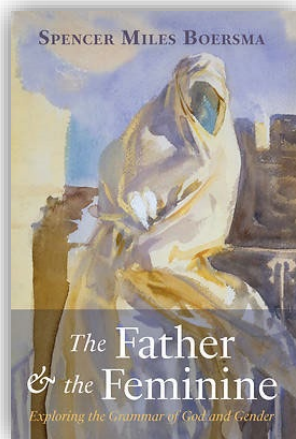


## BOOK REVIEW

# The Father and the Feminine: Exploring the Grammar of God and Gender

By *Spencer Miles Boersma*

Reviewed by Vincent E. Gil



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Spencer Boersma's *The Father and the Feminine* is a seminal work resulting from Boersma's own journey from complementarian, hierarchical evangelicalism to a more nuanced postliberal understanding of the language we use to articulate God. (We only find out about this journey in the book's *Postscript*).

In that *Postscript*, Boersma quotes Baptist theologian James McClendon, who once stated "*All theology is biographical.*"<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Boersma doesn't give away *his* biographical until the very end—and I suppose rightly so—so that his story doesn't disturb this erudite unpacking of the vocabularies we use to

translate and refer to who God is. The journey concludes in fashioning a redemptive hermeneutic of God which engages not only the male, but also the female in God's image; and hopes that through communal discernment it moves us to embrace historical Biblical language and imagery *in veritate*, while encouraging freedom to use other vocabularies in contemplation, prayer, and worship. All of which exalts the Trinitarian God who acts as Mother, Father, Brother, Sister, Friend—even 'Lady Wisdom'—all, he concludes, permissible grammars to the people of God. The journey changed Boersma, and he hopes reading his intriguing work will also inform and challenge the academic reader.

This work emphasizes that how we talk about God also affects *who we are* and *what we believe*.<sup>2</sup> It asks whether God can be referred to as female, as Mother, as a "she," or only as a "he." More to the point, what are the consequences which can stem from using specific nouns, pronouns, effusive or exacting, to depict God—both in the lived experience of men and women, but also as gendered creatures, made in God's image and as Christians, seeking to emulate God in thought and deed.

The book comes to press (2024) at a time when a resurgence of cultural, patriarchal nationalism and its melding with evangelicalism, evangelical identity, presages a continuity of masculine power and feminine submission. "If evangelicalism has [indeed] internalized patriarchy and nationalism, it serves as an

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Boersma from McClendon (2012).

<sup>2</sup> Anthropological linguistics teaches that language is not only a mirror of culture, reflecting via its articulation the world view and ideologies of a culture; but also by its inhaled vocabulary, reticularly influencing human thought and beliefs through the very words available. Benjamin Lee Whorf and Edward Sapir's now well-worn hypothesis of *linguistic relativity* underscores the influence of a language on how its users see the world and interact with it. And this includes self-perceptions as well as overall belief systems, customs, and practices.

ironic and sad reminder that often there is a version of conservatism that is the mirror reflection of what it hates: an accommodation to worldly thinking” (5).<sup>3</sup>

In acknowledging this resurgence early in the work, Boersma is positioning the forthcoming review of arguments and propositions within the foil of sensitivity toward the fact there is continuation of an established system of dismissiveness toward women’s voices; a “cultural system of language practices” which continues to be hostile to anyone questioning the authority of men. One can thus see how anyone questioning the necessity for a continuance of, or exclusive use of “Father language” in the biblical discourse of God and God’s representation can be met with “wrathful force.”

That all does not mean that a ‘conversation’ isn’t *continuing* about God, gender, and language; or that it is still restricted to theological speculation. Boersma notes the factuality of this conversation moving from “speculative classrooms and seminaries” out and into the pews and parishioners who dare to question how God is referred to in the modern era.<sup>4</sup>

### Charting a Course

A narrative theology of how God is articulated in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries could explode to fractions that would take any reader to far-away corners, thus Boersma limits his review and commentaries primarily to the more academic arguments and questions of how God is or could be referred to. This is truly more than enough. He attempts to chart *and assess* the “diverse debate” on the gendered language used to define God, all the while understanding that the larger patterns of biblical language, Christian historicity, iconography,

social, economic, racial intersectionalities necessarily play into the review. He previews his conclusion—and I quote it here so that the reader can keep it sternly in mind as they move through the twists and turns ensuing chapters take:

. . . while male language for God should not necessarily be taken as offensive (and thus will continue in the church), it also cannot be taken as exclusive (which in many cases it is.) Feminist language for God exists in the Bible and church history, and, thus, is more than permitted. Indeed, such language can aid in finding deeper authenticity in the Christian way of life. (7-8)

Moreover, Boersma brings attention—early on as well—to the necessity for Christians to understand how language functions, and in particular how we render ‘biblical language’, since on many occasions what we ‘say’ it ‘says’ wouldn’t actually be permitted or condoned were the full context of the language and its grammar be understood and honored.<sup>5</sup> The diversity of perspectives is continually being brought to light as Boersma moves us forward.

*In his first chapter*, “Revelation and Liberation,” Boersma explores this rather visible duality which “splits the debate into two sides down the fault line of whether inclusive God-language is permitted.” While emphasizing there is internal diversity present within both camps, Boersma drives home the main concerns: the reality of ‘revelation’, thus the authorial voice of

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<sup>3</sup> All quotes from Boersma, *The Father and the Feminine*, are from the eBook edition unless otherwise noted.

<sup>4</sup> See the excellent examples in Dickinson and Edung (2013).

<sup>5</sup> And on this point I wish Boersma could have taken a minute to dive more persistently into a rudimentary, yet necessary paragraph or two on how language (any language) functions to inhere specific grammars; and focally, give voice to his commentary, following, that “the rules of Christian discourse” “must be apophatic, analogical, narrative-driven, configured by thematic centers that are Christological, pneumatic, and trinitarian.” In his first chapter he discusses the referential and functional aspects of language as sites of meaning. He then jumps into the deeper clash in theology regarding the “rule of revelation” and what it does to literalism, missing guiding the reader through how an execution of revelation in orthodox form cements linguistic determinism in the masculine format. Nor is there an attempt here, early on, to come to grips with the historical, manifest world of the Bible as dogmatically patriarchal and often misogynistic. It’s as if it’s a taken-for-granted piece that needs no unpacking. Unpacking this all here vs. later, I feel, would have helped the reader who is perhaps *not as fluent* in historical theology to better contextualize historically and lexically those elements being explored. The two central lines which offer clarity are, “Revelation is historical and verbal and thus offers certain content”; and “The concern of this perspective is that any language about God must be done on the basis of the Bible, which records revelation, and, in turn, reveals.”

Scripture;<sup>6</sup> and social implications which become its fallout. The worry of feminists (defined neutrally and not rabidly) that there is female alienation going on via the exclusion of female nouns and forms, and that these absences uphold a male God that is bound up with patriarchy, makes it seem God is closer to men and thus allows men to lord over women. “Therefore, that which oppresses women must be negated and supplanted,” so goes the general feminist approach here.

In exploring this proposition, Boersma goes to great lengths to include dominant feminist Christian writers: Mary Daily, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sallie McFague, Elizabeth Johnson, to name a few; each adding some diversity to the issues. The one unifying thread, if there is one to note, is that the consciousness of modern women to contest what assuredly feels discriminatory in how Scriptures as grammar interpreted reflect God—and by fallout, the human dilemma of gendered selves—warrants linguistic and grammatical revisions to how we read Scripture. Scriptural authority has incontrovertibly been misused in the favor of men.

On the other side are those who feel gendered male pronouns are self-referents by God; and while the male is not essential—since God is not a creature—male pronouns are thus preferable to a depersonalized “it.” Male pronouns for God are thus “exclusively ordained for usage,” since God self-refers as male, and Jesus refers to God as Father. These would argue that God would be unknowable were it not for *his* self-referent revelation; a manifestational revelation of the very reality God wishes to reveal, and which presages God’s embodiment in a male Christ.

To end this important chapter, Boersma launches an appeal for a “deeper grammar,” a “grammatical approach” that could integrate both the forms of interpretation of Scripture which retain revelation as well as accommodate more inclusive acknowledgments of God beyond male symbols and patriarchy. Certainly, an acknowledgement that ‘Christian language’ is itself a product and a grammatical guidebook subject to change over time:

This poses significant questions for the relationship of men and women and how one speaks of God.

Fatherhood meant something more in ancient times than today . . . How do these affect Christian speech in a way that holds to the core concerns of Scripture? (45) . . . to think of the Christian faith as a language and Scripture as a book that offers the paradigms for this language, is to move between two strategies. (47)

And,

. . . if the biblical canon functions like a dictionary or glossary of the Christian way of speaking (or better yet, a grammatical guidebook, showing the patterns and concerns that govern Christian speech), then a Christian speaker may employ both [male and female pronouns] meaningfully and faithfully in different ways. The rules and context of usage would be central, however. (44)

We are left with understanding that this Christian grammar has the distinct possibility of allowing multiple lexical schemas, and “one set of rules [which] can actually result in more than one way of saying things.” Scriptures do indeed have more than one pathway for referring to God.

*In Chapter 2* Boersma takes us through the gauntlets of language’s incapacity to express God (the *ineffability* and *incomprehensibility* quotients), God being too great or abstract to be verbally communicated in adequacy. Nevertheless, and falling back on “realistic revelation,” this ineffability position often continues male-centric references because God refers to God in male terms. He quotes the Southern Baptist Convention’s resolution of 1992 as proof text of this position: “God is beyond human gender . . . [but] has uniquely and explicitly revealed Himself to us as Father.” (25)

Countering are both feminists and non who argue back that any literal forms of language about God can be/come idolatrous (he references among others, McFague’s comments in *Metaphorical Theology* [1982]). Discussing positive and negative theologies, Boersma goes on to amplify the review by deliberating the possibility that in an apophatic reading negating male imagery there is also the negation of idolatry to a male God. Thus, much of the feminist critique of

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<sup>6</sup> More on this authorial voice later, but it seems to me that “revelation” is yet another taken-for-granted term not explored etymologically till later. Here, it warrants elemental clarification; enough for readers who may again not be so theologically learned to understand its *propositional* and *manifestational* aspects. A clarifying footnote would have helped at this point.

patriarchal discourses which point to exclusive male symbology for God can open the way for God being symbolically shaped by women's realities as well.

Above all, Boersma is quick to remind the reader that throughout Scripture, God is described in terms that resist reduction to language, concepts or images—and he cites copious texts from both Testaments to affirm this (25). To cement the ineffability quotient, Boersma moves us through the writings of numerous church fathers and mystics, many calling for either a plurality of names for God, or falling back on God's "mystery," not dissolving it. The "I Am Who I Am" reverberates here.

On the prickly point of idolatry, Boersma asks whether the reduction of God to the creaturely by using gendered pronouns, especially and only male ones, leads one to idolize males and by extension, patriarchy (73). He of necessity then addresses the nature of idolatry, and God's own commandments to Israel to refuse any possibility of rendering God in an image. (To note, "image" here extends beyond the creaturely to anything created or *made idolatrous*; and that includes the Colossian warnings by Paul that anything which takes the place of God, supplants or robs God, limits God, puts self above God, is idolatry.)

To correct idolatry of the sort presumed, Boersma proposes "prophetic" and "contemplative" paths—*prophetic*, in calling out injustices and arrogance that have stemmed from the misuse and misunderstanding of God via male symbology. (He states, "Theology can and must look to those willing to call out injustice and lampoon images that have become morally lax" [78].) *Contemplative*—as well, personal and institutional contemplation, reflection on and revision of the symbols we use, engaging a consciousness of their purposes, widening the symbology to include the feminine and the neutral, and always, not reducing God to a "thing" (78–80).

*Engaging Chapter 3* at this juncture is to open wide to learning how language functions through its *analogical* and *narrative* capacities. Here, Boersma does excellently well in capturing the patterns of language central to the arguments already under way.

Thus, it would have been my wish to have explanations presented earlier in the work rather than at this juncture, given that an understanding of the way language works, its componential organization and structure, and in particular its analogical and narrational formats as illustrated here are somewhat assumed to be known when the earlier conversation and reviews are taking place.

That said, Boersma walks us through significant numbers of biblical metaphors and analogies for God that illustrate God as male, female, motherly, feminine in connotation, masculine in connotation, Almighty (*El Shaddai*), etc., much of these arising from Israel's own experiences with God. Particularly in evidence is God's love, providing above all else an understanding of God as goodness and perfection. That there are "dual gender references" throughout this review of Scripture is very much again underscored (110ff). Turning attention to such as Aquinas, Dionysius, Clement of Alexandria, Boersma goes to great lengths to help ensure that analogical and metaphorical language engaged by these neither replaces nor alters the fact that Scripture offers the "conditions and contexts of meaning by which one can refer to God" (131).

The main problematic remains, however, that there are conventions humans generate (thus the church!) which distort the fact both men and women are made in the image of God—yet God is greater than human images and conventions. Ultimately, the biblical narrative forms the canon by which Christian thinking is "regulated." Boersma acknowledges that within the narrative, there are included traditions—cultural at the core—that "have significant implications for how humans construe themselves as gendered creatures" (130).

With this acknowledgement he sets the reader up to ponder how typically male and female bodies (a "strategic essentialism," per Serene Jones [2000, 47–48]) can be other than gender binaries. (To not take away from the main scope of the chapter explored here, see the sidebar footnote below to get my thoughts on this last sentence.<sup>7</sup>) Boersma concludes that any reconceptualization of gender ought to be the result of

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<sup>7</sup> *Sidebar*: Boersma states "all humans are tasked with searching for their authentic selves, not merely seeking to discover a static self within" (134ff). I'm delighted to also read and agree that this search for authentic identity, inclusive of sex (body) and gender (its performance and internalization) for Boersma doesn't do away with a "critical realism" of the body, nor its influences on our psyche's body-self understandings (*vide* Gil [2022]). Boersma understands that there are "distorting forces," in culture and society, inclusive of some Christian theology, which entangle one's search for this authenticity. Today, some follow the current movement of self-identification and self-representation regardless of biological or other markers as their sociopolitical and personal right; while others struggle from early childhood with gender: body-mind incongruence, or *gender dysphoria*, a genuine and diagnosable

one moving into congruence with God's actions of redemption. "The self, made in God's image, is only completed as it looks to Christ, the true image of the invisible God (Col 1:15) . . ." (148).

*Chapters 4 and 5* are overviewed here in tandem for a reason: Boersma now enters into detailed discussions of three other lexical and symbolic subjects, a veritable 'trinity' of its own in discussing Christ (*vide* Christology), the Cross, and the Holy Spirit.

The intent is to cement both the historicity of Jesus, his sacrifice (via the cross), and engage views of the Third Person, the Holy Spirit, discussing at length its representations and extrapolating from it. Boersma strives to help the reader unbind patriarchy from the Trinity, as well as show how the feminine in all Trinitarian Persons—as in the church's iconic representations of the Trinitarian God—contribute to an understanding of the essence of God as love.

The task is enormous, a deep dive into the variegated theologies (feminist included), historical treatises and intertestamental works that abound in Christology; understandings of the cross; and of the Holy Spirit. These topically include the dynamics of Christ's incarnation, death, resurrection; the symbology of the cross as witness to the Sacrificial Lamb, as well as "apocalyptic disclosure of God's kingdom and the coming new age" (148); and in the nature and actions of the Holy Spirit, which has been appropriated as Lady Wisdom in both feminist and non-feminist theologies.

Several captures from this gargantuan effort:

- Jesus, as portrayed by the Gospels was a historical person, and insofar as we speak

historically about this person, Jesus is male. Jesus' maleness, however, is not exclusive since Jesus' incarnation is into *flesh*, which covers all of humanity and shows God's love for all.

- Boersma notes the problematic of appropriations of Jesus to represent particular gendered, racial or ethnic groups. Such appropriations should be interpreted not as an affront to any historical truths about Jesus, but rather, used for the purposes of communicating solidarity: the truth of God Immanuel (God *with* [all of] *us*). Speaking of appropriations, Boersma spends considerable time discussing and reflecting on *Christa*, a 1975 sculptural art piece representing a woman crucified, and the ensuing outcry. On this he concludes,

As it has been argued, an artistic depiction of a female Christ on the cross need not be at loggerheads with the historical description of Jesus . . . Rather it can be used to reiterate important theological truths implicit in the classic Christian doctrines of incarnation and atonement that the church has neglected. By picturing women's suffering as Christ's suffering, those who contemplate this image, men and women, are reminded that God is with all people, not just male flesh.<sup>8</sup> (134, paperback edition)

- The cross, variously intoned and represented, nevertheless consistently engages the supreme

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issue. In both cases the family of God must enable the type of kinship and care, acceptance of the person which allows each to work out their salvation with not only fear and trembling, but also with the understanding that God loves dignity and extends it to all of God's creation. To that end, both Boersma and I agree that either of these seekers ought to find in the church safe spaces to work out the meaning of their bodies, their identities, without dehumanization. For more on gender and the "gender moment" see Gil (2021).

<sup>8</sup> This view may carry substance in cultures where there has been an historical and significant movement toward feminist sensitivities, cultures where also the political has opened up to inclusiveness and a more civil recognition of not only women, but those oppressed in sundry ways. (Is there such a place?) It is my belief that the Christian church has always lagged behind cultural movements in the direction of sex/gender equality; indeed, in many parts of the world it is still way behind. The comment does not move me to believe other than Boersma's positive comments on *Christa's* imagery will fall on blind eyes in most Western Christian and Orthodox traditions. An argument for the incorporation of woman—if not *embodied* in Christ, certainly equally *comprehended* by the male Christ—could come from a discussion of Jesus' healing the woman with an issue of blood, Jesus sensing a specific healing power emanating from him *to cure a womb* (Lk 8:43-48). I have argued such in an article titled "Was Jesus Sexual?" (2022) at <http://drvincegil.com/downloads>.

sacrifice and also reads as hope for those in some form of ‘crucifixion’. It ultimately points to the resurrection—as final symbol of atonement the cross becomes “the culmination of Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God . . .” (148).

- When the Spirit comes to believers, it *falls on all flesh*, bringing Pentecost to the foreground as an underscore of the equality of all races, all classes, all genders, and all flesh being dignified through salvation and the Spirit’s indwelling (184).
- Imagery and language for the Holy Spirit appeals consistently to female language given the Spirit’s presumed qualities and actions (which correlate with views of the feminine—as Mother, as giver of life, as Lady Wisdom; even co-opted as Mary). As the Spirit of Wisdom, the controversy over the meaning of *sophia* (*chokmah* in Hebrew, חכמה; *sophia* in the Latin Vulgate) disturbs the neutral Person of the Holy Spirit and embodies it as *Sophia*, ‘Lady Wisdom’, imparting *her* a creaturely animation which goes beyond the metaphorical.<sup>9</sup> Such has been variously appropriated by theologians of differing persuasions, not just feminist theologians, causing concern for those more conservative to herald safeguarding the historical revelation of the Spirit as a “he” (and more, since Christ typically fulfills the figure of Wisdom in the New Testament).

Boersma concludes these chapters with a sermonic dialogue summarizing the interconnections exposed, emphasizing the unification of all humans under the salvific, free gift imparted, the wisdom given, the infilling and guidance enabled—all pointing to the capacity for a liberated reading of the text as an act of the Spirit. And such includes not only prompting

faithfulness in adhering to the canon, but also an understanding of salvation as holistic. This holism does away with prejudices that sideline women and their voices, their leadership in the church, and a preferential regard for male-only language in reference to the multiplex qualities of the Trinitarian God.

*In the last chapter before concluding (Chapter 6)*, Boersma attempts to bring together those significances discussed earlier and necessary for a holistic trinitarian discourse. Some of the material is repetitive of what’s already been covered—Boersma may not agree here—since, for example, discussion of the “Father title” has consumed significant sentences earlier; so have arguments counter-patriarchy, and the contexts of feminine language usage in Scriptural references pertaining to all Persons.

His real goal here is to render an understanding that Scripture reveals the oneness of God’s being in a three-person relationship, unified in Being and in action. However, “What that means for gendered language about God is far from clear . . .” (254). Boersma thus wants to explore how competing views of the Trinity may affect how humans view God, gendered God-language, and thus their own and each other’s relationships in a gendered world.

He discusses views on the nature of the Trinity, these often bifurcated into those that see trinitarian Persons in hierarchical fashion, an “exclusive rule for referring” (254) and for humans to emulate; or others, either downplaying trinitarian differences/titles or attempting substitutions so that Father language can be avoided. At this point, he dives even deeper into the meaning of the Father (and Father-language) in the Testaments, even intertestamental literature, to show that while such may be historically connected to OT patriarchy (inseparable from lineage and God’s ‘paternalistic’ nature), the NT moves it to a loving and compassionate term, inclusive of the use of *Abba*—an intimate Aramaic term characterizing a personal relationship with God; and ultimately, a marker for the Spirit of God. Thus, the Father symbol increasingly

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<sup>9</sup> *Chokmah* in Hebrew is a feminine noun (*sophia* in the Latin Vulgate [LXX]). Proverbs 8-9 embodies *chokmah* as Lady Wisdom. However, in reading Proverbs 8-9 one must keep clear in view this is a *poem*, an *encomium* (poetry of praise), which if understood as such makes wisdom *not literally a woman who prepares a banquet*, but rather a literary tool of personification to extol the blessing of being wise. *Wisdom* as an antecedent requires feminine personal pronouns in the Hebrew. The grammatical construction is an artifact of the process of personification, thus satisfying the demands of *diction*, and no more. Lady Wisdom is consequently left animated, embodied, later confused with Mary, elevated to deity, co-opted by feminists, demoted again to a metaphor, then by some an apostasy. Later in the read Boersma tries to salvage the metaphorical Lady Wisdom by showing her influence in liberating his mind to think of the feminine with regards to God.

becomes witness to the messianic and divine status of Jesus; and the Spirit a prompter of us calling out *Abba, Father*—a marker of our adoption into God’s family.

None of this dismisses the gendered language, but to Boersma it does open up space to understand how that language was used and eventually “evolves” into an affirmation of Jesus’ divine and messianic identity as the Messianic Son (in Hebrew, *ben elohim*, בן־האלוהים.) Ultimately, we come to understand that Father means other than a biological relationship; nor does it mean male gender for Father as an ontological name, but rather is used more for the benefit of human convention and analogical reference. In worship and in speech, “it is possible, then . . . to name God in ways that are faithful to what the Bible presents . . . [and] while the Father language is normative in convention, it need not be viewed as [gender] exclusive” (284).

## Conclusion

*In his finale*, Boersma is moved not only to recapitulate each chapter’s zest (which I think is now unnecessarily repetitive), but to give instruction (“pathways”) for Bible study and communal discernment. All to say, that in looking deeply at the figurative, the metaphorical, the factual, the narrative, we accept the truth of the full dignity of the many possible referents to the qualities and attributes of God. Consequently, and mirroring God, we accept the full dignity of all people. We are to rebuke patriarchal meanings “in a culture that still gravitates to patriarchy” (313); rebuke gendered hierarchies; and affirm that there are different language pathways to reiterate the unconditional love of God. “Inclusive language is more about recovery than revision” (313). Ultimately, “liberation” is about finding our true selves via an authentic relationship with God and with others. This provides liberty in contemplation, prayer, and worship, freely using any and all available grammars.

In his personal *Postscript*, Boersma takes us through his journey, explaining how he came to contemplate God using feminine imagery. Highly revelatory and personal, Boersma’s story (kept to a few words here so as not to spoil it for the reader) does expose the interplay of personal family history—growing up Christian in a fractured home—theological training, and exposure to religious biases, ultimately coming into his own even at some interpersonal and professional costs. I was tempted to do some Jungian and Freudian analysis but refrained. He has pursued his personal wholeness—and this work, *this work*, is as

much a reflection of what it means to let go of patriarchal thinking as it is a product of one’s commitment to live out an egalitarian Christianity.

The work will inform not only theologians—students and academics—but serve as resource and inspiration to social scientists, linguists, philosophers, and other academics of the faith in their quest for a more inclusive understanding of both God and humanity.

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