bible Review and is used here with his permission.*

These *matres*, for short, are *vov* (pronounced long *o*), *yod* (pronounced long *e*) and *heh*. With development of *matres*, words could be spelled either with them or without them. The spellings that include them are called *plene* orthography (full spelling). The spellings that don't are called defective orthography.

The lack of a *heh* in the "you" in Numbers 11:15 may therefore be either masculine in defective orthography or feminine in *plene* orthography. Which is it?

In the 10th century, Jewish scribes transcribing the Hebrew Bible developed a system of "pointing," adding subscripts and superscripts to letters to indicate vowels, thereby removing much of the ambiguity concerning how a word was to be pronounced (and understood). A different subscript would be placed under *you* when spelled *aleph* and *tov* to indicate whether it would be pronounced *atah* (masculine) or *at* (feminine).

Actually, the word spelled *aleph* and *tov* appears frequently in the Hebrew Bible, and in each case the scribes who developed the *textus receptus* and added the pointings had to decide whether these two letters should be pronounced *atah* (as if the *heh* were there) or simply *at*. In most cases the choice was easy.

In Numbers 11:15, it was not so easy. They chose *at*, the feminine form!

In one conservative commentary, the editor states in a note to this verse: "The female [*aleph* and *tov*] seems to refer to God."¹

It can perhaps be argued that this unusual instance is simply an orthographic variation—or in plain language, a spelling mistake. Yet we know that every word, every letter was sacred to the ancient scribes. If this *aleph* and *tov* is masculine, we would have to assume that a double mistake occurred. First, we must suppose that the ancient scribe who created the text and who wrote "you" with a final *heh* scores of times made a mistake by omitting the *heh* here. Second, we must suppose that the 10th-century scribes who pointed the word made a mistake by putting the wrong subscript under the second letter of this defectively spelled *you*.

Finally, in two instances in the Dead Sea Scrolls, God is addressed by the feminine *at*, once in the Damascus Document (4Q266, fr.11, 1.8)² and once in the Thanksgiving Psalms Scroll (Hodayot 13:32).³ By the time of the Dead Sea Scrolls, defective spelling was less common. In these two instances, did the Dead Sea Scroll scribe make a spelling error, or was he trying to tell us something about the nature of God? More work needs to be done. □

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- ¹ Avrohom Davis, ed., *The Metsudah Chumash/Rashi*, vol. 4, BaMidbar (Book of Num-

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bers) (Hoboken, N.J.:Ktav, 1996) p. 144.

²See Joseph M. Baumgarten et al., *Qumran Cave 4 XIII: The Damascus Document (4Z266-273)*, *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* 18 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 76. pl. 14.

³The same phrase, "You, O my God," appears frequently in this scroll, but with the *heh*. Of course the difference could be attributed to a simple scribal error, or it could, possibly, be purposeful.

W H E N Y O U N E E D A F R I E N D

On his way home, a man falls into a cistern. It is muddy. Its sides are slimy. Again and again he claws at the sides. "Help," he cries. "Somebody help me!"

A neighbor comes alone, looks at him and says, "You know, John, I thought all along that's the kind of guy you are. You should know better than to fall into something like this. You're an embarrassment!"

John sinks back, stunned, as his neighbor walks away.

"Help! Help! somebody! Help me out!"

A couple ladies from the church happen by, hear him, and hasten to the edge of the cistern. "Look at that! If I've said it once, I've said it a hundred times! There ought to be a law against people falling into cisterns!"

Nodding in agreement, they hasten away.

"Help! Help!" John's call has an even more urgent note.

A man walking by, sees him, and hastens to the city fathers. At his urging they make a sign: "Fine of \$25 for anyone falling into a cistern." He hastens to erect it by the hole. It's a good law. John can hear it pounded in from his cistern "basement."

"Help! Help!" he cries, his voice cracking.

A group from the local historical society comes along. They are aghast at the ugliness of the scene. "What an embarrassment to our town," they say. But this is not just a talk-talk group. They take up a collection, rush to a nearby nursery, buy some shrubbery, and plant it so that visitors from out of town won't have to see the ugly cistern.

The voice from the hole is weaker now. John has almost given up hope. "Help. Somebody. Please."

Steps approach. "John, that surely is a treacherous hole!" A strong arm reaches down and pulls John to safety.

Can you guess who it is?