

gest that imaging God as female is not a radical feminist innovation. People described God in feminine terms, not because God is actually a woman, but because feminine or maternal traits say something true about God and about their experience with God. Elizabeth Johnson wrote, "If women are created in the image of God, without qualification, then their human reality offers suitable, even excellent metaphor for speaking about divine mystery who remains always ever greater."¹⁷

Women's experience has provided several powerful biblical metaphors. Although these are admittedly not numerous, the fact that they appeared at all in a patriarchal culture is quite miraculous. Several biblical references speak of God giving birth to creation, laboring to create or bring the world into being. God is described as tenderly nurturing God's children, as in Hosea 11:1-9. Certainly a father could do this also, but the feeding and clothing of children would have been considered women's work in Israelite culture, as it usually is in ours. God is compared to a nursing mother. Just as she cannot forget her hungry child, so also God cannot forget or abandon the people of Israel.

God is compared to a mother hen in several psalms (57:1; 61:4; 91:4) where the author speaks of taking refuge under the shadow of God's wings. In his lament over Jerusalem in Matthew 23:37 and Luke 13:34, Jesus wishes to gather the city to himself as a hen gathers her chicks. The image suggests frightened chicks huddling within the warmth and safety of the mother bird's wings. It is interesting that when the image is used in a hymn, the pronoun is male: "Under his wings, I am safely abiding, there shall I hide till life's trials are o'er."

Christians cannot always hide under the wings of God because they are called to grow up, venture out, take risks. The image of God as mother eagle in Deuteronomy 32:11-12 and Exodus 19:4 offers a complement to the image of the hen. Virginia Mollenkott explained that when baby eagles are old enough to fly, the mother eagle begins nudging them out of the nest. She carries the baby eagles on her wings, then swoops out from under them to force them to fly on their own. But she is always present to catch them if they falter. This image of God encourages independence and action, rather than security and passivity. Both are important characteristics of God, who nurtures, enfolds, and comforts, but who also inspires bravery and self-confidence.¹⁸

Feminist theologians recognize that simply using feminine imagery for God does not resolve all the problems of God language. The Bible speaks of God as King, Judge, Creator, and many other traditionally male roles that are not linked to fathering. Much of the feminine imagery is maternal, which suggests that women are most like God when they are mothers, while men are like God in most of their activ-