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Expanding our vocabulary for God:
Female metaphors for God in Deutero-Isaiah

1. INTRODUCTION

In Genesis1:26-27 we read that God created both male and female in the image of God. This profound theological insight has led feminist scholars like Elizabeth Johnson (1992:55) to argue that the mystery of who God is includes the truth that both male and female may be used to image God. However, if one looks at the language we use in church, the sad reality is that our prayers, our hymns, and even our Bible translations continue to solely use male language and imagery for people (as is evident in the predominance of the he/him/brother/men language), as well as for God (cf. e.g. the male images of God as father, king, warrior and lord).

In his essay, "Image and Imagination: Why Inclusive Language Matters," Christie Cozad Neuger (2006:63) writes that "when our primary images and metaphors equate God with a white, male ruler… it contributes to a culture in which white male rulership is seen, at the least, as normative, and at the worst, as divinely sanctioned."[1] As Mary Daly's (1985:19) classic declaration expresses this point: "If God is male, then males are God."

Most scholars though would argue that God is not biological male; that the prevalence of the male language and imagery used for God in the biblical text can be explained in light of the fact that the Bible grew out of a patriarchal context, in which case most of the biblical writers were men – a reality that is continued in centuries of post-biblical theological reflection by mostly male interpreters (Russell 1985:587). However, as feminist theologians like Elizabeth Johnson (1992:39-40, 55) and Johanna Van Wijk-Bos (1995:ix) have pointed out, the Bible uses many different images and metaphors; both male and female, animate and inanimate, to describe God. So God is said to be a rock, leopard, bear, eagle, potter, builder, farmer, midwife, woman in labour, king, husband, father, shepherd and warrior. Brian Wren, theologian and hymn writer, reflects this theological insight beautifully in his hymn "Bring Many Names," in which he uses a number of creative images to describe the "living, loving God;" for instance, the "strong mother God, working night and day;" the "warm father God, hugging every child;" the "old, aching God, grey with endless care;" and the "young, growing God, eager still to know" which all work together to depict the "great, living God, never fully known"(*Common Praise* #395).[2] For these theologians, it is exactly the multitude of images that points to the fullness of God, mirroring the realization of the biblical writers that no one image could adequately capture the "I am who I am" (Exod 3:14).[3]

[1] In this regard, Elizabeth Johnson (1992:4, 47) says that the images we use for God are not "peripheral or dispensable to theological speech" or "ecclesial and social praxis." Rather they are powerful entities that may direct how people live their lives. Cf. also Paul Ricoeur's (1967:349) famous statement: "The symbol of God functions."

[2] This hymn can be found in the Anglican hymnal Common Praise (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2000). Cf. also Brian Wren's book, *What Language Shall I Borrow? God-Talk in Worship: A Male Response to Feminist Theology* (1989) for more examples of his work.

[3] Van Wijk-Bos (1995:35) and Johnson (1992:39-40) plead for a wide range of images in order to prevent one image to become an idol, namely, when one image becomes so powerful that it is not merely a

A further important perspective with regard to God-language is that all of our language for God is metaphorical. As Janice Soskice (1985:140) so beautifully explains: "…in our stammering after a transcendent God we must speak, for the most part, metaphorically or not at all."[4] In light of the fact that a metaphor tends to cross traditional boundaries, an integral part of any metaphor is that it is supposed to shock its hearers. With regard to our language for God, this shock value is closely associated with the realization that our language for God is in many ways inappropriate. Whenever a metaphor has become commonplace and lost this inherent tension, it may happen that a metaphor is erroneously taken literally as a description of God's essence instead of an attempt to speak the unspeakable. So Claudia Camp (1993:15) argues that as metaphors become more and more part of a literal language, they gradually tend to die as the metaphor loses its initial shock value (cf. also Soskice 1985:73). In some sense, one could say that in light of the fact that people no longer are shocked by the metaphor of God as a father, this metaphor has died. Or at least, people have forgotten that this most frequently used of all divine metaphors is a metaphor after all.

In this regard, the female metaphors in the biblical text and Christian tradition play an important role in helping us to recapture the metaphorical nature of our language for God, by deconstructing the male imagery that has been utilized as descriptive of God's essence (Cozad Neuger 2006:164). Female imagery for the divine may challenge us to encounter God in a new way, to find new ways to speak about God, and as a result expand our vocabulary for God. Cozad Neuger (2006:160) argues that new metaphors for the divine serve an "iconoclastic function." He says:

> They deconstruct the totality of previous descriptions of God. They refuse to allow us to describe God totally, and thereby they refuse to allow us to domesticate and contain God. With new language, we are held accountable for our tendency to create graven images rather than to live with the ambiguity and mystery that is God.

Theologians and pastors are thus invited to rediscover the female images that are used to talk about God in the biblical text, which rightly may be described in the words of Judith McKinlay (1996:133) as "a gift to Israel's religious tradition." As female voices are joining the theological conversation, women may help us to discover these images in terms of their own unique experience as women.[5] Women then may "become a new specific channel for speaking about God," so "recover[ing] certain fundamental aspects of the doctrine of God otherwise overlooked" (Johnson 1992:47).[6]

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pointer to God, but a description of God's essence. Cf. also Miller (1997:5) and Soskice (1985:77).

4   Soskice (1985:49, 47-51) argues that a metaphor is saying something that cannot be said in any other way. She defines metaphor as "speaking about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another." Thus, a metaphor uses the network of associations of a subject from one's own experience (vehicle) to disclose something new about another subject which is less well known (tenor), but which still carries its own set of associations with it. Using the example of "God as mother," one uses the associations of our own mothers or other mothers we know to say something new about the associations we have of God. These networks of associations interact in order to create a totally new meaning.

5   One should note that the concept "women's experience" is in itself problematic, as the experience of women surely does not constitute a unitary notion. Women of various cultures, of different ethnic and social-economic background, each has very different experiences and perspectives to contribute. Nevertheless, there also may be a number of shared experiences that provide common ground, for one, the experience of being excluded because of one's gender (Schüssler Fiorenza 1992:8, 137; 1998:94; Camp, 1995:32).

6   Serene Jones (1995:90-91) notes that this experience of women is often to be found in "mundane

2. THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF DIVINE FEMALE IMAGERY

A good example of female imagery for the divine that has the potential of expanding our vocabulary for God is the cluster of female images that are used in Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah[7] in conjunction with God's creative and liberative work.

In the wake of the cataclysmic events of the Babylonian exile, the prophet writing in the name of the 8th century Isaiah of Jerusalem seeks to give the exilic survivors, who have been physically and emotionally traumatized by witnessing the destruction of their city, temple, families and life as they knew it, hope for the future. Deeply rooted in the promises of the past, the prophet reminds the exiles that God, who is faithful still, will bring about a new creation, a new exodus, thereby establishing a new community back home.

As part of this powerful discourse, the prophet is using a variety of compelling metaphors to convince the broken exiles of an alternative reality including the following female metaphors that are used to describe God. So we see how God is imaged as a mother in labour in Isaiah 42:13-14:

The LORD goes forth like a soldier, like a warrior he stirs up his fury; he cries out, he shouts aloud, he shows himself mighty against his foes. For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labour, I will gasp and pant (Isa 42:13-14).

In this text, the metaphor of a mother crying out in labour pains is juxtaposed with the metaphor of a fiercely shouting warrior. These two metaphors work together to depict God's powerful ability to act; to bring forth new life for the exiles who found themselves in the desperate situation of captivity.[8]

In Isaiah 45:9-11, the same image of a woman in labour is used to very different effect. Woe to you who strive with your Maker, earthen vessels with the potter! Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, "What are you making"? or "Your work has no handles"? Woe to anyone who says to a father, "What are you begetting?" or to a woman, "With what are you in labor?" (Isa 45:9-10).

This time, this metaphor is used for God in conjunction with the image of God as a father who sires a child, and God as an artisan that shapes a pot from clay. Sarah Dille (1004:116-117) argues that the point of comparison among these images is the ability to create a new thing. These metaphors work together to convey to Israel the radical idea that Cyrus, the king of the Persian empire who is called God's anointed (Isa 45:1) and God's shepherd (Isaiah 44:28), will be the means by which God will create a new future for Israel.[9]

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and common rhythms of life," in "the everydayness of experience." From women's experience of being assigned to the role of society's caregivers, a whole new vocabulary emerges that describe God's care and love in terms of these experiences.

7   Clements (1982:123) argues that scholars are increasingly seeing a link between chapters 56-66 and chapters 40-55. Even though the material typically called Trito-Isaiah probably did not derive from the same author as the material designated as Deutero-Isaiah, chapters 56-66 examines the way in which the promises of the exilic prophet play themselves out in the late 6th/early 5th century.

8   For an in-depth exposition of the rhetorical junction of the interanimation of the metaphors of God as warrior and woman in labor cf. Claassens 2008 where I am in conversation with Darr 1987; 1994.

9   As Dille (2004:117) formulates this position: "Reading the parent imagery of v 9 in interaction with the artisan imagery highlights an aspect of the metaphor that is hidden when these are taken in isolation from each other. That aspect is the contrast between human artisans who make gods and YHWH who makes

In Isaiah 49:14-15 a different maternal metaphor is used for God when God is said to be a nurturing mother who comforts her child. But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. (Isa 49:14-15).

Responding to the laments of the exilic community who deeply feels that God has abandoned them; that God does not care, God assumes the persona of a mother, comforting Zion and promising to return her children to her.[10] God is depicted as the ultimate mother who shows compassion to the devastated exiles. Even in the highly unlikely event that earthly mothers will forget their children (maybe referring back to the horrific images in Lam 2:20; 4:10 of compassionate mothers being so desperate as to eat their own children), God will be faithful – in the words of the African-American Spiritual God will be "Mother to the motherless, Father to the fatherless…"

And in Isaiah 66:10-13, the nurturing mother metaphor is used once more to depict God's restoration of Israel in vivid colours. Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her -- that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom. For thus says the LORD: I will extend prosperity to her like a river, and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem. (Isa 66:10-13).

After describing the rebirth of the people in terms of Mother Zion bringing forth the restored nation without even as much as labour pains with the assistance of God as midwife (Isa 66:7-10), God is portrayed in vv 11-13 as a nurturing Mother who comforts her children; who together with Zion nurses and takes care of the newborn Israel (Claassens 2004:80-81; Bronner 1983-1984:76-78; Trible 1978:66-67).

Scholars have come up with a variety of proposals of why at this particular point of time these remarkable female images were used to describe God. So Mayer Gruber (1983:358) has argued that Deutero-Isaiah, who strongly reacts against idolatry, may have used both masculine and feminine metaphors for God to counter other religions which have female goddesses. In response to Gruber, John Schmitt maintains that the frequent occurrence of Zion as a mother in Isaiah 40-66, which complies with the Ancient Near Eastern custom to portray cities in female terms, served as the inspiration for the depiction of God as mother. Contrary to Gruber, Schmitt (1985:563, 569) maintains that Deutero-Isaiah would hardly have compared the God of Israel to the foreign deities whose idols he so vigorously condemned in earlier chapters (cf. e.g. Isa 44:6-23). Rather he states: "The motherhood of God parallels the motherhood of Zion in its goodness, its constancy, and its exuberant prodigality."[11] From a very different point of view, Leila Leah Bronner (1983-1984:82) argues that in light of the chaos people are experiencing during the time of the exile, the prophet draws upon nurturing imagery from the realm of the family, and

humans."

10   Cf. the work of Carol Newsom (1992:75), in which she sees Second Isaiah offering "a selective rereading of Lamentations in the service of the exilic community." She demonstrates these relationships based on a basic pattern of reversal, or "antiphonal answering," which matches Isaiah 51:3 with Lam 1:2; Isaah 40:6-8 and 49:1-18 with Lamentations 1:4; 2:8. Isaiah 52:1 with Lam 1:8-10 and Isaiah 49:18 and 51:11 with Lam 1:3, 5. Cf. also Patricia Tull Willey (1997: 157, 191).

11   Dille (2004:129) points out that Schmitt's argument is convincing with regard to the female imagery in Isaiah 49 and 66, but less so in explaining the female imagery that is used to describe God in Isaiah 42 and 45.

accordingly female experience, that constituted the only form of security for an exilic people. Bronner's arguments find support from Ranier Albertz's compelling treatment of the history and literature of the exile. Albertz (2003:135-136) argues for a distinctive societal shift during the exile, which, after the collapse of public institutions such as the monarchy, saw the family as the primary social entity. This societal shift is responsible for the fact that the family and the individual became more important in the religious sphere, with a greater emphasis on God's presence, protection, and support in the life of the individual believer.

Not seeking to pinpoint the exact reason for the inclusion of these female images, I argue that the female imagery that is used in conjunction with God's liberative and creative work, even though few in number, exhibited a transformative effect in the development of Israel's theological formulations, giving rise to new visions for God.

In this regard, one should not underestimate the impact of the trauma, which Israel had experienced at the hand of empires employing brutal force to dominate, on Israel's theological formulations and self-understanding. With regard to the book Jeremiah, Louis Stuhlman (1998:173-174) describes the world of the exiles in terms of the "utter collapse and disintegration all existing social and symbolic categories." As Stuhlman argues: "One world has ended; its belief systems and social life no longer provide meaningful and viable alternatives" (1998:174). However, in this state of utter chaos, amidst the fear and uncertainty brought about by the travesty of the exile, one sees the first signs of new social and mythical configurations. I argue that we see in Deutero-Isaiah and in particular with reference to the female imagery for God in these texts something of this alternative vision for God and God's relationship to the world emerging out of what Stuhlman calls "the rubble of the fallen world" (1998:188).

Moreover, as I have noted in the beginning of this paper, the female imagery for God that is used in the biblical text also plays a significant role in expanding our own vocabulary for God, showing how God cannot be captured in any single image or formulation. Thus, in the final section of this paper, I will make some comments as to how these images can be fruitfully employed in our contemporary context to express God's love in a new way.

One should note that each of the four occurrences of divine female imagery in Deutero and Trito-Isaiah warrants an extensive treatment of their own as to the rhetorical and theological significance of this image in their respective literary contexts as well as in the overall theological argument of these books – something that I attend to in greater detail as part of a larger project that seeks to re-imagine the image of God as liberator in terms of the minor or muted voices in the text. [12] However, for the purpose of this essay, I want to make some preliminary observations with regard to the significance of the cumulative effect of the female imagery for the divine that is used at this point of Israel's theological journey.

First, the female imagery, and in particular the emphasis on labour and birth, is used to denote the sense of a new beginning that is so important for the exiles who have experienced large-scale upheaval and disorientation. Edward Said (2000:174) remarks in his essay "Reflections on Exile" how exile is very much like "death without death's ultimate mercy." He argues that exile "has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family and geography." For the survivors of the Babylonian Exile, the experience of losing their land, temple, families and homes can thus accurately be described in terms of death. After the graphic violence and destruction portrayed in much of the exilic literature (cf. e.g. Lamentations 2; Jeremiah 4), it seems that the prophet in Deutero-Isaiah is using the connotations of new life to point to the restoration of

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12   Cf. also the excellent rhetorical analysis of how these divine metaphors interact within overall theology of Deutero-Isaiah in Sarah Dille's book, *Mixing Metaphors: God as Father and Mother in Deutero-Isaiah,* 2004.

God's people, imaged in terms of the birth of a nation.

In this regard, Rainer Albertz's observation that after the exile, disillusioned by the failure of the royal theology and the official religion, people slowly started to see God's involvement in their everyday lives again (2001:115; 1978:178-180) is significant. It is in the daily rituals of the exiles' lives; in the birth of their children; in the recovery from a terrible disease; in the rain after a prolonged drought; in the bounty of the land when it became time for harvest that the exiles once again saw God's presence and protection. God's involvement in the micro-stories of their personal lives – and particular the first signs of new life – thus offered a paradigm through which to understand the macro-story of their nation's future. In light of this development, it is thus fitting that in Deutero-Isaiah the hope for the future is captured in the simple, yet miraculous, action of the birth of a child.

Incidentally this notion of rebirth is often present in the way trauma survivors express their experience of survival. Flora Keshgegian (2000: 64) notes that survivors of the Armenian genocide talked in almost triumphant terms of being reborn. Despite the best efforts on the part of the Turkish, the Armenians survived and even thrived in their adopted country. To live, to be successful on an economic and social level, to start a new life seems to be for trauma survivors throughout the ages the ultimate revenge.

Moreover, the metaphor of God as a woman in labour also serves as a powerful image of liberation. Particularly if one considers the fact that childbirth quite often entailed the possibility of death of the mother and/or the baby, and that a successful childbirth without complications was celebrated in praise songs as an act of liberation,[13] the metaphor of a woman in labour captures both the precariousness of the exiles' situation, as well as the promise of being liberated when the exiles are released into a new life filled with possibilities. We thus see how the metaphor of a woman in labour creatively merges the themes of a new creation as well as a new liberation to denote the new life that God will create for the exiles by delivering them from the bondage of captivity. [14]

Second, the maternal metaphor that is used for God reflects something of the desperate need for compassion and care that the exiles traumatized by the violence at hand of the Babylonian empire must have felt. Crushed and tormented, the exiles faced a profound existential and theological crisis with regard to the very possibility of God's love for them in light of the tragedy they had suffered. For these people trapped in despair and anguish, the emphasis on womb imagery in these texts once again assures the exiles of God's genuine love for God's children.[15] In Isa 49:9-10, it is God's compassionate love for Israel that is responsible for returning the exiles home – as in the instance of the first Exodus providing once again food and protection along the way. And in Isaiah 66 an image of nursing that is used to describe God's restoration suggests that God will as before abundantly and sufficiently care for the newly born people.

It is significant that this emphasis on God's love is not confined to the exiles. In two of the instances where female imagery occurs, it is evident that God's comfort ought to extend to

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13   Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes (1993:94) notes that in the Ancient Near East birth was often deemed as a life and death struggle. So one finds examples of songs of thanksgiving that were sung after a successful birth, which depicts the woman in labor as a war hero who has successfully won the battle for liberation.

14   Cf. Mann 2000 as well as Stuhlmueller 1970 for the way in which the notion of creative redemption functions in the theology of Deutero-Isaiah.

15   Cf. Trible (1978: 33-34) who shows in her book *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* how the Hebrew root for "womb" (~x,r,) forms the basis for the imagery denoting God's compassion (root ~xr typically used in the Piel) that runs like a golden thread throughout the Hebrew Bible.

others. So we see in Isaiah 42:1-7 and Isa 49:1-6 the first appearances of the figure of the Servant of God who is said to be a light to the nations; who is called to bring justice to those who are in need: the poor, the imprisoned, the broken-hearted. In this regard, Ann Johnston (1994:38), who argues that servant language permeates the texts in Deutero-Isaiah that employ birth and mothering imagery, says the following: "The purposes of this rebirth of Israel are clearly stated as being far beyond the original conception. This rebirth of Israel is not for the sake of Israel alone and her continued existence." Rather, citing the servant language in Isa 49:6, Johnston points out that Israel is "called to be salvific in the lives of others." The nurturing maternal imagery thus reminds the exiles that just as they themselves are in need of comfort and care after all they had been through, so in the midst of their suffering, they are still called to remember those who find themselves in even greater need.

Third, female metaphors such as God as a mother in labour and God as a nurturing mother challenge us to think differently about the power of God. The theme of God's sovereignty is indeed very important in an exilic context where people harboured serious questions with regard to God's ability to intervene and effect change. As image of restoration, God's sovereignty serves as a prophetic response to the questions regarding God's powerlessness and absence. The prophet strongly asserts that God is able to act decisively in people's lives, to undo the powers that have sought the destruction of Israel, and to bring the exiles back home. The emphasis on God's sovereignty is thus responsible for the prophet's tendency to use powerful images like God as a mighty warrior (Isa 42:13), God as an influential Redeemer (Isa 44:6) and God as a Potter who can decide how to shape his pottery (Isa 45:9). However, the presence of the female images reshapes these traditional formulations for God. For instance, the fact that the image of God as divine warrior is juxtaposed with the image of a woman who is about to bring life into this world, challenges us to regard the traditionally military-oriented image of God as liberator in a new way, encouraging an alternative understanding of power that stands over against power as violence and bloodshed. [16] So the image of God as a woman in labour evokes the power of new life that counters or subverts the power to take life away. The presence of the female imagery serves as a reminder, even though a faint reminder of alternative values, of a mother's power first to give life, and then to nurture that life. The power evoked by the female imagery for the divine is a power that grows out of compassion; a power that seeks to preserve life and is ultimately concerned with the needs of the other.

Fourth, the merger of the seemingly disjunctive metaphors for God, e.g., the juxtaposition of God as a warrior/woman in labour in Isaiah 42, God as a mother/father/potter in Isaiah 45, and God as both mother and midwife in Isaiah 66 helps us to understand that God is so much more complex than people could imagine. It is a God who is said to create both light and darkness; prosperity and peace (shalom), as well as disaster (evil) (Isa 45:7). These multifaceted formulations that are used for God serve as an important rhetorical strategy to challenge the exiles to look differently at God as well as to regard the complexity of their own situation in a new way.

So the refusal to capture God in any one singular image aligns with Deutero-Isaiah's fierce anti-idol polemic; the "my-God-is-bigger-than-your-God-theology" that forms a central theme of Isaiah 44 as well as Deutero-Isaiah as a whole (cf. also a similar theme in Isa 40:18-20 where the question is asked who can be compared with God?)[17] For the prophet it is vital to

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16   Cf. the intriguing collection of essays in *Power, Powerlessness and the Divine*, edited by Rita Nakashima Brock. Particularly helpful are the essays by Brock 1997 and Hanson 1997.

17   Cf. also the vivid description of idol manufacturing in Isaiah 44:6-23 that offers a detailed and

assert that God is the sovereign God; the Creator and Liberator God, who cannot be captured in wood or stone or any simplistic formulation.

Moreover, the emphasis on complexity and ambiguity in the divine imagery makes sense in light of the complexity of the geopolitical situation in which Israel found itself. This complexity is evident in the radical position with which the prophet seeks to convince the exiles, i.e., that God is using a heathen emperor, who repeatedly is said not to know God (Isa 45:4-5) to now bring about liberation. For Deutero-Isaiah it is important to show that God is very much involved with the geopolitical reality of the day. Earlier in the book Isaiah it was often declared that God used the Assyrian and Babylonian empires to punish the wayward Israel (cf. the repeated references of the superpowers serving as God's instruments in Isaiah 5:26-30; 10:5-7). And now God utilizes yet another empire to build a future for God's people (Clifford 1984:117).[18]

Edward Said (2000:177) writes how an important aspect of exiles' recovery is to "reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or restored people." Said (1984:51) argues that this process of reconfiguring their lives in narrative form has the function "to reassemble an exile's broken history into a new whole."
One could imagine that part of Deutero-Isaiah's task is to tell the story of God's involvement with the exiles in such a way that the returning community cultivates a new sense of self. According to this story that challenges many preconceived ideas of someone from the Davidic line who will come to redeem or to restore the house of Israel, the prophet by means of innovative rhetorical strategies seeks to turn the exiles' hopes to the rising empire under the emperor Cyrus as the means by which the Creator-Redeemer God will bring salvation to God's people (Dille 2004:122-123).

Understanding what the prophet is doing in his quest to rebuild his people is only a first step. As biblical interpreters, one has to ask some critical questions about the impact or effect of these visions on future interpretative communities. So one should not forget that empires kill and destroy – a reality reflected in the first verses of Isa 45:1-2 that describe the violent downfall of Babylon (cf. also Isa 47:1-3). And there is no way of telling who will get caught in the crossfire.

In this regard, I argue that the very presence of the female imagery that is used for God in the empire-oriented discourse points to an alternative reality. The metaphor of God as a woman in labour and a mother who nurtures her newborn subverts the violence presumed and effected by the empire by drawing the reader's attention to life and love. The presence of this metaphor, even though a relatively minor voice in terms of the dominant storyline, offers the reader the opportunity to develop an alternative understanding of God's relationship to the world.

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quite humorous account of the inherent folly of idol manufacturing. We read how the prophet makes fun of the creators of these wooden idols (using the same verb to describe the "creative activity" of the idol makers in v. 10 that was used to describe the work of the Creator God in v. 2). These "creators" use one part of a tree to create an idol to whom they look for salvation, all the while employing the other part as fuel for a fire to prepare food for dinner. By means of this satire, the prophet wants to say that the idols made of wood and stone are not able to redeem – the one true Redeemer is the Creator God of Israel.

18   Fretheim (2004:366-367) argues that God's association with the violence of the empires is evidence of God's desire not to be an uninvolved, far-off deity, but that God seeks to be intimately involved with God's creation. Cf. also Fretheim's important book, *God and the World: Toward a Relational Theology of Creation*, 2005. Although I agree very much with Fretheim's assertion that God is intimately involved with God's creation, I argue that as contemporary interpreter, one ought to raise some critical questions with regard to the very notion of God's involvement with empires that may not be overtly helpful and even dangerous if applied uncritically to our situation today.

These remarks with regard to the rhetorical and theological significance of the female imagery that is used for God in Deutero-Isaiah reflect an important insight on the part of the biblical writers that new occasions ask for new formulations for God. It is important though to see how these formulations are always in conversation with the traditional understanding for God.[19] I would suggest that it is exactly the balance between creativity and tradition that helped Israel maintain and reclaim their religious identity, as is evident in the creative application of female imagery merged with traditional formulations for God. It is the dynamic nature of these formulations that subvert, challenge, broaden and enrich the traditional formulations that is ultimately responsible for the survival of God, which is intimately related to Israel surviving the trauma of being taken away into exile.

3. CONCLUSION

In her groundbreaking book on the Trinity, *She Who Is,* Elizabeth Johnson (1992:178) argues that a maternal metaphor, such as was used to image God as a mother in labour, is a compelling and for the most part an "untapped truth" that could possibly "reshape" our speech about the mystery of God. We have seen in this essay how the presence of the female imagery played a significant role in Deutero-Isaiah to reshape Israel's understanding of God. Moreover, these metaphors may not only help us to expand our vocabulary for God, it may also challenge us to think differently about the power of God.

So Rita Nakashima Brock argues that if "the struggles of mothers to keep their children alive, to protect them from harm, to teach them wilfulness, to foster friendship and mutuality, and to pass on their knowledge and wisdom to their grandchildren" serve as our starting point in theological reflection, God's love may be portrayed in terms of "mutuality, beneficence and empowerment" – very different qualities than the strict, authoritarian view that constitutes many people's picture for God (Brock 1995:151). This metaphor of God's maternal love may then be used to complement and to enrich the more traditional understanding of God as father.

In addition, imagining God's love in terms of the metaphor of a nurturing mother may have an effect on our human relationships. Brock (1995:150-151) notes that this "nurturing, empowering love is something we should all work to develop, men and women, not just mothers." This type of love might also change our perception of fathers so that "fathering" may gain the connotation of "lifelong, engaged, intimate caring." Thus, this commitment to motherly love may be expanded to include our commitment to all the children of our world – our obligation extending far beyond the nuclear family to those in need of care and support. Thus, the metaphor of God as mother may make a claim on all who have experienced the joys of God's motherly love to continue to mother others.

With this in mind, Sarah Ruddick (1989) highlights some fruitful options to explore with regard to a "maternal thinking," that is, a systematic reflection on the actions executed by mothers in the broad sense of the word (she calls her husband her "co-mother"). Ruddick (1989:49) defines "mothering" as "a sustained response to the promise embedded" in the creation of a new life. This commitment to "mothering," includes for Ruddick (1989:65-102) among others things, a desire to preserve life and to foster growth.[20]

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19   Cf. e.g. the interesting work done by Patricia Tull Willey 1997 and Benjamin Sommer 1998 on the creative reformulation of earlier traditions by the prophet in Deutero-Isaiah.

20   Ruddick (1989:40-51) works with a broad definition of mothering, maintaining that both men and women are qualified to "mother." Mothering for her also is not contingent on giving birth, arguing that

An alternative understanding of God's power that is informed by a maternal thinking thus has broader ethical implications. Ruddick (1989:57, 81) argues that this commitment to mothering may naturally be extended into "a commitment to protect the lives of 'other' children, to resist on behalf of children assaults on body or spirit that violate the promise of birth." So she argues that "the effort of world protection may come to seem a 'natural' extension of maternal work."[21]

On the other hand, one should not forget that a maternal metaphor of the divine could also exhibit authoritarian and patriarchal features.[22] One should therefore not fall into the snare of idealizing mothers. As many examples as there are of loving and reliable mothers, there are also instances of inadequate and abusive mothers. Mothers may be wrathful, moody and obsessive, and for some people the image of mother may be just as problematic as father for others (Johnson 1992:177; King 1989:135; Brock 1995:147). This reality helps us to understand once again the limits of our language for God, where we have to take seriously the "is-not" character of any metaphor.

Nevertheless, values such as a mother's unremitting commitment to life as well as the nurturing and caring of those who will not survive without our care, offer a rich resource for us to explore in our theological reflection as well as our social and ecclesial practices.

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stepmothers or adoptive mothers are no less qualified to do maternal work for not having given birth,

21	In particular note the subtitle of Ruddick's book "Toward a Politics of Peace" that points to the fact that Ruddick is seeking for ways to promote non-violent alternatives.

22	McFague (1996:325) argues that one should refrain from establishing a new hierarchical dualism. The danger in such a dualism is that people are kept in the role of perpetual children. To avoid this, one may argue as Johnson (1992:178, 186) does that "it is human experience that we do not remain small children, but grow up into adults." Moreover, as one's relationship with one's own mother and the mothering persons in one's life matures, it may grow to incorporate elements of mutual friendship and help (cf. also Kohn-Roelin 1989:65; King 1989:136).

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