

# Theological Language in Crisis? The Importance of Trauma Hermeneutics for Exploring Gendered Metaphors for God in the Book of Jeremiah

L. JULIANA CLAASSENS (STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY)

## ABSTRACT

*In this article that explores male and female metaphors for God in the Hebrew Bible, I argue with specific reference to the book of Jeremiah that the intersection of trauma and gender is particularly important in considering how tumultuous times inevitably impact the way people spoke and continue to speak about God. In this regard, recent developments in terms of gender theory including queer biblical interpretation and masculinity studies help us to engage critically with the gendered metaphors used for God in the Hebrew Bible. For instance, it will be shown how important it is to trouble binary constructions, i.e., in terms of male metaphors for God, to break the cycle of toxic masculinity that leads to further violence in an endless cycle of humiliation, shame and retaliation. And also, to, when it comes to female metaphors for God, move beyond a romanticised understanding of motherhood that is rooted in a prescriptive, essentialising understanding of gender.*

**Keywords:** Gendered Metaphors for God, Feminist Biblical Interpretation, Queer Biblical Interpretation, Masculinity Studies, Book of Jeremiah, Trauma Hermeneutics

## A INTRODUCTION

Not too long ago, controversy erupted on social media in Dutch Reformed Church circles when two female pastors, spoke about God in female terms from the pulpit, igniting the ire of a male pastor many miles away.<sup>1</sup> The female pastors were accused of propagating idolatry and destroying the church and society with their feminist ideas and liberal theology and I was shocked by the level of anger and hatred that featured in the ensuing conversation, with calls to weed out

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<sup>1</sup> See the Afrikaans News Service reporting on this controversy: <https://www.netwerk24.com/Nuus/Algemeen/herrie-oor-verwysing-na-god-as-vroulik-en-n-prisma-20210414> Cf. also a good overview of what led to this social media storm as well as the response by the local congregation where the one pastor is stationed: <https://www.ngkenridge.co.za/nuus/>.

heresy, not to speak of the (female) heretics that dared to speak in female terms of the God we first read about in the Hebrew Bible.

What most surprised me from this polemic is the fact that such an old question now seemed so threatening to those who fuelled the flames. After all, it has been decades since feminist scholars first started having the conversation about female metaphors for God, as evident in, for instance, Phyllis Trible's *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Johanna van Wijk-Bos, Renita Weems, Sarah Dille and many others who sought to highlight female metaphors for God in the Hebrew Bible while also interrogating the male metaphors that often were associated with abuse and sexual violence.<sup>2</sup>

I myself spent much of my early scholarly career on this exact question. In my Ph.D. dissertation, I considered the compelling metaphor of a mother nursing her child, imaginatively used by the rabbis to capture God's gracious provision of food to Israel in the form of manna that profoundly impacts the way we think about the Provider God, who feeds and cares for Her children as so many mothers have done throughout the ages.<sup>3</sup> This question also was at the heart of my second monograph, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, which sought to explore alternative (female) metaphors for the Warrior Liberator God: God as the Mourner God, the principal Wailing Woman who calls on the mourning women of Jer 9 to teach the community how and when to lament, thereby coming to terms with the trauma that has overwhelmed the community as a whole. God as Mother God, who, particularly in Deutero-Isaiah, is depicted as not only bringing new life into the world but also doing Her utmost best to preserve that life is also the Midwife God, whose deliverance in Pss 22 and 71 serves as a

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<sup>2</sup> Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), shows that a thread of female imagery for God runs through the Hebrew Bible; Johanna W. H. Van Wijk-Bos, *Reimagining God: The Case for Scriptural Diversity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995); Renita Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Sarah J. Dille, *Mixing Metaphors: God as Mother and Father in Deutero-Isaiah* (JSOTSup 398; Gender, Culture, Theory Series 13; London: T & T Clark International, 2004); Hanne Løland Levinson, *Silent or Salient Gender? The Interpretation of Gendered God-language in the Hebrew Bible, Exemplified in Isaiah 42, 46 and 49* (FAT 2/32; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> See L. Juliana M. Claassens, "The God Who Feeds: A Feminist-Theological Analysis of Key Pentateuchal and Intertestamental Texts" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2001). Cf. the monograph that grew out of my thesis that continued to trace the metaphor of the God who feeds beyond the Pentateuch to the rest of the Old Testament and beyond. L. Juliana Claassens, *The God Who Feeds: Biblical Images of Divine Nourishment* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004).

powerful expression of God’s ability to bring life in a context of death as represented by the perils associated with childbirth in the ancient Near East.<sup>4</sup>

In response to the increasingly vile conversation on social media that also reached the printed media and the Afrikaans radio station (RSG), my first thought was despair that these insights regarding gendered language for God, which have been so existential to myself and others, did not manage to reach many ordinary believers—and some clergy for that matter! This is true, at least in my context, but also presumably elsewhere if I look at recent publications that repeat some of the same questions and arguments about the nature and significance of male and female metaphors for God without really moving the conversation forward.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, perhaps these ideas *have* become more commonplace, as my (colleague) husband reminded me, after all, this controversy was sparked precisely *because* these female pastors, found it quite natural to employ female metaphors for God in a liturgical setting.

Another thought that came to mind in response to this social media storm is that the ferocity of the attack on these so-called feminist ideas and the young women who represented theological positions that challenge the status quo is representative of a much broader crisis. In a context plagued by great uncertainty and upheaval, masculinity, in particular, is in crisis.<sup>6</sup> For instance, it is helpful to remember that, as evident in the book of Jeremiah, which I propose offers fertile space to explore the topic of male and female metaphors for God, the original gendered metaphors for God also originated in a context in which the community was under siege. Desperately yearning for a world that is ordered and secured, the book of Jeremiah employs both male and female metaphors to speak of God in a context which “terror is all around” and the theological traditions and

<sup>4</sup> L. Juliana Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God’s Liberating Presence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Løland Levinson documents this frustration in the lack of change amongst her students as well as the ongoing quest of each generation trying to find female metaphors for God. Hanne Løland Levinson, “The Never-Ending Search for God’s Feminine Side: Feminine Aspects in the God-Image of the Prophets,” in *Prophecy and Gender in the Hebrew Bible: The Bible and Women Vol 1.2* (ed. Irmtraud Fischer and L. Juliana Claassens; Atlanta: SBL, 2021), 393–403; cf. James Gordon McConville, “Neither Male nor Female: Poetic Imagery and the Nature of God in the Old Testament,” *JSOT* 44/1 (2019):166–181. See also, most recently, Løland Levinson’s rebuttal of David Clines 2021 article in *JBL* that contended that one does not find any female metaphors in the Hebrew Bible; David J. A. Clines, “Alleged Female Language about the Deity in the Hebrew Bible,” *JBL* 140 (2021):229–249; Hanne Løland Levinson, “Still Invisible after All These Years? Female God-Language in the Hebrew Bible: A Response to David J. A. Clines,” *JBL* 141/2 (2022):199–217.

<sup>6</sup> For a succinct description of the various factors associated with masculinity crisis, see David Morgan, “The Crisis in Masculinity,” in the *Handbook of Gender and Women’s Studies* (ed. Kathy Davis, Mary Evans and Judith Lorber; London: SAGE, 2006), 109–123.

institutions consequently are under threat. I argue that the intersection of trauma and gender is particularly important in considering how tumultuous times inevitably impact the way people spoke and continue to speak about God. In this regard, recent developments in gender theory, including queer biblical interpretation and masculinity studies, may help us to engage critically with the gendered metaphors used for God, and for the purpose of this essay, specifically in the book of Jeremiah.

I dedicate this article on gendered metaphors in the book of Jeremiah to Professor Gerrie Snyman, who over the years has diligently focused on the perpetrators in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>7</sup> I have great appreciation for his ongoing commitment in viewing perpetrators such as Cain and Esau, candidly, but also with compassion. Not only has Snyman's work on perpetrators helped him to face his own power and privilege as a white male but it has also helped others engage with whiteness and with masculinity, embracing both one's vulnerability as well as one's agency in seeking to do good in a context fraught with injustice.

## **B BEYOND THE BINARY: TRAUMA, GENDER CONSTRUCTION AND GOD-LANGUAGE**

Probably more than anyone else, Judith Butler has helped us to understand the performative nature of gender, i.e., that gender constitutes a series of repetitive actions that are socially constructed and hence informed by a predetermined frame or script.<sup>8</sup> However, Butler and, in particular, queer theorists have demonstrated that these gender constructions are also more fluid than previously believed and that is well possible to subvert, undo or unfix rigid categories of male and female gender constructions to move beyond the binary.<sup>9</sup> The goal of

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Gerrie F. Snyman, "A Hermeneutic of Vulnerability: Redeeming Cain?" *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 1/2 (2015):633–665; "A Hermeneutic of Vulnerability: Edom in Malachi 1:2–5," *Journal for Semitics* 25/2 (2016):595–629; "Read as/with the Perpetrator: Manasseh's Vulnerability in 2 Kings 21:1–18 and 2 Chronicles 33:1–20," *Journal for Contextual Hermeneutics in Southern Africa* 116/2 (2017):188–207; "Cain and Migration: Opportunity amidst Punishment?" *HTS Theological Studies* 75/3 (2019):1–7.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 33. Cf. Salih's helpful wardrobe analogy to describe the socially constructed nature of gender and the role of a predetermined "regulatory frame" or "script" in which individuals only have "a limited number of 'costumes' from which to make a constrained choice of gender style." Sarah Salih, "On Judith Butler and Performativity," in *Sexualities and Communication in Everyday Life: A Reader* (ed. Karen E. Lovaas and Mercilee M. Jenkins; Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2007), 55–68 (56).

<sup>9</sup> Guest formulates the task of "queer theory [as] one of resistance to such [male/female and masculine/feminine] binaries: subverting, undoing, deconstructing the normalcy of sex/gender regimes, cracking them open, focusing on the fissures that expose their constructedness." Deryn Guest, "From Gender Reversal to Genderfuck: Reading Jael through a Lesbian Lens," in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the*

challenging these socially constructed binaries, boundaries and boxes is to allow all those individuals who do not fit into a socially ascribed box to be able to breathe a little more freely—and in a context of rampant gender-based violence and hate crimes, to live without fear of being harmed.<sup>10</sup>

This notion of harm, violence and exclusion signals an important point of connection between feminist interpretation, queer criticism and masculinity studies. What these different branches of gender criticism have in common is that they all recognise the harm done by gender constructions that perpetuate gender norms, which have and continue to cause much harm to individuals and groups. Whether it be women, members of the LGBTQ+ community or men who do not fit into what is held up by society as the ideal of masculinity, these gender constructions are responsible for a great deal of suffering—in its most extreme form of violence to others as well as to the self.

When it comes to gendered language for God, divine metaphors in the Hebrew Bible are closely connected to the gendered constructions and norms that govern a particular community. Gender constructions are, of course, not uniform for all times and places, yet, in every community, there are fixed ideas regarding gender identities and gender roles that impact the way people imagine the divine. In line though with recent developments in gender-queer criticism and masculinity studies, it is likewise important to trouble these binary constructions associated with gendered language for God, drawing on instances in the biblical text in which these fixed gender constructions are rendered more fluid and complex than would appear at first.

In biblical studies, ideas regarding gender performance and gender identity have fruitfully been drawn out of the book of Jeremiah. In her essay on gendered language for God, Corrine Carvalho shows how the book of Jeremiah employs this subversion of gendered categories or what she describes as gender reversal of gender bending to portray both the downfall of the community under siege as well as the hope for restoration.<sup>11</sup> In particular, the gender ambiguity associated with the prophet Jeremiah offers a fruitful point of entry for scholars like Susanna Asikainen, Rhiannon Graybill and Corrine Carvalho to interrogate the

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*Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship* (ed. Theresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone; Semeia Studies 67; Atlanta: SBL), 9–43 (9).

<sup>10</sup> The ultimate goal of queer biblical interpretation, as Burke has so eloquently argued, is to make it possible “for more bodies to matter—for more bodies to be recognized as fully human.” Sean D. Burke, “Queering Early Christian Discourse: The Ethiopian Eunuch,” in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship* (ed. Theresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone; Semeia Studies 67; Atlanta: SBL), 175–189 (176).

<sup>11</sup> Corrine Carvalho, “Whose Gendered Language of God?” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 43/3 (2016):12–16.

connection between gendered language for God and a community under duress.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the prophet is uniquely situated in the sense of both representing the collective experiences of a suffering community as well as embodying the divine who is intrinsically connected to the plight of the community. As Carvalho rightly contends, the "wounded male body" of the prophet Jeremiah "as a symbol of divine revelation," offers "an especially rich site for negotiating anxieties about the loss of patriarchal privilege as both something to lament and equally something to embrace."<sup>13</sup>

In the rest of this article, I will turn our attention to how male and female metaphors for God are performed in this multi-faceted book of Jeremiah, with particular attention to those instances in which the gender scripts associated with divine language are subverted. It will be shown how these divine metaphors emerged as a direct response to the greatly destructive effects of trauma that threatened to overwhelm the community.

### **C GOD AS A MANLY MAN? HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY, HYPERMASCULINITY AND TOXIC MASCULINITY IN JEREMIAH**

In the book of Jeremiah, as elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible Prophets, the male metaphors for God are predominantly associated with God's strength. The language that is used for God, of course, cannot be separated from the governing gender norms of the time. Susanna Asikainen, drawing on recent studies that outline the various representations of masculinities in the ancient Near East, offers a helpful overview of the masculine ideals that would have informed a book like Jeremiah that includes an emphasis on physical strength and specifically military might in a time of war. Strength, as a hallmark of hegemonic masculinity, also is connected to the importance conferred on "sexual strength," which according to Asikainen, in heteronormative terms, was "performed in the active and dominant role a man played in his relationships with women."<sup>14</sup> A real man was hence measured by his ability to have a wife and sire many children as well as how well he is able to exert control over his entire household. Finally, strength is also associated with a man's ability to engage in persuasive speech,

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<sup>12</sup> Susanna Asikainen, "The Masculinity of Jeremiah," *Biblical Interpretation* 28 (2020):34–55; Rhiannon Graybill, *Are We not Men? Unstable Masculinity in the Hebrew Prophets* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 71–96; Corrine L. Carvalho, "Drunkenness, Tattoos, and Dirty Underwear: Jeremiah as a Modern Masculine Metaphor," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 80/4 (2019):597–618.

<sup>13</sup> Carvalho, "Jeremiah as a Modern Masculine Metaphor," 617. Cf. also Graybill, *Are We not Men?*, 11–13, who outlines the value of employing feminist and queer approaches in considering the question of masculinity in the Hebrew Bible Prophets.

<sup>14</sup> Asikainen, "The Masculinity of Jeremiah," 37.

to exercise authority and to wield self-control in what was deemed to be the hallmark of the wisdom tradition.<sup>15</sup>

In light of these gender norms that give us some insight into what was thought to be the true man, the ideal man or one could say, the “manly man,” in Jer 2–3, God is presented as the esteemed Divine Husband and Great Patriarch to his City Wife, Jerusalem.<sup>16</sup> However, at the heart of this divine portrayal, one finds how the masculine ideal is rendered vulnerable, as God’s wife goes off after other men, leaving her divine husband furious and acting out in fury. As Asikainen argues, Judah’s behaviour as the insubordinate wife has the effect of challenging God’s masculinity.<sup>17</sup> Masculinity is indeed always a process, never quite stable, with the male subject forever needing to prove or assert himself. The only way for God to reassert control and prove his manhood is to punish his wife—in the process employing violence to protect his masculinity.<sup>18</sup>

In terms of the expression of domestic violence at the heart of the marriage metaphor in Jer 2–3, it is not merely the Divine Patriarch who is compelled to reassert his masculinity. Underlying the female metaphor of a battered City–Wife, one finds a myriad of male members of the community who are shamed by the exertion of male control and violence associated with this metaphor of God who goes after his unfaithful wife.<sup>19</sup>

In this regard, Stuart Macwilliam, in his queer interpretation of the marriage metaphor in Jer 2–3, has helped us see how the City–Wife in the form of Jerusalem and Judah represents the elite men of the community who constitutes the intended audience of this metaphor. In a creative act of gender reversal, the

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>16</sup> Kathleen O’Connor, “A Family Comes Undone,” *Review and Expositor* 105/2 (2008):201–212. Cf. also Christl M. Maier, “Interventions to the Drama of a Broken Family in Jeremiah 2:1 – 4:4,” in *Transgression and Transformation: Feminist, Postcolonial and Queer Biblical Interpretation as Creative Interventions* (LBHOT; ed. L. Juliana Claassens, Chrisl Maier, Funlola O. Olojede; Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2021), 52–66.

<sup>17</sup> Asikainen, “The Masculinity of Jeremiah,” 42.

<sup>18</sup> The phenomenon of gender-based violence in the biblical prophets has been extensively argued, especially in Weems’ seminal book, *Battered Love*. Cf. also Linda Day, “Rhetoric and Domestic Violence in Ezekiel 16,” *Biblical Interpretation* 8 (2000):205–229; Nancy Bowen, “Women, Violence and the Bible,” in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld* (ed. Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 186–199.

<sup>19</sup> Even though the link between masculinity and violence is well established, DiPalma warns that “while associated with some masculinities, [violence] is not consistently associated with all masculinities.” Brian C. DiPalma, “De/Constructing Masculinity in Exodus 1–4,” in *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond* (ed. Ovidiu Creangă; Sheffield Phoenix Press; 2010), 36–53 (39).

upper echelon of male leaders of Jerusalem in Jer 2–3 is couched in the figure of a disobedient, sexually promiscuous wife. The marriage metaphor, which draws upon the fixed gender scripts of its time, actually manages to subvert these gender norms when the male readers, who really would like to identify with the Divine Male Patriarch who looks like them, realise (probably in shock) that they are cast in the image of the unfaithful wife!<sup>20</sup>

This challenge to the male readers' already fragile masculinity may quite likely lead to violence (against women in particular) and it is hence not surprising that they would imagine their male God to do likewise. One thus finds that the book that begins with violence born out of a fragile masculinity on behalf of the Scorned Husband Deity, seeking to regain control over the multiply violated men of the community in this queer performance in Jer 2–3, ends with even more violence. In the final chapters of Jeremiah (Jer 46–51), the military defeat experienced by Judah offered fertile ground for the community to imagine a hypermasculine Warrior-God whose fury is unleashed upon the nations including the Babylonian Empire whose destruction of Judah is documented throughout this prophetic book.<sup>21</sup> Thus, one finds that in this context in which military might was considered to be an essential element of the ideal man, the metaphor of a Woman in Labour, which throughout the book of Jeremiah is applied to the once-mighty warriors, serves as a fitting strategy to portray the defeat of the nation.<sup>22</sup> In what Carvalho describes as an act of "gender-bending," these formerly strong and brave men now are feeling like vulnerable women.<sup>23</sup> It is these male subjects whose masculinity is under threat, who in an act of

<sup>20</sup> Stuart Macwilliam "Queering Jeremiah," *BibInt* 10 (2002):384–404 (395–397); Asikainen, "The Masculinity of Jeremiah," 42.

<sup>21</sup> See O'Connor's argument that these violent images for God form part of the community's survival strategy in making sense of disaster. Kathleen O'Connor, "Reclaiming Jeremiah's Violence," in *Aesthetics of Violence in the Prophets* (ed. Chris Franke and Julia M. O'Brien; Sheffield: T&T Clark, 2010), 37–49 (47). Cf. also Carvalho's alternative proposal for making sense of the vivid portrayal of divine violence in the biblical prophets. Corrine Carvalho, "The Beauty of the Bloody God: The Divine Warrior in Prophetic Literature," in *Aesthetics of Violence in the Prophets* (ed. Julia M. O'Brien and Chris Franke; LHBOTS 517; London: T&T Clark, 2010), 131–152.

<sup>22</sup> Consider my exploration of this metaphor in L. Juliana Claassens, "Like a Woman in Labor: Gender, Queer, Postcolonial and Trauma Perspectives on Jeremiah," in *Prophecy and Power: Jeremiah in Feminist and Postcolonial Perspective* (ed. Christl Maier and Carolyn Sharp; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 117–132 as well as in the essay, "Between Excruciating Pain and the Promise of New Life: Birth Imagery in the Prophets and Trauma Hermeneutics," in *Prophecy and Gender in the Hebrew Bible: The Bible and Women Vol 1.2* (ed. Irmtraud Fischer and L. Juliana Claassens, Atlanta: SBL, 2021), 315–332.

<sup>23</sup> Carvalho, "Whose Gendered Language for God?," 13.



wishful thinking, in the ultimate revenge fantasy, imagines a mighty God who lives up to the most extreme masculinist ideal of the time.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, the hypermasculine metaphor for God that emerged out of a context of trauma and that could be said to compensate for these feelings of inadequacy associated with a loss of power, privilege and control associated with the defeat by the Babylonian Empire is also less stable than it initially appears. What makes the book of Jeremiah so intriguing is how female metaphors, especially connected with sound, interrupt the dominant male representation of violence and bloodshed.

#### **D WAILING WOMEN/ MISSING MOTHERS: DISRUPTING GOD-LANGUAGE**

Amidst the overpowering male presence that marks the divine expression in Jeremiah, one finds a small number of women's voices who struggle to be heard but succeed in disrupting the dominant discourse. Kathleen O'Connor was one of the first scholars who drew our attention to the tears of a Weeping God that disrupt and, to some extent, disempower the governing metaphors of God as an Abusive Spouse and God as an Architect of War that has governed much of the conversation in the book of Jeremiah and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible Prophets.<sup>25</sup>

This Weeping God, crying a fountain of tears, is introduced in the context of the wailing women, the female mourners, who like so many women have done throughout the centuries, in Jer 9:17–20 are called to lead the community in expressing their grief. As first responders, these women who, in contemporary terms, can be said to be skilled in trauma counselling, offer through their laments a safe space for the community to come together and come to terms with the terrible things they have seen.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> On the notion of the Oracles against the Nations in Jere 46–51 as revenge fantasy, see Amy Kalmanofsky, "'As She Did, Do to Her!' Jeremiah's OAN as Revenge Fantasies," in *Concerning the Nations: Essays on the Oracles against the Nations in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel* (ed. Else K. Holt; Hyun Chul Paul Kim, and Andrew Mein; London: Bloomsbury), 109–127; Christopher G. Frechette, "The Old Testament as Controlled Substance: How Insights from Trauma Studies Reveal Healing Capacities in Potentially Harmful Texts," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 69/1 (2015):20–34.

<sup>25</sup> Kathleen O'Connor, "Divine Lament in Jeremiah," in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann* (ed. Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 172–185. Cf. also Graybill, *Are We not Men?*, 75, who has noted the disruptive nature of sound in the book of Jeremiah, which quite often is connected to that of female voices in pain.

<sup>26</sup> For an exploration of the therapeutic and prophetic function of the image of the Wailing Women in Jer 9, see L. Juliana Claassens, "Calling the Keeners: The Image of

These women are led in their public display of mourning by the Mourner God who calls upon the community of mourners to lament and to call upon the rest of the community to do so as well. Mothers are called to teach their daughters to lament; neighbours are implored to help one another to voice the unspeakable. The metaphor of a Mourner God is thus very much a relational image, a divine expression emerging from a community coming together in its shared grief. As I have proposed elsewhere, this female metaphor for God is closely connected to the mothers and the other female mourners of the community, who specifically are gathered by God to share their craft with all who have been affected by violence.

The divine metaphor of a Mourner God thus serves as a powerful expression of the community initiating the long and arduous process of moving towards healing and in the process, overcoming the collective trauma that has hurled them into calamity—the city, the inhabitants and the whole earth which is said to be mourning as well (Jer 9:19[MT 18]; 4:28).

However, in this public display of mourning that is initiated by the Mourner God, the central role of mothers to convey the skill and the art of lamenting in the face of trauma draws our attention to the fact that mothers are largely absent in this book dominated by the destruction wrought by war and military invasion. It is ironic that whereas the cries of women gripped in the pains of childbirth resound throughout the book of Jeremiah, this intimately female experience associated with the woman in labour metaphor is appropriated to express the feelings of vulnerability and anxiety of male warriors facing military defeat. Thus, even though the female experience of childbirth is instrumentalised in depicting the defeat of the nation, nowhere in the book of Jeremiah does this endless and futile process of being in labour without end result in the birth of a child that needs to be nursed and comforted.<sup>27</sup>

This absence of mothers and any sustained attention to acts associated with mothering and childrearing that typically are associated with women in this and many other culture(s), may not be incidental. Caught in the grips of the atrocities associated with war and famine, which graphically are documented in the book of Lamentations in the image of mothers, instead of feeding, eating their children, this community is experiencing a profound lack of care and comfort.<sup>28</sup>

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the Wailing Woman as Symbol of Survival in a Traumatized World," *JFSR* 26/1 (2010):63–78.

<sup>27</sup> Dille, *Mixing Metaphors*, 63. Claudia Bergmann, "We Have Seen the Enemy, and He Is Only a 'She': The Portrayal of Warriors as Women," *CBQ* 69 (2007):651–672; Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, "No Strength to Deliver: Bringing to Birth," in *Isaiah's Vision and the Family of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 205–224.

<sup>28</sup> Hens-Piazza writes that "the description of 'compassionate mothers' boiling and eating their children may serve to narrate the drastic social change that has invaded the lives of the community." Gina Hens-Piazza, *Lamentations* (Wisdom Commentary;

It may be this dire situation that is responsible for the fact that not only are mothers largely absent from Jeremiah but the Mothering God also fails to appear in this book in which “terror is all around.” In stark contrast to the use of the female God-language in Deutero-Isaiah in which the metaphors of God as a Woman in Labour and Nurturing Mother are used to express Deutero-Isaiah’s message of restoration and renewal,<sup>29</sup> the absence of maternal metaphors for God in Jeremiah contributes to the feelings of despair, the lack of new life and the inability to nurture and sustain life that permeate the book of Jeremiah.

Nonetheless, amidst this pronounced absence of mothers in Jeremiah, there is one Mother whose tears cannot be erased. Joining the Mourner God of Jer 9, in Jer 31, Rachel becomes the paradigmatic mother who weeps for her children and refuses to be comforted.<sup>30</sup> Together, these fountains of tears cried by these two Wailing Women, come to represent the missing mothers of Jeremiah, who must have been in this community and whose grief was erased by the authors of the book. These female metaphors associated with the divine have the function of commemorating the thousands of mothers in the book of Jeremiah and whose presence in this time of war is so deeply connected with the grief associated with the loss of life.

## **E GENDER FLUIDITY AND AGENCY IN DIVINE METAPHORS IN JEREMIAH**

When contemplating the topic of male and female metaphors for God in the book of Jeremiah, there is a danger that one may end up perpetuating the binary as one imagines—on the one hand, a hypermasculine Warrior God whose robes are stained red with blood (to borrow the image in Isa 63) and, on the other hand, an emotionally wrought Mother God who cannot stop crying about the carnage caused by the male warriors led by the Divine Warrior. When it comes to speaking about God, feminist and queer insights regarding a type of masculinity that embraces vulnerability and embodies a variety of different characteristics, typically associated with male and female experiences, are helpful to imagine a God who represents the full range of the gender spectrum.

However, contemporary gender scholars have shown how important it is to trouble these binary constructions, i.e., to break the cycle of toxic masculinity that leads to further violence in an endless cycle of humiliation, shame and

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Collegeville: Liturgical Press), 65. Cf. also Kelly M. Wilson, “Daughter Zion Speaks in Auschwitz: A Post-Holocaust Reading of Lamentations,” *JSOT* 37/1 (2012):93–108 (104–106).

<sup>29</sup> Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife*, 49–63.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Kozlova who portrays Rachel as the “bereaved mother” who participates in a number of mourning rituals in Jer 31:15–22 to honour the lost children of Israel. Ekaterina Kozlova, *Maternal Grief in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 157–177.

retaliation and also to move beyond a romanticised understanding of motherhood that is rooted in a prescriptive, essentialising understanding of gender.

According to Carvalho, the Hebrew Bible's portrayal of God's gender is not as stable as one would think with the gender bending image of God creating humans, both male and female in God's image (Gen 1:26) probably being an apt description of the fluidity of gender associated with language for the Divine.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, Carvalho and other scholars, citing examples from the ancient Near Eastern context that informed the gender script for the portrayal of God in the Hebrew Bible, note that it is interesting to see how the Divine Warrior metaphor seems to be quite fluid in terms of gender expression, merging male and female metaphors. For instance, Assyrian goddesses such as Anat and Ishtar are shown to be gender bending deities—Ishtar sometimes imaged as having a beard and both Anat and Ishtar portrayed in terms of "a combination of hyper-feminization" (e.g. the reference to Anat having multiple lovers while remaining a virgin) and "male-like behavior" as fierce warriors.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, feminist scholars have sought to show that there is a range of different experiences of what it means to be a woman with maternal roles constituting but one aspect of women's lives, as not every woman necessarily desires to fulfil this role.<sup>33</sup> Mothering should thus not be romanticised either. As mentioned above, mothers can be negligent or cruel as evident in the book of Lamentations' portrayal of mothers, who under extreme duress, engage in acts of terrible cruelty.

In order to move beyond the binary, several scholars have recently turned their attention to the figure of God's prophet Jeremiah who encapsulates traditionally male and female gendered expressions in the prophetic body to help us embrace a more fluid understanding of gender. For instance, Graybill argues that Jeremiah "adopts the forms of sound traditionally marked as feminine, even as his body gives voice to what cannot be spoken in language."<sup>34</sup> Jeremiah's expression of his and the community's suffering, subverts the gender

<sup>31</sup> Carvalho, "Whose Gendered Language for God?," 13.

<sup>32</sup> Carvalho, "Beauty of the Bloody God," 148. Cf. also how this gender bending characteristic associated with Ishtar is also "embodied by her transvestite priests." Carvalho, "Whose Gendered Language for God?," 13.

<sup>33</sup> For a helpful overview of the various positions of feminist thinkers on the topic of motherhood and identity, see Nadine Ehlers, "Identities," in *The Oxford Handbook on Feminist Theory* (ed. Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 346–367 (351–352). Cf. also the collection of essays edited by Stovel that further shows the multiplicity of experiences and perspectives on what it means to be a mother. Beth M. Stovel, *Making Sense of Motherhood: Biblical and Theological Perspectives* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016).

<sup>34</sup> Graybill, *Are We not Men?* 15.

construction of its time “by offering an alternate, non-masculine gender performance through sound.”<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, Carvalho views the figure of Jeremiah as “a modern masculine metaphor,” a type of avatar that binds the different parts of the book together and serves as a way to deal with the individual and communal trauma that informs the social collapse documented in the book.<sup>36</sup> For contemporary audiences, who find themselves in a state of upheaval, causing a lot of anxiety for those who have been in situations of privilege, especially white men in my context of South Africa, the book of Jeremiah and the prophet, in particular, may also serve as “an especially rich site for negotiating anxieties about the loss of patriarchal privilege as both something to lament and equally something to embrace.”<sup>37</sup>

Thus, in our quest to find innovative language for God that is not limited to traditional gender norms both then and now, it might be valuable to focus on how the prophetic body is also the wounded body and violated, carrying the wounds of the people on his person. Instead of reacting in violence to this injury, though, the prophet responds in community building ways. Significantly, as Graybill reminds us, it is the honest embrace of woundedness that offers the potential for something new to emerge:

It is the very difficulties that prophets experience with their bodies—nakedness, suffering, pain—that render these bodies queer, while also holding forth the promise of transformation, even a transformation of the very experience of masculinity.<sup>38</sup>

Jeremiah, as spokesperson and representation of the divine, thus serves as a good example of embracing an alternative understanding of masculinity that disrupts and is able to undo the typical stereotypical assumptions about masculinity in terms of strength, coercion and violence—and femininity as representing being passive and demure and hence powerless.

Moreover, this emphasis on gender fluidity in the book of Jeremiah encourages us to be intentional about challenging gendered assumptions that only associate male metaphors for God with violence and bloodshed and female metaphors with nurture and care. I would also argue that it is important to draw on the full range of human experience, including gender when speaking about the God of the Hebrew Bible, which continues to be influential in many communities. Such an understanding of divine metaphors for God thus pushes back against a disembodied representation of God as an impersonal, beyond-gender God but instead employs the real pain, joy, hopes, fears, victories and

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Carvalho, “Jeremiah as a Modern Masculine Metaphor,” 602, 616.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 617.

<sup>38</sup> Graybill, *Are We not Men?* 11.

failures of human bodies—male, female and queer bodies—to speak about God. The hope is that if one can imagine a differently masculine as well as a differently feminine God, we also may help to bring into fruition a community in which more females will feel free to embrace being strong independent women and more males would choose to self-identify as loving caring men. Thus, wherever one finds oneself on the gender spectrum, individuals are free to be who they are, created in the image of God who encompasses gender fluidity as a central aspect of God's very being.

## **F CONCLUSION: A GOD WHO TRANSCENDS GENDER BOUNDARIES**

In this article, we have seen how recent feminist and queer critical investigations of the gender constructions in Jeremiah have helped us to consider the impact of trauma on the way people make sense of the world, which includes also the metaphors they use to speak about God in contexts of upheaval. These insights also help shed light on what may be behind the contentious reception of gendered language for God in my context of South Africa, referenced at the beginning of this article. Part of the problem concerning the firestorm that erupted because female pastors dared to utilise female metaphors for God in a worship setting may be attributed to the inability of some members of the broader community to embrace ambiguity and uncertainty, which also extends to the way they imagine God.

Thus, as in the case of Jeremiah, this societal and theological crisis also offered the disruption that made new language for God not only possible but essential, as it points to the emergence of a new world. For Carvalho, gender ambiguity or gender bending in the book of Jeremiah, is deeply theological, pointing to a God who transcends gender boundaries to envision a new social order. She argues that the enigmatic text in Jer 31:22 of a woman surrounding a warrior serves as a "symbol of a new utopia" in gender relations. Multiple explanations have been given to what this text possibly means.<sup>39</sup> However, for Carvalho, it is clear that "gender 'disorder'" constitutes a characteristic of an ideal society.<sup>40</sup> As she writes, "The presentation of gender inversion as a sign of God's 'new thing' does not reinforce the patriarchal assumptions found in other parts of the book. It subverts them."<sup>41</sup>

This "new thing" and the ideal society imagined amidst a crumbling world also extends to this topic that explores male and female metaphors for God. In this essay, we have encountered examples in which the traditional masculine and, most often, hypermasculine metaphors for God that are very much the norm

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Angela Bauer, *Gender in Jeremiah: A Feminist-Literary Reading* (StBibLit 5; New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 137–145.

<sup>40</sup> Carvalho, "Whose Gendered Language for God?" 15.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

throughout the book are subverted and rendered less stable than would initially appear. Thus, at key points throughout Jeremiah, one finds female metaphors for God that capture the entire community's suffering in a remarkable way that transcends narrow gender stereotypes of women not having agency or a voice—something which quite strikingly is encapsulated in the courage of the female pastors in my context in speaking in unconventional ways about a gendered God.

Finally, reminiscent of many contemporary communities in which the very foundations of a patriarchal power system inevitably are challenged, we see in Jer 31 how space is created for a new gender configuration to emerge that truly adheres to the full spectrum of human experience. In this brave new world, one finds a tenuous step towards subverting traditional gender roles, which in a context in which masculinity is severely threatened no longer depends on brute strength and being stuck in fight mode, but in which there is an emphasis on embrace, comfort and care leads to a transformed community. In this vision of a transformed future, new language and new language also for God are a vital aspect of deconstructing power relations. In such a transformed community, women will not be afraid to show their strength and when they do, they will not be judged for it. Men too will not be afraid to show their vulnerability nor will they be derided for it.

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L. Juliana Claassens. Stellenbosch University, Professor of Old Testament, Head of Gender Unit, Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University Stellenbosch, South Africa. Email: [jclaassens@sun.ac.za](mailto:jclaassens@sun.ac.za). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5490-0974>